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WHEN HOLLYWOOD COMES TO THE HISTORY
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Scott Alan Metzger

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WHEN HOLLYWOOD COMES TO THE HISTORY CLASSROOM:
THE EDUCATIONAL USES OF HISTORY FEATURE FILMS

By

Scott Alan Metzger

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

WHEN HOLLYWOOD COMES TO THE HISTORY CLASSROOM: THE EDUCATIONAL USES OF HISTORY FEATURE FILMS

By

Scott Alan Metzger

This study examines the educational promise and pitfalls of history feature films (commercial motion pictures targeted at a mass audience that take place mostly or entirely in the past) used as instructional tools in the classroom. It opens with a review of relevant literature, identifying three scholarly frames (historians' perspectives, historical thinking/collective memory, critical media scholarship) that help conceptualize the educational potential of history movies.

The dissertation offers two distinct but related analytical components. The first component illustrates a way of evaluating history films along six pedagogical functions (content coverage/period representation; historical construction/social construction; empathy/moral response). This *pedagogical content analysis* framework is tested on three recent movies: the 2004 version of *The Alamo*, *The Last Samurai* (2003), and *The Patriot* (2000). The second analytical component is a case study of four film-based lessons taught in actual social studies classrooms: a grade 8 teacher showing the 1977 television miniseries *Roots* in U.S. History; a grade 9 teacher showing the 1994 Chinese-language film *To Live* in a unit on communism; a grade 9 teacher using a portion of *Legends of the Fall* (1994) for a lesson on WWI; a grade 10 teacher showing *The Pianist* (2002) during a unit on WWII and the Holocaust. Analysis of the cases explores what these film-based lessons accomplished in terms of learning about the past (using the

pedagogical content analysis functions) and speculates why these teachers chose to use the films in manageable, safe, and teacher-directed ways.

The study closes with a discussion of why history teachers are attracted to using movies in their classrooms. Dramatic and memorable history feature films have tremendous power to help students visualize and care about the past. History movies also can distort or simplify the past in the minds of young learners when film-based lessons do not provide them with sufficient content support and opportunities for meaningful intellectual engagement. Yet, the circumstances of schooling—limited time, student absenteeism, interruptions and distractions, assessment demands—get in the way of adventurous teaching with history movies and impel teachers to limit student engagement within safe, manageable boundaries. As seen in the four cases, the typical purpose of using history films in the classroom is to provide extra visual reinforcement of content covered by traditional means (lecture, textbooks). The dissertation also considers the place of history feature films in historical literacy. It posits five competencies that history movies are well-suited to help students develop: learning and using content knowledge; analyzing historical narratives (interpretations); considering cultural positioning (of filmic texts); discerning presentism in accounts of the past; historical empathy (recognizing historical perspectives and caring about the past). The study concludes by suggesting directions for further research and by recommending that history/social studies teacher preparation include explicit preparation in the use of film.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Studying History Movies in the Classroom

Gladiator (2000), *Titanic* (1997), *Braveheart* (1995), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Many of the most successful and acclaimed motion pictures are stories set in the past. Of films that won the Academy Award for Best Picture from 1980 to 2005, 15 were entirely historical period pieces and two others (*Driving Miss Daisy*, *Forrest Gump*) were time-spanning stories that mostly took place decades earlier. In 1998, all five nominated films were set more than 50 years (*Life is Beautiful*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*) or nearly 500 years (*Elizabeth*, *Shakespeare in Love*) ago. For the most recent (78th) Academy Awards, three of the Best Picture nominees were historical films (*Capote*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Munich*). Indeed, there is not a single year in the last 25 in which the Best Picture nominees failed to include at least one film principally set in the historical past.¹ History movies are a popular and respected (if the Oscars are any indication) mass entertainment. They are seen every year in theaters by millions of Americans of all age groups—and are subsequently viewed on television, cable, satellite, or home video by millions more.

The rise of VHS and DVD created an era of media on demand, in which a viewer can watch almost any film at any time. They have extended the reach of history movies not only into homes but also schools. By the 1990s, the videocassette player became ubiquitous in schools, and the proliferation of affordable DVD players over the past five years has given teachers access to an even larger, and ever-growing, catalog of video media. The History Channel, Discovery Channel, National Geographic Channel, and

¹ Toplin and Eudy (2002) and Marcus (2005) have previously commented on the Oscar clout of history movies. All of the above Academy Awards information is available through the searchable database on the official Oscars website (<http://www.oscars.org/awardsdatabase/>).

A&E on cable and PBS on broadcast television all regularly air historical documentary programs that are made available on home video. Furthermore, the Hollywood motion picture industry every year releases more history-oriented feature films. All these movies—good and bad, blockbuster and flop—subsequently come out on home video, almost always at prices below \$20. Experiencing history on film has never been easier or more affordable.

Americans make ready use of this vast amount of history-oriented media. When Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1998) interviewed 808 Americans about their interest in history, 81% of them reported watching television programs or movies about the past within the previous year. More recently, Alan Marcus (2005) interviewed a sample of high school students and learned that 86% had seen *Forrest Gump*, 75% *Saving Private Ryan*, 61% *Pearl Harbor*, and 55% *Glory*. Jeremy Stoddard and Alan Marcus (in press) surveyed 84 U.S. History teachers in Connecticut and Wisconsin and found that 52% had used *Glory* in the classroom, 40% *Amistad*, 34.5% *Schindler's List*, 31% *Saving Private Ryan*, and 25% *Dances with Wolves*. Movies are an integral part of youth culture, so it makes perfect sense for teachers to bring them into their history classrooms. Given the traditional ennui that many middle and high school students express about history, the motivational aspects of big-budget films full of exciting effects and beautiful Hollywood stars are very appealing.

VHS and DVD are a powerful new instructional technology in the hands of schoolteachers. The power of history movies emerges from their considerable production values. Movies are made as commercial consumer products by a hugely profitably industry and are designed to be moving, memorable, and appealing to a broad audience.

Even the worst history movies feature visuals, sound, costuming, and effects far better than anything seen in the audio-visual media used in schools prior to the 1980s. Compared to the primitive educational still-shot filmstrips or 16mm motion pictures produced by smallish school-resource companies in previous decades, big-budget history movies pack a vastly more powerful psychological punch. But what educational ends can these powerful media texts serve?

Educational Promise, Potential Pitfalls

The educational potential of the use of history movies in classroom instruction is significant. Most U.S. schoolchildren enjoy movies on their own free time and can bring ready interest in, and sometimes knowledge about, history movies to school. With their high production values, movies can attract and stimulate student interest in a historical topic. Another important consideration is that most history movies have a point or message—they depict the past in consciously chosen ways that can be analyzed, critiqued, and discussed by students. Indeed, for some, the best history movies provide a controversial take on the past that inspires debate even after they are gone from theaters.

History movies provide teachers with a resource for dramatizing history, to show students a visually alluring recreation of time or place. They can be shown in full to present a detailed take on a historical figure or period, or particular scenes can be shown to illustrate a point about a specific historical topic. Teachers can use these dramatic recreations to spark discussions with students about what history is or means, about how we in the present know what happened in the past, about the role of factual evidence in creating accounts of the past, or about how an historical era or event can generate multiple, often competing, interpretations.

On the other hand, there are potential pitfalls. Movies can be used superficially or shallowly; they can also misrepresent the past. While it is possible for teachers to use movies to analyze the interpretative nature of history or to generate deeper discussions about historical causation or meaning, doing so requires a great deal of effort on the teacher's part—and not all teachers may be game for it. School folklore holds that movies are used largely as filler when a teacher lacks the inclination or personal knowledge to teach a particular topic or does not have the time or desire to teach on any given day. A history movie can be shown in the classroom as the single authoritative account to “cover” a topic, to make up for a shortfall in the teacher's own knowledge or range of accounts on the subject. Other times, teachers might show history movies merely as an escape from normal academic work. These potential pitfalls suggest that the use of movies in the classroom is not an unquestioned good.

The selection of history movies can be problematic, too. Some films are carefully researched and take seriously scholarly accounts of their topics, but most are designed to be entertaining stories with historical flavor, little more than costume dramas. Due to restrictions of time and audience expectations, all history movies must selectively pick and choose what historical knowledge to include and what details are ignored or altered. All invent circumstances essential to their plot that, to lesser or greater degrees, are factually inaccurate or questionable (Rosenstone, 1995a, 1995b). When history movies are simply shown to students without any critical analysis, it is possible that some students will accept the powerful images they see as literal truths—as Bruce vanSledright (2002) discovered when teaching the Jamestown “starving time” to fifth graders who were certain the governor was to blame as portrayed in Disney's 1995 animated musical

Pocahontas. There is a risk that the fictionalized historical accounts provided by movies will be more memorable than anything the students read or hear from their teachers—and that showing these movies in the classroom grants them a kind of official authority (“If they showed it in school, it must be true!”). Hence, even when used carefully, history movies pose considerable instructional challenges to teachers.

Since history movies present educational promise as well as potential problems, their classroom use deserves scholarly attention. This dissertation aims to expand our knowledge of the use of commercial mass-media history feature films in classroom settings. What films are teachers actually using, in what ways, and for what purposes? Additionally, it offers a framework for analyzing the educational use of history feature films. What can students learn from such films? Given that far more people encounter history through movies than through scholarly historical books (Rosenstone, 2002) and that history movies are already widely used in schools, it is no longer a question whether classroom teachers should use them but what kinds of films should be used, how, and for what purposes. These are issues at the heart of this dissertation.

Conceptualizing History Feature Films as a Focus of Research

History and social-studies educators cannot afford to ignore the prevalence and influence of history-oriented media. Historian Robert Rosenstone (1995b) has observed, “A century after the invention of motion pictures, the visual media have become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture” (p. 3). His observation suggests that popular-culture motion pictures about the past play a major part in public discourses about cultural identities and social meanings.

The career of filmmaker Oliver Stone serves as a useful example. Coming of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I personally remember the heated debates over two of his projects. *Platoon*, released in 1986, generated a great deal of public attention and controversy by calling into question the fundamental character of the U.S. military during the Vietnam War and criticizing the morality and rationality of the entire endeavor. The film sparked intense public debate, some defending it as a bold artistic vision of a dark chapter in U.S. history, others decrying it as a slander against those who served honorably in the military in 1960s. Stone's *JFK*, released in 1991, was more than an account of the murder of an American president three decades earlier. It was an exposé of multiple possible conspiracies that questioned the integrity of the U.S. government and military. Controversy raged between those who believed there simply had to be more to the Kennedy assassination than was admitted by the official reports and those who felt Stone's film was an unfounded, paranoid lie. Nor did Stone's most recent film *Alexander* escape controversy. By depicting the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great as possibly homosexual, Stone angered some cultural conservatives who believed his film mischaracterized a classical icon of Western civilization.

The controversy around Stone's films illustrates an important point: history films that present troubling or controversial interpretations of the past also comment on contemporary social conditions or meanings. Stone's *Alexander* was not just the biography of an ancient conqueror: It commented on the social acceptance of homosexuality in Western culture at a time when public opinion on marriage rights for gay men and lesbians remains deeply divided and is very much part of current political

debates. Mass-media depictions of history have the potential to sway public discourse more than virtually anything else. Robert Toplin (1996) writes,

Dramatic motion pictures that feature famous stars in the roles of historical characters and present vivid scenes of yesteryear through sophisticated cinematography can make strong impressions. Historical films help to shape the thinking of millions. Often the depictions seen on the screen influence the public's view of historical subjects much more than books do. (p. vii)

To conceptualize the instructional use of history films as a research problem, I need to locate history films within the context of the cultural discourses about truth and art. Next, I synthesize some of the existing scholarly opinion about the roles of invention and historical evidence in the history movies. This review of literature provides helpful background for considering the educational issues in this dissertation.

History and the History Film in Cultural Context

In recent decades, history visual media and their influence on how people think about the past have certainly caught the attention of scholars (Carnes, Mico, Miller-Monzon, & Rubel, 1996; Davis, 2000; Doherty, 2002; Edgerton & Rollins, 2001, Grindon, 1994; Landy, 1996, 2001; Loshitzky, 1997; O'Connor, 1990, 2002; Rosenstone, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2002; Sklar, 1997; Sorlin, 2001; Toplin, 1996a, 1996b, 2002a, 2002b; Toplin & Eudy, 2002). The ensuing debates show that there is considerable disagreement over how to critique and respond to filmic depictions of history. What degree of historical "accuracy" should be expected from history motion pictures? Do the history filmmakers have any responsibility to historical evidence or does artistic license free them from such considerations? Are history movies creative visions of the past that

warrant consideration on their own terms or are they historical accounts that deserve criticism based on their fidelity to facts and evidence? That is, are they to be critiqued as filmic dramas or as works of history?

Some scholars argue that it is proper and reasonable to criticize history movies for the soundness of their historical claims and their factual basis, in the same way that historians critique one another's books. Many professional historians take to task films that distort the historical record (Carnes et al., 1996). A historian who writes prolifically about history films, Robert Toplin (1996) argues,

Questions about responsible portrayals of historical events are appropriate when assessing popular movies that can affect the way millions view the past. To claim that "anything goes" in the name of artistic license is to invite fictional excesses that can grossly distort the public's understanding. Cinema is a powerful tool for communicating feeling and opinion about the past; if historians believe that the tool has been employed irresponsibly, they should articulate their concerns forcefully.... Still, historians cannot treat dramatic entertainment simply as non-fiction brought to life with actors. They should recognize the need to incorporate speculation and myth and to take poetic leaps when presenting history on the screen. (pp. 225-226)

However, Toplin (1996) admits that it is problematic to treat history movies like books: "If we hold cinematic historians strictly to the standards of most written history, we are almost certain to be disappointed, for filmmakers must attend to the demands of drama and the challenges of working with incomplete evidence" (p. 10). Similarly, historian Natalie Davis (2000) is sympathetic to the challenges faced by filmmakers

(herself having worked on the film *The Return of Martin Guerre*). She grants that even when a film distorts known details of the past it can still get to a deeper historical truth—for example, Stanley Kubrick's 1960 film *Spartacus* is largely fictional but nonetheless depicts the greater truth of the resistance against slavery in the Roman Empire. On the other hand, she warns that fictionalization in movies can go too far and that the practice of historians can provide a useful perspective for filmmakers: "Historical films should let the past be the past.... Wishing away the harsh and strange spots in the past, softening or remodeling them like the familiar present, will only make it harder for us to conceive good wishes for the future" (p. 136).

Other scholars argue that it is not sensible to judge history films based on the supposed accuracy of facts and details. Another leading historian interested in film studies, Robert Rosenstone (1995b) contends that "Dragnet historians," scholars principally concerned with a film's fidelity to historical facts ("Just the facts, ma'am"), must understand that a history film cannot be or be treated like a book. Historians, he argues, need to consider the perspectives of cinema theorists, who are more appropriately concerned with the creation and manipulation of meanings, representations, and discourses about the past, not just with accounts of what happened in the past. This stance is echoed by Robert Sklar (1997) in his critique of the "historian-cop" who applies the standards of published history to history on film; he instead advocates greater awareness of how movies are produced and received to better appreciate what audiences see and understand as history on the screen.

History films are not a unitary art form. The most widespread type of history movie is the traditional costume drama that uses the past solely as a setting for romance

and adventure (Rosenstone, 1995c; 2002). A small number deal seriously with the relationship of the past to the present, however, and these experimental films, often produced internationally or by small, artistically minded studios, have attracted the attention of scholars interested in how films can substantively explore the past (Grindon, 1994; Landy, 2001; Rosenstone, 1995a, 1995c). For the past 200 years, history has been an academic discipline with its own rules for evaluating evidence, and the written monograph has been the basic form of contribution. Historical films are history as vision rather than history as monograph; they represent another kind of contribution to historical study that evokes emotional realities and seriously encounters lingering meanings of past events (Rosenstone, 1995c). Zelizer (1997), in defending Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, underscores the legitimacy of popular-culture history movies as part of the "growing diversification of history-making" (p. 20) beyond the traditional authority of historians and their texts. She praises the function of popular-culture representations that give pause to the ongoing scholarly record of historical events, that occasionally shake up the public and rattle its sensibilities about the past, and that make us realize the distinction between the "event-as-it-happened" and the "event-as-it-is-retold"—which she argues is the closest anybody can ever come to the actual past (p. 30).

Debates over the role of artistic imagination in history are hardly new. The philosophical divide between mythic history-as-story and factual history-as-truth goes back to antiquity (Davis, 2000). Homer claimed divine inspiration behind his historical poems, but Herodotus said his knowledge was drawn from what he had "learned by inquiry" and not from a goddess. Thucydides also claimed that his history came from "inquiries" using critical comparisons of accounts and evidence. Whereas poets like

Homer are permitted to exaggerate or invent, Thucydides wrote only what he had witnessed or discovered from reliable sources. However, the writings of Herodotus contain many colorful stories for which there is little evidence, and Thucydides doubted the veracity of some tales. Even Thucydides at times had to fall back on imagination, inserting made-up but appropriate speeches (like Pericles's famed Funeral Oration) that he could not possibly remember word for word.

The philosophical quandary of history-as-art and history-as-truth played a part in the rise of the modern discipline of history. The development of scientific history—the study of historical documents and evidence for the purpose of reconstructing the truth of what happened in the past—was led by the prolific and long-lived German intellectual Leopold von Ranke in the early 19th century. Von Ranke was converted to scientific history by the shock of discovering inaccuracies in Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *Quentin Durward*. He applied methods he had learned for studying linguistics to the study of historical texts in hopes that such inaccuracies could be avoided in the future (Evans, 1997). Von Ranke's reaction to Sir Walter Scott's story, in a sense, kicked off the quest to learn the "truth" about what happened in the past, which would obsess historians in Europe and the United States for more than a hundred years. Although most contemporary historians, swimming in the intellectual currents of the postmodern world, are more circumspect about historical truth and accept the multiplicity of interpretations and the ever-changing character of historical knowledge, there is still hope that historical scholarship amounts to something honest, useful, and meaningful about what happened in the past (Evans, 1997; Novick, 1988). It is this hope in the soundness of historical knowledge that makes possible for many scholars and teachers a distinction between

historical fiction and historical scholarship. Just as von Ranke imagined a way to discern knowable history from the artistic inventions of Sir Walter Scott, students today can study history movies as accounts that blend invention, imagination, and knowledge.

History films, then, hold a place in a long, evolutionary cultural context. Rosenstone (1995b) suggests that history films represent a kind of “postliterate” culture: “Film, with its unique powers of representation, now struggles for a place within a cultural tradition which has long privileged the written word” (p. 43). History films are more akin to older forms of oral history—stories about the past that would have been shared aloud and changed over time, like the Homeric poems. “Literate” culture intervened between then and now, and the written monograph has had a powerful influence on how people relate to the past. History films, Rosenstone contends, are a new visual culture that may change our relationship to the past, just as written culture challenged older oral culture. Though a literate culture will always have book knowledge as a counter-voice to fictionalized stories about the past, in an increasingly visual age the way most people experience history is changing. Rosenstone (2002) argues, “For visual thinking of the past, metaphor and symbol may become far more important than amassing data or creating a logical argument,” and wonders if in the far future written history will be “seen as a religious endeavor, practiced by a priesthood who cares about explicating the truth of sacred texts” (pp. 479–480). Will filmmakers become the dominant public historians? When teachers bring feature films into their classrooms, are they intermediaries for those filmmakers, and do their lessons inculcate in students this emerging visual thinking about the past?

Invention and Evidence in the Historical Film

History films are not just part of culture. They also possess a formula for storytelling (Rosenstone, 1995a). By nature of being movies, they are narratives told from the perspectives of featured characters. Only the most experimental, artistic films have attempted to go beyond the linear narrative structure, and few have enjoyed reception by a mass audience. At its worst, the linear-narrative storytelling formula, with its emphasis on the perspectives of main characters, present a shallow depiction of the complexities of the past. Bartov (1997), in discussing *Schindler's List*, notes this potential problem:

In our post-Holocaust world two major requirements can be detected in public taste for representations of the past. First is the demand for a “human” story of will and determination, decency and courage, and final triumph over the forces of evil. Second is the quest for authenticity, for a story which “actually” happened, though retold according to the accepted conventions of representation. Now, there is obviously a contradiction between these two demands, since authentic stories rarely happen according to accepted conventional representations and even less frequently culminate in the triumph of good over evil. (p. 46)

At its best, however, the linear-narrative storytelling formula can meaningfully engage with historical knowledge and offer intriguing possible depictions of the past. Toplin (1996) writes, “Cinematic historians engage forms of poetic speculation much as historical novelists employ artistic devices. When filmmakers practice this art with a well-informed and sensitive appreciation of history, they can make useful contributions to the public's thinking” (p. 7). In other words, the best history films find ways to reflect the

complexities, uncertainties, and strange differences in the past. The filmic formula is put to the service of depicting history, rather than putting history simply to the service of filmic storytelling conventions. The extent to which a history film succeeds on this measure may be one important, valid criterion in considering its educational value.

It may be helpful to look at how some historians have classified historically themed films and made sense of the filmic conventions and techniques used to make them. Rosenstone (1995a, 1995b) suggests that they can be classified in three categories: *history as drama* (stories with a historical theme or setting, the most common category), *history as document* (documentaries, films that present accounts of true events), and *history as experiment* (avant-garde films that are made in opposition to mainstream cinematic codes of representation, often independent films produced outside Hollywood or films from other countries). Rosenstone (1995b) also details four “moves” of invention used to make history films: *alteration* (changing historical details), *condensation* (using a small sample of characters to stand in for the experiences of larger groups), *compression* (tightening the number of details or passage of time), and *metaphor* (conveying an appropriate historical meaning that goes beyond facts and details). By the medium’s limitations, all history movies require some degree of invention—the combination of many complex events into one representative depiction due to the limits of time, the creation of fictional characters to represent people cannot actually be known to historians (for example, every individual soldier in an army) or to serve as a composite of many minor figures (for example, a regiment’s many sergeants might be combined into one figure), or the imagination of background details that historians cannot know with any veracity but which must nonetheless be depicted in a motion picture (for

example, the specific words historical figures said in private or the particularly furnishings of a room on a particular day).

So, does a film have any responsibility to historical accuracy? It is hard to say how many people go to a Hollywood history movie expecting to be taught the whole truth about the past, but it is likely that many leave wondering what parts of the movie are reasonably accurate and what elements are fabricated. Techniques for responsibly informing the reader about evidence, guesswork, and imagination have long been a part of historians' professional culture. Davis (2000) wonders if they could be adapted to filmmaking, bearing in mind the considerable differences between books and films. She observes that professional historians seek evidence widely and deeply and try to keep an open mind as they assess it, admit when their evidence is uncertain or ambiguous, make it clear when they offer personal interpretation beyond what the evidence strictly presents, try not to impose their subjective judgments on the mental world of historical actors, and should not knowingly falsify or suppress evidence from the past. She asks, "Can there be lively cinematic equivalents to what prose histories try to accomplish in prefaces, bibliographies, and notes and through their modifying and qualifying words 'perhaps,' 'maybe,' and 'we are uncertain about'?" (Davis, 2000, p. 131).

Rosenstone's typology is helpful for distinguishing the types of history media used in the classroom—almost always *history as drama* (Hollywood movies) or *history as document* (History Channel programs, for example). For analyzing the educational potential of history movies, the four moves of invention highlight the ways in which filmmakers incorporate, ignore, change, or twist historical evidence about the past when crafting their stories for the screen. Davis's questions become all the more pressing when

history movies are used in schools. Despite considerable philosophical debate over whether there is objective truth about the past by which “accuracy” can be gauged, schools are responsible for teaching students factual subject matter knowledge. Yet, when it comes to using history movies in the classroom, teachers and students are often on their own in figuring out what parts are based on factual historical evidence and which parts are imaginative fiction. Can classroom uses of history movies explore issues of historical accuracy, interpretation, and imagination, or will these issues be forgotten amidst the exciting sights, sounds, and Hollywood stars? Viewed together, Rosenstone and Davis raise important considerations to keep in mind in investigating the educational potential of movies.

Three Frames from the Scholarly Literature

History films are the object of study for a growing number of scholars and educators. In 1988, the American Historical Association began publishing historians’ discussions about history movies in the *American Historical Review* (an extended collection appeared in volume 95). In 1999, the AHA devoted an entire special issue of the professional newsletter *Perspectives* (volume 37, number 4) to discussions about history movies and programs on cable and television. There are also scholarly journals, such as *Filmhistoria* and *Film and History*, devoted exclusively to the study of history-oriented media and their influence on society. Educational researchers concerned with history and social studies also have taken to writing about history media. Articles about history films frequently appear in *Social Education* (published by the National Council for the Social Studies), *The History Teacher*, and *The Social Studies* (Goldstein, 1995; Johnson & Vargas, 1994; Justice, 2003; Marcus, 2005; Matz & Pingatore, 2005; Metzger,

2005; Seixas, 1993; Sturma & MacCallum, 2000; Weinstein, 2001; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2001).

In reviewing existing scholarship relating to the uses and analyses of history films, I have adduced three theoretical frames that provide helpful background for the issues that this dissertation investigates. Of course, these scholarly frames are not hard-and-fast divisions. There is considerable overlap among and between these perspectives. Historians, as we will see below, do not all comfortably fit within one analytical framework—critical or postmodern historians work within a different framework but are still part of the discipline of history. Each frame is discussed below. I return to them again when detailing the methods for this study (chapter 2), exploring the kinds of educational questions each frame raises. These scholarly frames informed my thinking about the pedagogical functions developed for the content analysis of history films (chapter 3). Furthermore, they served as helpful background as I analyzed four cases of teachers using history movies in the classroom (chapter 4).

Historians' Perspectives

This frame emerges from the scholarship of professional historians and history educators who have taken an interest in films as serious and influential interpretations of the past (Bartov, 1997; Briley, 2002; Carnes et al., 1996; Cheyette, 1997; Davis, 2000; Doherty, 2002; Edgerton, 2001, Grindon, 1994; Landy, 1996, 2001; Loshitzky, 1997; O'Connor, 1990, 2002; Rosenstone, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2002; Sklar, 1997; Sorlin, 2001; Taves, 2001; Toplin, 1996a, 2002a, 2002b; Toplin & Eudy, 2002; Wyke, 2001, Zelizer, 1997). Historians' perspectives do not constitute a single unified theory but reflect a diverse range of thought about history films and their relationship to the written

word and published historical scholarship. There is plenty of room for debate within the historical-disciplinary approach to history media. Toplin (1996a; 2002b) accepts feature films as influential depictions of the past worth attention and criticism from professional historians. It does not help simply to chastise filmmakers for not operating under the exacting standards of evidence used by professional historians, he writes, but “at the same time, we need to be aware of the dangers of too much tolerance. Artistic creativity can be abused. Filmmakers who see no limits to their imagination may present badly distorted pictures of the past” (Toplin, 1996a, p. 2). He praises “cinematic historians” who practice artistic speculation “with a well-informed and sensitive appreciation of history,” noting that “they can make useful contributions to the public’s thinking” about the past (p. 7).

Rosenstone (1995a, 1995b, 2002) argues that a film is not like and cannot be like a book; history films represent an emerging “postliterate” culture of image, sound, and symbol. Visual media provide their own form of truths about the past, different from but not necessarily in conflict with the written word. He contends that professional historians and filmmakers approach the past with a major similarity: “Both possess attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs—entire value systems—that color everything they express and underlie the interpretations by which they organize and give meaning to traces of the past. Such interpretations may be seen as at once the most important and the most fictional part of history” (p. 6). In contrast to Toplin’s (1996a, 2002) focus on commercial mass-media history movies, Rosenstone (1995c) believes that “New History” films, most of which come out of Third-World postcolonial contexts or European countries experiencing social upheaval, are more important than Hollywood costume

dramas or traditional documentaries. Toplin and Rosenstone even carried their academic disagreement into the pages of the AHA newsletter *Perspectives*, (volume 37, numbers 4 and 8), where they debated the current state of research on the historical film scholarship and the appropriate role for film-studies theory. This brief review of just two leading scholars demonstrates the diversity among historians' perspectives.

Yet, there is space for consensus. More recently, Toplin (2002b) has written that "the challenge of assessing cinematic history involves more than just raising complaints about the handling of evidence.... A sophisticated response also calls for recognition of the distinctive ways that movies can stir the public's thinking about history" (p. 203). Like Davis (2000) and Rosenstone (1995a, 1995b), Toplin recognizes that an excessive focus on literal factuality, what Sklar (1997) called the "historian-cop," misses the medium's broader potential as stimulant to historical thinking. Taken overall, historians' perspectives conceptualize history feature films as valid historical interpretations for scholarly critique, examining their narratives in light of known evidence, cogency of historical argument, and effectiveness of their elements of historical imagination. Even if one accepts that history is constructed by individuals within ideological and socio-cultural contexts, there is a difference between an account of the past based on available and widely recognized historical evidence and an account that is wholly or partly imagined in the creator's mind. This frame suggests that there are multiple perspectives on past events. For example, was Davy Crockett captured and executed by Santa Ana's soldiers as some period accounts suggest, or did Crockett fight to the death as many Americans have preferred to believe? *The Alamo* (2004) chose to depict the former

account, but we cannot know for certain and can only debate the extant, imperfect evidence.

Historical Thinking and Collective Memory

This frame is drawn from two distinct but complementary veins of scholarship. Taken together, those lines of scholarship conceptualize history movies as sites of meaning-making about the past and its relationship to the present. Studying history is a psychological act of individual cognition, a social act between individuals, communities, and generations, and a cultural act employing collectively remembered narrative “texts” that relate the past to the present in ways comprehensible to those who share the common culture. Though this hybrid frame embraces a wide range of theoretical currents, as a whole it captures the complexity of the issues behind history education and underscores the multiple ways in which historical thinking shapes and is shaped by cultural knowledge and memory.

Historical thinking (here I also include historical consciousness) is reflected in a wide range of scholarship on how people learn, use, and make sense of the history (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Ashby & Lee, 1987; Bain, 2000; Barton & Levstik, 1998, 2004; Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Carretero, Jacott, Limon, & Lopez-Manjon, 1994; Epstein & Shiller, 2005; Husbands, Kitson, & Pendry, 2003; Husbands & Pendry, 2000; Leinhardt, Stainton, & Virji, 1994; Levstik, 2000; Seixas, 1993, 1994, 2004; VanSledright, 2002; Von Borries, 1994; Wineburg, 1991, 2001; Wineburg et al., 2000). The field has been influenced by Sam Wineburg’s (2001) research on how students construct understandings of the past, make sense of both similarities and strange

differences between past and present, and convey meanings about the past across generations. Wineburg describes historical thinking as a strange and difficult act:

Historical thinking requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off, and, second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past. (p. 12)

In other words, we cannot think about the past divorced from our own lives shaped by place and time, but if we do not explicitly recognize our situated perspectives we are likely to impose it on a strange past in order to make it seem more familiar to us.

Wineburg and his colleagues have also explored the role of film in historical thinking, in particular the 1994 Oscar-winning film *Forrest Gump* and its iconic representations of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s. When interviewing parents and students about the period, they found that the film was mentioned repeatedly; as a “shared text between parent and child, its influence was peerless” (Wineburg et al., 2000, p. 57). Wineburg (2001) has further argued that movies like *Forrest Gump* may play a role similar to that played by “sacred texts” in earlier times—consumed repeatedly by members of the culture until those texts become part of the social consciousness (p. 241). Wineburg’s contribution to the field of historical thinking points specifically to how movies can function as common texts that pass on certain historical meanings between generations while forgetting certain other meanings.

Another prolific contributor to the field is Peter Seixas (1993; 1994; 2004). Seixas (1993) conducted one of the first studies explicitly about student responses to history feature films, showing segments of the 1990 film *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and

the 1956 Western *The Searchers* to 11 Vancouver high schoolers to probe their thinking about Native American-White relations. He points out that viewing popular-culture movies is related to the problem of empathic imagination: “Students are likely to be swept quite completely into the 'historical' world as presented on film, but unlikely to exercise critical judgements of the filmic depiction of the past” (p. 352). This was especially true, he found, of the more recent *Dances with Wolves*, rooted in the contemporary culture in which students live and act. He concluded about the students’ evaluations of the film:

Its effectiveness was based on its being “realistic,” not on its being “accurate”....

Not having much information on the historical topic, when forced to make a judgement, [students] fell back on their knowledge of “human nature” and their sense of an appropriate and believable narrative line.... In other words, ironically, the more a “historical” film presents life in the past as being similar to life in the present, the more believable it is to these students. (Seixas, 1993, p. 364)

In other words, the influence of movies on students’ historical thinking can be powerful. Seixas (1993) cautions that uncritical immersion in such films is a “dangerous strategy on which to base history instruction, since it simply strengthens students’ already considerable propensity to accept uncritically the media’s presentations of the past” (p. 366). Represented by the research of Wineburg and Seixas, historical thinking must be understood as complex individual cognition with substantial socio-cultural overtones.

Collective memory (or cultural/social memory) is reflected in scholarship about how ideas, meanings, and understandings of the past are socially constructed and collectively shared across generations through families, media, works of art, literature,

and film, museums, and public parks and monuments (Bal, Crewe, & Spitzer, 1999; Frisch, 1989; Gedi & Elam, 1996; Kammen, 1995; Klein, 2000; Lowenthal, 1997; Megill, 1998; Nora, 1989; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Ozick, 1999; Radstone, 2000; Schudson, 1995; Sobchack, 1996; Wertsch, 1994, 2000, 2002, 2004; Zerubavel, 2003). Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer (1999) define social/cultural memory as remembering that is a cultural as well as individual phenomenon. Cultural remembering is something actually performed as a result of collective agency: “Cultural memorization is an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (p. vii). For example, a Western icon like Custer has been redescribed in cultural memory over the past several decades from unambiguously a hero of westward expansion (as people who grew up in the 1950s might remember) to a representative of exploitative Manifest Destiny; at the Little Big Horn today, a statue of his Sioux enemy towers over the old monument to Custer’s Last Stand.

Wineburg (2001) reinforces this observation in his distinction between “collective memory” and “collective occlusion” (stories and cultural codes blocked in the transmission from one generation to the next). “Collective memory acts as a filter,” he argues—what is remembered or occluded is constantly reshaped by contemporary social pressures (p. 249). Some researchers have noted that collective memory can be distorted across time and different societal groups (Schacter, 1995). Schudson (1995) argues, “Distortion is inevitable. Memory is a distortion since memory is invariably and inevitably selective. A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a way of remembering is a way of forgetting, too” (p. 348). Thus, people remember their collective past through constructed narratives. Schudson (1995) suggests how movies are a kind of narrative

memory text—the 1976 film *All the President's Men* collapses the Watergate affair into a narrative of two heroic reporters exposing a corrupt government, and the 1965 movie musical *The Sound of Music* remembers Austrians mainly as Nazi victims rather than collaborators. However, Kammen (1995) points out that “distortion or even the manipulation of collective memory does not always, or inevitably, occur for cynical or hypocritical reasons” (p. 340). Broad shifts in public narratives frequently coincide with major social transformations. “How else can [society] coherently adapt to change, often desirable change, without being plagued by a sense of inconsistency or sham?” (p. 340).

James Wertsch (1994; 2000; 2002; 2004) is an influential contributor to the literature on the process of collective remembering. Wertsch (2002) contends that collective remembering occurs through “narrative texts” that are important to us and that people tend to think simply relate what actually happened. They are stories and impressions that represent perceived notions of truth about the past. Narratives (whether from books, school, movies, or family lore) serve as “textual resources” that stand in between the events themselves (which younger members of the society could not have experienced themselves) and individual understandings of them. Collective memory is inherently “multivoiced”—which is to say, memory is “distributed” between the performing individual and the “cultural tools” (language, narratives) employed. The result is a “mediated action” that is a product of a “textual community”—the voice of the actor and the available cultural tools. He rejects notions of “internalization” of collective memory in favor of “mastery” (the ability to use a narrative without necessitating any emotional commitment to it) and “appropriation” (to make a received narrative one’s own). The counterpoint to appropriation is “resistance”—just because a narrative is

mastered (or used) does not mean it is internally appropriated. Wertsch (2002) further observes:

The tendency [is] to assume that it is somehow possible to produce collective memory directly. Such an assumption is reflected in analyses that imply that if we know about the narrative texts produced by a collective, we know what people will think, believe, and say. In actuality, even the most exhaustive study of text production cannot tell us whether narratives will be used in the way intended by their producers. (p. 117)

Wertsch's conceptualization is useful for considering the educational uses of history movies. Schools are important sites for collective remembering. History movies are widely circulated narratives about the past and how it relates to the present. They are also textual resources employed as tools in cultural discourses, as demonstrated in the Seixas (1993; 1994) and Wills (1994) studies of how students made use of *Dances with Wolves*. Students are social actors who will use a textual resource in their own ways—sometimes even in ways not intended by their teachers.

Critical Media Scholarship

This frame emerges from critical cultural and media studies that view media texts as sites for social power, control, resistance, and formation of individual and societal identities (Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Ellsworth & Whatley, 1990; Fiske, 1989; Giroux, 1999; 2002; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Masterman, 1985; Segall, 1997, 1999; Shohat & Stamm, 1994; Stoddard, 2004). Segall (1997) has usefully defined the critical media perspective as it applies to schools: "The core principle of media education is that media are symbolic systems that need to be actively read....

This, in turn, encourages students to actively produce their own meanings rather than accept institutionalized meanings as givens” (pp. 230-231). A chief goal of critical media education, then, is to educate students to be critical consumers of media, aware of the influence media exert on individuals and society. Media are not just consumer entertainment choices but tools for the active construction of social identities and hierarchies.

Segall (1997) contends that students need to be “encouraged to explore how knowledge (text) is produced, legitimated, and interpreted in its historical and social contexts” (p. 233). Extending Segall’s rationale to history films, it is not sufficient to think of history movies simply as expressions of knowledge—they are media texts with social meanings explicitly and implicitly coded in them. For example, in the Steven Spielberg’s 2005 film *Munich*, the Jewish characters speak English while their enemies speak Arabic with subtitles. This choice is an intentional act that creates distance between the PLO and the audience and more intimacy with the Jewish protagonist. Exploring films as social texts takes on even greater importance when the film deals with issues of race, power, and social inclusion (Stoddard, 2004; Stoddard & Marcus, in press). Building on Shohat and Stamm’s (1994) work on the “burden of historical representation,” Stoddard (2004) argues that films that portray marginalized or underrepresented groups need to be used in the classroom especially carefully if students are to be “able to form a more complex and diverse understanding of the great and multiple contributions of all groups in our history” (p. 23). If not, students (especially those of privileged backgrounds) could conclude that dominant societal power

arrangements seen in mainstream films are normal, natural, and beyond the need to critique or even consider.

The critical media frame raises controversial issues that deserve to be considered when looking at the educational uses of history movies. Films are like any other curricular material employed by a teacher for instructional purposes. Ellsworth and Whatley (1990) ask, “How does the use of visual representation in curriculum materials privilege some ways of knowing over others?” (p. 3). The powerful images of movies communicate particular messages and information, and as a consequence others messages and information are de-emphasized or ignored. Fiske (1989) notes the “intertextuality” between popular culture commodities, as texts, and their audiences. Different audiences read texts in different ways and make different uses: “The popular text is a text of struggle between forces of...the readerly and the producerly” (Fiske, 1989, p. 127). Movies (as media texts) in the classroom operate within an intertextuality between how the students and teachers (as readers/audience) respond and make use of them and the producer-intended responses and uses of the films as commercial commodities. Media texts involving history, including movies, are produced for particular purposes to convey particular messages about the past and society today. Masterman (1985) argues that any history film,

should be seen as an ideological “working” of the past for the purposes of the present. Students need to ask why this particular subject has been chosen, why it is being treated in this way, what “lessons” are being drawn from it, and with whose point of view we are being encouraged to identify. (p. 259)

In other words, history films are not just about the past but also its relation to our world today. What history they cover is only part of the equation, along with how they cover it and why. In this sense, they are no different than written histories, which are influenced by the passions, beliefs, and enthusiasms of their historian-authors (Jenkins, 1991; Novick, 1988)

Critical scholarship generally espouses a radical-left ideology, perhaps best reflected in the scholarship of Henry Giroux (1999; 2002). Though skeptical of the influence of corporations like Disney on youth, he embraces film study in education as a powerful learning tool. For Giroux (2002), films are “a new form of pedagogical text” (p. 8) that “offer a pedagogical space for addressing how a society views itself and the public world of power, events, politics, and institutions” (p. 10). It is possible to utilize the explanatory power of this critical media scholarship without necessarily subscribing to its ideological stances. This dissertation endeavors to be conscious of the core issues raised by the critical media frame, chiefly that feature films are multifaceted societal texts that warrant careful analytical readings by scholars who study them and teachers who use them with students.

Rationale and Organization

With the history feature films conceptualized as a subject of research and equipped with three theoretical frames drawn from scholarly literature, I now can lay out the purposes and shape of the coming chapters. First, I detail the core questions at the heart of this study—what I have learned about the instructional uses of history movies. Then, I summarize the chapters to come and what they aim to accomplish.

Guiding Questions

Two core questions lay at the heart of this study. First there is the question: “What can students learn about the past, the people in it, and its relationship to our world today from history movies?” History feature films are complex and diverse media texts. Each film is a unique combination of selected historical information, interpretations, and imaginations. They are narratives about the past made by and for people in the present. It is important to consider what films can teach students about the past and its connection to our contemporary experiences. How do movies convey factual historical knowledge as well as fictional imagination? How do movies communicate meanings about history, about people, and about societies? Most importantly, these questions explore the inherent characteristics history movies possess that teachers can mobilize in their lessons.

There is also a second question: “What movies do teachers use in the classroom, in what ways, and to what purposes and educational ends?” Teachers have a vast selection of movies to choose from when designing film-based lessons. A film chosen for classroom use is selected for specific purposes and employed in particular ways to achieve instructional goals. Different teachers may use the same film in very different ways to different ends. Every teacher has his or her own unique range of motivations—intentions, needs, hopes, and goals—in bringing history movies into the classroom. How do teacher motivations affect the film as experienced by students in the classroom? What do these film-based lessons actually look like when carried out in the classroom? How do students receive these film-based lessons? Most importantly, these questions explore why teachers are drawn to the classroom use of movies, why they use them in the ways that they do, and how students respond to them as instructional experiences.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation contains two loosely connected studies of history feature films as texts for learning about the past. The first component is a conceptual analysis of the educational potential of history movies; the purpose is to illustrate a way of evaluating history films as instructional tools. The second component is a field study of teachers and students watching films in actual secondary classrooms. Though these components were conceived and conducted distinctly, this dissertation points out the connections between them. In this introduction, I have tried to conceptualize my research subject, position it within scholarly literature, and detail the kinds of questions this study aims to address. The chapters to follow are summarized below.

Methods for Studying History Movies in the Classroom (chapter 2) details the methodology employed in this study. It discusses the evolution of the project, both intellectually and in execution. The chapter returns to the three scholarly frames and describes how they informed the development of a pedagogical content analysis framework for history feature films. Additionally, it describes methods for fieldwork in actual classrooms, how teachers and students were recruited as participants, and the observations and interviews in which they participated.

The Educational Potential of History Feature Films (chapter 3) focuses conceptually on history feature films as subject-matter texts. The chapter lays out a framework for conducting pedagogical content analyses of history movies, examining what a film teaches about the past, the people in it, and its connection to the world today along six pedagogical dimensions. The framework is applied in full on three history feature films with the potential to be used, in whole or in part, in secondary classrooms.

Seeing the Past, Playing It Safe: Four Cases of History Feature Films in the Classroom (chapter 4) focuses on teacher and student interactions with history movies. It explores teachers' goals and motivations for teaching with film, how teachers actually use film in the classroom, and what their film-based lessons accomplish. The chapter offers four in-depth case studies of instructional uses of history movies in actual secondary classrooms and analyzes what these teachers tried to do and why.

Conclusion: The Place of History Feature Films in Historical Literacy (chapter 5) ties together the previous chapters. It offers further thoughts on why teachers use history movies in their classrooms and lays out a vision of the role history feature films can play in helping students develop historical literacy. Additionally, it considers some practical implications of instructional uses of feature films on history teaching and learning.

Chapter 2

Methods for Studying History Movies in the Classroom

This dissertation explores the potential of commercial mass-media feature historical films when used for instructional ends. I employ three different research methods: content analysis of three specific history feature films; observational case studies of four different teachers; and in-depth interviews with the four teachers and a small sample of their students. This chapter explicates the methods employed in the study and their affordances and limitations.

Defining the Object of Analysis

This study focuses exclusively on the use of *commercial mass-media history motion pictures/feature films*, colloquially called “history movies.” The first defining characteristic is their *commercial* quality: they are consumable products made principally for-profit, not educational purposes, and after their initial theatrical run or airings on cable/satellite or broadcast television broadcast are released on private home video. The second defining characteristic is *mass-media* orientation: wide national distribution in a large number of movie theaters (generally more than one thousand screens in the opening week) or on a major American cable/satellite or broadcast television network. Hence, scholars often use the more general term “feature films” to describe them—they are full-length “features” made by a film-production studio. The final essential characteristic is their *historical* nature: the majority of screen time depicts historical settings or actual historical figures or events. The “historical” measure can only be arbitrarily defined: for the purposes of this study, a film is “historical” if it is set in a time period more than one full decade from the present year, 2006.

These definitional characteristics permit us to usefully distinguish between possible film selections. By the above definition, *Black Hawk Down* (2001) would be a possible title in this study—the film, distributed by Columbia Pictures and opening in wide release on more than 3,000 screens, depicts the U.S. military action in Somalia in 1992. Likewise, *All the President's Men* (1976) is a possible selection—though the film was made only a few years after the Watergate affair, it was distributed by Warner Brothers and depicts events that occurred now more than 30 years ago. *Caesar* (2002) is also a possible selection—though the film was produced in Europe, it originally aired in the U.S. on TNT cable network and was subsequently released on home video. The above characteristics also exclude certain selections. First, any documentary film that is not presented in the format of a dramatic narrative story is excluded, even if it had a theatrical release—for example, *Fog of War* (2003). Likewise, educational documentary films produced for television (PBS) or cable (History Channel) networks are excluded. Additionally, dramatic films depicting past events that occurred less than a decade ago (for example, films made in the past few years about the Enron corporate scandal) are excluded. Lastly, small-scale independent (“art”) films or international films without a domestic U.S. distributor are excluded; such films generally are not widely available on VHS or DVD and are less likely then to be used in schools.

Exclusion is not a criticism of the quality of these films, their historical interest, or their pedagogical potential. The purpose for defining the object of analysis in these terms—*commercial mass-media history motion-pictures/feature films*—is to consider the most influential popular-culture feature films about history that schoolchildren may encounter. These are movies that youths (especially teenagers) are most likely to see on

their own and that teachers are most likely to use in the classroom. Some scholars are primarily interested in experimental “New History” art films (Grindon, 1994; Landy, 2001; Rosenstone, 1995c), but these are too obscure to find widespread use in U.S. public schools. Nonetheless, the analytic tools employed in this study could very well be extended to the study of other kinds of film as well.

Pedagogical Content Analyses of History Feature Films

The first approach taken to exploring the potential pedagogical use of films entailed generating and testing a conceptual framework for document content analysis of history feature films and what they might teach or be used to teach a viewer about the past and its connection to our world today. Methods for content analysis of visual, audio, and print documents are well established in quantitative research domains (General Accounting Office [GAO], 1989; List, 2002; Stemler, 2001). As described in the literature, typical methods involve defining analytical categories, dividing up discrete segments of content in the document into the appropriate categories, and calculating the frequencies that certain instances in specific categories. For example, literary scholars have used quantitative content analysis methods on writings of uncertain authorship by calculating the rates of usage of certain words or phrases and comparing them to the rates of usage of known authors. If the document of uncertain authorship uses certain uncommon phrasings at a similar rate to a document of known authorship, it is likely that they share the same author. This study, however, does not employ content analysis for quantitative calculations. Instead, it takes the core idea of content analysis—a structured consideration of visual and auditory material within established and carefully defined

categories—and extends them into qualitative domains for the purposes of analyzing the pedagogical potential of history feature films.

What I call “pedagogical content analysis” is the resulting product, an analytical tool for considering a film’s pedagogical potential to teach the viewer about history. It is concerned with how the film’s content (characterizations, dialogue, imagery, sounds), narrative structures (storytelling devices and screenplay organization), and visual and aural rhetorics (filmic conventions, scenic devices, and choices in sights and sounds) convey information, alternative interpretations, and thematic messages about the past and the people in it. The framework defines three categorical dyads (pairs of related pedagogical functions) and uses them to explore both the holistic shape (the film-document’s overall, dominant narrative) and discrete elements (individual scenes and their relationship to each other) of a history feature film. The actual pedagogical content analysis framework is presented and described in chapter 3.

I began the development of the content analysis rubric by consulting the literature on content analysis methods (GAO, 1989; List, 2002; Stemler, 2001). However, these extant methods were chiefly quantitative and did not directly address the kinds of meanings and interpretations that I wanted to examine in history feature films. Informed by the literature on cultural, media, and history film studies (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Fiske, 1989; Hayward, 1996; Landy, 1996; Loshitzky, 1997; Masterman, 1985; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992; Schatz, 2004; Sobchack, 1996) and consulting journals like *Film Comment* and *Film Quarterly*, I set out to construct my own framework. Important to the development of my thinking was the scholarship on history in media (Carnes, Mico, Miller-Monzon, & Rubel, 1996; Davis, 2000; Doherty, 2002;

Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Landy, 2001; O'Connor, 1990, 2002; Rosenstone, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2002; Sorlin, 2001; Toplin, 1996a, 2002a, 2002b; Toplin & Eudy, 2002; Weinstein, 2001), on how people think about history and participate in collective or social remembering of the past, including through movies (Bal, Crewe, & Spitzer, 1999; Frisch, 1989; Gedi & Elam, 1996; Kammen, 1995; Klein, 2000; Lowenthal, 1997; McGill, 1998; Nora, 1989; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Ozick, 1999; Radstone, 2000; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998; Schacter, 1995; Seixas, 1993, 1994, 2004; Stoddard & Marcus, in press; Wertsch, 2002, 2004; Wills, 1994; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2000; Zerubavel, 2003), and on film in cultural studies and media education (Buckingham, 2003; Ellsworth & Whatley, 1990; Giroux, 1999, 2002; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Segall, 1997).

Three scholarly frames were adduced from my reading: historians' perspectives, historical thinking/collective memory, and critical media scholarship. Each frame suggests distinct central questions about the educational uses of history feature films (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

Three Scholarly Frames Informing This Study

| | Central Questions |
|----------------------------|--|
| Historians' Perspectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role should historical scholarship/evidence play in history feature films and what is the place for invention? • What makes a history feature film's account of the past valid or invalid, sound or objectionable? • What kinds of history feature films convey the most powerful content knowledge for use in schools? |
| Historical Thinking/Memory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do history feature films influence the ways that people construct, communicate, and make use of the past? • How do history feature films function as "narratives" that mediate collective remembering and uses of the past? • How do history feature films shape which understandings of the past are appropriated or occluded by young learners? |
| Critical Media Scholarship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do history feature films create, reinforce, or challenge existing social identities and power hierarchies? • What knowledge and mental skills do young learners need to think critically about history films as media texts? • What kinds of curricular and instructional attention are most effective in helping students learn from history films? |

These three frames and their central questions informed the development of the pedagogical content analysis. Pedagogical functions along which the educational potential of a history movie could be analyzed emerged from the issues that I inferred in the scholarly literature. As explain in full in chapter 3, each function is a substantive lens through which I explored particular concerns, but each is also linked with a closely allied set of concerns. Hence, I have conceived them as six separately defined functions in

three dyads. Table 2.2 lists the functions as dyads and details the analytic questions central to the paired functions individually and jointly.

Table 2.2

Pedagogical Content Analysis Functions, Dyads, and Their Central Questions

| | Central Questions | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| | Jointly | Individually |
| Content Coverage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historical fact and fiction How does the film make use of factual information and fictional invention? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well does the film convey historical knowledge based on scholarly evidence about the past? |
| Period Representation | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How effectively does the film re-create or represent particular eras or elements in the past? |
| Historical Construction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructing the past and the people in it How does the film build its historical narrative and social depictions of its characters? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the film build a historical narrative through available evidence and interpretations of the past? |
| Social Construction | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How appropriately does the film convey messages about people in the past, especially marginalized groups in relation to dominant groups? |
| Empathy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reacting to the past What are the film's interpretive themes about the past and what ethical stances/ messages are conveyed? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the film involve the viewer emotionally in its representations of the past? |
| Moral Response | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What conclusions about people, perspectives, or events in the past are conveyed by the film and how are they connected to our world today? |

Evolution of the Framework

The pedagogical content analysis framework evolved in stages. In its initial inception, I tried to stick close to its roots in quantitative document analysis. I developed a grid-like checklist that sorted each scene in the film into one of the analytical categories, with the ultimate purpose of tallying under which pedagogical function the film is best classified (i.e., this film is mainly a “historical empathy” film). However, I came to realize that a quantitative focus was too blunt. What I was really interested in was the film’s historical meanings and messages, not in calculating elements or classifying film types. Furthermore, it made little sense to classify a film as chiefly associated with one particular pedagogical function when a film relates to every pedagogical function in some manner. Consequently, I shifted to format that allowed me to use all of the analytical categories in analyzing each film.

The dyads themselves changed slightly, too. Initially, I paired Period Representation with Social Representation (what later become Social Construction) and Historical Construction with Content Coverage. While doing the first film analysis (for *The Alamo*), I realized that the “representation” aspects did not align as meaningfully as I initially conceived—what was really at the heart of that function was the active construction of societal elements. Revised as Social Construction, it was paired with Historical Construction—the active construction of historical narrative elements. Likewise, Period Representation was paired with Content Coverage. My experience with the first film analysis helped me align the connections and distinguish the specific domains of the Content Coverage/Period Representation dyad more meaningfully. *The Alamo* analysis was reorganized along the lines of the revised framework, which I used

for the next two film analyses. Once the framework was set down in a clear, concrete, and replicable format, it was possible to make cross-case comparisons of the films. Although each pedagogical content analysis is unique and linked to the context of the specific film, the common stock of pedagogical functions and their defining characteristics and questions makes it possible to group the kinds of concerns and information generated across different films.

The study's three components were conceptualized as loosely linked investigations of the use of historical films in secondary classrooms from three perspectives: the film, the teacher, and the students. Thus, the pedagogical content analysis framework was intentionally designed in advance of any fieldwork. Viewing and analyzing films prior to fieldwork allowed me to recalibrate my own assumptions and views concerning historical films and their use in classrooms (I return to the issue of my own biases shortly). While it might have been ideal to have aligned the film document analysis with the actual films in the observational component of this study, participating teachers and the feature films they would be using had not been identified yet.¹ As a result, I chose films based on external criteria (see chapter 3).

Teachers Using History Feature Films

The second inquiry involved a comparative field study of four teachers and their uses of film in secondary social studies classrooms. My observations and interviews were conducted from November, 2005 through January, 2006. I begin by explaining the

¹ Indeed, even finding teachers who could commit to using a particular film would have been difficult. Experienced teachers have a collection of films to choose from, and it was my experience in the fieldwork that decisions about which films to use were made, and then revised, depending on how the curriculum was advancing or which film the teacher believed would be best for the students. One teacher (Kellie) changed her mind about which film to use over the weekend before showing it in class on Monday.

strategies used for soliciting participation of the teachers. Afterward, I describe the strategies for interviewing the teachers and observing their film-based lessons.

Sample and Access

While films are used widely in social studies classrooms, there is no centrally located repository of information concerning teachers who use films, or what films they use. Furthermore, one cannot guarantee that a randomly selected teacher will use a film in his or her social studies classroom. Thus, I had to develop a means for selecting participants that targeted teachers who were known users of historical films. To identify and recruit possible participants, I asked colleagues (university faculty, other graduate students, personal friends and acquaintances in the teaching profession) to nominate middle- and high-school social studies teachers who used history feature films in the classroom and might be open to letting an outsider observer visit. Four colleagues (two graduate students, one graduate student still working as a classroom teacher, and one friend working as a classroom teacher) responded with nominations of one middle-school and seven high-school teachers working in the tri-county area around Michigan State University; two colleagues nominated one additional teacher in more distant counties, as fallback possibilities. I made initial contact with the eight nominated teachers in the tri-county area through postal mail. Three did not reply, five did.

Following the university's required protocol for securing human-subjects research approval, I then initiated contact with the administration of the four school districts. Designated officials (the principals in three of the schools, a district assistant superintendent in one) responded and granted approval for the named teachers to participate in the research. However, by this time a teacher at the fourth school district

stopped corresponding with me, despite repeated attempts to contact her by phone, email, and letter. Thus, she was removed from the sample. Ultimately, the study proceeded with four participants (pseudonymously named Isabel, Kellie, Marie, and Regina) at three schools (pseudonymously named Great Falls High School, Ottawa High School, and Waynesburg Middle School). All four teachers participated in the study through data collection (see appendix A for consent forms). However, one left on maternity leave shortly thereafter and could no longer be contacted.

These four teachers do not form a representative sample. First, all are women in their late twenties or older. Second, three are White, and the one teacher of color is not originally from the United States and is a legal resident (not a citizen). Third, their three school districts are mostly suburban, largely of middle-class socio-economic status, and have student populations that are overwhelmingly White (Black and Hispanic populations are underrepresented in all three schools compared to broader U.S. demographics). Though they and their students may not be representative demographically, they are typical of a great many suburban classrooms throughout the country. In future research, I plan to study teachers and students in more diverse settings, since there is some history education research that suggests that students from different backgrounds respond to texts and curriculum in history classrooms in different ways (Epstein & Shiller, 2005; Levstik, 2000; Price, 1998).

Observational data collection. Frequent communication (by phone and email) was established with the participating teachers in order to identify when feature films would be used in their classrooms and to schedule interviews and observations. Prior to the observations, I developed a rubric to focus my attention during the fieldwork. The

elements of that rubric included: the timing of activities, the amount of time spent on discussions, the questions and comments discussed by the teacher and students during class time, and evidence of teacher motivations enacted and student reactions to them. Field notes were written on a laptop during the observations. No video or audio recordings were made during field observations.

As part of the approval to work with the teachers, I agreed only to come into their classrooms when invited and not to interfere with the normal functioning of the class time or school day for the students. As a consequence, when I was able to visit the classrooms and for how many days varied among the participants. Whenever possible, I tried to arrange visits before the classroom use of the film, during the days in which the film was shown, and for any day after the film was shown when it was discussed or used for an activity in class. In most cases, I observed only one specific class period nominated by the teacher. In Regina's case, the film was shown during an all-day special event in the school auditorium for all of her classes at once; thus, I observed all her classes at once on this day and then observed one specific class period thereafter. Field observations focused on the teacher's practice, the shape of the lesson experienced by the class as a whole, and on public comments and questions during the observed lessons. Field notes were typed in real-time during the classes on a laptop computer using an organizational rubric document made to be used with MS-WORD.

The organizational rubric template (see appendix B) illustrates the kinds of things I was looking and listening for while observing lessons. First, I gathered information about the course and classroom context—numbers of students and their diversity, course and unit names, course textbook used. Second, for each period observed, I tried to keep

track of what different activities or events affecting the classroom occurred, at what times, and for how long. Third, I endeavored to note the substance of all audible in-class communications between the teacher and students. Since I did not have permission to audio-record class sessions, I described what they were talking about and the apparent meaning, illustrated as needed by quotations. Even this proved extremely difficult, as my placement in the room limited what I could see or hear, individual student remarks often were inaudible, and comments during class discussions frequently overlapped.

Using my field notes, I then wrote lengthy, descriptive narrative case studies for each teacher's use of a film. These narrative write-ups organized the notes on class timing, activities, and teacher-student interaction and comments into a descriptive and chronological framework. These descriptive cases were then used as the basis for the full analyses in chapter 4.

Interview data collection. Teacher interviews were guided by semi-structured protocols written in advance. Questions fell into three clusters: background questions about the teacher's professional experience; questions about the teacher's planned use of the film; and a post-film reflection, which occurred from one to four weeks later. In some cases the background portion and pre-film interviews were conducted on the same day, while in other cases they were arranged on separate days (depending on the teachers' schedules). Interviews were held at various times convenient for the teacher's schedule, usually after school but before school in one case and during a planning/lunch period in another case (see appendix C for interview protocols).

The "background" portion asked teachers to talk about their education and experience as teachers, about their uses of media in the classroom in general, and about

the unit I would be observing. The “pre-film” portion specifically explored their reasons for their film choice, their intentions for using the film, their previous experiences using the film, and their general opinions about the influence and factuality of history movies. The post-film reflection allowed teachers to talk about the lessons I observed and how they thought those lessons went. I then presented them with six hypothetical scenarios of classroom uses of history movies and asked each teacher to offer their thoughts on the scenarios, as a way to explore their philosophies about history and to expand my understanding of each teacher’s perspectives beyond the specifics of the single film I observed them use.

All teacher interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded along the dimensions of teacher motivation for using films in the classroom that were delineated in chapter 1 (covering content; motivating student interest; rewarding student behavior; attending to personal needs; complicating historical interpretations provided by textbooks; advancing a particular worldview; personal passion). Other codes reflected practical or technical issues: amount of video (used in class); selecting video (finding, choosing, and acquiring video); video content (curriculum, subject matter, images and depictions); video ethics (in selection and use, in dealing with parents, kids, and schools); video uses (in lesson planning and teaching); student learning (from video); student responses (to video); opinions on movies (from the teacher, about films and the film industry). These codes were used to identify portions of the interviews to analyze more extensively (see chapter 4).

Student Reactions to History Feature Films

The third method of inquiry involved students' reactions to history feature films. I begin by explaining the issues affecting the selection of and access to students. Then, I describe the strategies for interviewing small samples of students after participating in their teacher's film-based lesson.

Sample and Access

Working with minors is one of the most sensitive aspects of educational research. No students were approached as part of this study until after the teachers had consented to participate and formal consent was granted by designated officials of the school districts. The classroom teachers were given full discretion over whether students could be interviewed and how they could be recruited.

Ideally, I hoped to interview two pairs of students from each of the four participating classrooms, but I was constrained by teacher willingness to facilitate interviews and student willingness to participate. All of the teachers postponed discussing this aspect of my study with their students until the last possible day. In the end, I was able to arrange interviews with seven students: two 8th graders (Marie's class), two 9th graders (Isabel's class), and three 10th graders (Kellie's class). In one case (Marie), the teacher on her own selected two students and personally asked them to volunteer to be interviewed. In another case (Isabel), the teacher asked the class for volunteers and selected the first two who agreed. Only in one case (Kellie) did the teacher follow my suggestion to have students indicate willingness to be interviewed on their consent forms, by which means they could be identified and approached privately.

Regina initially said that she would personally recruit student volunteers but ultimately did not do so and declined to provide for student interviews.

The students are not representative of the broader U.S. population. As explained above, these three schools are largely White, middle-class, and suburban. For the interview sample, there was a reasonable division by gender (three girls, four boys) but six of the seven students are European American (one girl was born in Germany); the seventh student identified himself as Arab American. Though the students in the observed classes and the interview samples are not representative demographically, they struck me as quite typical of pre-teens and teenagers in suburban, predominantly White schools across the Midwestern U.S.

Observations. As described above, consent forms were requested from all students and their parents. Return rates varied: 25/26 (96%) for Kellie's class, 11/19 (58%) for Isabel's class, and 7/23 (30%) for Marie's class; for Regina's assembled classes with approximately 125 students, 74 formal consent forms were returned plus seven informal notes granting permission (approximately 65%) and two parents returned the forms with handwritten notes asking that the students be exempted due to scheduling conflicts. As required by the university's human-subjects policy and explicitly explained on the consent form, I still would be able to observe the teacher's class but could not interact with any students who did not return a consent form.

Given that there was not a 100% return rate and distinguishing consenting individuals from non-participants proved impossible, I did not interact with individual students and did not explicitly identify individual students in my field notes. Classroom observations focused on the teacher and her interactions with the class, and student

identities were kept generic (male, female) when their comments and interactions were given attention. The methods for including students in the field notes using the organizational rubric previously described.

Interviews. Student interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol (see appendix C). Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the students and approved by the teacher. Marie arranged my interview with her students. Isabel and Kellie informed me of the dates of school-wide open study periods and helped arrange the student interviews during them.

Before conducting student interviews, I ensured that the students were voluntarily willing to be interviewed and secured consent forms signed by the students and their parents. To avoid making the students feel uncomfortable in a one-on-one situation with an adult stranger, students were interviewed in groups—Marie’s pair together, Isabel’s pair, and Kellie’s trio. Each interview was one complete session, though the amount of time varied depending on what the teacher allowed (around 23 minutes for Marie’s students, 29 minutes for Isabel’s, and 56 minutes for Kellie’s).

The first set of questions asked students to reflect on the specific film they watched, what they learned from it, and the class work they did in conjunction with it. The second set of questions explored student reactions to history visual media in general, both in school and on their own. The final questions asked them to consider what “real” history means and how they learn it. I passed around a print-out defining six common ways people encounter history (books, family, movies, museums, teachers/school, and television) and asked the students to rank-order the ways in terms of influence on what they know about the past. The goal here was to get students to offer insights into how

they themselves think about learning history and whether they believe the media have influenced what they know. Student interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts and field notes were used for the analysis of students in chapter 5.

Coming to Grips with Intellectual Biases

Researchers bring their personal interests, passions, beliefs, and intellectual orientations to their work. This was certainly true of me as I conducted this study. In this section, I discuss my predispositions, how they affected my work, and in what ways I tried to address their influence in my methods and scholarship. I chose to do this dissertation on the use of history films because I was a history teacher and a history film enthusiast. I had been a high school history teacher for six years before undertaking doctoral studies, and in that time I had even taught an elective course titled History through Film that fueled my interest in history movies as an intellectual topic. This background sustained me through this work in important ways, drawing energy from my personal passion and using my practical experience as a touchstone for thinking about and observing classroom uses of film. However, this background also contributed to intellectual biases that colored the way I looked at the topic and threatened to limit the range of possibilities I could perceive.

I began this study with a strong, clearly articulated normative stance, that I “knew” the right answer about what history films are good and which classroom uses are best. This bias originated in a shallow understanding of the educational uses of media but proved a hard habit to kick even after I had read more deeply in the literature. Shifting from a normative to an analytical stance would produce a study of much more scholarly value, but it required me to suppress some of my original enthusiasm for evaluating

teachers' uses of film—pointing out what is “right” and “good” in the instructional uses of history films—and instead to try to understand why and how these teachers use film as they do.

My first major task was to think more expansively about history films. Prior to this dissertation, I focused my energies on evaluating the factual veracity of movies. For example, in my first published writing on history movies (Metzger, 2005), the dominant motif is how accurately the 2005 film *The Kingdom of Heaven* depicted the medieval Crusaders conflict with Saladin. But after I developed the pedagogical content analysis, and conducted several such analyses, I began to see movies as texts that could be used in a variety of ways to achieve a range of educational outcomes. Once I recognized how a fictional history movie could have solid educational uses, I was on to a more meaningful analysis. A history movie might be considered “bad” for any number of reasons—historical inaccuracies, a dubious plot, weak characters or acting, poor direction or script. Yet, a film that historians might consider “bad” can still be put to “good” educational uses that stimulate deeper historical thinking by students.

The other crucial step was to stop thinking of myself as a classroom teacher who “knew” the right way to use films. That was no longer my role—I was there not to evaluate teachers; rather, I was a researcher who was interested in learning, not judging. Dwelling on whether or not I would have used the film that way was of little interest to anyone else. Rather, I had to train my attention to consider the meaning of what was happening in the lesson and to analyze the possibilities and problems inherent in the interplay between film choice, teacher, and students. Reading scholarship on film criticism and history movies was an important starting mechanism, helping me realize

that debates over the influence of history movies extended by straightforward issues of accuracy. Conducting the pedagogical content analyses of actual movies was another helpful mechanism, as I came to see more interesting historical possibilities in movies (*The Last Samurai* and especially *The Patriot*) that I had dismissed as hopelessly inaccurate.

A final way that I secured some psychological distance was to select teachers whom I did not already know closely. Three of the teachers I had never met before this study, and one of them I had met only a few times before and not in any detail (she was formerly a student-teacher with one of my close friends and colleagues). Working with teachers whom I did not know personally encouraged me to think of their classrooms more clinically rather than as spaces too close to my own teaching background.

Conclusion

This dissertation employs a range of methodologies in order to study the different levels involved in the classroom use of history movies: film choice, teachers, and students. Here I have offered a wider view of the study's logic and design; specific details of the analyses are offered in the relevant chapters. The methods employed aim to explore the educational potential of history feature films as instructional tools as reflected in actual classrooms.

Becoming a researcher has taught me important lessons about using history films educationally and the challenges in studying them. Each method had advantages but also drawbacks. The pedagogical content analysis mobilizes ideas drawn from scholarly literature in an analytical device. It is an informative mechanism for exploring the educational implications of history feature films. However, it is a demanding process,

both intellectually and in terms of time and energy. It gave me an appreciation for how the professional life of academic researchers affords them the time and support required for this kind of work, something I increasingly realized I could not have done when I was a classroom teacher. With more classes, more students, and more day-to-day management work, classroom teachers cannot be expected have the available time to engage in this kind of analytical work on films. It gave me a new appreciation for the importance of partnership between classroom teachers and academic researchers. I hope to develop applications of my research that can directly benefit teachers.

The field observations and interviews provided me with a space to analyze theoretically why teachers use films, what actually happens with them between teacher and students, and how students respond to film-based lessons in the classroom. I learned that this kind of work is extremely demanding in terms of attention to detail, alertness, and openness. No matter how much class time I observed or how many interviews I transcribed, I always felt like I needed more data. There always seemed to be a deeper level beyond what I observed or talked about, and I always wished I could go back and look at it again or ask more follow-up questions. No matter how many details I recorded, I realized that countless others slipped by me. This experience stressed the importance of careful organization, keeping an open mind to what is occurring, and recording efficient, detailed field notes, especially on what is spoken. The limitations of the data in this study result from my failures along these dimensions.

Finally, conducting this study has taught me the importance of self-knowledge for a researcher. Doing this research forced me to confront my affinity for the role that Sklar (1997) has dubbed “historian-cop”—someone who applies historians’ professional

standards of accuracy to history movies. My natural tendency both when watching films and watching teachers use them was to think like a historian-cop, ready to spot historical inaccuracies and rush in with the appropriate knowledge to save the day. While factual content knowledge is a valid and important consideration, it is not the only one. My predispositions narrowed what I let myself see both in the possibilities of movies themselves and also in what teachers could do with them. Learning to critique my predispositions was perhaps the most important lesson I gleaned from my work.

Chapter 3

The Educational Potential of History Feature Films

This chapter offers an analytical framework for considering the educative value and pedagogical uses of commercial mass-media history films. While there is value in going “behind” a film to study its genesis, intention, and production (Toplin, 1996a), this pedagogical content analysis framework is not concerned with the intentions of the filmmakers, whose conscious purposes may not emphasize or even include educating the audience. Even when a history film is produced chiefly as a mass entertainment, the film’s historical setting cannot avoid conveying information or messages about the past. In this sense, every history film is potentially a curricular and pedagogical tool.

First, I define three pairs of closely related educative functions that can be met by a history film and explore how the pedagogical power of a history film is affected by its narrative composition (visual and aural rhetorics) and emerging educative questions (the kinds of things teachers and students might talk about). I then test the framework by analyzing three major Hollywood history movies: *The Patriot* (Emmerich, 2000), *The Last Samurai* (Zwick, 2003), and *The Alamo* (Hancock, 2004). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications the pedagogical content of history movies for teachers and students.

My framework draws heavily from historical scholarship about history movies and how they inform the audience about the past (Carnes, Mico, Miller-Monzon, & Rubel, 1996; Davis, 2000; Landy, 1996, 2001; O’Connor, 1990; Rosenstone, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2002; Toplin, 1996a, 2002b), as well as scholarship concerning the influence of history movies on what students know and how they think about the past

(Paxton & Meyerson, 2002; Seixas, 1993, 1994; Seixas, Stearns, & Wineburg, 1999; Stoddard & Marcus, in press; Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2000). Its purpose is to build on the work of educators who have written about the educational uses of Hollywood films (Briley, 2002; Goldstein, 1995; Johnson & Vargas, 1994; Justice, 2003; Marcus, 2005; Matz & Pingatore, 2005; Metzger, 2005; Stoddard, 2005; Sturma & MacCallum, 2000; Weinstein, 2001). This chapter offers a conceptual look at history feature films as a kind of subject matter text. The goal is to illustrate a way of evaluating the educational potential of history movies, laying the groundwork to examine film-based lessons in actual classrooms in chapter 4.

Explaining the Pedagogical Content Analysis

At heart, pedagogical content analysis is a structured document analysis of how a media text (history feature films) can inform teaching and learning about the past. Though it shares with pedagogical content knowledge an interest in representations of subject matter knowledge (Shulman, 1986, 1987; Wilson, 1987), pedagogical content analysis (PCA) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) are distinct ideas. Traditional written content analysis is typically quantitative; large amounts of print text are scanned for key words and phrases that can be divided into distinct, mutually exclusive categories in order to meet precise objectives (GAO, 1989). In recent years, content analysis techniques have been used on visual media such as television, recordings of live events, and motion pictures. Like traditional written content analysis, visual content analysis requires clear categories, precise objectives, and manageable subdivision of the visual material. The longer the unit of analysis, the more difficult and subjective becomes the work of coding (List, 2002).

This chapter expands the use of visual content analysis into qualitative and pedagogical realms. That is, instead of focusing solely on the formal content of the films, I will also focus on their pedagogical potential for conveying knowledge, interpretations, and ethical messages about the past. This kind of analysis does not reduce the films to numbers but instead facilitates structured talk about a film's historical content, interpretations, and themes consequential to what the viewer can learn from them.

The first step in developing my analytical method involved developing a framework to be used across all historical movies. The framework is organized around three dyads—closely related pairs of pedagogical functions that reflect thinking and learning about the past: *content coverage/period representation*; *historical construction/social construction*; *empathy/moral response*. Each dyad features a primary, general pedagogical function coupled with a supporting specialized function that emerges from and is interconnected with the first. Each function may be considered separately, but they are analyzed most profitably in proximity to each other through their interrelated scopes. The paired pedagogical functions can be used to analyze the substantive (content and material) and syntactic (interpretive and communicative) structures of the history film's scenes, both as discrete units and cumulatively as an overall narrative. The categories are not presented in order of priority or primacy; instead, they are ordered in increasing abstraction, from the factually concrete to the materially constructive to the intellectually and emotionally reactive. The functions are detailed below.

Content Coverage/Period Representation: Fact and Fiction

Learning about the past is a foundational aspect of studying history. Discerning historical fact from fictionalization and considering issues of accuracy and realism are, at least to some degree, important tasks for analyzing historical films (Toplin, 1996a, 2002b; Weinstein, 2001). Though historian John O'Connor (1990) has cautioned that the concern should be less with detecting factual mistakes and more with discerning ways in which historical films "often manipulate and trivialize historical issues" (p. 24), he nonetheless uses "content" as a principal element that prompts questions like, "Can [a historical film's] interpretation be supported by the body of scholarly evidence available?" and "To what extent were the script and the characters based upon direct historical evidence and to what extent were they fictionalized?" (p. 38). Thus, a sound starting point for a pedagogical content analysis of history motion pictures is *content coverage*—how well the film conveys historical knowledge grounded in evidence from the past.

Although historians debate interpretations about the past (for example, what a certain event means, was caused by, or subsequently led to), and historians frequently must offer conjectures about uncertainties (what may have happened during a gap in time for which there is no direct surviving evidence), there is a great deal of consensus among historians about underlying factual knowledge: that a famous event certainly occurred at a particular time, for instance. History films, however, are not scholarly works. As fictional, semi-fictional, or dramatized stories, movies are free to embellish, truncate, or ignore the surviving historical record. The educational potential of a film must involve, at least to some extent, consideration of historical accuracy and factuality. The

pedagogical function of content coverage examines what widely recognized historical knowledge is included, what knowledge is left out, and what knowledge is compressed or altered. For example, the 2000 film *The Patriot* climaxes in a decisive battle between American and British troops that blends factual details of two major engagements that actually occurred (Cowpens and Guilford Court House).

A closely related issue is *period representation*—how the film re-creates or represents past eras, episodes, or timeframes. Whereas content coverage focuses on the factuality of specific historical knowledge contained in the film, period representation focuses on the film’s “periodization” (how it situates its narrative in the passage of time within and between eras) and the milieu and mood of the era/episode as evoked in the film’s scenes (both discretely and as a whole). All films deviate from the ambient details of the period being depicted to some degree. The dialogue in almost all commercial mass-media history motion pictures is spoken in English even if the historical characters would not have spoken English, for instance.

Furthermore, filmic conventions and commercial demands shape how a history movie can represent the past. The convention of a linear narrative may limit the number of perspectives on the period that can be depicted (many films follow the viewpoint of just one main protagonist). The convention of a comprehensible, widely accessible plot may restrict the amount of detail (the number of names or places or dates mentioned) that can be incorporated. Commercial demands may require visual/auditory impact or action that meets contemporary audience entertainment expectations regardless of period appropriateness (such as medieval catapult projectiles that explode like modern firebombs). The pedagogical function of period representation examines the extent to

which a film's scenes and narrative recreate a past era based on historical knowledge, reinterpret a past era colored by a broader phenomenon or metaphor about history, or reinvent a past era with imagined details. For example, the 2003 film *The Last Samurai* reinterprets the samurai in the 1870s as a native warrior tribe whose rebellion against the modernization of Japan compelled Emperor Meiji to preserve Japan's traditions and sovereignty.

Historical Construction/Social Construction: Constructing the Past and the People in It

The second dyad deals with how a film actively constructs its depictions of the past and the people in it. Postmodern and critical scholarship in recent years has emphasized how historical narratives are constructed texts situated within the perspectives of their authors (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; Evans, 1997; Jenkins, 1991; Segall, 1999; Stone, 1991). Given this "literary turn" in the discipline of history more broadly, a pedagogical content analysis of history motion pictures needs to take into account *historical construction*—how the film builds a historical narrative through available historical evidence and interpretations. This pedagogical function focuses on how meanings about the past are conveyed in the film.

A history film can signal the viewer about the particular narrative decisions that have been made through words spoken by characters, visual images, or objects and places depicted. It is extremely unusual for a commercial, mainstream history film to convey what VanSledright (2002) has called the "interpretive paradox" of history, that historical interpretation is conjecture about a past we can never know with absolute certainty. Just as uncommon is the film that depicts the tentative nature of historical knowledge claims, though some avant-garde art films have attempted this feat (Rosenstone, 1995c). Most

mainstream history films present a linear narrative story that makes decisions among competing knowledge claims, choosing only one version to depict even when there is evidence for multiple possible versions. Given that higher-order thinking in history requires awareness of the interpretive nature of history, the educational potential of a film should include examination of the evidentiary elements used in its construction of the past. The pedagogical function of historical construction explores the authentic elements (artifacts, documentation, language) of historical evidence that are included in the film narrative as well as what decisions the film makes regarding historical uncertainties. For example, in the 2004 film *The Alamo*, actual period documents—such as a letter by the Texan president to Sam Houston in the field urging him to attack Santa Anna’s army—are woven into the screenplay.

Just as history is constructed by choices in narratives and evidence, a related concern is *social construction*—how appropriately the film defines and conveys messages about groups of people in the past, especially depictions of the condition of historically marginalized groups (women, people of color, the poor) in relation to dominant groups. Whereas historical construction focuses on the elements that build the narrative in general, social construction focuses specifically on how the film’s narrative defines and constructs roles for societal groups. It is an analysis of how the film’s narrative positions dominant and subaltern groups of people. There exists a special “burden of historical representation” when depicting historically marginalized, underrepresented groups (Shohat & Stamm, 1994). This burden can be met by developing complex, meaningful character depictions of the marginalized groups that

demonstrate their agency and rather than subordinating them to the dominant perspective (Stoddard & Marcus, in press).

This puts the Hollywood history filmmaker in a bind. There is a demand for greater and fairer representation of marginalized groups, but if a film strays too far in this direction it is open to counter-charges of “political correctness” from viewers who demand the traditional perspectives of dominant groups. In facing this dilemma, history films can highlight the overlooked presence of non-dominant groups in the past, ignore or downplay their presence in order to emphasize traditional dominant perspectives, or exaggerate the presence of non-dominant actors beyond what can be inferred from the historical record. The pedagogical function of social construction explores how the film depicts issues of identity, power, conflict, cooperation, and awareness between different groups of people in the past. For example, the 2000 film *The Patriot* presents African Americans as supporting characters, and even though the story is set in South Carolina in the 1780s, most Black characters are not slaves but instead free laborers who hold virtually no acrimony against Whites.

Empathy/Moral Response: Reacting to the Past

The third dyad involves how a film positions its audience to react to the past. In the 20th century, historians gradually backed away from the notion that studying history required dispassionate neutrality, as the possibility of objectivity increasing came to be questioned (Novick, 1988). Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004) have posited that reacting morally to the past is a natural “stance” that can be a useful stimulus to learning. They suggest that empathy is essential for recognizing different human perspectives and that emotional connection is a critical tool for making sense of the past. Alan Marcus

(2005) also argues that “historical empathy” is an important element that history movies can contribute to the classroom, helping students learn by evoking feelings and raising emotional issues in the past. In light of its educative role, a pedagogical content analysis of history motion pictures needs to examine *empathy*—how effectively the film involves the viewer emotionally in its representations of the past.

A formative part of studying history is recognizing different perspectives in the past, both those that a person today might identify with and others that may seem strange or wrong to people today. The more remote the historical perspective is from the contemporary world, the more difficult it is for a person today to resonate emotionally with the viewpoint. As a result, a perspective from the past may be dismissed as foolish, evil, or corrupt because a person today cannot conceive of why someone in the past could have thought or acted a particular way. History films can bring to life voices from the past, in both sympathetic and hostile fashions. There is a powerful filmic convention to present audiences with heroes and villains, characters whom viewers are supposed to support or oppose. Just as the real world today does not clearly and naturally divide into heroes and villains, such a dichotomy in the past can oversimplify the perspectives on historical actors. The pedagogical function of empathy examines which historical perspectives are depicted sympathetically and to what extent the film inspires identification on the part of the viewer with particular historical actors or perspectives. For example, the 2003 film *The Last Samurai* empathizes with the samurai rebels as an honorable warrior tribe representing Japan’s traditional native culture and likens their suppression to the subjugation of the American Plains Indians.

Closely interconnected with issues of empathy and identification is *moral response*—what conclusions about people, perspectives, or events in the past are conveyed by the film. If empathy focuses on perspective recognition and identification, moral response focuses on the ethical and emotional reactions elicited by the film. A moral or lesson to the story is a powerful and longstanding tradition in Western literature readily (and often) converted into a filmic convention. Many American viewers expect that a film will present a clear moral judgment about its events and characters. In the case of fictional stories, the moral typically involves the triumph of good or justice over evil or wickedness (though dark comedies sometimes invert this convention). Historical stories often are shoe-horned into this good-evil dialectic, but even when they are not, audiences still commonly expect that the film will provide a satisfying resolution and a conclusion that makes sense of the issues and events in the narrative.

Reacting to the moral implications of historical events for our world today can be a powerful aid to learning about the past. Of course, the potential drawback is “presentism”—viewing the past only through the lens of the present and never engaging with the past on its own terms (Wineburg, 2001). The problem of presentism can reduce studying history to little more than congratulating ourselves for our world today in light of how bad off people were in the past. The pedagogical function of moral response examines the ways in which the film simplifies or complicates the viewer’s understandings of people and events in the past in light of our contemporary society and values. For example, the 2000 film *The Patriot* concludes with a message of racial unity and hardly any mention of slavery or racial oppression that would have tremendous impact on American society over the next two centuries after the Revolutionary War.

Composition: Visual and Aural Rhetorics

Making sense of the six pedagogical functions detailed above as observed in actual feature films benefits from an awareness of the dramatic visual and auditory techniques filmmakers use to convey explicit, tacit, and metaphorical messages about history and its relationship to our world today. Paying attention to a film's composition—the visual and aural rhetorics employed to present its narrative—helps to better understand its approach to historical and period content, historical and social construction, and empathy and moral response. For example, in the 2000 film *The Patriot* all troops fighting for Britain are dressed as Redcoats; this visual rhetoric, though not historically accurate, serves to designate the protagonist's enemies. In the 2004 film *The Alamo*, portions of letters written by the defenders to their families are heard in voice-over during a montage scene the night before the final assault; this aural rhetoric lets the filmmakers to include parts of actual period documents while conveying information about the characters' thoughts and feelings. Consideration of a film's composition techniques serves as an overarching lens that informs the analyses within the pedagogical content analysis rather than a discrete analytical category.

Concepts drawn from literary and cinema studies can aid in studying the visual and aural rhetorics used by a film. Diegesis concerns the “telling” of the story, the narrative directly conveyed to the audience through what is said by the characters or a narrator. It consists of all auditory parts of the primary narrative, including background events that have led to the present action, other people talked about, and concurrent off-screen events referred to by the characters (extradiegetic narratives). All frames, spaces, and actions not focused on visually are diegetic elements. Sound (including music) is

considered diegetic if it exists within the narrative sphere of the film as experienced by the characters: Davy Crockett's fiddle performance in the 2004 film *The Alamo* is diegetic, while orchestral scoring not heard by the characters is non-diegetic.

A related concept, mimesis, concerns the "showing" of the story, the visual narrative devices through which the audience perceives the unfolding events and character development. Visual and potentially aural devices that infer meaning about the characters' thoughts and feelings are mimetic elements. For example, in the 1999 film *The 13th Warrior*, an Arab poet captured by Vikings observes the lips of his captors as they sit around a campfire, and gradually their Nordic words are replaced by English; this mimetic technique symbolically shows him learning the Viking language.

Cumulatively, a film's diegetic and mimetic devices service its composition of visual and aural rhetorics. These rhetorics communicate notions about the past and the people in it to the viewer. When analyzing a film along the six pedagogical functions described above, it is important to pay attention to how the film's visual and aural composition conveys, both implicitly and explicitly, historical information, meanings, and messages.

Application: Emerging Educative Questions

At this point, we have looked at six pedagogical functions for analyzing history movies and how they are informed by considering a film's visual and aural composition. So what are the uses of pedagogical content analyses? Chiefly, pedagogical content analyses can equip educators with a stronger understanding of a film's educational potential. To activate this potential, the teacher needs to meaningfully connect the film-based lesson to the broader curricular unit and provide opportunities to interpret the

film's historical events and what they mean. This is the kind of historical subject matter that Michael Whelan (1997) has argued matters most—significant issues and generalizable knowledge that provides a richer understanding of how the past relates to our world today. Teachers can scaffold the educational potential inherent in films in ways students can comprehend and will be open to receiving.

Used as instructional texts, films can convey both intended and unintended messages. Left on their own, students might take away lessons very different from those the history teacher would want. Thus, skillful teacher guidance is essential. There is no one best way for teachers to use films. They can be used as a springboard for activities in which students apply knowledge and interpretations learned. They can serve as a foil to contrast differing accounts of the past. They can be a provocation that gets students to think about a particular problem or to look at the past from particular perspectives that they otherwise might not consider. They can function as a capstone to a broader unit in which students recognize elements studied previously as they are depicted in a dramatic narrative. They can even be used as an act of imagination, a way to get students to consider “what if?” certain events happened in different ways.

This kind of powerful subject matter and learning about history is the educative potential of history feature films. Whatever the active intentions of the filmmakers (which may or may not have included teaching the audience something), a history film functions as a depiction, generalization, representation, or interpretation of the past and raises or implies historical questions. Both “good” and “bad” history films do this. Indeed, a “bad” movie may raise some penetrating questions for thinking about history—from “What is wrong with this scene?” to more conceptual questions like “What is the

film's narrative trying to say about the relationship between the past and present?" These kinds of questions are useful ways for viewers to engage with the historical ideas conveyed by the film. A pedagogical content analysis needs to yield potentially educative questions that emerge from a close consideration of the film along the six pedagogical functions. These emerging educative questions can be used as the basis for activities, discussions, and assessments that help students get the most out of watching a history movie in the classroom.

Using the Pedagogical Content Analysis Framework

Before moving on to actual uses of the pedagogical content analysis framework, several concepts need to be defined. The term *history* can cause some confusion. Colloquially, it describes anything that happened previously ("Oh, that's all history now"). In academic use, greater care must be taken with the word. *The past* is what actually occurred in earlier times, independent of memory and surviving knowledge. Since it cannot be revisited the past cannot be known with complete certainty. The past is approached or explored through the work of history, though historians disagree whether historical knowledge is discovered (objective facts revealed), reconstructed (putative understandings represented), or created (narrative understandings made) (Evans, 1997; Jenkins, 1991; Novick, 1988). *History* refers to the disciplined study of constructed understandings of the past. In the modern Western tradition, history is a logical, or alternatively humanistic, discipline based on evidence and critical debate over interpretations of evidence. *Historical* can be a descriptive adjective for either the work of history or the past itself, and context of usage must distinguish the meaning.

Two additional concepts concern the structure of a film: scene and narrative. A *scene* is a discrete, self-contained sub-unit of a film, separated from the other sub-units by cinematographic devices (cut, fade, blackout, montage) or by a narrative shift (a sudden new event, a turn to a different point-of-view). A scene may contain multiple devices or shifts, so long as each is not substantive enough to serve as a separate scene on its own and all of them cumulatively construct a discernable sub-unit of the film. A *narrative* is a distinctly identifiable, ongoing story perspective that runs throughout the film. Narrative relates to the point-of-view(s) of the film's characters and plot. Narrative is built through a string of connected, cumulative scenes. The typical mainstream film features a dominant narrative in which the story is presented (either passively through point-of-view or actively through voice-over narration) through the perspective, voice, and experience of one or a small number of main characters. Other narratives in a film usually play a secondary or supporting role. A pedagogical content analysis of a history film examines the pedagogical functions through the film's scenes and narratives, both discretely and cumulatively.

In testing the pedagogical content analysis framework for this dissertation, I used the following process. First, I watched the film uninterrupted at home to get an overall impression of the film. My attention was focused on watching the film rather than taking notes—I occasionally jotted down questions, names, or events to look up later. Next, I consulted recent informational sources (published scholarship, educational documentaries) that directly related to the film's historical period and elements provided current historical knowledge with which to analyze the film. With the rise of specialty cable television like the History Channel, useful educational documentaries often are

produced to coincide with the release of a major history motion picture (and are frequently included as extras on a film's DVD release); I used these whenever available. After doing this background research, I watched the film two more times. The first of these viewings was another uninterrupted general reaction to the film, focusing on its themes and historical messages more broadly. The latter viewing was a scene-by-scene breakdown of the film, taking careful notes about what occurs in each scene, how each scene constructs historical elements, and what visual and aural rhetorics were employed to convey meaning about the past.

Finally, I applied the scene-by-scene breakdown to the pedagogical content analysis dyads. My notes from the background historical research, my notes about the film's narratives, scenes, and composition, and my notes about its themes and historical messages were organized along the six pedagogical functions. The product of this synthesis was a written pedagogical content analysis of each selected history movie. It must be noted that the written analyses are quite long. Given the dense information load contained in a feature film—characterizations, narratives, visual and aural composition, themes—there is a lot to observe and analyze. My goal in this dissertation is to offer examples of full analyses in maximum scope and detail.

Film Choices for Testing the Framework

This chapter tests the framework by performing a pedagogical content analysis on three commercial mass-media history motion pictures: *The Alamo* (2004), *The Last Samurai* (2003), and *The Patriot* (2000). These three films were intentionally selected for several reasons. First, all are about major historical events commonly taught in history classes. Second, all have potential to be used in secondary-level U.S. or World

History classrooms. *The Last Samurai* and *The Patriot* are R rated due to graphic violence, but since they do not contain sexuality or profanity, grade 9-12 schoolteachers could feel comfortable using at least select scenes from them. *The Alamo* is rated PG-13 due to battle violence and could be used for grades 7-12. Third, all are recent films made in the current decade. The actors appearing in them are still recognizable to students as contemporary Hollywood figures. Students would be most likely to respond to all of these films as current cultural products rather than older pieces associated with previous generations. A final criterion guiding the selection of these specific titles as opposed to other possible films: all three feature Americans as central characters in relation to other peoples in the world. *The Patriot* depicts colonial Americans in relation to the British. *The Alamo* features Americans in relation to Mexicans and Texans of Mexican origin. *The Last Samurai* primarily is about the Japanese, but the main character and his rival are Americans. This theme of Americans in the world connects the three film choices.

The pedagogical content analyses of these films were conducted prior to observations of teachers using film in their classrooms (see chapter 4). Ideally, I would have been able to conduct in advance analyses of the films used in the observed lessons. However, testing the pedagogical content analysis framework prior to observing film-based classroom lessons allowed me, as researcher, to refine my own sensibilities about history films as a genre, about how to watch such films, and about what other viewers might see in them. Indeed, the exercise led me to be much more open to the educational possibilities of history movies before I ever stepped into a classroom. Chapter 2 discusses these issues in more detail.

Before proceeding to the individual pedagogical content analyses, it may be helpful to review the framework. Table 3.1 summarizes the dyads; the paired functions are separated by a permeable line to signify the close interplay between them.

Table 3.1

Summary of the Pedagogical Content Analysis Framework

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | what historical knowledge is incorporated into the film narrative, what knowledge is left out, and what knowledge is compressed or altered |
| Period representation | extent to which a film recreates a past era based on historical knowledge, reinterprets a past era colored by a broader phenomenon or metaphor about history, or reinvents a past era with imagined details |
| Historical construction | how authentic elements of historical evidence used in the film narrative, and how the film signals its decisions regarding historical uncertainties |
| Social construction | how the film depicts issues of identity, power, conflict, cooperation, and awareness between different groups of people in the past |
| Empathy | with which historical actors and perspectives does the film narrative sympathize and inspire emotional identification on the part of the viewer |
| Moral response | How the film simplifies or complicates understandings of people and events in the past in light of our contemporary society and values |

Pedagogical Content Analysis of *The Alamo*

The Alamo (Hancock, 2004) tells the story of the battle for Texas independence from Mexico in 1835-1836. Its central event is the battle for the mission-turned-fort called the Alamo, in what is now San Antonio. The historical background and factual details in this analysis come from my research using historical reference texts, recent published scholarship, and educational programming about the war for Texas.¹

¹ Rather than interrupt the flow of the analysis, I will reference upfront materials used. Brands (2004) is a recent, highly readable account of the Texas conflict. Woodruff (2002) situates the conflict with Mexico in a broader continental and global context. Dupuy and Dupuy (1993) and Dupuy, Johnson, and Bongard (1995) are useful reference texts for military figures and events. Several documentary films about the Alamo are also very informative (Haffner, Lusitania, Alper, & Rehr, 2003; Haffner, Lusitania, & Drooker, 1992; Tovaes, 2004).

Plot Summary

The film opens with images of the aftermath of the March, 1836, battle at the Alamo before flashing back to events one year earlier. Texas is a sparsely settled province populated by American immigrants and ethnically Mexican Tejanos. Mexican general Santa Anna (Emilio Echevarría) has recently overturned Mexico's federal constitution and made himself dictator. An army sent by Santa Anna to crack down on Texan autonomy has just been defeated at San Antonio de Bexár. A convention of Texan leaders meets to plan the next course of action. In attendance are the hard-drinking Sam Houston (Dennis Quaid), the famed frontier knife-fighter James Bowie (Jason Patric), the young slave-owner William Travis (Patrick Wilson), and Tejano volunteer Juan Seguín (Jordi Molla). Dismissing the Texans' fixation with the Alamo, Houston dispatches Bowie to retrieve the guns from the fort. However, the seriously ill Bowie recalls his life in nearby Bexár with his deceased wife and decides not to abandon the fort. Meanwhile, Travis has been sent to take command of the Alamo garrison. The two men quickly clash, and only news of the advance of Santa Anna's army convinces them to put aside their differences and work together to defend the fort. Menial work at the fort is performed by Travis's slave Sam (Afemo Omilami) and Bowie's slave Joe (Edwin Hodge), who refuses to die for a Texas that keeps him enslaved.

The defenders are reinforced by band of volunteers including famed frontiersman and former U.S. Congressman Davy Crockett (Billy Bob Thornton). Santa Anna's Mexican army arrives soon thereafter and lays siege to the fort. Bowie is taken fatally ill, and Travis must assume sole command. Travis dispatches Seguín to smuggle communiqués to the Texan leaders calling for help. Houston convinces the government

to appoint him as commanding general. When Seguín arrives with the letter, Houston decides that the army must wait for reinforcements before moving to relieve the Alamo. Santa Anna orders a frontal assault to reduce the Alamo and kill the fort's rebel defenders. The Mexicans take the fort in a predawn assault. Travis is killed fighting on the ramparts, and Bowie dies fighting from his sickbed. Crockett is taken prisoner and executed at Santa Anna's command. In the aftermath, Houston retreats east across Texas with his army, burning the settlements along the way that cannot be defended. When a Mexican courier is captured and reveals that Santa Anna has divided his army into smaller columns, Houston turns to fight and captures Santa Anna himself in a surprise assault at San Jacinto. The film closes with a text block stating that Santa Anna signed over Texas independence in return for his life.

Content Coverage / Period Representation

The Alamo is a challenging type of history movie to make: a re-creation of events that actually happened, using actual historical figures as characters. The challenge of this type of history film is how to provide a narrative story, an essential filmic convention in mainstream Hollywood movies, that conveys a large amount of historical knowledge and makes reasonable decisions about gaps or uncertainties in the surviving historical records. To a remarkable degree, *The Alamo* presents a narrative story richly grounded in the historical record.

Of course, the film cannot include every complex detail in a running time just a little over two hours. In order to avoid confusing viewers, the sheer volume of dates, places, and people needs to be limited. At times, too, protracted or dense events need to be presented in simpler, shorter form more readily digestible by the viewer. The film

opens with Sam Houston back in the U.S. at a theatrical performance of *The Lion of the West*, a play inspired by the life of Davy Crockett, trying to drum up investment and immigration to Texas. Crockett is in attendance and chats with Houston, who convinces him to start a new political career in Texas. Houston did indeed travel back to the U.S. on behalf of Texas, but in 1835 the Texan leader sent to the U.S. was actually Stephen Austin. Crockett, for his part, had been considering a move to Texas for many months, and his defeat in the 1835 congressional elections made up his mind. *The Lion of the West* was a real play from the time, and this scene charmingly imagines Crockett's reaction to seeing his alter ego on stage. But it did not take a quick-sell by Houston at this play to talk Crockett into moving to Texas.

The film provides different takes on the value of the Alamo. In an early scene, Houston complains to Bowie that the Alamo has little strategic value despite the fact that people run to it whenever there is trouble. In a later scene Colonel Neill tells Travis, "As goes the Alamo, so goes Texas." Since the movie's climax is the heroic defense of the fort, and it is not exactly heroic if the characters' deaths are a waste, the narrative seems to favor Neill's verdict over Houston's. The Alamo clearly was not strategically essential. The fort did not block access to Texan settlements, and Santa Anna simply could have kept its garrison bottled up inside with a small portion of his army. Rather, the Alamo was chiefly of symbolic value for both sides, but the film's heroic storyline requires the Alamo to have heroic significance. The film's opening frames feature a text block that implies "fate" has made the Alamo an important battlefield.

Sometimes the film shunts around events in order to fit as many as possible into the limited timeframe. In the film, Crockett's party approaches the Alamo at night some

days before the siege and is held at gunpoint by wary defenders until Crockett reveals who he is. Historically, Crockett's party arrived before the Texans even knew Santa Anna was in Texas. However, this scene is close to what actually happened on the night of February 29, when 32 men from Gonzales sneaked through Mexican lines to reinforce the Alamo. The nervous defenders opened fire, hitting a man before the arrivals revealed that they were friends. On a similar vein, Seguín's mission is moved to an earlier date. In the film, he is sent to deliver a letter to Houston shortly after the Mexicans surround the fort. In the historical accounts, Seguín's ride came days later when Travis realized that reinforcements might not be coming. Shifting the timing of Seguín's ride compresses Travis's numerous letters to compatriots outside the Alamo into one scene.

At one point, the film uses a generic scene to represent more drawn-out real events. In a scene during Santa Anna's march into Texas, his army rounds up prisoners outside a small border village by a river and Santa Anna orders them all shot. The order is reluctantly carried out in front of the screaming women of the village. It is a generic display similar to but not definitively based on specific events. Weeks before the Alamo, a Mexican rebel named Mexía recruited a troop of volunteers at New Orleans for a raid on Tampico in Mexico; their ship ran aground, and local loyalists obeyed Santa Anna's standing order to execute the captured foreigners as pirates. Weeks after the Alamo, James Fannin and nearly 400 men were captured as they belatedly followed Houston's order to retreat from Goliad; Fannin and most of his men were executed at Santa Anna's express order. Colonel Fannin is mentioned in *The Alamo* (in scenes during which Houston complains that reinforcements are not gathering at Gonzales fast enough), though the narrative does not include Fannin's sorry end.

In other places the film omits historical details that would confuse or overburden the narrative. Sam Houston, while crucial to the story of Texas, is a sideline in the story of the Alamo. Historically, he did not want to waste men defending or relieving it and was not present with the Texan leadership until early March. The film's Houston is always present in the field, there to receive Travis's letters requesting help and to gather reinforcements. On a similar note, the film makes scant reference to who these reinforcements are. Clearly they are Anglo men ("Texians" in the parlance of the period), but the film seems to imply that they are Texas residents. In reality, the vast majority of "Texian" fighters were recent arrivals from the U.S. American newspapers publicized the conflict with Santa Anna and the opportunities available to volunteers who went to Texas. By early 1836, around 1,000 Americans were arriving every month, and the majority of the Alamo defenders were Americans who came to Texas in previous months. The only element in the film which touches on this point is Travis's motivational speech the day before the battle, in which he states the many settlers have come to Texas for a "second chance" in life.

The battle of the Alamo, like virtually every historical event, has lingering questions that the surviving records do not conclusively answer. When Santa Anna's army overran Bexár, there was some confusion among the defenders as they retreated into the Alamo. The Mexicans hoisted a red flag up the church tower, which the rebels interpreted as a sign of no quarter. Travis apparently ordered a cannon fired in the flag's direction. Meanwhile, Bowie may have tried to arrange a parley—he exchanged letters with Santa Anna's secretary but received only a demand for "surrender at discretion" from the Mexican dictator. Certainly Bowie and Travis were at cross purposes. The film

addresses the confusion by having Bowie physically ride out to parley with a Mexican general. Travis sees Bowie negotiating with the enemy on his own initiative and orders a cannon fired to break up the talk. In response, the Mexicans hoist up a red flag labeled “Death to Traitors.” It is a clear depiction of an ambiguous situation.

The death of Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie are also open to debate. Earlier Alamo film versions have shown Crockett fighting to the death atop the Alamo’s walls. However, Crockett and a handful of other prisoners may have been executed after the battle. There are several different surviving accounts of what happened. Mexican officer de la Pena reported in his memoirs that Crockett and his mates were painfully hacked to death by the swords of Santa Anna’s guards. Sergeant Frank Dolson wrote a letter to his brother reporting the account of a Mexican prisoner that Crockett and the other survivors were shot at Santa Anna’s order. The film depicts, by and large, de la Pena’s version. Likewise, depicting Bowie’s death requires imagination to fill in the blanks. The surviving accounts testify that Bowie was incapacitated with sickness, possibly consumption or pneumonia. Whether he was already dead by the time of the battle is uncertain. His bloody body was recovered after the battle, but the Mexicans might have stabbed the body if they thought he was hiding. In the film, Bowie is barely still alive when the Mexicans attack, puts up a brief fight from his bed, and is bayoneted by the enemy. It is not possible to know how Bowie actually died, and this scene is a plausible piece of guesswork.

The March 6 battle of the Alamo is the climax of the film. The most notable visual choice is setting the battle during the pre-dawn hours, when Santa Anna actually ordered his men to attack, rather than during daylight when it would be easier for an

audience to watch what was happening. The battle scene in the movie follows what is known of the attack in great detail, except for a serious blunder on the part of the defenders. In the film, the defenders are eventually driven into the long barracks in the heart of the mission after the Mexicans overrun the north wall. According to surviving accounts, the Mexicans used the defenders' own cannon against them. Apparently when the defenders were driven back, somebody forgot to spike the gun (making it inoperable by driving a spike into the firing hole). The Mexicans turned this gun on the barracks. Some defenders seem to have tried to fly a white cloth and surrender, but others kept fighting. The Mexicans, outraged at being fired at even while some were raising white flags, violently counterattacked. The cannon blunder also would have been difficult to communicate visually in the film, and so the filmmakers chose to omit it.

The Alamo was clearly made by people who know and love the period. Considerable work was put in to re-creating the Alamo mission as it must have looked during the fight. Appropriate period artillery and muskets are used to great effect in the battle scenes. A tactical advantage of the defenders was provided by the Kentucky long rifles many brought with them, more powerful and accurate than the Mexican muskets. This edge is underscored in a fanciful scene in which Crockett shoots the epaulet off Santa Anna's shoulder at extreme range. It is a kind of legendary feat for which Crockett was famous. Indeed, the historical Crockett occasionally engaged in trick-shooting contests during his travels, though probably not during the grave Alamo crisis.

For all the merits of the Kentucky rifle or the skill of famous fighters like Crockett or Bowie, the balance of military power greatly favored Santa Anna. The film amply conveys this in the scenes of the Mexican army surrounding the Alamo and

swarming over the mission. Less on display is the Mexican artillery which over the two-week siege softened up the Alamo's walls. Santa Anna conducted an able Napoleonic-style siege appropriate for his era. The only reference to it in the film is in the strategy session the night before the battle. An officer urges Santa Anna to postpone the attack and await the arrival of a heavy siege gun that will knock down the Alamo's defenses. Santa Anna dismissively rejects the advice and orders the attack. Historically, Santa Anna had a good reason to hurry: The longer he was away from Mexico, the more time he gave political opponents to organize against him.

Another period element evoked by the film is the condition of Texas in 1836. It was very much a frontier society, with less than 50,000 inhabitants. Except for Bexár, most settlements were recently built and scarcely populated. The scenes of Bexár and San Felipe show the viewer unpaved streets and scattered wood buildings, the humble beginnings of future cities. The film tries to convey the condition of the Texan leadership of the period, too. *The Alamo* incorporates more historical figures by name than many history films, and the film shows the famous Sam Houston quarreling with lesser-known figures like Governor Smith, President Burnet, and the Scotsman Dr. Grant.

The film's first full scene set in Texas opens with a fundamental conflict: Should Texas remain loyal to Mexico but resist the dictator Santa Anna, or should it break away and become independent? This brief debate in the film was of grave importance to Texas in the 1830s. Many Texians (like Stephen Austin) had sworn to become loyal Mexican citizens and did not accept the need for independence until very late in 1835. The personal difficulty of the independence question for many Texan leaders is not conveyed. Three scenes in the film specifically depict the San Felipe "consultation" that established

the provisional government of Texas. They follow a progressive flow: At first there is great dissention and Houston's position is challenged, then the Alamo crisis forces the leaders to rally around Houston, and finally the council gives Houston the necessary authority to lead Texas to independence.

It is a simplified depiction of a complex situation. The film does not show that Houston, for all his effort, was unable to block Grant's ultimately disastrous raid on Matamoros. When the Alamo was attacked, Texan leaders turned to Houston because he was an experienced commander. The film shows Houston promising to relieve the Alamo if the government gives him full command over all troops. In actuality, Houston felt the Alamo was unsalvageable and retreated east across Texas. The film shows the retreat but not the purpose: Houston was trying to overextend Mexican supply lines and draw Santa Anna close to the U.S. border, hoping to provoke a border fight that would bring in a U.S. army in Louisiana in support of Texas. Houston never really had unquestioned command. Most Texian fighters were volunteers in units that elected their own officers and decided for themselves which orders they would obey. The scene in which Travis calls for the Alamo men to vote on whether they would follow him or Bowie was applicable to how many militia units operated. Even in the San Jacinto campaign, Houston's command required pleading and cajoling more than orders, and when his men finally insisted on fighting he had little choice but to give in.

The film is most effective at period representation when it puts the limited events of the Alamo in a broader strategic and political context. That the closing scenes depict the decisive battle of San Jacinto is appropriate. In the film, Santa Anna pursues Houston's army across Texas and divides his own forces. What is missing from these

scenes is why Santa Anna took such a gamble. Historically, when Santa Anna learned that even the Texan provisional government had taken flight to Galveston Bay, he split his army and rushed south with a small force to try to capture them. At this favorable turn of events, Houston gave in to pressure to attack and moved south after Santa Anna. One scene in the film tries to capture the pressure put on Houston—a letter from President Burnet (the actual historical document is used) is read to Houston shaming him for retreating.

The battle at San Jacinto is another example of how the film presents a contained, simplified scene for a more drawn-out event. In the film, Houston comes across the battlefield through an almost mystical vision: He sees it and knows it is where he is destined to win. The successful battle takes place there almost immediately. Historically, Houston drew up his army in a solid defensive position and waited, hoping to goad Santa Anna into attacking him. Mexican reinforcements arrived that night. Santa Anna believed that the rebels would never dare give up their defensive ground to attack and gave his exhausted troops the next day to rest. Houston's men insisted on attacking, and Houston gave in. It was through a combination of boldness and good luck that the Texans caught the Mexicans utterly by surprise and were able to rout them. Here the film scenes pick up what is known from the historical record. The Texans fell upon the fleeing Mexicans and slaughtered many without mercy in revenge for the Alamo (and Goliad). A panicked Santa Anna fled but was subsequently captured.

Historical Construction / Social Construction

The Alamo contains direct quotes from letters or diaries written by the historical figures or by witnesses who knew them. Travis's letters to the provisional government

and Sam Houston are quoted in the film ("Victory or Death"). Later, Sam Houston is read an actual letter from President Burnet: "Sir, the enemy are laughing you to scorn. You must fight them." The screenplay also inserts famous stories about the characters that, while not occurring at the Alamo, help to establish their reputations. In an early scene in San Antonio, Bowie tells a story of a fight in which his friend had failed to back him up. "Jim, you were in the wrong," the friend protests. "Exactly," Bowie returns, "that's when I need you the most." It is an amusing paraphrase of a surviving account of a brawl Bowie got into after his wife's death. Twice in the film, Bowie and Crockett discuss Bowie's famed "Sand Bar" fight which he won despite suffering extraordinary wounds. When Crockett arrives at the Alamo, the film has him regale his new comrades with the clever line that Crockett actually told to newspapers on his journey out of Tennessee: If the Tennessee voters don't want him anymore, they can "go to hell, and I will go to Texas."

At other times, invented dialogue is used to convey information about the historical figures. In an early scene, Travis and Bowie pass each other; Travis calls Bowie a drunk and Bowie calls Travis a dandy. In a later quarrel during the welcoming dance for Crockett, Bowie calls Travis a debtor who has run out on his pregnant wife, and Travis denounces Bowie as a land swindler who married a girl for her money (referring to the deceased Ursula Veramendi, daughter of the Mexican administrator of Bexár). It is highly unlikely that the men really exchanged such conveniently packaged insults, but in the context of this film the words establish the tense relationship between them while at the same time giving the viewer additional information about their backgrounds.

The Alamo uses filmic techniques to offer interpretation about two of the main characters, Bowie and Crockett, and their significance to the era portrayed in the film. At the time of the Alamo, both were already famous men. Crockett, who had already served several times in Congress, was one of the most famous men in the U.S. Bowie was a legendary frontier fighter whose exploits were well-known throughout the West. In several scenes, this film gives these men the opportunity to discuss the myths that grew up around them. Each man, in a sense, is trapped by his reputation. The screenplay even lets Crockett say as much, when he tells Bowie that if he were just plain David Crockett he might slip out and try to flee, but as the hero Davy Crockett he has no choice but to stay and fight. In a touching scene just before the battle, Crockett visits a comatose Bowie and puts a pistol in his unmoving hand. It is a gesture from one legend to another; both must go down fighting.

At times the film engages in pure historical imagination. We do not know if Travis ever gave an inspiring speech to the men about the importance of Texas, but it feels important that he should have. The surviving accounts only suggest that Travis talked to the men about when reinforcements might come and why they should not surrender to the Mexicans. The film imagines what inspiring words Travis might have said to convince the men to fight for Texas. The film's Travis says that Texas represents a "second chance" to "become a different man." The camera cuts to a close-up looking directly into Travis's face as he adds, "And I hope a better one." The historical William Travis squeezed a lot of hard living into his 26 years, and he had no shortage of character flaws (he was a chronic womanizer and an ardent pro-slavery agitator). Yet at the Alamo he rose above his flaws and fulfilled his duty at the cost of his life. The close-up on

Travis's face as he says that he hopes he has become a better man implies the filmmakers' ultimate assessment of Travis's worth.

Only one major scene in the film seems to be wholly imagined. At dusk before the battle, Mexican musicians play the cavalry tune *deguello* to remind the Alamo defenders that there will be no quarter. Crockett runs to the walls with his fiddle and accompanies the grim march with a lively counterpoint. As the music fades Crockett muses, "It's amazing what a little harmony'll do." It is a piece of historical imagination that lets the filmmakers convey the message that the world is a better place when Mexicans and Anglos live in harmony rather than in conflict. That the filmmakers chose the good-humored Crockett to deliver the humane message seems appropriate, even if there is no surviving evidence that this happened.

In terms of social construction, *The Alamo* incorporates perspectives beyond just the Anglo males who died defending the fort. A number of scenes include Tejanos, the men and women of Mexican origins who shared Texas with the Anglo Texian settlers. The cooperation of Tejano rebels like Juan Seguín was important to the Anglo Texians during the war against Santa Anna. Seguín and his men are also Texan heroes, the film suggests—and if they have been forgotten in previous film version of *The Alamo*, it is time to reinsert them in the Alamo story.

The film has a difficult line to walk between incorporating an integral but previously neglected people and overstating their position. Tejanos probably did not number much more than 3,000-4,000 in the 1830s, while the population of Anglos had grown to more than 30,000. Some Tejanos, like Seguín's family, were actively allied with the Texians, but the bulk of them probably only wanted to avoid getting caught in

the fighting between the rebels and Santa Anna. Indeed, hesitance to alienate Tejanos who opposed Santa Anna but nonetheless still considered themselves Mexicans was a chief reason why the rebel provisional government held off so long on declaring independence.

In the film, Seguíñ is asked by his friend Esparza why he fights for men like this. “Santa Anna only wants to rule Mexico,” Esparza wryly notes, “these disgraces want the whole world.” Seguíñ has no answer for his friend. It is an ambiguous exchange that hints at the tension Tejanos must have felt. Santa Anna was a dictator who had unlawfully seized absolute power and overturned the federal constitution, but he was a Mexican nationalist. For most Anglo Texians, independence was a prelude to joining the United States—and the future of Tejanos in this arrangement must have given many of them pause. This uncertainty is reinforced only a few moments later when Crockett tours the streets of Bexár and notices how many Tejano families have fled. When he passes one such house, the father tells a son to close the door. “Do they know something we don’t?” he asks a companion. The implication is that, for some Tejanos, the Texian fight was not theirs.

Another crucial tension for the Tejanos was the fact that the Texan war was for them a civil war against fellow Mexicans. Like the U.S. Civil War that Texas statehood contributed to causing a few decades later, the Texas rebellion pitted brother against brother. Though the need for Tejano cooperation prevented Anglo Texians from openly trumpeting the war as a racial struggle, killing Mexican *soldados* weighed less heavily on them. In the film, after Travis orders a cannon fired at the arriving Mexican army, Santa Anna’s army raises a red flag marked “Death to Traitors” atop a church tower in Bexár.

Seguín asks Esparza if his brother is in the enemy army. Esparza ruefully answers that his brother could be one of the men raising the red flag.

Ultimately, *The Alamo* squarely aligns Tejano interests with the struggle for Texan independence. Juan Seguín's passion for Texas becomes the most important perspective. When a letter must be delivered to General Houston, Travis calls on Seguín to do it. This mission prevents him from being with his fellows at their hour of need, but he fulfills it without complaint. In the scenes at San Jacinto, Seguín and a cavalcade of Tejanos charge the surprised Mexicans to Seguín's cry, "*A lá batalla, tejanos!*" It is a rousing image that stands in contrast to Westerns of earlier decades—here comes the cavalry, but this time they are Mexican Americans.

Another aspect of inclusive representation is the depiction of female historical figures. There actually were women at the Alamo, some of the defenders' female relatives. Captain Almaron Dickison's wife Suzanna and daughter Angelina appear in the film several times, notably in a tearful separation when Almaron rushes off to his death during the battle. Two Tejana women tend to Bowie on his sick bed, one of them the sister of his dead wife, Ursula. Ursula Veramendi herself appears in visions in Bowie's mind. Travis's wife appears as well, reluctantly signing divorce papers and telling their children to say goodbye to their father.

Overall, however, the women of *The Alamo* are a sideline to the narrative. After all, the women did not fight at the Alamo or San Jacinto and did not participate in the provisional government. Women played important roles in the lives of all of the leading men—Houston, Crockett, and Travis all came to Texas leaving behind failed marriages. In *The Alamo*, female characters appear only to establish male characters. Ursula is used

to express Bowie's pain and loss. Rosanna Travis is used only to depict Travis's personal failings. Suzanna and Angelina appear only to weep for Dickinson.

Black slaves are highlighted in the film's narrative. At least a couple were actually at the Alamo, although the only one known for certain is Travis's manservant, Joe. Joe was in the Alamo throughout the battle, saw Travis die, and was later set free by Santa Anna (Mexico had banned slavery). Joe traveled back Texas and was returned as a slave to Travis's estate. The film portrays a second slave, Bowie's servant Sam. Bowie owned a slave named Sam but it is not known whether he was at the Alamo or what happened to him after Bowie's death. Sam plays an interesting role in the film: He is an older man who takes the young, naïve Joe under wing. Sam teaches Joe how to surrender in Spanish and tells him that he has done all manner of unpleasant work for White folks and that he "ain't gonna die for them." The kinds of physical labor Black slaves would have been assigned is represented in the film by a scene in which Travis orders Sam and Joe, when they are not busy doing other work, to dig a well.

Later in the film, when Santa Anna offers to let non-Anglo occupants out of the Alamo, Sam readily obeys Bowie's instruction to return home. Sam asks for manumission papers, but Bowie snaps that Sam is his property and will be until he dies. Joe, on the other hand, sticks it out with Travis, helping load muskets until his owner is killed. The implication of these scenes involving slaves is ambiguous. The Texan rebellion was not their fight—who can blame Sam for leaving the White people who enslaved him? Joe is the obedient slave who helps his master in a noble cause—but only until the master is killed. Slavery was a thorny issue for Texas, and the film's representation of Blacks conveys this only partly. The Texans claimed to be fighting for

liberty—but most were slave-owners, while the Mexican government had abolished slavery. Many Texians during the crisis worried that their slaves hoped for a Mexican victory, since that would bring liberation. These tensions are left unmentioned in *The Alamo*.

Another missing element is the presence of American Indians. Though probably no more numerous than the Tejanos, they exerted an influence beyond what their population suggested. A chief reason why Spain built missions like the Alamo was to monitor and Christianize the native peoples, and pressure from Comanche raids was one reason why Spanish, and subsequently Mexican, settlement was so restricted. The U.S. settlers who came to Texas in the three decades before the Alamo battle often had to contend with Indian raids. The Texians who left their farms and ranches in order to join the army were making a risky sacrifice—while their militias were out fighting the Mexicans, their homesteads were left open to Comanche raids. Texian fighters, thus, had a strong motivation to push for a quick decision against the Mexicans in order to get back to their homes and strike back against the Indians. This complication fails to appear anywhere in the film.

In constructing people of Mexican origin, Mexican officers and soldiers are on the whole brave and professional, which the historical record suggests they truly were. Interestingly, the film tries to avoid a characteristic limitation of the war-movie genre: reducing the enemy to faceless masses or evil villains. In many of the scenes in which the Mexican army appears, the point of view is from two nameless *soldados*, one older and one still a boy, who humanize the conflict even though they are never named. Indeed, it seems to be the boy who fires the fatal shot at Travis. In another scene,

Crockett leads a raid outside the Alamo to burn surrounding building and a young *soldado* is shot. The viewer is given a close-up of the dying man's face, and Crockett's expression conveys the sad waste of a young life.

Witnessing some scenes from the perspective of a pair of imagined Mexican footsoldiers is a step toward humanizing the "other" side. Much more is known about Santa Anna's officers, and many of them are identified in the film by actual name. In general, they too are honorable and brave. They put up token resistance to Santa Anna's furious outbursts but back down under his scorn. One noble general, Castrillón, protests Santa Anna's orders to kill all prisoners but without effect. His reward is to be struck down by the Texian charge at San Jacinto (which was indeed the man's actual fate). The cumulative effect of how Spanish-speaking peoples are used in the film might be called a limited multicultural message. Each side was brave, each side was fighting for what it believed, and each side could give in to rage or vengeance. The film suggests that the Texian cause was right, but that does not mean the Mexicans were in the wrong—they simply had the misfortune of following a bad leader. The Tejano rebels offer the film's hopeful image of inclusion: people of Texas, Anglo and Hispanic, joined together to build a new state.

Empathy / Moral Response

A core convention of Hollywood movies is the need for heroes and villains. Clearly made for U.S. audiences, *The Alamo* is loath to depict Texian Anglo settlers as villains. Personal failings can be pointed out (Travis's callous abandonment of his wife and children, for example), and a dark underside can be highlighted (the Texian ownership of slaves or the vengeful slaughter of fleeing Mexicans at San Jacinto), but in

the end the Texians are fighting for a noble cause. They come from the U.S., the land of liberty, and even in a Mexican territory they still defend freedom.

A more detailed accounting is never really given in the film. Toward the end of the siege of the Alamo, Travis is called on to give a motivating speech to the men. He has to convince them why they should die for Texas. He tells them that Texas means a second chance, a place to make a new beginning. Each man should envision for himself what is most important in life, and that is represented by Texas. No mention is made of U.S. expansion, of the land-hungry White settlers, or the longstanding U.S. interest in acquiring Texas. The Alamo patriots were heroes, imperfect perhaps, but still defenders of American freedom. The film offers one particularly moving scene in tribute to them. The night before the battle the camera view moves throughout the Alamo, focusing on individual men with their final letters or diaries—actual period documents—read in voice-over. It is a poignant choice that gives the viewer empathy for the authentic voices of men who chose to sacrifice their lives for a cause.

Then who is the villain in this historical tale? Mexico is not cast as the enemy. The film absolves the Mexican soldiers and officers of blame for the war, hoisting it entirely on Santa Anna. The real Santa Anna was a notorious opportunist who seized power through an unlawful coup, abrogated Mexico's constitution, and forced armed conflict in Texas. Beating up on Santa Anna was a popular activity among Mexican leaders after he was deposed, and the film models its Santa Anna on accounts from his many disgruntled followers. Throughout the film, Santa Anna comes off in a very negative light. In one scene, Santa Anna retires to bed where a frightened Tejana girl is waiting for him. As Santa Anna closes the door, the scene cuts to Almaron Dickson

comforting Suzanna and Angelina in the Alamo. It is a subtle contrast—Santa Anna the ravisher versus a noble Alamo defender who loves his wife and daughter.

The Alamo fails to establish a multidimensional Santa Anna. Emilio Echevarría ably conveys Santa Anna's temper, arrogance, and selfishness, but missing is the noted allure of the real man. Echevarría looks much older than the mid-40s that Santa Anna actually was at the Alamo. It is difficult to see in his grim-faced portrayal the handsomeness that won over many supporters and the personal charisma that kept the loyalty of the common soldiers.

By contrast, the Texan rebels come off as remarkably appealing. The handsome William Travis is well-represented by (the probably handsomer) Patrick Wilson, who captures Travis's youth but not his hard-living edge. The film's Travis is several times called a "dandy" by other characters, and Wilson's gentle demeanor reveals nothing of the pro-slavery firebrand who was always at the fore calling for Texan independence. Dennis Quaid as Sam Houston looks the part and gives the role a surprising amount of sobriety; the likely alcoholism that ruined whole portions of Houston's life (and dogged his reputation even in Texas) is represented by just two scenes in which Houston is shown pounding a shot of whiskey. Jason Patric as Bowie, like Wilson, is probably handsomer than the real man. Bowie's reputation as a criminal forger of land deeds and a super-human brawler is only alluded to in passing. Billy Bob Thornton creates an enormously appealing Crockett, winning over the viewer with his portrayal of the famous man's legendary good humor and folksiness. Thornton's Crockett is a man on the run from his reputation, which he cannot escape even in frontier Texas. The real Crockett never forgot the need for publicity and boasted to newspapers that he would cut off Santa

Anna's head. Unlike many Western historical films prior to the 1990s, *The Alamo* does show the dark sides of its protagonists, but the performances work to reinforce their image as imperfect heroes. Santa Anna comes off badly by comparison—raging, petty, and (worst of all) a bad loser.

The film tries only once to give Santa Anna's perspective its due. During the strategy session before the Alamo attack, he denounces the defenders as "pirates" and orders no prisoners taken. If Mexico allows American "bandits" to take Texas from Mexico, he says, "our grandchildren and their grandchildren will suffer the disgrace of begging for crumbs." This statement put in Santa Anna's mouth seems to hint at the poverty many Mexican Americans (both citizens and illegal immigrants) face today. It is one reason why Santa Anna wanted to crush the Texan revolt, execute prisoners, and drive illegal immigrants of Texas.

Perhaps this is the most pressing moral connection between the struggle for Texan independence and U.S. society today. Millions of Mexican nationals illegally cross the border into Texas and the U.S. Southwest every year, in a reverse of what occurred in Texas almost 200 years ago. A fundamental theme of *The Alamo* is a multicultural message of harmony—Mexicans and Americans finally resolving a peaceful border, Tejanos and Anglos uniting to form a new American state. The film's closing text blocks underscore the finality of the events: "In exchange for his life, Santa Anna signed over all Mexican rights to Texas. Nine Years after the fall of the Alamo, Texas became the 28th state of the United States." Yet 1836 did not mark a final resolution, nor did 1844. When the U.S. annexed Texas, it directly sparked the Mexican War, as Mexican troops moved across the disputed border held by the U.S. army. The Mexican War confirmed

U.S. control of Texas and the Southwest but not the movement of peoples across a porous border. Even 150 years later, the U.S. and Mexico remain divided over this issue.

The Alamo elicits its most powerful moral response when dealing with the execution of prisoners. The film drew some public attention during its initial release for depicting Davy Crockett's execution, contrary to decades of popular mythology that he died fighting. There is no shame to Crockett that he was overpowered in battle and subsequently executed, but the film puts the shame entirely on Santa Anna for ordering it. The Alamo executions pale in comparison to the nearly 400 men shot to death outside Goliad, but perhaps the emotional impact of Crockett's death is representative enough.

Yet by minimizing the execution of prisoners, treating the affair as the cruel act of one cruel man, the film sidesteps one of the most important issues facing the world today. Had Santa Anna had access to our contemporary political rhetoric, he surely would have denounced the Texians as terrorists, extremists, and foreign fighters. Today there remains uncertainty over what can be done with captured combatants who technically do not serve any national army and who, if released, would likely just take up arms again. Santa Anna faced this same problem 170 years ago and applied an unequivocal headsman's solution. By dismissing the complexities of the issue, *The Alamo* misses an opportunity to help people today see how a similar problem faced today played out in the past.

Taking Stock

Thus far, I have described my framework for conducting pedagogical content analysis of history movies and tested it on the 2004 film *The Alamo*. The film represents one kind of historical storytelling: dramatized recreation of actual events. Most

characters are real historical figures or reasoned representatives of groups (for example, the two unnamed Mexican *soldados*). Almost all the events are drawn from period accounts, and authentic artifacts (for example, letters) are incorporated into the screenplay. Of course, some events must be compressed or altered to fit sensibly into the film's narrative and running time, and some confusing or uncertain details or deeper complications are left out. Furthermore, the film's factual basis and use of historical evidence do not by themselves provide broader meaning. The film offers one possible interpretation of the meaning of the Alamo crisis (a symbolic defense of liberty against tyranny) and encourages a multicultural moral response (White and Hispanic harmony in Texas, peaceful cooperation between Mexico and the U.S.). Table 3.2 briefly summarizes main points of the analysis along the six pedagogical functions defined at the beginning of the chapter. Furthermore, it points out some implications of this film for teachers and students.

Table 3.2

Pedagogical Content Analysis Summary: The Alamo

| | <i>The Alamo</i> (2004) |
|-------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | Incorporates remarkable number of historical details (real figures, Texas politics, Alamo siege and battle), but exaggerates strategic value of Alamo and cannot include every possible detail (e.g., cannon at the long barracks) |
| Period representation | Accurate evokes period with sets (Alamo, frontier towns) and props (rifles); downplays effectiveness of Mexican artillery and competence of Santa Anna's siege; simplifies scope of Santa Anna's strategy and actions (e.g., San Jacinto taken out of its broader context) |
| Historical construction | Incorporates many recorded anecdotes (Crockett, Bowie reputations) and period documents (letters) into screenplay |
| Social construction | Features Tejano characters (Seguín) and emphasizes Tejano importance, but downplays racial dynamics and aligns Tejano interests with Anglo Texans; Mexican perspective reflected through soldiers (Castrillón, two unnamed <i>soldados</i>); slavery issue highlighted through Joe and Sam; women used mostly to establish male characters |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Empathy | Despite their dark undersides, Anglo Texians depicted as heroes; Tejanos/Mexican people depicted sympathetically; Santa Anna presented as the villain and comes off badly compared to Texian leaders |
| Moral response | Alamo represents defense of liberty against dictatorship; the film emphasizes multicultural message of racial unity, but ignores how events relate to ongoing issues of border conflict and treatment of captured enemy insurgents |
| Implications for Teachers | Dramatized recreation of historical events; teachers may be attracted to its factual basis but need to distinguish content coverage from its debatable choices in empathy and moral responses; film offers one meaning of the Alamo, but a lesson could investigate multiple possible interpretations |
| Implications for Students | Box office failure, so many students may not have heard of this movie before seeing it in class; dense amount of factual detail may be overwhelming for some students; students may fixate on period details and battles without necessarily considering the story's connection to our world today |

Pedagogical Content Analysis of *The Last Samurai*

The Last Samurai takes place during the modernization of Japan after the 1868 overthrow of the last Tokugawa shogun in the name of the young Emperor Meiji. Its central event is the defeat of the final major uprising by the samurai, Japan's traditional feudal warriors. The historical background and factual details in this analysis come from my research using historical reference texts, recent published scholarship, and educational programming about the Meiji Restoration and Japan in the 19th century.²

Plot Summary

The film opens in 1876 in San Francisco, where drunken former Civil War hero Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) is selling Winchester rifles. An old Army comrade, Zebulon Gant (Billy Connolly), convinces Algren to consider a new job opportunity as an advisor in Japan. Algren dines with his despised former commander, Colonel Bagley

² Keene (2002) offers a highly detailed study of the personality and times of Emperor Meiji. McClain (2002) provides a helpful overview of the period and supplied most statistics used in this analysis. Woodruff (2002) situates Meiji Japan in a broader global context. Dupuy and Dupuy (1993) and Dupuy, Johnson, and Bongard (1995) are useful reference texts for military figures and events. Goldfarb, Desnoo, and Toshihiro (2003) give a fascinating visual account of Japan in the samurai period. Some useful background material also is included in the special features contained on *The Last Samurai* DVD.

(Tony Goldwyn), and the Japanese emissary Mr. Omura (Masato Harada). Algren accepts a job helping train the new Japanese Army to put down a rebellion of samurai warriors under the leadership of the young emperor's former teacher, Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe). Algren is haunted by memories of participating in massacres of American Plains Indians while under Bagley's command. In Japan, he befriends the translator Simon Graham (Timothy Spall), an Englishman who resigned from a trade mission some years earlier. Algren learns that the American ambassador is trying to convince Omura and the Emperor to sign an exclusive trade agreement with the U.S. in return for modern armaments. Algren, Gant, and Bagley begin training an army of Japanese peasant-conscripts, ordered into battle before they are ready. Omura, who dominates the Emperor's governing council, is personally suffering financial losses and wants the rebellion crushed immediately. The armies clash in a night battle in a forest, and the peasant-conscripts are routed. Gant is killed, and Algren is taken prisoner at Katsumoto's request after he watches the badly wounded American craftily slay a samurai.

Algren is taken to a mountain village under Katsumoto's control for the winter, during which time he recovers from his wounds, gradually overcomes alcoholism, and gains a deep respect for the traditional samurai way of life. He is put under the care of Katsumoto's sister Taka (Koyuki), the wife of the warrior whom Algren slew. He later learns the identity of the slain warrior, falls in love with Taka, and becomes a surrogate father-figure to her children. Katsumoto befriends Algren and encourages him to train in the samurai code and style of warfare. In the spring, Algren is taken to Tokyo by Katsumoto, who has come to the capital in one last effort to convince Emperor Meiji (Shichinosuke Nakamura) to turn his back on Omura's policies. Katsumoto is arrested by

Omura's men. Algren learns Katsumoto is to be killed and joins with Simon Graham and the samurai to rescue him. They escape Tokyo and flee back to the mountain village, but Bagley, Omura, and a well-trained modern army are in pursuit. Algren is accepted as a samurai and given the armor of Taka's dead husband, and he helps Katsumoto plan and fight a final battle. The samurai briefly gain the upper hand, but eventually the superior firepower of the modern Japanese Army turns the tide. Algren charges Bagley and kills him, but machine guns quickly cut down the samurai. Katsumoto dies in the arms of his friend Algren, who survives and brings the samurai leader's sword to the Emperor. Moved by Algren's gesture, Emperor Meiji turns on Omura, strips him of his wealth and power, and refuses to sign the exclusive trade agreement with the United States. Simon Graham narrates the film's closing images, speculating that Algren returned to the mountain village and found happiness there with Taka and her family.

Content Coverage / Period Representation

The Last Samurai is probably best described as a fictional story inspired by real events. The film is an amalgam of a significant number of historical elements and figures. Several of the key Japanese characters, though fictionalized, are clearly based on actual historical persons. Katsumoto is modeled on Saigo Takamori (1828-1877), a leading samurai from Satsuma, the southern province in Kyushu that sparked and sustained the revolution against the Tokugawa shogunate. Saigo was one of the "heroes of 1868" who led the imperial forces to overthrow the last shogun and became a close advisor of the young emperor. Like Katsumoto, Saigo was a defender of samurai class and was driven from the governing Council of State (*Dajokan*) by political rivals. While Katsumoto's differences with his rivals are only generally depicted in the film as a

disagreement over samurai traditions and their role in modern Japan, Saigo left the government specifically when the emperor refused to support his proposal to go to war with Korea. Korea had declined to recognize the Meiji government until China did first, and Saigo hoped war against Korea would restore samurai prestige and make the government need them again. After this rejection, Saigo asked to be appointed ambassador to Korea, hoping that the Koreans would assassinate him and thereby provide a pretext for Japan to declare war. When this request was turned down, Saigo and his followers quit the government. This somewhat Machiavellian side to Saigo is expunged from the handsome and sympathetic Katsumoto.

Mr. Omura seems to be based on Okubo Toshimichi, another leading samurai from Satsuma province instrumental in the Meiji Restoration. He reformed Japan's financial system and was appointed interior minister. In 1871 he was part of a delegation of 50 Japanese leaders who visited Europe and the United States to get ideas and recruit advisors for Japan's modernization. Probably to keep the number of characters manageable and to simplify the complexities of the imperial government, the film gives Omura more political control than Okubo had. Omura is shown controlling the Council of State, but Okubo shared power with other ruling ministers like Iwakura Tomomi. It was Iwakura who convinced Emperor Meiji to reject Saigo's plans for Korea. In the sense that Omura is depicted as Katsumoto's rival, he is a composite of Okubo and Iwakura. At the film's conclusion, Omura is punished as the emperor strips away his family's wealth. This is perhaps the character's most fictionalized aspect. Far from being punished, Iwakura later became Prime Minister and was eulogized by the emperor after his death in 1883. Okubo, on the other hand, paid with his life not his wealth: in

May, 1878, six ex-samurai sympathetic to Saigo ambushed Okubo's coach and killed him. Meiji did not strip Okubo's family of its wealth; the emperor posthumously promoted Okubo.

General Hasegawa perhaps can be compared to Yamagata Arimoto, Japan's chief of general staff and army minister. It was Yamagata who commanded the 60,000 troops dispatched by Okubo to southern Japan to put down Saigo's rebellion in 1877. In the film, Hasegawa is captured in the forest battle and, with Katsumoto's assistance, commits ritual suicide. The real Yamagata did not die on the battlefield. He pursued the campaign to its conclusion and later served as Prime Minister for a time. Hasegawa is a fictionalized figure used by the film to show that not all samurai opposed modernization.

The only historical figure portrayed under his own name in the film is Emperor Meiji. In the film, the emperor is depicted as a quiet young man who keeps his personal feelings somewhat of a mystery. Mutsuhito, the Meiji Emperor, was only 25 years old during the 1877 rebellion, and had already been on the throne for a decade. He did not keep a personal diary and wrote few letters—only his poetry provides some insight into his feelings. The film emphasizes the personal closeness of Meiji and Katsumoto. The young emperor is unsure how to rule and in one scene even begs Katsumoto, his former teacher, to tell him what to do. The real Meiji did depend heavily on his advisors and let his Council of State direct most national business. Saigo Takamori, the inspiration for Katsumoto, was a close advisor for whom Meiji felt personal affection. Saigo wrote a letter to the emperor during his rebellion and claimed to be marching on Tokyo to meet with him, but Meiji never wrote back or saw him again. At the film's end, Meiji reveals his grief for Katsumoto's death to Algren when he visits the throne to present

Katsumoto's ceremonial sword. The real Meiji did mourn Saigo's death. One of his ministers, Kido Takayoshi, wrote how he was moved to tears by the emperor's display of affection for the slain Saigo, and Meiji asked the empress to write a poem mourning the dead samurai.

Katsumoto's rebellion is a composite of three different historical uprisings in Japan in the 1870s. In the film, Katsumoto's rebellion is already under way by 1876 and targets the infrastructure of modernization, notably railroads. When the first army of peasant conscripts sent against him is repulsed, Minister Omura himself takes command of the modernized army trained and equipped by Colonel Bagley and the Americans. These fictional story elements seem drawn from the Saga uprising in early 1874, when Eto Shinpei, the former justice minister, gathered 300 dissident samurai and began attacking banks and government offices. Interior Minister Okubo personally took charge of an expeditionary force and quelled the uprising. Eto was executed two months later and his head displayed in public as a warning. Katsumoto's rebel samurai are traditionalists who refuse to use modern Western armaments. This story element has some basis in reality. In late October of 1876, the *shinpuren* (200 or so former samurai) tried to attack the garrison at Kumamoto Castle, in Kyushu. Strongly anti-Western, they fought only with traditional samurai arms and were crushed.

Katsumoto's rebellion is mostly based on Saigo Takamori's uprising from January to September in 1877. The film places this last samurai rebellion in Yoshino, a mountainous region in southern Honshu, though Saigo's revolt actually occurred in Satsuma in southern Kyushu. After resigning from the government, Saigo retired on a large stipend. He became a sponsor of disaffected samurai in Satsuma, funding a

network of private military academies to help them organize. Late in 1876, the government sent agents to investigate the academies. The cadets captured one man and tortured him into confessing that he was a spy and that the government was plotting to kill Saigo. In January, 1877, the cadets broke into government arsenals and seized the guns and ammunition after learning Tokyo had dispatched ships to transfer the ordnance to Osaka. Saigo was away at the time and did not condone the cadets' actions, but upon his return he took command of the rebellion. Unlike the film's Katsumoto, Saigo knew well the power of modern weapons and used them. The army he led in 1868 against the last shogun also had used modern weapons imported from the West.

The film depicts Katsumoto's rebellion as a last stand of the traditional samurai way of life, a pure culture untainted by Western technology and industrialization. Saigo's rebellion surely attracted some anti-foreign ex-samurai, but the rebellion was not so much anti-Western as it was a protest against the dismantling of samurai caste. Throughout the previous decade, Saigo had seen the imperial government strip away samurai privileges one by one. In 1871, Japan's feudal domains were abolished and replaced by prefectures. Another law permitted all citizens to take surnames, formerly a samurai privilege. The establishment of a modern army based on mass conscription in 1873 did away with any military need for samurai. The final blow came in 1876, when the government banned ex-samurai from publicly bearing swords and replaced their traditional stipends with lower-paying government bonds. It was the loss of traditional status of the samurai that convinced Saigo to lead the 1877 rebellion. When his rebels took to the field, it was not exclusively with feudal arms and armor. His forces fought

with swords, rifles, and artillery, and they wore a wide variety of uniforms—the men who quit the government to join him even wore their old governmental uniforms.

In terms of actual historical events, Katsumoto's uprising is largely fictionalized. The film narrative consists of an early victory against the peasant conscripts in the forest battle in 1876 and then, after Algren's lengthy interlude among Katsumoto and the samurai, one decisive last battle in 1877. In reality, Saigo's rebellion was a seven-month campaign waged from Kumamoto Castle to Kagishima. Only the battle scene in which Algren is taken prisoner seems influenced by an actual historical event. Algren reluctantly leads the peasant conscripts into a dark, foggy wood, where they are overrun by a fierce samurai charge. Something similar actually occurred on February 22, 1877, when a governmental regiment clashed with Saigo's rebels in a moonlight battle. The rebels attacked at close quarters with swords drawn and drove back the government troops, who lost their regimental banner (in the film, it is Algren who captures the tiger pennant and uses it to fight off the samurai attackers).

In many ways, how historical content knowledge is incorporated into the screenplay closely relates to how the historical period is represented in general. This is most true regarding the end of the samurai rebellion. The film's principal narrative is almost entirely invented. Saigo did not capture an American officer who later fought at his side; Saigo did not ride to Tokyo and was never arrested by the government; the government did not send assassins against Saigo (though his young cadets suspected it). The scenes in which ninja attack Katsumoto's village at night and ex-samurai (*ronin*) ambush Algren in the streets of Tokyo are visually exciting, violent interludes (expected in action movies), but they have little historical basis.

The film's final battle between the modernized Japanese army and Katsumoto's rebel samurai is heavily fictionalized but does offer some historical insights. Katsumoto and Algren engage Omura's army in one final set-piece battle in May, 1877. Colonel Bagley parleys with Katsumoto and Algren and asks for their surrender, but Katsumoto answers that Mr. Omura knows this is not possible. Taking advantage of the terrain and some carefully laid traps, the few hundred samurai rebels briefly gain the upper-hand but soon are overwhelmed by the superior firepower of the government's forces. At the very end, Katsumoto and Algren are brought down under a hail of machine-gun bullets. Helped by Algren, Katsumoto is able to kill himself with his sword rather than suffer capture or a slow death. Historically, Saigo's army peaked at 20,000-30,000 in March. After his siege of Kumamoto Castle was broken, the rebels were forced into a bloody retreat to Kagoshima and their numbers dwindled. In September, Saigo and a few hundred remaining followers dug into the low hills north of Kagoshima Castle. Yamagata Arimoto wrote a letter to his former friend asking him to surrender, but Saigo sent no response. The next morning Yamagata's army attacked the rebels. Saigo was shot through the pelvis and probably died almost instantly. However, afterward a legend sprang up that he lived long enough to face the far-off Imperial Palace and take his own life by ritual *seppuku*.

The film's last battle viscerally shows the power of modern weaponry, most notably the machine gun. It also suggests the effectiveness of a trained national army of infantry armed with rifles over the individualistic skill and courage of warriors with pre-modern arms and training. On the other hand, the visual rhetoric of this extended scene emphasizes fictional adventure. Historically, heavy artillery became the most powerful

ranged battlefield weapon in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and the film does show a howitzer having some distant impact on the samurai ranks. However, it is the machine gun that most contemporary viewers can understand: it lets the filmmakers show a more personal visual mode of killing, with men aiming directly at the other characters and mowing them down. Filmic convention also demands that *The Last Samurai* let the ultimately doomed heroes put up a good fight first. Hence, the extended battle scene begins with the samurai luring the first government regiment into close combat, trapping them behind walls of fire. In reality, Saigo's last stand was short and hopeless, even though his men also fought with modern arms. As colonial battles throughout Asia and Africa in the late 1800s amply demonstrated, a pre-modern army with traditional arms almost never could hold out against a trained army with modern weapons.

The Last Samurai represents the broader period of Meiji-era Japan in both historically compelling and problematic ways. The film narrative from start to finish emphasizes the role of Western foreign pressure on Japan and the struggle of the Meiji government to pursue modernization on its own terms. From the 1850s to the 1870s, the United States, Russia, Britain, Holland, and France all vied for influence and trade with Japan, and the ensuing treaties and trade agreements are a complex historical topic. By filmic convention, movies must avoid bombarding the audience with excessive detail, so *The Last Samurai* depicts a simplified foreign presence to represent the difficulty Japan faced in dealing on an equal footing with Western nations. The Americans are shown exclusively, though the screenplay implies representatives from other Great Powers are present in Japan. Graham originally came to Japan with a British delegation. In one scene, U.S. ambassador Swanbeck tries to pressure Omura into concluding an exclusive

trade bargain with the U.S., and Omura counters by threatening to turn to European nations for trade. As an American-made film, it is hardly surprising that the main character is American and the role of Americans is exaggerated. In reality, the Japanese used the U.S. as a model for their school system and some financial reforms, not their military. The Meiji government turned to the British to modernize its navy and to the French and later the Germans to modernize its army. Yet, Swanbeck's impatience in the film illustrates the historical reality that the Japanese government often used delaying tactics against foreign diplomatic pressure.

The film carefully, even lovingly, depicts the culture and appearance of traditional, feudal Japanese society. The screenplay makes many references to *bushido* (the "way of the warrior"), *kendo* (the art of swordfighting), and Zen Buddhism (the spiritual philosophy of inner peace embraced by many samurai). A particularly touching recurring motif in the film is the cherry blossom (*sakura*), a popular element in traditional Japanese art. A famous Japanese poem compared samurai armies to a field of cherry blossoms—an array of beautiful colors and forms blown apart by a strong wind. At the end of the last battle scene, after stabbing himself with his sword, Katsumoto observes blossoms drifting nearby on the wind and notes, "They are all perfect." The blossoms are beautiful and glorious but ultimately cannot last in the world.

The strangest assertion made by the film about the period is that the samurai are a native tribe. In numerous scenes, the samurai are compared to Native Americans of the Great Plains. Algren is brought to Japan because of his intimate knowledge of the Cheyenne. He laments that suppressing tribal rebellions is the only work for which he is suited. On many occasions, Algren has flashbacks to the slaughter of a Native American

village. Algren only regains his mental health after coming to identify with the samurai warrior-tribe. This “tribal” conception of the samurai would have made no sense to the Japanese of the period.³ Although it is true that Saigo’s rebels largely consisted of men from the Satsuma region, they were not a distinct tribal group and sympathetic ex-samurai could be found all over Japan. More accurately, the samurai were an elite social caste of warrior-families. A more defensible choice might have been to compare the rebel samurai to another defeated American group—the Southern Confederacy. Like the Confederates, Saigo’s Satsuma rebels came from the deep south of their country, felt abused by the national government, and claimed to be defending their traditional way of life. The film ignores the Confederate comparison except to construct Algren as a Civil War veteran.

Arguably, the film is most educational in its symbolic representation of the period. How the film depicts the Council of State (*Dajokan*) is particularly insightful, with the panel of ministers seated around a table in rank order while the emperor observes them quietly from his own table at the head of the room. The emperor is separated, distant, and not expected to join the debates. The ministers debated and formulated policy; the emperor listened and intervened only when a choice between policy options had to be made (such as when the emperor supported the peace faction over Saigo’s faction calling for war against Korea). Although the *Dajokan* was replaced by a formal cabinet system in the 1880s, the dominance of head ministers and the limited but important role of the emperor continued through WWII. The film skillfully depicts

³ There is some irony in this “tribal” depiction of the samurai. Through the 1870s-1890s, the same decades in which the U.S. government subdued the native peoples of the American West, Japan’s government subjugated the Ainu, the indigenous people of Ezochi (Hokkaido), by seizing their hunting grounds and settling ethnic Japanese in subsidized homesteads. By 1908, the Ainu were only 1.25% of Hokkaido’s population. The American Plains Indians are far more analogous to the Ainu than to the samurai.

the ceremonial world of the emperor (*tenno*, “heavenly ruler”), who was revered as a semi-divine figure. Especially perceptive is the scene in which Graham first takes Algren and Bagley to meet the emperor, lecturing them on the intricate protocols of the imperial throne.

The film further evokes the period through a pair of visual metaphors. When Algren first arrives in Yokohama in 1876, he sees a traditional Japanese town. After spending many months with Katsuomoto, he returns to a modernized Japanese town symbolized by streams of telegraph lines running across the skyline. In a separate scene in between, Algren’s poorly trained conscript regiment marches alongside a great railway being built in the countryside. An old, traditional village is being demolished to make way for the railroad. Graham tells Algren that Mr. Omura owns all the railroads, which is why he needs Katsumoto’s rebellion to be crushed as quickly as possible. These scenes are more useful metaphorically than literally. The modernization of Japan was a shockingly rapid process (from the 1860s to the 1890s), and the film tries to convey this by showing differences in Yokohama over a single year. The train was an immensely important technology for Japan, a mountainous country that benefited greatly from rapid land transportation. Locomotives were one of the first Western technologies acquired by Japan, and the government supported the rapid construction of railroads. Having all the railroads owned by just one minister, Mr. Omura, is a simplification for the sake of the plot. Yet, this simplification points to a larger omission. Japan was rapidly industrialized through the creation of *zaibatsu*, powerful families that were given control of factories by the government. The *zaibatsu* formed the genesis of industrial and commercial corporations, becoming a capitalist oligarchy. The monopoly over the railroads that the

film gives to Omura perhaps is meant to represent the power of the *zaibatsu*, but it fails to capture their full reach over the economy and the role they played in swiftly building up Japanese industrial production.

Historical Construction / Social Construction

The Last Samurai constructs its historical narrative to a limited extent with language that comes from Meiji-era Japan. The most immediately obvious choice on the part of the filmmakers is to include a significant amount of Japanese-language dialogue with English subtitles. This aural rhetorical choice augments the authenticity of the historical narrative for the English-language viewer, who feels immersed in the period language. It also gives the filmmakers the opportunity to include actual period Japanese phrases that can be discerned by an informed listener. Meiji is called *tenno*, the ceremonial mode of addressing the emperor. In the scene when Algren is leaving the village to ride to Tokyo, Taka's son addresses him as Algren-*san*, using the honorific suffix attached to the name of a samurai to indicate he has been accepted by Taka's family.

Also instructive are the use of actual political slogans promulgated by the Meiji government. In the council scene in which Katsumoto appears before the emperor bearing a sword and is arrested, Omura tells the other ministers, "We must resist the Western powers by becoming powerful ourselves. Our army, our economy must be strong." This is a skillful inclusion of the official slogan "Prosperous Nation, Strong Military" (*fukoku kyohei*). Other slogans are referenced more indirectly. Earlier in the film, Colonel Bagley tells Algren that the Japanese have decided to become a civilized nation. This echoes the Meiji slogan, "Civilization and Enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*).

The symbolic presence of the telegraph wires, trains, and steamships, as well as Omura's insistence that Japan needs a strong economy evokes the slogan, "Increase Production, Promote Industry" (*shokusan kogyo*). In a similar vein, the screenplay incorporates a touch of the rhetoric actually employed by the anti-government rebels of the period. In a voice-over early in the film, Algren admits surprise to learn that Katsumoto feels his rebellion is in service to the emperor. In reality, many who participated in the overthrow of the last shogun and the "restoration" of imperial rule embraced the slogan "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarian" (*sonno joi*). When some of these *sonno joi* partisans felt betrayed by the Meiji government and resisted, they claimed they were rebelling in service to the emperor in order to rid him of corrupt advisors. This rhetoric of loyalty to the emperor was employed by the real Saigo Takamori—as well as by the ex-samurai who assassinated Okubo Toshimichi.

Linguistic elements are not the only kind of historically authentic documentation used by the film in its construction of history. Costumes, sets, and props (especially weapons and armor) visually evoke the period in visually moving ways. Saigo's last rebellion may have used modern weaponry, but nonetheless the film adeptly imagines what a samurai army might have looked like at the end of the Tokugawa era. In a scene shortly after Algren is brought to the samurai village, he observes the warriors engaging in sword drill and mounted archery—two skills long prized by samurai.

Ultimately, *The Last Samurai* is a created story. In that it seeks to comment on the historical legacy of the period, the film is more than a strictly entertaining costume drama or action movie. Most characters (including the hero Algren and the villain Bagley) and most of the plot events (including the fights) are wholly or mostly invented.

The filmmakers shrewdly straddle the divide by changing names but keeping the historical period: the rebel leader is Katsumoto not Saigo, the last rebellion occurs in Yoshino not Satsuma, but the period setting is still 1876-1877.

As telling as the film's historical construction is how the narrative constructs different social identities and groups. One of the chief goals of the Meiji government was to modernize the Japanese people, to turn the traditionally stratified population into "national citizens" (*kokumin*) bonded together by loyalty to the state. The film hints at the transformation of the people in two scenes. When Algren first takes charge of training the Japanese army, the soldiers are basically peasants straight off the farms. Their conical helmets evoke the traditional peasant field hat. These peasant-conscripts quickly break in fear when Katsumoto's samurai charge them. At the film's end, Bagley leads a new army of national soldiers against Algren and Katsumoto. They wear European-style uniforms and fight with discipline. This new army represents the *kokumin* ideal. What is missing from the depiction of this transition is any kind of resistance or agency. The common people who go along with the changing times are obedient and deferential to their leaders. The peasants who hold to the traditional lifestyle are obedient and deferential to the samurai. There is no glimpse of the kind of wild independence that led hundreds of thousands of ordinary Japanese to take to the streets across Japan in the autumn of 1867, uncertain months when the Tokugawa shogunate was collapsing, in a bacchanal of fatalistic celebration taking up the chant *ee ja nai ka* (roughly "It's okay! What the hell!"). Neither do we see the popular agency that led some Japanese to advocate local constitutional reform in the two decades before 1900 or to push for socialism in the decades after.

The world of *The Last Samurai* is a man's world. Women and children only function in the film in relation to their men. Perhaps in some ways this is an appropriate metaphor for traditional Japan, in which women were expected to be visibly deferential to men. Yet, the film never explores these individuals from their own perspectives or observes the world from their point of view. The only substantial female character is Taka, Katsumoto's sister. She and her children mourn the samurai slain by Algren, respect the wise Katsumoto, and accept the changing Algren. The narrative confirms that Algren has changed as a person when he is embraced by Taka's family. Taka, in a sense, is used in the traditional female role of securing an alliance between men, as she is symbolically passed from Katsumoto's control to Algren when Katsumoto commands Taka to take Algren into her home. Of course, Taka also serves the powerful filmic convention of the "love interest" for the main character. The racial dimensions are worth contemplating. How would American audiences react to a movie set in the Old West of the 1870s in which a lone Asian man came into their world, killed a White woman's husband in a duel, and then fell in love with the widow and took the slain husband's place?

The film constructs a dominant role for a few characters that are not Japanese. It is a longstanding filmic convention to have a strong main character countered by a strong villain. Thus, during the last battle, Mr. Omura panics while Colonel Bagley takes charge of the army, establishing Bagley's courage in counterpoint to Algren's so that it is emotionally satisfying when Algren kills him. Algren is constructed as a White super-man. Quite quickly, over no more than eight months (fall of 1876 to May, 1877), Algren becomes a better samurai than the Japanese samurai who have trained all their lives.

Nobutada and especially Ujio nourish Algren's transformation as he eventually surpasses them (Algren outlives both of them). Only Katsumoto is depicted as Algren's equal, and indeed the film seems to construct these characters as spiritual equals—they see in each other fellow warriors and kindred souls. Yet it is Algren who lives through the last battle and holds his dying friend in his arms, not the other way around. The White hero is the only survivor of the doomed rebellion that originally was not even his own cause, and it is he who bears the samurai spirit at the end of the film. This ambiguity is reflected in the film's title—who is the last samurai, Katsumoto or Algren?

Empathy / Moral Response

The Last Samurai fulfills an established filmic convention by dividing its historical characters into heroes and villains. What is surprising is that this U.S.-made film so effectively establishes empathy with an archaic culture that is foreign even to many Japanese today. The film accomplishes this historical empathy through the psychological journey of Captain Algren as he becomes immersed in the compelling beauty of the Japanese setting. At the start of the film he is a guilt-haunted, self-destructive man. As he gets to know Katsumoto and lives among his people, he comes to identify with a foreign culture that restores his humanity, honor, and inner peace. Early in Algren's captivity, Katsumoto confronts Algren about his nightmares. When Algren says that all soldiers have nightmares, Katsumoto replies that only soldiers who are ashamed of what they have done have them. By embracing *bushido*, the samurai code, Algren shuffles off his old life and finds self-acceptance in samurai identity.

Algren's identification with the samurai facilitates empathy for their culture because Algren, despite his transformation, never ceases to be readily identifiable as a

hero in U.S. filmic convention. He always fits comfortably with our contemporary popular-culture views of a hero: Algren feels guilty about past atrocities, respects other cultures, and is gentle with women and children. Algren's hero status is further reinforced by casting. Tom Cruise is one of the most recognizable stars in the world, well known for his leading-man good looks. Cruise's handsome appeal and sympathetic performance helps to bridge the gap in time and culture for the audience. Cruise's Algren becomes a samurai but he never shaves off his long, dark hair.

If Algren is representative of the redemption of Western culture through the rediscovery of forgotten virtues like honor, Katsumoto is representative of the purity of the virtues of samurai culture. He is the noble leader, a warrior guided by the Buddhist virtues of Right Thought, Right Action. He has achieved inner peace because he has nothing to be ashamed about, and he will follow his right cause to the end even though it results in his death. If Western culture stresses the struggle for survival at all costs, Katsumoto's culture looks to find a good death. The purity of Katsumoto's honor earns him the veneration of his followers and the respect of his enemies. His death represents that death of a way of life that the film strives to commemorate. When Katsumoto dies, the soldiers of the national army weep and bow to him in respect. Casting also reinforces Katsumoto's hero status. Ken Watanabe's Katsumoto is an equally handsome and charismatic hero as Cruise's Algren. Watanabe's brave but soft-spoken portrayal of the samurai leader is enormously appealing—exotic enough to be interesting but affable and approachable.

Missing from this hero-identification with samurai culture are the characteristics of the historical samurai that are dissonant with contemporary values. Katsumoto and his

rebel samurai live in a small, close-knit village community. In one scene, they share an evening's entertainment with the people, and the kindly Katsumoto even joins the on-stage theatrics. Historically, traditional Japanese society was hierarchical. Many entertainment performers were *burakumin*, an outcast caste of no social worth. Samurai were the social elite empowered to impose violent justice upon the common people. In the film, peasants bow and defer to Katsumoto and his men because they deserve it, but historically commoners could be killed by samurai for failing to respect them. The theatrical cut of *The Last Samurai* never shows this kind of violent social enforcement—a scene in which Ujio decapitates an ordinary citizen for mocking him was deleted from the theatrical release. Neither does the film explore the inherently anti-democratic hierarchy of the traditional Japanese culture with which its narrative empathizes.

The film's villains are those who fail to appreciate the values of samurai culture. Mr. Omura represents the corruption brought to Japan by Westernization and modernization. He wholly turns his back on the old ways, embracing Western dress, customs, and capitalism. Omura desperately wants to stamp out the samurai who threaten the profitability of modernized Japan (and his monopoly over railroads). Omura is not a pawn of the West—in an early scene he tells a colleague that America is a “land of cheap traders,” and during the council scene he stresses to the ministers that Japan can only resist the Western powers by becoming like them. Modernization and Westernization are processes embraced by some Japanese leaders as necessary, even at the cost of Japan's traditional samurai culture. By the end of the film, though, Omura's lack of virtue is exposed. He panics when the samurai rebels briefly gain the upper hand during the final battle and screams to his soldiers to mow down the samurai with machine

guns. The carnage only ends when a sorrowful officer ignores Omura and orders the guns to cease fire. Omura, and by extension the modernized warfare he embraces, lacks the honor of traditional samurai warfare.

Colonel Bagley and Ambassador Swanbeck embody the intrusiveness, insensitivity, and arrogance of Western societies. The United States they represent stands in for the West writ large, as European countries are mentioned but play no part in the narrative. One of the “good guys” is Mr. Graham, an Englishman who came to Japan on a trade mission, but he recognized the corruption and settled down in Japan to become a part of its culture. Swanbeck represents the heavy-handed economic power of the United States. A blustery American imperialist, his polite speech is laced with threats and domineering glares. All that matters to him is closing the deal and securing trade with Japan. Colonel Bagley represents American cultural imperialism. He is a swaggering, smug Yankee to whom the samurai are “savages” that deserve to be subdued in the same manner as the Native Americans. At the end of the film, Bagley himself undergoes a short-lived transformation when he recognizes the warrior ethos in action. During the suicidal charge of the samurai in final battle, Omura panics but Bagley calls for his horse. Even Bagley cannot resist the purity of samurai valor that reawakens the warrior spirit in him. Bagley joins the ranks and dies with his revolver blazing, cut down by Algren’s sword. Bagley’s death fulfills another filmic convention, the hero killing the villain, but it also serves to further empathy with the samurai ethos, since even the villain could not deny its allure.

Emperor Meiji, the only actual historical figure in the film, serves as a spiritual battleground between traditionalism and modernization. He is a young man torn between

the two poles, dreaming of a modern and powerful Japan but also holding a fondness for the traditional past. It takes the outsider Algren to make the emperor see the worth of the samurai heritage that his government has destroyed. In the film's final scene, Meiji punishes the surviving villains. Algren demonstrates that he now bears the samurai spirit and offers to kill himself on the emperor's command, and Meiji is overcome by the memory of Katsumoto's honor. The emperor turns on Omura, stripping his family of its wealth to make as a gift to the Japanese people. When Omura protests, the emperor offers him Katsumoto's sword to commit ritual suicide if he cannot stand the shame. Meiji then rejects the American trade agreement and sends Ambassador Swanbeck packing. The film's Meiji emerges as an honorable, strong leader who will find the balance between modernization and preserving Japan's heritage. However, nothing like this happened historically. Meiji never stripped his rich ministers of their wealth or advocated economic equality for his people. His government opposed Japanese socialism. Meiji's government remained under the control of influential ministers and continued to pursue trade agreements and military alliances with Western powers. Even before Meiji's death in 1912, Japan had already jumped into the great game of imperialism by waging wars against China, Russia, and Korea.

The chief irony of the villain-identification in the film is that the Meiji government sought to democratize Japan to a limited extent—to replace the old social hierarchy with a new conception of most people as ordinary citizens (*heimin*) and establish constitutional government. From this perspective, the samurai that the film empathizes with were reactionary holdouts against the partial democratization of Japan. In choosing to identify with the conservative samurai against the modernizers, *The Last*

Samurai overlooks the limited democratic changes modernization brought to Japan. At the same time, the film seems to empathize with Meiji's dream of establishing Japan as an independent great power, but in doing so ignores Japan's resulting path to militarism and imperialism.

The film's identification with the spiritual purity of traditional samurai culture over the hollowness of the modern Western commercial culture is a vehicle for the moral responses the film aims to elicit in the viewer. A dominant theme repeated throughout the film is the destruction of tribal societies in the name of modernization. Technological and commercial development is in conflict with the cultures of traditional warrior societies like the Japanese samurai or the Plains Indians. Personal honor, courage, and loyalty, the core virtues of warrior societies, are lost to modernized societies dominated by economic production and technological innovation. The film's samurai, like the Plains Indians, live close to the beautiful land in balance with nature. Modernization in the film replaces with natural existence with cities and railroads crisscrossing the countryside. The film suggests that traditional warrior societies had to be destroyed because they were in the way of modernization. In his numerous mental flashbacks, Algren compares the samurai to the Native Americans of the Great Plains, another "proud and brave" people (in Algren's words) crushed by a modern army to pave way for development.

The film identifies scalping as indicative of this cultural destruction. Early in the film, Algren terrifies Graham with a visceral description of scalping. In a later poignant scene, after the Meiji government has issued new laws stripping the samurai of their remaining ceremonial privileges, policemen grab Katsumoto's son Nobutada, strip him of

his swords, and violently “scalp” off his topknot. The film’s visual rhetoric equates the removal of the samurai topknot, a privilege of a formerly elite caste, with the scalping in America, a brutal practice performed both by and against the native peoples. Whether the loss of samurai topknots and Indian scalping are on similar moral footing is debatable, but it is nonetheless historically dubious to equate the samurai, Japan’s formerly elite social class, to North America’s displaced indigenous peoples.

The strangest implication of this moral response elicited by *The Last Samurai* is the idea that the “strength of the samurai” was a positive heritage for Japan. The film’s themes go beyond commemorating a lost way of life or disappearing virtues and actively celebrate the samurai tradition as representative of Japan before Westernization/modernization. Yet, in elevating *bushido* virtues, the film offers no hint of the problems to which they contributed. As the film’s ending suggests, the samurai ethos never wholly died out in Japan after 1877. Japanese militarists and imperialists inspired Japanese soldiers by appealing to the social memory of the samurai tradition. Samurai heritage exacted a gruesome toll during World War II. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese troops chose death or suicide over surrender. Japanese officers commonly executed Chinese prisoners their samurai *katana* swords, Japanese pilots performed samurai rituals before *kamikaze* suicide attacks, and some Japanese civilians on islands like Saipan committed mass suicide rather than be taken prisoner. Only the cataclysmic events of 1945 and the subsequent U.S. occupation of Japan stamped out the samurai legacy.

The Last Samurai seems to exist with no awareness of WWII. Its conclusion even implies that the U.S. and Japan were put on course for conflict by Emperor Meiji’s

resistance to U.S. economic influence. Such a moral response overlooks Japanese military expansionism and colonial competition in the Pacific after 1900. Empathy for the intellectually appealing aspects of the samurai tradition absent critical consideration of its actual consequences overlooks the brutal toll that continued idealization of the samurai exacted on Japan in the 20th century.

Taking Stock

So far, I have offered pedagogical content analyses of two history movies along the six pedagogical functions defined at the start of the chapter. Compared to *The Alamo*'s dramatized recreation of actual events, *The Last Samurai* represents another kind of historical storytelling—a fictionalized story inspired by real historical events. Most characters are invented (Algren, Bagley) or loosely based on historical figures (Katsumoto, Omura). The principal narrative is an amalgam of imagination (Katsumoto and Algren's friendship) with some actual historical events (samurai uprisings in the 1870s). As a fictionalized story, *The Last Samurai* has less obligation to the historical record than a film like *The Alamo*. But, as an intelligent historical tale, *The Last Samurai* offers interpretation of the era it depicts. The destruction of Japan's traditional native society was the price of modernization. The samurai rebellions, the film seems to suggest, reminded Japan of some of its traditional virtues convinced the Japanese government not to grow too close to the West. The film empathizes with its construction of idealized samurai culture and encourages a moral response that blames Western-style capitalism for the loss of nature and native cultures while overlooking later Japanese militarism fueled by the perpetuation of samurai rhetoric. Table 3.3 briefly summarizes main points of the film analysis along the six pedagogical functions defined at the

beginning of the chapter. Furthermore, it offers some implications of *The Last Samurai* for teachers and students.

Table 3.3

Pedagogical Content Analysis Summary: The Last Samurai

| <i>The Last Samurai</i> (2003) | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | Characters are mix of real (Meiji), fictionalized (Katsumoto-Saigo; Omura-Okubo/Iwakura), and invented (Algren); main events inspired by Saigo's 1877 rebellion, with details from uprisings in 1874 and 1876; narrative plot is mostly fictional, including most the final battle |
| Period representation | Lovingly depicts Japan's traditional culture (samurai training, philosophy, poetry); presents samurai not as elite warrior caste but as primitive native tribe like American Plains Indians; Western imperialism represented by U.S. ambassador, Europeans mentioned only in passing; evokes era of Japanese modernization (cities, Council of State) in simplified ways (no <i>zaibatsu</i>) |
| Historical construction | Incorporates Japanese language and Meiji slogans into screenplay; imagines what an authentic feudal samurai army would have looked like, even though Saigo's rebels actually used modern weapons |
| Social construction | Japanese citizens constructed as deferential and without political agency; women and children function only in relation to their men; Algren the White hero is accepted by the samurai (replacing Taka's husband), surpasses their prowess, and outlasts them (is Algren the last samurai?) |
| Empathy | Empathizes with the reactionary samurai, overlooking brutality and inequity of their traditional society; Algren (handsome White hero) and Katsumoto (attractive, charismatic) facilitate empathy for samurai culture; even the villain (Bagley) succumbs to the allure of samurai way |
| Moral response | Equates defeat of the samurai with destruction of Native American cultures; links modernization with Western imperialism and capitalist corruption; suggests Japanese strength comes from balance between tradition and modernization and celebrates samurai heritage without any hint of its destructive influence in 20 th century |
| Implications for Teachers | Fictionalized story inspired by real historical events; to activate its content value, lesson design will need to distinguish factual inspiration from invented story; teachers also will need to consider whether the film glorifies samurai violence and mischaracterizes the modernization of Japan |
| Implications for Students | Since almost all names, places, and events are fictionalized, students may need extra support to apply film to content learning; students are likely to empathize with samurai characters without necessarily reflecting on why; the film communicates sharp messages about the price of modernization, corruption in capitalism, and destruction of native traditions that students may benefit from interrogating but could miss if overly focused on exciting action |

The Patriot

The Patriot is a fictional story set in South Carolina during the War for Independence against Britain. The tale revolves around a reluctant soldier and his family and how they become caught up in the Revolutionary War. The film's central events are the battles in which the British are defeated in the South and eventually compelled to surrender at Yorktown in 1781. The historical background and factual details in this analysis come from my research using historical reference texts, recent published scholarship, and educational programming about the American Revolution and the war in the South.⁴

Plot Summary

The film opens at Benjamin Martin's farm in South Carolina in 1776. A widower, Martin (Mel Gibson) raises his large family with the help of his Black housekeeper, Abigale (Beatrice Bush). Martin is a religious man who operates his farm with free Black workers, not slaves. Martin is summoned to attend the colonial legislature when the struggle against Britain breaks out, and at first he refuses to back the war for independence. The legislature votes to support the war, and Martin's eldest son Gabriel (Heath Ledger) enlists in the Continental Army despite the disapproval of his father, who had fought twenty years earlier in the French and Indian War and could never forget the violence he saw. Then, the British under Lord Cornwallis (Tom Wilkinson) invade South Carolina and seize control of Charleston. The war literally shows up on the

⁴ Middlekauff (2005) offers an expansive account of the American Revolution. Pancake (1985) provides a detailed study of the war specifically in the Carolinas. Henretta and Nobles (1987) overview the era and supplied most statistics in this analysis. Genovese (1972) and Johnson (1999) are thorough accounts of American slavery that illustrate the diversity of owner-slave interactions. Dupuy and Dupuy (1993) and Dupuy, Johnson, and Bongard (1995) are useful reference texts for military figures and events. Hovde and Meyer (1997) provide an informative, engaging visual account of the Revolutionary period. The additional background material included in the special features on *The Patriot* DVD is quite helpful, too.

Martin's doorstep, and a wounded Gabriel bearing dispatches for the Continental Army stumbles into his family home. The next morning a squad of British horsemen led by Colonel William Tavington (Jason Isaacs) rides to the Martin's farm, finds Gabriel's dispatches, and arrests him as a spy. When Martin tries to intervene, Tavington orders his farm burnt and shoots his second son Thomas in the back. Martin and his two remaining young sons take up muskets and ambush the British squad transporting Gabriel. Martin unleashes his military prowess from the last war: he picks off the British soldiers one by one and rescues Gabriel. Martin takes his remaining family to shelter with his dead wife's sister Charlotte (Joely Richardson), while he and Gabriel ride to the encampment of the Continental Army. In the camp they meet Jean Villeneuve (Tchéky Karyo), a French volunteer officer who ensures them that France will honor its alliance with the colonies. Martin is commissioned as a colonel to lead the militia, and Gabriel reluctantly transfers from the Continentals to his father's command.

As the Continentals retreat and regroup further north, Martin and Gabriel recruit a band of militiamen to wage a protracted guerilla war against the British. Villeneuve joins them in training the recruits. Among the volunteers are a slave named Occam (Jay Arlen Jones), who is fighting to earn his freedom, and Dan Scott (Donal Logue), a racist White man who initially taunts Occam but later comes to respect him. Martin, known as only as "The Ghost" to the British, is a wanted man. Martin's guerilla fighters hide out in a swamp and launch a series of hit-and-run raids against the British. At first, Cornwallis tries to rein in Tavington's violent tactics, but as the general grows increasingly frustrated with Martin's guerilla war, he gives Tavington permission to use brutal methods. Tavington compels the loyalist volunteer Wilkins (Adam Baldwin), one of Martin's

neighbors, to reveal Martin's name and identity. Tavington raids Charlotte's farm in an attempt to capture Martin's family, but they manage to escape to the coast where they find shelter with Martin's Black employees who are hiding there from the British. Tavington then turns his rage on the South Carolina towns that are supporting the militia, locking up the townsfolk in a church and burning it down. Gabriel, whose girlfriend died in the church, angrily pursues Tavington's horsemen, but in the skirmish Tavington kills him. Gabriel's death renews Martin's determination for fight for the cause, and he leads the militia to join the Continentals in a desperate assault on Cornwallis's army. In the ensuing battle, Tavington leads a cavalry charge without orders, and Cornwallis's jealousy commits the rest of the army to battle to prevent Tavington from stealing all the glory. The British army falls into a trap set by Martin and is pushed back and routed. In hand to hand fighting, Martin kills Tavington. In a letter to Charlotte, Martin narrates how Cornwallis was compelled to retreat from the Carolinas to the Virginia coast at Yorktown, where they were cut off by the newly arrived French Navy and surrounded by American troops. Before letting his second-in-command surrender the army, Cornwallis bemoans that he was beaten by a rabble of peasants. The film closes with Martin returning to his farm with his family, where he finds Dan Scott and Occam working together to build a new home for the Martin family.

Content Coverage / Period Representation

The Patriot is an imagined historical story set during a real historical period but told from the perspective of mostly fictional characters. A few characters are named historical figures, notably British general Cornwallis (Tom Wilkinson) and American general Nathanael Greene (Andy Stahl). While most other characters are wholly

imagined, some major characters are based on historical figures. The titular hero of the film, Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson), is a composite character drawn from the lives of Francis Marion, Andrew Pickens, and Thomas Sumpter. Like the film's Martin ("The Ghost"), Marion led the only substantial American fighting force in South Carolina after the defeat at Camden and waged an effective guerilla campaign against British supply and communication lines, hiding out in the Carolina swamps (from whence he earned his nickname the "Swamp Fox"). Pickens, like Martin, was a devout Presbyterian and the father of a large family (12 children, even more than the film's Martin). Pickens, like Martin, commanded the militia in some of the major field engagements in South Carolina. Sumter, like Martin, operated independently of the Continental Army. He was appointed commanding general of the South Carolina militia by Governor Rutledge after the fall of Charleston and the dispersal of the colonial legislature. The film's Martin is a reluctant warrior who only takes up arms against the British after his son is killed and home burned. Pickens was captured by the British and dutifully observed his parole until his farm was burned by Tories (South Carolinians loyal to Britain). After the surrender of Charleston, Sumter retired to his plantation but rejoined the war after Tories raided his land and burned his home.

The French officer Jean Villeneuve (Tchéky Karyo) is very loosely based on the Marquis de Lafayette. The young Lafayette came to America early in the war. He became very close to George Washington and served as a general in his army. Like Villeneuve, Lafayette was present at the battle of Yorktown, but he never fought alongside South Carolina partisans. In the film, Villeneuve trains Martin's South Carolina fighters. This may be an element drawn from another European volunteer,

Prussian officer Friedrich von Steuben, who actually did help train Washington's Continental Army.

Colonel William Tavington (Jason Isaacs), the film's chief villain, is loosely based on Colonel Banastre Tarleton, the British officer tasked with (it was not considered an honor) commanding the Tory Legion of South Carolinian loyalist volunteers. He was renowned for his aggressive tactics and reluctance to take prisoners in the heat of battle, a practice denounced as "Tarleton's Quarter" by his enemies. "The Butcher" (Tavington's sobriquet in the film) evokes "Bloody Ban," the nickname Tarleton was given by his foes. Like Tavington, Tarleton served under Lord Cornwallis and fought in most of the major field engagements in South Carolina, but he was not killed in battle. Tavington's death in the final battle is a nod to filmic convention, in which the hero must personally defeat the villain. Tavington may also be based on Scottish Major Patrick Ferguson, who led a loyalist unit that drove patriot guerillas from northwestern South Carolina. Ferguson was killed in battle at King's Mountain in October, 1780.

In the film, virtually all of Cornwallis's and Tavington's men are British soldiers. Only one actual loyalist volunteer is depicted, Martin's neighbor Wilkins (Adam Baldwin). In reality, a significant number of soldiers fighting on the British side in South Carolina were loyalists. As the film shows, loyalist volunteers were generally looked down on and put under the command of British officers. What the film fails to capture is the civil tension in South Carolina: the patriot rebels seized control of the colonial government by suppressing loyalist dissenters. The British invasion of the South sparked a vicious partisan war, and many Tories who had been tarred-and-feathered or otherwise tortured by their opponents struck back. Much of the violence took the form of raids and

murder, as partisans took advantage of the chaos to settle old scores with neighbors on the other side. It was this guerilla violence, and the inability of the British army to protect their supporters against it, that silenced most loyalists in South Carolina. As the fighting wore on, the loyalist population grew increasingly silent and, to Cornwallis's frustration, declined to provide intelligence about enemy movements.

Almost all of the atrocities in the film are committed by the British. When the patriots slaughter some Redcoats trying to surrender in revenge for the destruction of their homes, Martin is quickly persuaded by his son Gabriel to stop the killing. This one-sided depiction is mostly fictional, as are the outrages committed by Tavington. Tarleton's Legion did sometimes attack so aggressively that prisoners hardly had a chance to surrender. This happened to a force of Virginia militia marching to relieve Charleston in May, 1780. The Virginians turned back after learning that Charleston had surrendered, but Tarleton's cavalry quickly caught up to them at the Waxhaws near the North Carolina border. Tarleton launched a savage attack that killed or wounded over 250 Virginians. In *The Patriot*, this episode is likely the inspiration for the massacre described by Gabriel when he first returns home after being wounded. In the film, Tavington frequently shoots prisoners, and in one powerful scene burns down a church filled with civilians. The real Tarleton never did anything of the sort. Tarleton's men burned the farmland and houses of partisans away fighting against the British, but not people. Terrible atrocities were committed in South Carolina, mostly by irregular guerilla forces on both sides. Many partisans took advantage of the war to get revenge against their neighbors. Some partisans just wanted plunder and switched sides depending on whose land they wanted to raid.

Perhaps the most ironic atrocity depicted in *The Patriot* is the threatened hanging of Martin's men when they are captured by the British. Accepted rules of war at the time gave armies the justification to hang spies—loosely conceived as anyone not in uniform undertaking actions in support of the enemy. Occasionally this cause some dispute, as when the Americans executed Major Andre for attempting to acquire the plans to West Point over the protest of the British, but rarely were soldiers captured on the battlefield hanged. There was one notable exception in South Carolina. In October, 1780, Major Patrick Ferguson led a force of South Carolinian loyalists up King's Mountain. Patriot irregulars who had previously been driven out of the territory regrouped and surrounded the mountain. Many loyalists were killed while trying to surrender, given "Tarleton's Quarter" in revenge for the Waxhaws. Not sated, the next day the victorious patriot partisans hanged nine prisoners before their officers put a stop to it. It may be predictable that a U.S. film would choose to pin a war crime committed by American irregulars on the enemy instead.

Much of Benjamin Martin's backstory revolves around his brutal experiences in the French and Indian War of the 1750s. Many American soldiers got their first taste of battle in British service in this war, including George Washington. It is also true that the war involved some savage fighting on the frontiers between colonial militia and Indians. However, the "Fort Wilderness" that is mentioned so much in the film is a fictional invention. The only fort by that name exists at Disney World. When describing Fort Wilderness to his son Gabriel, Martin mentions geographic features that are scattered around the eastern United States and do not suggest any real location. Perhaps this fictional episode is drawn from the massacre of British soldiers at Fort Loudoun in 1760.

The South Carolina militia responded with a punitive raid against the Cherokees, who had broken their alliance with the British. Francis Marion, one of the inspirations for Benjamin Martin, participated in the expedition.

The Patriot depicts three pitched battles, only one of them in significant detail. The first engagement is identified as the battle of Camden, which Martin and Gabriel watch through the window of a deserted mansion. The real battle occurred on August 16, 1780, three months after Charleston fell to the British. The date of the battle is not identified in the film, though it occurs the morning after the nighttime skirmish in which Gabriel was wounded and witnessed Tavington's dragoons slaughter surrendering Virginian troops. Gabriel's story was probably based on the British attack at the Waxhaws, though this event actually occurred three months before Camden and the victims were Virginia militiamen rather than Gabriel's Continentals. Some nighttime skirmishing the night before the battle of Camden was reported, but the battle the next day was the only major encounter. In the film, Martin and Gabriel make much of the ineptitude of Horatio Gates, the commanding general dispatched to South Carolina by Congress. Their comments reflect actual events: Gates lacked sufficient cavalry, was unaware of Cornwallis's strength and position, and gravely overestimated his own troop strength. As a result, the Americans were routed. Though the film does not show the Americans being pushed out of Camden, nor does it mention the South Carolinian loyalists who made up a significant portion of the British army (or for that matter the militiamen under Thomas Sumter who fought alongside the Continentals), it does graphically depict the routing of the broken Continentals. The film also fails to mention the chief reason why the British were so keen to drive the enemy from Camden—800

British regulars wounded at Charleston were recuperating in Camden, and the British could ill afford their capture.

The film's biggest battle is a composite of two actual engagements, Cowpens (January 17, 1781) and Guilford Court House (March 15, 1781). The chief narrative function of this battle scene is to show Benjamin Martin and his militiamen triumphant—and to give Martin (the hero) the opportunity to kill Tavington (the villain) in a like manner to how Tavington previously killed Gabriel. The film simplifies the protracted military campaign in the South by combining elements from the two actual historical events into a single fictionalized battle. In *The Patriot*, Nathanael Greene takes over command of the broken American army from Gates and plans a decisive battle to drive the British from the Carolinas. Martin proposes a central role for his militia and orders his men to stand their ground against the British long enough to fire two good volleys of musket fire. The battle takes place on a field with a sloping hill and a ruined courthouse in the center. Cornwallis commands the British infantry and Tavington the cavalry, in competition to see who will deliver the victorious stroke against the enemy. When the Martin's militia falls back after firing their two shots, the British infantry and cavalry rush after them in pursuit and are surprised by the Continentals waiting behind the sloping hill. The battle's turning point occurs at the ruined courthouse, as the Americans engage the British in fierce hand-to-hand combat and forcing them to retreat.

The militia firing two shots and falling back, the sloping hill covering the Continentals, and the stunning American victory are elements taken from Cowpens. However, Cornwallis was not present at Cowpens—the disastrous defeat was entirely Tarleton's affair. The decision by Greene to stop and risk a major battle, the old

courthouse on the field, and the fierce close-quarters fighting in the closing moments of the battle are elements drawn from Guilford Courthouse. Both Cornwallis and Tarleton were present at this battle, but unlike in the film, the British got the better of the close-quarters combat when Cornwallis in desperation ordered his artillery to fire point-blank into the confused melee to separate the intertwined British and American soldiers. In actuality, Cowpens was a major (but not decisive) victory for the Americans; Guilford Courthouse was a tactical defeat for the Americans but so costly to the British they were compelled to withdraw from the Carolinas. *The Patriot* simplifies the complex situation by presenting one decisive American victory that spells the beginning of the end for the British cause. The movie even makes it seem that the Carolinas were liberated when Cornwallis withdrew to Virginia. In reality, the Americans had to fight a protracted campaign against remaining British garrisons. Sumter and Marion's irregular troops cut British communication lines and picked off isolated forts. Greene fought and lost more battles in South Carolina before the surviving British and loyalist troops fell back to Charleston and Savanna, where they waited out the end of the war.

The last battle briefly depicted in *The Patriot* is Yorktown, where Cornwallis surrendered his army in October, 1781. The protracted siege of Yorktown occurred months after the British retreated from the Carolinas, though in the film it occurs shortly after the decisive battle. The film accurately depicts the American redoubts surrounding the British position, the artillery bombardment that wore down British forces, and the arrival of the French fleet that prevented the British navy from evacuating Cornwallis's army. As in the film, Cornwallis reluctantly surrendered and foisted the duty of handing over his sword to his second in command, O'Hara. Martin sarcastically describes the

French fleet as “long lost friends” who showed up in the nick of time. This characterization drastically underplays the French military contribution to the American victory. France provided weapons to the Americans virtually since the outbreak of the war and had thousands of troops on the ground at Yorktown. Indeed, O’Hara first tried to surrender Cornwallis’s sword to Rochambeau, the French general, rather than Washington. As presented in *The Patriot*, the Revolutionary War was mostly an American victory. France’s military role is minimized (and the participation of Spain is ignored altogether).

The Patriot incorporates actual historical details into its fictional narrative, but how it represents the period is troubling. Slavery was a dominant feature of the South before the Civil War, and even in the North much of the emerging industrial economy was dependent on raw materials acquired from Southern plantations. In some parts of the South Carolina tidewater, Black slaves outnumbered the White population. In *The Patriot*, slavery is almost invisible. The audience never sees slaves toiling in gangs under the watch of plantation overseers, nor does the film hint at the racial brutality inherent in a labor system in which large numbers of enslaved Blacks had to be kept in line by a few White plantation employees, themselves often from impoverished origins. The only Black field workers shown in the film are free Blacks employed by Benjamin Martin. While not a historical impossibility, this depiction distorts the historical record of the period. Manumission of slaves was illegal or difficult in much of the South before the American Revolution, but there were small populations of freedmen during and after the War for Independence. They were much more numerous in the Mid-Atlantic and Chesapeake than the Deep South (where even by 1790 free Blacks still numbered less

than 8,000). Freedmen in the South often were forced to live in segregated communities or required to leave the area after being freed so that their presence would not agitate the remaining enslaved Blacks. While Martin's farm worked by freed Blacks could have actually existed, it would have been an aberration not at all representative of the experience for most African Americans at the time.

The film does try to represent an aspect of the revolutionary period usually ignored until recent years—the presence of Black soldiers. The character Occam (Jay Arlen Jones) reflects a measure of this reality. It is estimated that perhaps 5,000 African Americans fought for American independence. However, Black soldiers were far more likely to be from the North than the South. Free Blacks made up perhaps 20% of the New York Continentals in the late 1770s, for example. All states allowed at least some Blacks in the military—except Georgia and South Carolina. In 1775, Edward Rutledge, South Carolina's delegate to the Continental Congress, tried to get Congress to discharge Blacks from military service. In 1779, Congress urged the enlistment of 3,000 Black slaves in the South, paying \$1,000 to compensate masters for each recruit freed for service, but South Carolina and Georgia refused. In 1782, Nathanael Greene proposed raising 2,000 Black troops but was refused by the newly convened South Carolina legislature. Early in the war, George Washington issued orders not to enlist Blacks into his army, but later accepted Black freedmen out of necessity. Like Occam, it seems that some Black slaves served as replacements for Whites called up for service and that military service was a way out of slavery for some Black men. Occam's experience is plausible for the period, just not in South Carolina.

Historical Construction / Social Construction

Though *The Patriot* is an imagined story, some authentic artifacts are employed in the construction of its historical narrative. Most visible are the period uniforms and weapons used by the film's soldiers, though somewhat simplified. All British troops are put in the famed redcoat, including Tavington's men, even though the British army in actuality had a wide range of uniforms for different types of troops (Tarleton's Tory Legion wore a distinctive green uniform). The chief effect of this visual simplification, of course, is to help keep the Americans and British separate to the viewer—an advantage that soldiers in the period did not always enjoy. It was all too common to mistake a friendly unit for an enemy unit (or vice versa) at a distance. Period flags also add to the film's authenticity. On the eve of the film's major battle, Martin rides in front of the army bearing the classic Continental flag attributed to Betsy Ross (American regiments fought under a variety of battle standards, including this one). Early in the decisive battle, one of Martin's men waves the famous "Don't Tread on Me" flag (depicting the Thirteen Colonies as a united serpent).

Authentic text and language enhance the film's construction of the historical period. One nice little touch is the appearance of broadsides, mass-printed leaflets announcing news or other information of public interest. Actual period broadsides are seen in the film alongside invented broadsides created for the film in the style of the originals. One scene features a close-up of a period broadside recruiting Negro soldiers for the British army, and tacked over it is wonderfully realistic-looking fictional broadside announcing a reward for the capture of The Ghost. *The Patriot* also occasionally includes period language in its dialogue. Early in the film, Benjamin Martin

attends a session of the legislature in Charleston to debate whether the colony should support independence. Martin refuses to support war against Britain and quips that it is hardly better to trade one tyrant 3,000 miles away for 3,000 tyrants one mile away. His jest is very close to an actual quote attributed to the clergyman Byles Mather, a loyalist in Boston.

Authentic aspects of 18th-century warfare are incorporated into the film. One in particular furthers the dramatic narrative. After the battle of Camden, Tavington's men come to Martin's farm and arrest Gabriel as a spy. Martin's teenage son Thomas tries to wrestle his brother free from the clutches of the British, and Tavington shoots Thomas dead. Martin keeps Thomas's bag of little toy soldiers and throughout the film melts them down to make musket balls with which to shoot the British enemy. There was a constant need for homemade musket balls in the War for Independence, and many soldiers carried with them implements for melting down lead or pewter and pouring the metal into balls. This scene demonstrates how a fictional story can represent authentic historical circumstances in ways that have both historical and dramatic value. Furthermore, the film takes pains to include the kinds of injuries soldiers in the period suffered from gunfire. Exploding cannon shells had not yet been invented, and the film's battle scenes graphically show solid round shot passing through the bodies of rows of soldiers.

The social construction of people in the past in *The Patriot* is more problematic. Just as the film's period representation largely ignored the omnipresent reach of slavery, its narrative constructs African Americans who are not scarred by slavery. The Black characters in the film are uniformly placid and longsuffering. Occam does not run away

to join a Continental regiment in the North but rather obediently follows his owner's prompting to join Martin's militia; he spends the rest of the film patiently counting the days until his promised emancipation and continues to fight even after completing his term of service. Martin's Black workers are equally free from acrimony over slavery. When Tavington captures Martin's farm, he tries to haul off the freedmen to become soldiers in the British army. Martin's people later run away from the British and hide out in happy fishing villages on the coast—where they, in turn, shelter Martin and his family during their moment of need.

It is not unbelievable that Martin's Black workers would be willing to shelter his family. The past three decades of historiography on American slavery amply demonstrate that slavery was a complex institution that fostered a variety of owner-slave relationships, not all of them hostile (and, after all, Martin was a kindly employer who did not use slave labor). What is hardly believable is the happiness and comfort in which the runaway Blacks in the film are shown living. There were villages of "Gullah" Black slaves who worked the rich cotton fields of the Sea Islands of the South Carolina and Georgia Coast, but runaways hardly enjoyed the idyllic island lifestyle (complete with calypso music) suggested by the film. The real experience of runaway slaves in South Carolina was far harsher. Their only hope to evade capture was to flee into desolate swamplands. These runaways established "maroon colonies" in the marginal wilderness, and some maroons even fought as guerillas on behalf of the British.

The vast majority of people presented in the film are White. Despite the reality that the society built in the Americas by European settlers revolved heavily around the enslavement of Black Africans, justified at the time by a host of legal and moral

arguments, White racism is hardly present in the world of *The Patriot*. Virtually all of the European Americans in the film are racially tolerant. The only notable exception is Dan Scott (Donal Logue), a bigoted militiaman who at first taunts Occam. Over time, even this bigot comes to accept Occam as a friend and equal. Dan Scott is the sole construction in the film narrative of a perspective extremely widespread among White Americans at that time, especially in the Carolinas, and his conversion to racial equality undermines even this one construction of the perspective.

Furthermore, the film narrative constructs White characters almost entirely free of ethnic distinctions. Of course, British Whites are constructed as a separate people from American Whites. The British characters are all stereotypically English, uniformly presented as stuffy and aristocratic regardless of whether they are upper-crust officers or ranker foot soldiers. Only one Redcoat (in a scene deleted from the theatrical release) speaks with what sounds like an Irish accent. White Americans in the film have no perceivable ethnic diversity. The problem with this construction of Whiteness is that it ignores distinctions that would have been an important aspect of identity to the American colonials of the 18th century. Not all colonials in British North America were of British origins, and even among the British settlers there were important ethnic difference between English, Irish, Scottish, and Scots-Irish. There also were significant numbers of Germans, Dutch, French Huguenots, and other European nationalities who had settled in different parts of the colonies. Ethnic identity, religion, and language all contributed to identity in the 18th century. *The Patriot* glosses over ethnic distinctions to provide a unitary construction of Whiteness more comparable to contemporary American society.

The film also is largely missing another important racial group. There were substantial populations of American Indians east of the Mississippi in the late 1700s. Most of the combat experienced by the colonial militias before the 1770s had been against hostile Native Americans. Just as the French and British competed for Indian support during their war in the 1750s, both the British and the American colonials sought to attract Indians to their cause as warriors, scouts, and informers. In *The Patriot*, Indians are never seen and are only referred to as victims of Martin's brutal Fort Wilderness attack. Indian scouts are mentioned once and only in a deleted scene (it was an Indian scout who brought back the surviving Redcoat from Martin's attack to rescue Gabriel). What is curious about this absence of Indians is that South Carolina was where one native people supported and was supported by the revolutionary colonial government. In the South Carolina Piedmont, the Catawba Nation supported the war against the British by providing supplies to Thomas Sumter's partisans and fighting in minor engagements in the backcountry. British forces punished the Catawbans by burning their homes and crops, and later the South Carolina legislature sent them corn and money to help them rebuild. In the rest of the colonies, most Indian tribes supported the British, only to suffer reprisal raids by colonial militias and then to be abandoned by the British in the Treaty of Paris that ended in war in 1783. The film avoids the complexities of interaction and conflict between White colonials and Native Americans by virtually ignoring the latter.

The film's construction of women fulfills a filmic convention about women in the past. They are used only as mother figures, beloved daughters, or love interests. Their sole purpose is to provide motivation for their men. Only three female characters of much substance appear in the film: Charlotte (Joely Richardson), the sister of Martin's

dead wife and his love interest; Anne (Lisa Brenner), Gabriel's love interest; and Abigale (Beatrice Bush), Martin's housekeeper and surrogate mother to his young children.

Women in the 1770s really did play these roles, of course, and the roles were regarded as important (especially in the matronly "sphere" of the domestic household). However, the film never gives us any insight into the role of women as participants in the revolutionary struggle. With the exception of Anne, who gives a brief pro-independence speech in church, women do not appear to have much of a part to play. *The Patriot* is a war movie, and perhaps it is reasonable that the major characters are males who are military figures. However, it is worth pointing out that even in the military forces of the period women were not altogether absent. British officers quite frequently brought their wives with them on campaign, and even some lower-class wives were engaged to follow the regiment as matrons of the camp to oversee laundry and nursing.

Empathy / Moral Response

The Patriot divides its historical characters into two camps—heroes who range from fairly to epically heroic, and villains who range from peevish to dastardly. Eliciting empathy from the audience by presenting heroes to cheer and villains to deplore is an old melodramatic convention which *The Patriot* superimposes over the War for Independence. The American colonials fight for a noble cause and triumph through pluck, ingenuity, and by usually doing the right thing. The British are arrogant, corrupt, or evil. Their cause is pure greed and without merit. The Americans are fighting for home and hearth; Lord Cornwallis is fighting for a fief in Ohio. This negative pall cast on the British even extends to women. Only one British woman is featured in the film, a

moronic high-society lady (complete with iconic wig and face powder) who mistakes an exploding British warship in the harbor for an entertaining fireworks display.

While the British are bad guys whom the audience may comfortably oppose, they are not all arch villains. Most are just snooty soldiers following orders. Lord Cornwallis is not a vile man, just a land-hungry snob. Cornwallis at first even opposes brutal, ungentlemanly tactics. Rather than disparaging the entire British people, the filmmakers heap all the villainy upon Colonel Tavington. It is Tavington who sparks the guerilla insurgency in South Carolina by killing children and burning homes, who goads Cornwallis into unleashing brutal tactics to root out the insurgents, and who bullies his troops into committing atrocities against civilians. These narrative moves are used to build up the tension for the film's last battle, in which Martin kills Tavington in bloody hand-to-hand combat, but it oversimplifies history. The British army, even Tarleton's Legion, almost uniformly behaved within the expected norms of warfare at the time. The vast bulk of the atrocities were committed by Carolinian partisans against other Carolinians, and pro-independence patriots had blood on their hands as did the anti-independence loyalists.

Any feature film set in the late 1700s in the American South must face a serious question when trying to establish empathy for its protagonists: Can a slaveowner be a good and heroic person? It is a complex question, one with which even many Southerners in the late 18th century grappled. Slaveowners like Thomas Jefferson morally opposed slavery and admitted it was an evil institution but were economically dependent on slave labor. Not all Southerners owned slaves: most slaves were owned by the elite planter class to work on large plantations. Yet, slavery was the dominant social

institution in the South, and even most poor Whites supported slavery and aspired one day to acquire enough slaves to run a large farm. Slaveowning, then, was viewed as a key to social mobility for Whites. That Black slaves had to suffer for it was masked by popular paternalistic rhetoric that Blacks were being cared for and civilized in exchange for their labor.

The Patriot wholly dodges these complex questions and, by extension, the problem of persistent racism in American history. Martin is not a conflicted Presbyterian torn between moral revulsion to slavery and economic dependence on it. Instead, the film shows him running a comfortable little farm with free Blacks as happy employees. His love interest Charlotte apparently is a slaveowner, but the film shows little of the material existence of her slaves. Charlotte is such a good and kind plantation owner that one of her slaves is willing to die rather than divulge her location to Tavington. Nowhere in the film is the field overseer with his whip or the desultory violence and racial tension that characterized the South's peculiar institution. Freed from this burden, the viewer can empathize with the proto-abolitionist Martin and the kind slave-mistress Charlotte. In an ironic way, the film does hint at the reality that thousands of slaves ran off to join the British army in return for promises of freedom. In the scene when Tavington raids Martin's farm, he offers freedom to Martin's Black workers and, learning that they are freedmen, conscripts them into the army regardless. Just as the film places the burden of war atrocities on the British, so too is the burden of racial exploitation put on them.

The film's casting reinforces the empathy it elicits for the heroes and the antipathy it directs against the villains. Mel Gibson is perfect as Benjamin Martin. One of the world's best known stars, he himself is a religiously devout father of many

children. He brings appealing charm and paternal concern to his performance. Heath Ledger is handsome and winning as Gabriel. He captures Gabriel's idealism and passion that are the moral center of the narrative. They are matched on the other side by English actors Tom Wilkinson, who brings a doddering ineffectuality to his aristocratic Cornwallis, and Jason Isaacs (now better known as the malevolent Lucius Malfoy in the *Harry Potter* movies) who portrays Tavington as coldly handsome, supercilious, and cruel.

The empathic contrast between the heroes and villains sets the stage for the moral responses the film aims to elicit about this part of the past. The prevalent theme seems to be that the War for Independence in the South was a good struggle that should resonate with and inspire viewers today. The film achieves this resonance across time by presenting moral dichotomies with which contemporary American viewers are comfortable. It is a war movie but carefully avoids glorifying war. War is profitable and entertaining only for the British, and only when they are winning. For Martin, war is a dark matter he tries to avoid at all costs and only accepts when his home and family are threatened. The film's titular hero, Martin, is a reluctant warrior but not a pacifist—an attitude perfectly in tune with U.S. society at the dawn of the new millennium. "If your principles dictate independence, then war is the only way," Martin's friend Burwell tells him early in the film, a prescient observation that summarizes Martin's psychological journey. When Martin takes up arms again despite his hatred for war, his decision is justified by the haughtiness and brutality of the British army.

Another powerful moral response prompted by *The Patriot* is the cause of common people over arrogant aristocrats. Indeed, the people's militia led by Benjamin

Martin is a kind of collective hero in the film. All the militiamen are humble folks, and not even Martin is a great landowner. One of them is a reverend pastor, and when persuaded of the justness of the American cause even he takes up arms and is willing to kill and be killed. The viewer might be forgiven for thinking that South Carolina did not have any great landowners at all, based on this film alone. Certainly nowhere in the film is the kind of status competition and jockeying for rank that seriously troubled the American military cause in the North and South. When Congress dispatched Nathanael Greene and Dan Morgan to the Carolinas after the defeat at Camden, Greene and discontented officers who supported him simply left. Instead, the film presents a band of freedom fighters wholly united in their cause—even the racial prejudice of a bigoted White militiaman gives way to fraternity by the start of the decisive battle. The British officers, by contrast, are snobbish aristocrats. Cornwallis and his aide repeatedly disparage Martin's militia as a "rabble of peasants" and are shocked when defeated by them in the final battle.

This aristocratic conceit is reinforced throughout the film: Cornwallis is shown fretting over his memoirs and clothes, pampering a pair of dogs brought along on campaign, and mapping out his American domain that will be his reward from the Crown. The implication is that the British would have fared better had they not underestimated the fighting spirit of the American people. Of course, this moral reaction overlooks the important reality that the American militia rarely performed well in battle, that Cowpens was one of the few engagements when the militia played an effective if limited role, and that the British tactically won most of the field battles in the war. What undermined the British war effort was the distance between their home islands and the

colonies, the British army's inability to absorb heavy losses even when winning battles, and the growing discontent with the war among the opposition in Britain's Parliament. Patriot irregular partisans did play an important role in disrupting the British army's lines of supply and communication, but the War for Independence could not have been won without the steady presence of the regular Continental army and support from France. These historical complexities given way in the film to the longstanding urge in American culture to celebrate the "underdog" against the rich and powerful.

It is no small irony that the South Carolina Patriots whom the film lionizes for winning American independence are the very same type of people who spearheaded secession from the United States 80 years later. It was South Carolinians who early on called for withdrawing from the Union and who opened hostilities in the Civil War by firing on Fort Sumter in 1861. *The Patriot* provides no insight as to why South Carolina helped to build the United States and then tried to leave it in the next century. By glossing over slavery, the film removes from view the major socio-economic issue that motivated most South Carolinians. By the early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson already feared that slavery one day would lead to civil strife, yet *The Patriot* ends without a cloud on the horizon. The White bigot Dan Scott and the Black freedman Occam join hands to build a new future. There is no hint of the legacy of slavery and persistent racism that would continue to shape American history to the present.

Taking Stock

At this point, I have offered pedagogical content analyses of three history movies along the six pedagogical functions defined at the start of the chapter. Each film represents a kind of historical storytelling. *The Alamo* represents a dramatized recreation

of actual events. *The Last Samurai* represents a fictionalized story inspired by real historical events. *The Patriot* represents an imagined historical story with mostly fictional characters. This film is closest of the three to the traditional costume drama (creative story using the past only as a colorful backdrop), but it goes beyond this genre in important ways. *The Patriot* is set in a real historical period. Some characters are actual historical figures (Cornwallis) or an amalgamation drawn from real figures (Martin as a composite of Pickens, Sumter, and Marion). While most of the principle narrative is imagined (Martin's family crisis, the struggle against Tavington), some of the key points around which it turns are either actual events briefly portrayed (Yorktown) or fictionalized composites of historical events (Camden, Waxhaws, Cowpens, Guilford Court House). However, as an imagined story *The Patriot* is free to structure a narrative independent of the historical record. It is free to ignore partisan violence in South Carolina and pin all war atrocities on the British. It makes the irregular, undisciplined peoples' militia triumphant on the battlefield over the professional British regulars. Most critically, it presents an American South during the American Revolution in which slavery is almost invisible and superimposes contemporary American racial values over the past. Table 3.4 briefly summarizes main points of the film analysis along the six pedagogical functions defined at the beginning of the chapter. Furthermore, it notes some implications of *The Patriot* for teachers and students.

Table 3.4

Pedagogical Content Analysis Summary: The Patriot

| | <i>The Patriot</i> (2000) |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | Characters mostly invented, though some are composites (Martin-Marion/Pickens/Sumter; Tavington-Tarleton/Ferguson) or real figures (Cornwallis, Greene); real events (Camden, Yorktown) occur in the background, and film's culminating battle is a composite of two actual battles (Cowpens, Guilford Court House); French military contribution is downplayed; war atrocities pinned on the British, even though most were actually committed by South Carolinian partisans |
| Period representation | Slavery is almost invisible in the film; depicts the reality of Black soldiers, an actual part of the Revolutionary period—except in South Carolina |
| Historical construction | Redcoats always designate the enemy, even though British forces wore variety of uniforms; period language and artifacts (broadside, flags, weapons, musket-balls) establish sense of authenticity |
| Social construction | African American characters not scarred by slavery (Martin's free Black workers); the only slave character (Occam) is long suffering and patriotic; White characters are racially tolerant, and White ethnic diversity is ignored; British are almost all stereotypically English; Native Americans are almost totally absent; women service filmic conventions and have little to do in the political/military narrative |
| Empathy | Empathizes with heroic Americans fighting for their homes over greedy, aristocratic British; Tavington positioned as arch villain, blamed for atrocities; Martin fits comfortably with contemporary mores (morally opposed to violence but brave when necessary, not a slaveowner or racist) |
| Moral response | Attributes victory to the democratic militiamen (heroic underdogs) against aristocratic British (defeated by their arrogance); lionizes the South Carolinian patriots without any hint as to why South Carolina would spearhead secession from the Union; communicates a message of racial unity by ignoring the legacy of slavery and racism after independence |
| Implications for Teachers | Imagined historical story with mostly fictional characters; activating content knowledge requires a lesson design that equips students to recognize the film's composite elements; if teachers consider social construction in the film, it can serve as a springboard to help students confront issues of race in American history |
| Implications for Students | Film's narrative follows many filmic conventions students will recognize: heroes and villains, underdogs against the strong; it positions students for an emotionally powerful but historically selective take on the American Revolution and the kind of society it created; students with differing experiences with racism may react in very different ways to the film's historical meanings and messages |

Historical Storytelling and the Educational Uses of History Movies

As an art form, historical storytelling is very old. The earliest literary epics—*Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*—were stories that took place in times before they were written. Much of the Old Testament purports to chronicle the history of Hebrew people. Medieval European chronicles, like Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, linked the era in which they were written to earlier times. Many of Shakespeare's most successful plays were histories of famous past rulers and their deeds or downfall. Sir Walter Scott's historical novels like *Ivanhoe* were popular throughout English-speaking world in the 19th century. It seems that people have always had a desire or need to be entertained by tales of distant times, to connect with what came before them, and to understand their world in relation to the past.

Part of storytelling is the need for authenticity. The ancient Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides both claimed that their stories about the past were "inquiries" into the truth. Biblical chroniclers recorded ancient lore preserved since the days of Moses. Medieval chroniclers based their histories on earlier accounts they insisted were true. Shakespeare based his histories on popular medieval chronicles. Down to today, historical novelists tell stories set in a past detailed in ways that make it recognizable and believable.

Another part of storytelling is the need to create. Even if we desire an authentic past, we cannot possibly know everything about it. Stories fill the void with imagination, which makes it possible to create connections between the contemporary world and the past. People may be dissatisfied with the world they live in and look to the past for stories about better times, or to explain why the world is wrong, or to imagine how the

world could have been different. Old Testament chroniclers lived in a divided Israel and looked to a past when the Hebrews were united and faithful to God. Medieval chroniclers like Geoffrey of Monmouth did not limit themselves to kings who actually lived but imagined ideal rulers like King Arthur. Shakespeare imagined past English kings in ways that applied to his Tudor times. Down to today, when Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* imagines a different past for Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Christianity in a way that is relevant to millions of readers.

Historical storytelling is shaped by these two dynamics, the need for authenticity and the need for imagination. It may be tempting to envision them as opposites, but both are inherent qualities. A sense of authenticity, of realism—that the world depicted really could have been like that—is what separates historical storytelling from pure fantasy. A sense of imagination, of creativity—a fullness of experience, emotion, and human interaction—is what makes historical storytelling more satisfying to many people than scholarly history texts (after all, millions more read historical fiction or watch history movies than read historians' books). Still, there is a tension between them. Narrow authenticity limits the possibilities for imagination; open imagination undercuts beliefs of authenticity. Historical storytelling exists in a balance between them shaped by the cultural context, for different cultures at different times have particular and changing needs, desires, and uses for the past.

Feature films, a relatively new mode of historical storytelling, also reflect the dynamics of authenticity and imagination. First and foremost, movies are entertainment made to attract a paying audience. Of course, "entertainment" is not limited to light fun in a narrow sense; it can also mean emotional and mental stimulation appealing to

something we care about. This is why dramatic stories can be so powerful and appealing. Stories give people we do not know (in the case of historical stories, distant people we cannot ever know) an emotional intimacy, an experiential immediacy. Thus, almost all mainstream history movies are character-driven dramas, making the past come alive in human terms.

However, history feature films are also made to appeal to audiences on an atavistic level, heightening interest because they are about something real that came before our time. The film's messages and themes can have greater weight if they are couched in a "true" or "real" version of the past. Thus, the authenticity of movies about the past can generate controversy. Whether the version of Christian history central to the 2006 film version of *The Da Vinci Code* was really possible was hotly debated in churches and media outlets around the world. The emotional power generated by an imaginative history film can make viewers feel that they have a stake in just how authentic, how potentially real it is.

Most mainstream history movies attempt to tap into both dynamics through what Robert Toplin (2002b) has dubbed "faction"—a blending of fictional imagination with some degree of historical factuality. Historical factuality gives the storytelling a greater weight because the viewer feels something "real" (to some extent) is at stake. Fictional imagination gives the storytelling freedom to entertain emotionally and mentally, to make connections between the past and the present, and to communicate themes beyond what scholars might agree is strictly known about a past era. Different films blend the two in distinctive ways.

Looking Across the Three Films

The Alamo, *The Last Samurai*, and *The Patriot* reflect the imagination-authenticity dynamic in different ways. Each film is a different kind of historical storytelling with particular implications for how teachers might use them instructionally and for how students might learn about the past from them. Table 3.5 compares the pedagogical content analyses of the three films side-by-side. First, I use the pedagogical content analyses to compare the films as representations of three styles of historical storytelling. Then, I will discuss the educational uses of history films in light of what I have learned from this study.

Table 3.5

Pedagogical Content Analysis Summary across All Three Films

| | <i>The Alamo</i> (2004) | <i>The Last Samurai</i> (2003) | <i>The Patriot</i> (2000) |
|------------------|--|--|---|
| Content coverage | Incorporates remarkable number of historical details (real figures, Texas politics, Alamo siege and battle), but exaggerates strategic value of Alamo and cannot include every possible detail (e.g., cannon at the long barracks) | Characters are mix of real (Meiji), fictionalized (Katsumoto-Saigo; Omura-Okubo/Iwakura), and invented (Algren); main events inspired by Saigo's 1877 rebellion, with details from uprisings in 1874 and 1876; narrative plot is mostly fictional, including most the final battle | Characters mostly invented, though some are composites (Martin-Marion/Pickens/Sumter; Tavington-Tarleton/Ferguson) or real figures (Cornwallis, Greene); real events (Camden, Yorktown) occur in the background, and film's culminating battle is a composite of two actual battles (Cowpens, Guilford Court House); French military contribution is downplayed; war atrocities pinned on the British, even though most were actually committed by South Carolinian partisans |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|
| Period representation | Accurate evokes period with sets (Alamo, frontier towns) and props (rifles); downplays effectiveness of Mexican artillery and competence of Santa Anna's siege; simplifies scope of Santa Anna's strategy and actions (e.g., San Jacinto taken out of its broader context) | Lovingly depicts Japan's traditional culture (samurai training, philosophy, poetry); presents samurai not as elite warrior caste but as primitive native tribe like American Plains Indians; Western imperialism represented by U.S. ambassador, Europeans mentioned only in passing; evokes era of Japanese modernization (cities, Council of State) in simplified ways (no <i>zaibatsu</i>) | Slavery is almost invisible in the film; depicts the reality of Black soldiers, an actual part of the Revolutionary period—except in South Carolina |
| Historical construction | Incorporates many recorded anecdotes (Crockett, Bowie reputations) and period documents (letters) into screenplay | Incorporates Japanese language and Meiji slogans into screenplay; imagines what an authentic feudal samurai army would have looked like, even though Saigo's rebels actually used modern weapons | Redcoats always designate the enemy, even though British forces wore variety of uniforms; period language and artifacts (broadside, flags, weapons, musket-balls) establish sense of authenticity |
| Social construction | Features Tejano characters (Seguín) and emphasizes Tejano importance, but downplays racial dynamics and aligns Tejano interests with Anglo Texians; Mexican perspective reflected through soldiers (Castrillón, two unnamed <i>soldados</i>); slavery issue highlighted through Joe and Sam; women used mostly to establish male characters | Japanese citizens constructed as deferential and without political agency; women and children function only in relation to their men; Algren the White hero is accepted by the samurai (replacing Taka's husband), surpasses their prowess, and outlasts them (is Algren the last samurai?) | African American characters not scarred by slavery (Martin's free Black workers); the only slave character (Occam) is long-suffering and patriotic; White characters are racially tolerant, and White ethnic diversity is ignored; British are almost all stereotypically English; Native Americans are almost totally absent; women service filmic conventions and have little to do in political/military narrative |
| Empathy | Despite their dark undersides, Anglo Texians depicted as heroes; Tejanos/Mexican people depicted sympathetically; Santa Anna presented as the villain and comes off badly compared to Texian leaders | Empathizes with the reactionary samurai, overlooking brutality and inequity of their traditional society; Algren (handsome White hero) and Katsumoto (attractive, charismatic) facilitate empathy for samurai culture; even the villain (Bagley) succumbs to the allure of samurai way | Empathizes with heroic Americans fighting for their homes over greedy, aristocratic British; Tavington positioned as arch villain, blamed for atrocities; Martin fits comfortably with contemporary mores (morally opposed to violence but brave when necessary, not a slaveowner or racist) |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|
| Moral response | Alamo represents defense of liberty against dictatorship; the film emphasizes multicultural message of racial unity, but ignores how events relate to ongoing issues of border conflict and treatment of captured enemy insurgents | Equates defeat of the samurai with destruction of Native American cultures; links modernization with Western imperialism and capitalist corruption; suggests Japanese strength comes from balance between tradition and modernization and celebrates samurai heritage without any hint of its destructive influence in 20 th century | Attributes victory to the democratic militiamen (heroic underdogs) against aristocratic British (defeated by their arrogance); lionizes the South Carolinian patriots without any hint as to why South Carolina would spearhead secession from the Union; communicates a message of racial unity by ignoring the legacy of slavery and racism after independence |
| Implications for Teachers | Dramatized recreation of historical events; teachers may be attracted to its factual basis but need to distinguish content coverage from its debatable choices in empathy and moral responses; film offers one meaning of the Alamo, but a lesson could investigate multiple possible interpretations | Fictionalized story inspired by real historical events; to activate its content value, lesson design will need to distinguish factual inspiration from invented story; teachers also will need to consider whether the film glorifies samurai violence and mischaracterizes the modernization of Japan | Imagined historical story with mostly fictional characters; activating content knowledge requires a lesson design that equips students to recognize the film's composite elements; if teachers consider the social construction in the film, it can serve as a springboard to help students confront issues of race in American history |
| Implications for Students | Box office failure, so many students may not have heard of this movie before seeing it in class; dense amount of factual detail may be overwhelming for some students; students may fixate on period details and battles without necessarily considering the story's connection to our world today | Since almost all names, places, and events are fictionalized, students may need extra support to apply film to content learning; students are likely to empathize with samurai characters without necessarily reflecting on why; the film communicates sharp messages about the price of modernization, corruption in capitalism, and destruction of native traditions that students may benefit from interrogating but could miss if overly focused on exciting action | Film's narrative follows many filmic conventions students will recognize: heroes and villains, underdogs against the strong; it positions students for an emotionally powerful but historically selective take on the American Revolution and the kind of society it created; students with differing experiences with racism may react in very different ways to the film's historical meanings and messages |

In terms of historical storytelling, *The Alamo* is a dramatic recreation of past events. Of the three films, it approaches the need for authenticity most literally. There is quite a large amount of known factual information and surviving documentation about the Alamo and its central figures. The 2004 film version incorporates actual

documentation and recorded anecdotes about its characters into the screenplay and bases its main narrative closely on recorded events. Even as much as the filmmakers strove to make an “authentic” Alamo version, imagination was part of their vision too. Where there were uncertainties (what happened to Crockett), imagination envisioned a possible outcome. Where there was a need to flesh out the characters (Travis and Bowie’s personalities), imagination created scenes that probably did not happen but which still conveyed factual information about them. Where there was a desire to express a theme that resonates with our world today, imagination put hope for multicultural harmony in the mouth of Davy Crockett.

The Last Samurai can be described as a fictionalized story inspired by real events. Of the three films, it strikes the most careful balance between imagination and authenticity. Its account of the past is imagined but not unfettered fantasy. Its main narrative is a composite of details from recorded historical events. Some characters are composites of actual figures from the past. These decisions ground the film’s statements about the world in a degree of authenticity. The samurai rebels really were crushed by the forces of modernization in Japan. Japanese modernization really was fueled by the need to compete with Western power. Imagination gives the authentic events emotional resonance across time. Imagined characters, interactions, and events communicate the film’s messages about modernization and the destruction of traditional cultures and nature, about capitalism and corruption, and about American imperialism as a problem in the world of the past and, by extension, potentially in the world today. Furthermore, imagination in the film makes its story entertaining and comprehensible to an American audience by providing viewers with a recognizable, handsome American hero, a

conventional romantic subplot, and exciting battle action that simplifies Saigo's protracted military campaign into two easily understood battles.

The Patriot is an imagined historical story. Of the three films, it is grounded most powerfully in the need for imagination. Almost all of the characters are either original inventions or re-named, created amalgamations of real historical figures. Most of the story of Martin and his militiamen is invented, too. The purpose of this imagination is to envision an American Revolution emotionally compelling to Americans today, a version of the past in which heroic ordinary people overcome arrogant, aristocratic villains and in which the racial exploitation that marked the U.S. society throughout the 19th and 20th centuries is replaced by racial unity. *The Patriot* offers historical storytelling as wish fulfillment, a way to think about a better world by imagining a better past. The film uses elements of authenticity—some actual named historical characters, period images, language, and objects, action scenes inspired by details from actual historical battles—to make its imagined world more credible, more real.

For history scholars and teachers, it is tempting to trumpet authenticity when considering the educational potential of history films. After all, authenticity is what encourages filmmakers to ground their screenplays in factual evidence. However, the box office performance and critical reception of the three movies point to an important realization: most people like imagined stories. *The Alamo*, at a reported cost of \$107 million to make, was a commercial disaster that took in only \$22.5 million at the domestic box office and an additional \$3.5 million overseas. The film also was widely rejected by critics: of 33 reviews in major newspapers, magazines, and national media outlets, only 36% were favorable. *The Patriot* was much more commercially

successful. It reportedly cost \$110 million to make, while taking in \$113 million domestically and \$102 million overseas. The film's critical reception was tepid: of 26 film reviews, 40% were favorable. *The Last Samurai*, with a reported budget of \$140 million, was not commercially successful in the U.S. (where it took in only \$111 million) but was a major hit overseas (taking in another \$345.5 million). The film was a genuine critical success: of the 38 reviews, 54% were favorable.⁵

The movie that was the most factually authentic was the least successful commercially and critically (indeed, some critics complained that the historical accuracy of *The Alamo* made it too slow and confusing). *The Last Samurai* and *The Patriot* more palpably blended imagination with elements of authenticity and were more successful with the public. The failure or success of these films suggests that many viewers, including young people in school, respond to imagination in storytelling. It is not that they reject the need for authenticity. Authenticity gives the film real meaning; imagination gives the film real emotional power.

Educational Uses of History Movies

Thus, educational uses of history feature films are informed by the imagination-authenticity dynamic. Every history movie takes an approach to historical storytelling that conveys messages about the past by the very nature of what the film chooses to include, exclude, emphasize, downplay, valorize, or deny. When teachers design a film-based lesson, they are immersing students in a particular mode of storytelling that communicates information and understandings about the past in certain ways and for

⁵ Information about film budgets and earnings was generated by searching the industry website Box Office Mojo (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>) on November 3, 2005. Information about critical reactions was generated by searching the popular movie website Rotten Tomatoes (<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>) on November 3, 2005.

certain purposes. Based on its approach to storytelling and what elements it contains, a history movie has the potential to play inherent roles in the classroom. It can teach students factual content about the past. It can convey moral or ethical stances to students. It can relate history to students in ways that are culturally relevant to them. Of course, it can also entertain them. The potential roles it can play depend on the film choice but also on the teacher—it is the teacher who mobilizes the film’s potential in the lesson.

History movies are flexible tools. As detailed in chapter 4, teachers can employ them in a variety of ways—multi-day events, short clips selected for specific purposes, or divided up over curricular units to cover topics at appropriate points. Movies can support a range of related classroom activities: lectures, discussions, writing (both creative and factual) assignments, and student visual projects. However, any educationally substantive instructional use of a history movie requires an awareness of style of historical storytelling, how it treats historical fact and fiction, how it constructs the past and people in it, and how it encourages students to react to the past. Thus, the value of pedagogical content analysis is in highlighting these kinds of issues so they can be used as springboards for deeper student historical learning. My analyses of the three films suggest possible implications their use by teachers. What connects them all is the need to consider the pedagogical functions of the films in lesson design.

For *The Alamo*, teachers may be strongly attracted to its factual basis. This sense of factual authenticity may lull teachers into overlooking the film’s more debatable choices in empathy and moral response, and it is in these areas that the film has the most to say about what the Alamo means. This film version of the story offers one possible meaning—the Alamo as a symbol of American liberty and a hope for racial cooperation.

That 150 years later the U.S. and Mexico are still at odds about movements across their shared border suggests a film-based lesson could investigate multiple possible interpretations of the Alamo and the Texas conflict.

For *The Last Samurai*, activating the content value of the film requires a lesson design that distinguishes factual inspiration from invented story. The modernization of Japan in the Meiji era is an important curricular topic in world history, and the teacher would need to bridge the film's imaginative story and the actual historical events that inspired it. Another implication of the film's approach to storytelling is that the empathy and moral responses conveyed by the narrative may glorify the violence of the samurai and mischaracterize the modernization of Japan. There is a potential for dissonance between a teacher's curricular goals and the interpretations and conclusions transmitted by the film.

For *The Patriot*, activating the film's content value requires a lesson design that equips students to recognize its composite elements. The film becomes more useful educationally when students can recognize Marion, Pickens, and Sumter in Martin or when they can see that movie's climactic battle incorporates authentic historical events. Additionally, consideration of the film's social construction can serve as a springboard to confronting issues of race identity and conflict in American history. If the movie's ending is historical wish fulfillment, it can be a powerful learning experience for students to think about what happened historically to make that wish resonate with people today.

These films also present implications for student learning. *The Alamo* was a box office failure, so it is unlikely that students will have heard of it. It has a dense amount of factual detail, potentially overwhelming for some students. The drawback is that students

could fixate on period details or the action-oriented events of the titular battle without necessarily considering the ways in which situation in 1836 connects to our world today. *The Last Samurai* may require extra support for students to help them apply the film content to the curricular content of the unit, since almost all names, places, and events in the movie are fictionalized. The film is so emotionally powerful that students are likely to empathize with the samurai characters without necessarily reflecting on why this is a goal of the film. Furthermore, students could become so tied up in the exciting action that they could miss out on the film's sharp thematic messages about modernization, capitalism, and the destruction of native cultures. *The Patriot* may appeal to students because its many filmic conventions are so recognizable to American audiences—heroes and villains, underdogs against the strong. The film positions students for an emotionally powerful but historically selective take on the American Revolution and the kind of society it created. Race and slavery are central to this tension. There is the potential that students with differing experiences with race and racism will react in very different ways to the film's historical meanings and messages.

So what can teachers do with these films to maximize their educative potential? My work with pedagogical content analyses of history movies suggests that the most valuable application is to generate educative questions that emerge from the history films and can be used as the basis for classroom activities. As described earlier in the chapter, educative questions get to the deeper level of a history film, meaningfully connect the film-based lesson to the broader curricular unit, provide opportunities to interpret the film's historical events and what they mean. Their purpose is to explore significant, generalizable issues that relate the past to our world today.

In chapters 1 and 2, I described three analytical frames drawn the literature: historians' perspectives, historical thinking/collective memory, and critical media scholarship. Now I would like to return to them and apply them to my analyses of these three films. Each frame suggests different possible educational questions for a history film that can be used to make meaningful use of a history film shown in the classroom. Table 3.6 details the educational questions that emerge from my analyses of these three films.

Table 3.6

Educational Questions Raised by the Three Films

| | <i>The Alamo</i> | <i>The Last Samurai</i> | <i>The Patriot</i> |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Historians' perspectives | What are the Alamo's political dimensions? Was Texan independence a justified break from a tyrant, an unjustified land-grab by Americans, or something in else? | Can the Japanese samurai be compared to the American Plains Indians? In what ways are their historical situations similar and in what ways are they different? | It can be argued that the revolution was started in the North, fought in the South, and won by the French. In what ways does the film demonstrate or deny this statement? |
| Historical thinking/collective memory | What are the moral dimensions of the violence in this war? Was Santa Anna justified in using force to suppress the Texian revolt? Who are the heroes and villains in this account, and what makes them heroes or villains? | Who is the "last samurai" and why, Algren or Katsumoto? Why is Algren so attracted to Katsumoto's culture, and how would you feel if you were in Algren's place? | Can slaveowners in history be considered American heroes today? To what extent should our contemporary social attitudes influence how we think and feel about people in the past? |
| Critical media scholarship | How do the film's themes relate to our world today? What aspects of the Alamo story help explain problems and conditions in the U.S. and Mexico today? | What does this film have to say about Americans and Japanese people? Was the samurai tradition a positive or negative part of Japanese culture? | What does the film have to say about slavery and the treatment of Black Americans in history? Why didn't the American Revolution live up to its potential by granting liberty to all people? |

The three frames each represent a different kind of learning important in history/social studies classrooms. Historians' perspectives emphasize what knowledge we can learn about the past based on evidence and interpretation. Thus, this frame suggests educative questions that strike at the historical significance of the eras and events in the three movies. What do we know about the events? Why did they happen? What explains their outcomes? Historical thinking/collective memory emphasizes getting students to empathize with the past, to think about what the past means to them, and to consider how the past is important to societies. This frame's educative questions strike at the moral, ethical, and psychological dimensions of the three films. Who are the heroes and villains, and why? How should our cultural values today influence the way we think about the past? Critical media scholarship emphasizes issues of social identity, power and control, and cultural meanings in media texts. The educative questions suggested by this frame, thus, strike at the social messages communicated by the films. How do past events affect conditions in our world today? How are powerful and subordinate groups and cultures positioned in this account of the past?

The kinds of educative questions that I argue emerge from the three films in this study can be applied to film-based lesson design. They can be confronted explicitly between the teacher and students as the basis of a rich class discussion. They can be the underlying rationale for lectures or student activities. They can inform student work involving the film. Ultimately, they serve to ground the film-based lesson in high-order thinking about history.

Conclusion

History feature films have considerable educational potential. We already know that they are widely used in schools and are watched by millions of children in schools, in theaters, and on television. What is needed is a mechanism for using them more seriously and rigorously in the classroom. The pedagogical content analysis suggests one route. Its analytical categories are a profitable framework for conducting and organizing a careful, scene-by-scene breakdown of a history film as well as a critical consideration of the film's broader narratives and themes. The pedagogical content analysis can be applied to the classroom by helping students think about fact and fiction in the film, how the film constructs the past and the people in it, and the film's moral reaction to the past.

By applying three frames drawn from existing scholarship in history and media, deeper educative questions raised by the film can be made explicit and used to guide discussions and activities in the classroom. By bringing to a film-based lesson an awareness of the movie's pedagogical functions, approach to storytelling, and emerging educative questions, teachers can meaningfully use history feature films with their students. I suggest that asking social studies teacher candidates, or certainly teachers in a Masters-degree program, to analyze a history feature film using the kind of framework modeled in this chapter would be a feasible and valuable activity—and one that would prepare them to tap into the educational potential films in their classrooms.

Chapter 4

Seeing the Past, Playing It Safe: Four Cases of History Feature Films in the Classroom

Scholarly interest in the instructional use of visual media in the history classroom is not new. Within a few years of the invention of talking motion pictures, some scholars began to consider how motion pictures might affect the teaching of history in schools (Knowlton & Tilton, 1932; Wise, 1939). Since that time, the advent of affordable VHS and DVD has greatly expanded the reach of movies into the classroom. Over the past two decades, scholars have studied how commercial feature films are used in history teaching and can influence student learning (Briley, 2002; Doherty, 2002; Goldstein, 1995; Johnson & Vargas, 1994; Justice, 2003; Marcus, 2005; Matz, 2005; Metzger, 2005; Paxton & Meyerson, 2002; Seixas, 1993, 1994; Stoddard, 2005; Stoddard & Marcus, in press; Sturma, 2000; Toplin, 2002; Weinstein, 2001; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2000). Judging from this body of research, it is no longer a question of if but how teachers should bring history movies into the classroom.

The previous chapter examined commercial history feature films as learning texts, in terms of potential for teaching content and understandings about the past. This chapter explores the educational affordances and limitations of film-based instruction through four observed cases in actual secondary social-studies classrooms.¹ Regina used the 1994 Chinese-language film *To Live* to teach about communism in China for her unit on political and economic systems. Marie showed an episode of the 1977 television miniseries *Roots* for her Early American Republic unit. Isabel used a clip from the 1994 film *Legends of the Fall* as part of a lesson in her World War I unit. Kellie showed the 2002 film *The Pianist* for her World War II/Holocaust unit.

¹ All names of individuals and schools are pseudonyms.

Each teacher used history feature films in different ways, but the four cases share notable features in common. All four teachers were drawn to history movies as a way to stimulate student interest and help students visualize the past. At the same time, they carefully controlled what questions and aspects of the film were talked about in class, thereby constraining student enthusiasm and intellectual engagement with the historical topics. This study offers a closer look at these four differing approaches by focusing on the teachers' choices and uses of films and their instructional interactions with their students. My analysis draws on classroom observations and interviews with the teachers and a small sample of student volunteers (see chapter 2). Since my presence was limited and I could not become an "insider" in the observed classrooms, I sought to immerse myself unobtrusively in the classroom context and watch how the teachers and students experienced the film-based lessons. Making sense of these instructional experiences requires what Geertz (1973) called "thick description"—probing the context of practices and discourses within a culture in a way that makes them meaningful to an outsider.

This chapter uses the observations and interviews to analyze these four cases of instructional uses of history movies. First, I briefly discuss what goes into preparing a film-based lesson. Next, I offer in-depth examinations of the four observed lessons. I look at the teachers' intentions and views on teaching with film, at what the teachers did with the films and their students, and at how the observed lesson in each classroom maps onto the pedagogical functions examined in chapter 3—content coverage and period representation; historical construction and social construction; empathy and moral response. Finally, I conclude by looking across all four cases and theorizing why history

teachers use movies in safe, traditional ways instead of ways that seek to expand student intellectual engagement.

What Goes into the Instructional Use of Film?

Some of what goes into a film-based lesson is manifestly visible—students in the dark staring at a screen, the teacher often doing something else. Impressions of this visible portion of the context fuels the conventional folklore that showing movies is a way to dodge teaching—a facile assumption which ignores that teachers (like the four in this study) can and do put a great deal of thought into their film-based lessons. When I asked the teachers in my sample what they thought was the worst reason for showing a film in class, all of them pointed to the assumption that showing movies is not really teaching. Regina said that the worst reason was “to just take up time.... I’ve seen where people are just showing movies just to take up time, time to grade or whatever.” Marie commented that she has known many teachers “who have done video that was put on in order so the teacher could get other things done, and that’s not the purpose of video, or shouldn’t be. Or [they] show something they haven’t really previewed or designed lesson plans around.” Isabel said the worst reason would be “because I’m tired, I don’t want to teach today. That would be the worst.... The kids know if you just want to slap something in there.” Kellie’s comments echoed the others: “Filler just to take up time. That would be a bad reason, that’s kind of like doing a disservice to your students.”

Other parts of the context are less visible, manifest only to those on the “inside” participating in the full lesson. How did the teacher relate the film to what was studied before watching it? How were students prepared to watch the film and use what they see and hear? What will the teacher do with the film after showing it? What historical

questions will the film help the students meaningfully examine? These issues are essential to the educational value of using a history movie instructionally.

How the film's characteristics relate to the instructional unit of study is the key. Important characteristics include the film's subject or topic (what is the movie "about"), its historical content (what subject matter from the unit of study also appears in the movie), its visual and aural rhetorics (how the movie's sights and sounds convey information and meanings), and its messages and themes (what the film says about the past, the people in it, and their relationship to our world today). In other words, the pedagogical functions examined in chapter 3. What the film can offer is limited by what the film contains. A "good" movie can be a bad instructional choice if its elements do not meaningfully feed into the lesson, and a "bad" movie can be a terrific instructional choice when used strategically by the teacher.

Students, both individually and collectively, are another important factor. They bring to a film-based lesson their own prior knowledge, degree of interest in the topic and movie itself, attitudes about the class and the teacher, and varying moods or dispositions each day. Teachers tend to be very sensitive to this and want their students to "like" the movie. Since films tend to be lengthy, managing the classroom during the length of time can be trying if students get restless or antsy. Complicating this challenge for teachers is the realization that students are not passive consumers of film. Literature on media education emphasizes that students actively participate in how they learn from media texts, including movies (Masterman, 1985; Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). In other words, students' own personalities, outlooks, and backgrounds

affect how they respond to and make use of media texts, and this in turn influences how film-based lessons turn out in the classroom.

Limits on Control

On the surface, teachers seem to exercise considerable control in film-based lessons. They ultimately select the film and what elements in it receive focus. The traditional way of showing a movie in the classroom, with students quietly watching the film at their individual desks, inherently controls student behavior by requiring them to be silent and still. In actuality, teacher control is imperfect. Film choice is limited by what the motion picture industry produces. While the advent of indexed DVDs makes it easier for a teacher to focus on particular elements in a film, teachers have no control over the particular images, dialogue, and structure of the film narrative.

Additionally, teacher control is constrained by the students. Teachers can influence student reception of a film by framing it in particular ways, but control over how students respond mentally may be even more limited for a movie than other kinds of texts. A textbook or other non-fictional instructional text is typically a straightforward statement of official factual knowledge, but movies are also a part of popular youth culture independent of the classroom. Students may accept a teacher's interpretation of a textbook without much personal reflection, but most adolescents watch movies on their own and bring to the classroom their own ideas on how to make sense of a film story.

Teachers' perceptions of what their students will like and can handle affect their film-based lessons. For example, a teacher may hesitate to use a particular film because of students' immaturity. Two teachers in this study brought up this tension. Regina noted, "There's a lot of films that I would love to use, but because of the age group it's

not relevant, I can't.... Like [the 1951 Japanese film] *The Seven Samurai*. The 11th graders loved it. The ninth graders couldn't get it at all." Marie's prior experience had taught her that:

[*Roots* is] an intense movie. It deals with some more mature issues especially the brutality and the abuse of human beings. This is a borderline age for that, for kids, and so it takes some preparation on my part to help these children understand what they're going to see and to be prepared for the maturity level that they need for it.

Students can also pressure the teacher to choose a particular film. In my study, Kellie ended up choosing *The Pianist* partly because some of her students lobbied for it. Other times, the pressure is less benign. Isabel complained, "*Pearl Harbor* of the late 90s with Josh Hartnett and Ben Affleck. The girls, and even the guys to some extent, every time we get to WWII [ask], 'Do we get to watch *Pearl Harbor*?' And my response is, 'Why? Why would I show that to you?'"

Of course, students affect a film-based lesson in more ways than just telling the teacher what title to pick. How the film is presented, the work designed to go along with the film, and the ways in which the film is talked about in class all depend to some degree on whether the teacher believes the students will cooperate with or benefit from it. In the end, the teacher can only influence but not control student understanding and reception of the film. Teachers' desire to harness the visual power of movies while containing student reactions, enthusiasm, and intellectual engagement within manageable bounds is a theme that I will revisit at the end of the chapter.

History Movies in the Classroom: Four Cases

I now turn to four classroom cases of teachers' instructional use of feature films about history. The teachers—Regina, Marie, Isabel, and Kellie—reflected different approaches to how film can be presented to students and used in the classroom. For each case, I begin by describing the teacher's instructional goals and views on teaching with film. Next, I relate the lesson as I observed it and offer preliminary analysis of what was actually accomplished by the lesson. Then, I examine what subject matter knowledge students could learn from the lesson by mapping what I observed onto the six functions of the pedagogical content analysis (detailed in chapter 3).

Regina: Bringing the Real China to Great Falls HS

Regina is an experienced teacher in her early 40s. Of African national origin, she grew up in Spain and has been a permanent legal resident of the United States for many years. She majored in history and political science for her bachelor's degree, and completed both her initial certification and master's degree in teaching at small, regional private colleges in Michigan. Regina has been teaching for the past 12 years at Great Falls High School in a largely middle-class, rural/suburban district located in the countryside near Michigan's capital area. Over 1,800 students attended Great Falls HS in 2005-06, of whom 1,701 (91%) were White/Caucasian. All 29 of Regina's students in the class that I observed appear to be White/Caucasian. The Great Falls area was once a rural farming community, but suburban expansion in recent years has connected it more and more to the nearby metropolitan area and increased its residential population. The Great Falls HS facility is sizable and in good condition, built in the early 1990s. It features a modern performing-arts auditorium with a video projector and large projection

screen. The first day of Regina's lesson took place in the auditorium. The second day of the lesson took place in Regina's regular classroom, an ample space for at least 30 students, their desks, a teacher's desk, and a few other work tables.

The observed movie lesson was part of Regina's unit on economic and political systems for World Cultures, a course required for graduation. Her current teaching load consisted of five periods of the World Cultures course. It has been her only "prep" for the past few years, though in the years before she typically taught two or three different courses. Most of her students in the class I observed were 9th graders (mostly 14-15 years old), though some students were in the 10th grade and one young man was 18 years old. For this unit, she showed her students *To Live (Huozhe)*, a 1994 Mandarin-language film with English subtitles. Directed by Yimou Zhang, *To Live* was made in Hong Kong before its return to Chinese control. Banned in China itself, the film was released first in Europe and distributed in the USA by the Samuel Goldwyn Company. *To Live* relates what life was like in communist China from the late 1940s to the early 1970s through the tragic experiences of the Xu family.

The Teacher's Intentions and Views on Film

Regina frequently uses film in the classroom, and she brings a number of deeply felt motivations to her film-based instruction. "At least every unit has some kind of visual [media]. Overall, every unit is two to three weeks, so there is a film in there somewhere," she told me. A chief purpose is for her students "to get another [learning input] besides hearing about [the topic], to also see. So it's a multisensory type exercise." Regina referenced this purpose again when reflecting on the effectiveness of her *To Live* lesson: "It's almost like you experienced something, so it was kind of like telling a story

of something that happened. So I think they students were able to retain because they saw it, so it's multisensory."

Furthermore, Regina brings a personal passion in world cinema to her lessons. She enjoys exposing students to global languages and cultures; the objective is for her students "to identify with that culture, with that period of time, and compare it to today. That's the object of every film [I use]." In her view, a film made by members of the depicted culture is more authentic. One of our exchanges was indicative of her philosophy:

Scott: So you personally have a strong interest in international world cinema?

Regina: Oh yeah, definitely, I'm addicted to foreign film.

Scott: So that influences your choices?

Regina: Most definitely, especially when they come from the perspective of the people.... [*To Live*] was done by a Chinese director as opposed to Hollywood coming in and trying to tinker around with the culture.

Regina later added that *To Live* is "in the target language and it's made by the target culture"—in other words, it comes from an authentic perspective and is not an artificial Hollywood version of another culture. In one of our last conversations, Regina clarified why she feels Hollywood versions are not authentic:

You get a film like [the 2004 ancient epic] *Troy*, but the main actors aren't Greek.... If you're going to spend time with the historical costumes, with the architecture and making sure that they research the history...why the heck are you putting a Caucasian actor when there are, I'm sure, a billion Greek actors that can

play the role the same way? [Hollywood filmmakers] just haven't taken the step to make it culturally correct, some of these movies.

When asked why she chose to use a movie for this lesson on communism in China, Regina complained about the limitations of other options: "Documentaries about the Cultural Revolution are too graphic or way too gory, or they're too preachy, news-reel type stuff, or too propaganda.... This film is great because it tells a story of a normal family going through horrific times." Regina feels that movies pack a visual reinforcement and inherent emotional interest that other instruction methods, including non-fiction video documentaries, cannot match:

If I can find movies to replace the documentaries, any time. Because once you find a movie, you fall in love with the character and then you can identify with the character much more than some voice-over. At least with this age group. With documentaries, it's like, you turn the lights down and that's all.

Of course, there are problems in using movies. As much as she loved *To Live*, Regina told me that she worried about "the length and the fact that it's subtitled." She further noted that the 1994 film is "already aging and the kids these days don't have any patience for anything that was not made in the last five years."

In our interview after she showed students the film, Regina commented that *To Live* was still effective educationally because "it's dramatic. It's got like the tugging at the heart element. It's got children and the way children are raised. And it's got cultural elements, social elements, economic elements, political elements, so it's got a little bit of everything." She further extolled the film for its chronological sweep:

[*To Live*] spans, it's like the 40s, the 50s, the 60s, and the 70s. So you see the same character going through each time.... I wish all educational movies were set up this way, where you take one character and you pass them through, you take them to the actual events through history.

To Live appealed to Regina because of its match with the curricular topics for this unit, the historical information conveys, and the opportunities it provides to convey to students a particular way of seeing history. Its depiction of historical content fits with Regina's own understandings and experiences. She told me:

I wanted to see [in class] this movie because it's banned in China, because it really tells the story of what Mao's communist ideas really were like. And so when I did go to China, indeed, they were like, "Well, Mao, he's all right, but he made a lot of mistakes" and they very openly criticize him now.

Furthermore, the film's depiction of life in communist China scaffolds understandings about the world today that Regina wanted to convey to her students. One of the consequences of China's post-Mao economic growth is inequality, with implications for the place of the U.S. in the world. She commented,

Even though China is gaining economically, not everybody is coming along. There are so many people left behind.... We've been talking in class about what our government has to do in order to maintain our standard of living. We're used to certain things. Does that mean invading another country in order for us to drive our SUVs? Does that mean borrowing money from China because we want extra stuff for cheap clothes? So that's basically where I want them to see that, okay, China is growing really fast, but how deep is their team?

Regina's ending words were a baseball metaphor suggesting that China's rapid development will require a constant struggle to maintain the new standard of living.

Regina has shown *To Live* in her World Cultures class for the past several years, but this time she was trying something new. Rather than showing the film to each class independently as in the past, Regina arranged for all her students to be released from their regular classes to spend the entire day with her in the auditorium watching the film together on the large screen. Students needed to bring back permission slips from their parents in order to be released from their other classes, and students could check out of the auditorium as necessary to attend classes that could not be missed (due to a test, for example). Regina made these arrangements very quickly; her invitation for me to observe the lesson came suddenly at the end of the week preceding the Monday showing of the film. She intended this day to be a special event for her students to get them to be more excited about her lesson and the film. Describing the lesson as an experiment, she explained,

This experiment [is] out of the blue, something I wanted to do all the time, but now let's do it.... you try it and if it doesn't work you throw it out. And if it works, great.... I'm not sure yet, I haven't decided if this is something I want to repeat. It's the first time I've done it like this.

Observing the Lesson

Initially Regina tried to bring in a guest speaker from China to speak just prior to the film, but by Monday morning this plan had fallen through and she soldiered on by herself. Around 8:25 a.m., the students from all of Regina's sections of World Cultures were released from their regular 1st hour and streamed into the auditorium. On their way

in, they dropped off their permission slips and sign-in with a student-aide, received a list of discussion questions about the film, and chose seats from among those that Regina allowed. Regina began addressing the more than 100 assembled students shortly before 8:40 a.m. Their energy level was high, with voices bubbling across the auditorium, but mostly the group was very cooperative. Regina used a handheld microphone to amplify her voice, but individual student voices were nearly impossible for those seated in the house to hear. This remained a problem throughout the morning. Many students asked or answered questions, but only Regina's words could be heard by everyone.

A few minutes later, Regina launched into her PowerPoint lecture on *To Live* and its historical background projected onto the large white screen hanging above the auditorium stage. The PowerPoint slides were amply illustrated with pictures and photographs and also contained a fair amount of text, which Regina used as memory prompts for her own narration. Regina's lecture identified key figures in recent Chinese history and outlined major events in China from the 1930s to the present. She instructed the students to listen and take notes in the semi-darkness; perhaps around half of the visible students had notebooks out. Within a few minutes, there was a two-minute interruption of the lecture as some students asked for more light. No sooner was that resolved then several students protested the speed of the changing PowerPoint slides. During the lull, some young men chimed in asking whether the lecture material would be on the test. Regina warned them that it would and gave them a sample question: "What were the two factions in the Chinese Civil War?"

Regina spent about 40 minutes lecturing and introducing the film. Questions and comments from students were interjected periodically. When Mao Zhedong was shown

on the screen, one young woman raises her hand to ask for clarification about who that “Mayo guy” was. Her pronunciation error seemed to be genuine; Regina corrected her and led the students en-masse in pronouncing Mao’s name. “Sounds more intelligent,” she explained. Later a different young woman asked for clarification about what Mao’s “little red book” was. As soon as Regina answered her, a young man asked whether the film would be in Chinese or English. Perhaps nervous that the students would react negatively to a foreign-language film, Regina replied that the film would be in Chinese but quickly added that it has “very good English subtitles.” Regina’s lecture included notes on modern China, too, which elicited some verbal exchanges. One student interrupted to ask what Deng Xiaoping’s title of “premier” means. Before Regina could respond, a young woman jumped in to ask if it means he was “like the President” in the U.S. This sparked a series of inaudible questions regarding Deng’s influence on changes in China. As student chatter began to rise, Regina halted her lecture, telling students to take a nap if they were bored rather than disrupt those wanting to learn.

Around 9:15, Regina wrapped up the lecture and, over the next dozen minutes, described elements that the students should watch for in the film, illustrated by images on a PowerPoint slide. A request for clarification about the persecution of teachers during Cultural Revolution from a young woman surprised that students could be allowed to beat and humiliate their teachers sparked a series of overlapping, inaudible questions from many students about why Chinese students were allowed to do this, what they were armed with, and how long they did this for. Regina provided brief answers to this flurry of questions, and it is unlikely she heard all of them. She concluded the overview by asking whether something like the Cultural Revolution could happen in the U.S. There

was a general clamor of yes-and-no answers shouted out by many students. Regina quelled the clamor by quickly concluding that “Hippies” in the 1960s were an example of protest against authority in America.

Both before and during the movie, Regina’s special film event was interrupted by external factors. Her lecture was interrupted at 8:54 by the bell signaling the end of 1st period, and a handful of students left the auditorium to attend their 2nd-period class. Shortly after 9:10, she was interrupted by another teacher entering the darkened auditorium looking for three students who needed to take a test. Around 10:00, the movie was interrupted by another series of school bells marking the transition from 2nd to 3rd period. There was a considerably larger and noisier exodus of students leaving the auditorium than before. Twice in the morning Regina had to pause her lesson to give the students bathroom breaks.

After the first bathroom break, Regina had the lights turned off altogether, and visibility was limited to the glow from the screen. In response to what seemed like student complaints, she told them, “Don’t try to take notes” on the movie, just watch it. From time to time, Regina interjected brief comments over the microphone, pausing the film when speaking for more than a few seconds. Most of her comments were narrations of what was going on in the story, although as the film progressed she increasingly interjected explanations of events and observations about the nuances of scene imagery or sound—during a scene depicting the Great Leap Forward, Regina asked, “Remember when we were talking about propaganda?” and pointed out in the film the communist slogans being broadcast on loudspeakers. Most of the time students seemed to watch the film quietly, though it was impossible to note their posture or alertness in the near-total

darkness. There was some student tittering during predictable episodes—when a sex joke was made during a shadow-puppet play; when the characters swore (subtitled in English); when the main character urinated in fear after watching the execution of the gambler who stole his family estate. During one scene, many students (mostly young women) gasped audibly when the main character berated his wife for interrupting his gambling and ordered her to go home. Many of the female students mumbled what seemed like positive reactions when in the next scene his wife left him. Perhaps encouraged by the other students who got away with talking aloud, one young man audibly scoffed at the “bad quality of the actors” after seeing the main character’s tearful reaction to his wife leaving him. Regina quieted down the students but did not address their reactions.

Just after 11:00 a.m., Regina stopped the movie to give the students a 40-minute lunch break. After lunch, the students reassembled at the appointed time only to discover that the school band needed to use the auditorium to practice for an upcoming concert. Regina tried to lead her large group of students in a discussion of the film, but the lobby adjoining the auditorium was an ill fit for a hundred or so students and no one could hear over the sound of the practicing band. Regina and her students sat in the lobby until the band finished around 12:30 p.m. Once back inside the auditorium, Regina showed the rest of the film. After the film concluded around 1:30, she reviewed her presentation on China and tried to re-start the group discussion about the film. The students got extremely antsy, proving too uncooperative in her judgment, and Regina dismissed them around 2:15 (several minutes before the official end of the school day).

On Tuesday morning, I was invited to observe the aftermath of the film lesson. Instead of spending the hour discussing the film as she originally planned, she began

class by expressing her disappointment over student behavior yesterday. She apologized for giving students a false impression with her easy-going demeanor and stated a need to change the class culture based on group behavior during *To Live*. “I am not angry but more heart-broken,” she said to her class. She then explained that she was canceling a planned field trip to the Islamic Center, and she was also rethinking whether they should do other group lessons.

Regina then told the students to take out blank paper for a pop quiz. Subdued, the students quietly accepted their teacher’s disapproval and had no visible or audible reaction to the pop quiz. Regina read four questions about the China lesson and *To Live* one at a time:

- 1) Who is Hu Jintao?
- 2) What was the Cultural Revolution?
- 3) What are two things the main character loses on the very last night that he gambles?
- 4) What was the PLA?

About six minutes later, Regina directed students to exchange papers with one another for grading. She then reviewed the questions and appropriate answers one at a time, asking students to read the written responses and clarifying acceptable responses.

After collecting the student-graded pop quizzes, she told the students to take out the list of discussion questions about the film given out on Monday and instructed them to spend the rest of the hour writing answers to the questions individually. There were no complaints and the students quickly got to work. The silence was briefly broken after a few minutes when a young woman asked Regina, “Could you write the names from the

film on the board?” Before Regina could react, the young woman reminded her that yesterday she told them not to write notes in the dark auditorium.

The questions, originally meant for students to talk about in small groups, tried to draw out a range of student responses to the foreign-language film. (See Figure 4.1 below for the questions.) Questions 7, 11, and 12 seemed to be designed to bridge the film’s foreign culture for the students. Questions 4, 8, and 13 aimed at helping students comprehend the film’s complex historical content. Nearly half the questions (3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 14) focused on students’ personal reactions to the movie—what they liked about it, how it made them feel. Evident in Regina’s questions is her goal of getting students to care about the past through this film, particularly in questions that invite emotional reflection (e.g., 3b. What aspect of Communism touched you the most?).

"To Live" Film Discussion Questions:

1. a. What is the conflict in the Xu family's life? b. Do you believe that their conflict is resolved by the end of the film?
2. a. Why do you think the film is called "To Live"? b. Were the film makers successful in portraying life during this historical time in China?
3. a. Did you learn anything more about Communism from this movie? b. What aspect of Communism touched you the most?
4. a. Was there something you didn't understand about the movie? b. What was it?
5. a. What did you like best about the movie? b. Why?
6. a. What did you like least about the movie? b. Why?
7. Select an action, which displeased or shocked you, performed by one of the characters in the film and then explain, given the choices you have, how you would have taken a different action.
8. a. Why do you believe the characters in the film did what they were told without question? b. Would they act the same way under a capitalist philosophy?
9. a. Who was your favorite character in the movie? b. Why?
10. a. Who was your least favorite character in the movie? b. Why?
11. Discuss the use of music in the movie. a. Did it enhance the story that the filmmakers were trying to tell? b. Are there parts of the music that stayed in your head?
12. What cultural customs portrayed in the film did you find interesting?
13. a. How did the characters' costumes change from the beginning of the film...to the end of the film? b. How did the costumes show the change in political climate?
14. a. Did you like this film? Explain your position. b. Should this film be used in the future to teach Communism?

Mini Group Project

After you have discussed the film in your discussion group, invent an alternative ending to the film "To Live": Then answer the following questions: Why did you choose the ending you invented? Why is it important in our culture for a film to have a happy ending?

Figure 4.1. Regina's student handout.

For the last item on the list (Mini Group Project), Regina told her students to change the directions to an individually written paragraph. About 10 minutes before the end of the period, students began turning in their written responses. Regina warned these students to sit quietly at their seats when done. Many students worked straight through to the closing bell.

Regina scheduled the unit test for the subsequent week. It was an online test which the students took individually at home, with their notes allowed. Consisting of 30 short-answer or multiple-choice questions, the test had a one-hour time limit. Of the 13 questions on the test about or related to China, five were related to elements depicted in *To Live*. Only two of the five are specifically drawn from the film. The first was a straightforward recall question about the Nationalist Army, while the other asked for plot details about the main character unrelated to the film's historical content:

1) What army first captures Fugui and Chunsheng in the film *To Live*?

10) *To Live*: What two critical things does Fugui lose the last night he gambles?

Later, when I asked Regina how the students did on the test, she said:

Well, the questions that were movie questions, I was very satisfied with the score overall of that particular portion. But the test as a whole, it was the end of a unit test, I'd say it was an average grade, like 64% [was the] mean. And there were several 100 percents there, so some guys didn't do very well. It was an open-note test, too.

Despite Regina's strong interest in and beliefs about the film, it ultimately meant little in the unit assessment. No more than one-sixth of the test items related to the film lesson.

Regina's Reactions to the Lesson

Overall, Regina was pleased with the *To Live* lesson. She reaffirmed her commitment to the film choice because it still can appeal to many students.

I know that it's in Mandarin, and it's about communism, and it's not necessarily the average teenage thing. So it really surprised me that students like the movie, almost 90% of the students like the movie, and the ones that don't they just don't

really care about those issues or they weren't paying attention, but it gripped them.

Even having used the film several times before, she was still surprised that the movie can have such a strong appeal despite the language and culture gap.

The problems she faced, then, according to Regina, were not with the film but with the lesson's implementation. She designed the lesson as a special event that pushed the organizational boundaries of school, but she blamed partly herself and partly the students for what ensued rather than any constraints imposed by the structure of schooling. She reflected on the trouble in one of our exchanges.

Scott: Were there any problems in how you chose to show it, all in one day?

Regina: With the film itself, I don't think so. But the rest of the set-up, I think especially toward the afternoon where the students just lost control, I lost control.

Scott: You also mentioned that the band was not exactly cooperative.

Regina: Exactly, but again it's not because they students couldn't stay still, because they do that every day in class. Again it's because they choose not to.

In her view, the special event was not so different from regular class time that the students should have had any problems. If they had a hard time watching the whole movie or the group discussion, it was because they choose not to cooperate.

The day after the special event, Regina expressed palpable disappointment to the students in the class I observed. Over time, however, she seemed to become more sanguine about the experience. In our last conversation she told me:

It went very well considering all the factors that could have gone wrong. The whole experience, I would definitely repeat it with that whole set-up with creating

like a seminar. Maybe making it half a day instead of a whole day, and definitely have a speaker come.... I would have it more interactive, maybe more student interaction. I just have to bring it back to the drawing board.

Understanding Regina's Lesson: The Real China Meets the Realities of Schooling

Regina wanted her students to see what China was really like after Mao's communist revolution. *To Live* let her students experience this through the moving story of one Chinese family. She believes that China's past is important to understanding China today and its growing presence in the world politically and economically. Hence, her film-based lesson was not for a purely historical unit. She used it for her unit on capitalist and communist political systems. The film provided moving, visual historical context for the broader issue of a changing China.

For Regina, *To Live* was a special film and China a special topic worthy of a more adult venue than the regular classroom. Her special event attempted to heighten student receptivity by changing the typical school setting (the solitary classroom) and student arrangement (one class of 20-some students). But school routine got in the way. Even when Regina arranged the auditorium for the day, she could not overrule the school band's claim to it. Her special event co-existed alongside the regular school day, as dozens of students throughout the day passed in and out on their way to their regular classes they could not miss.

While the auditorium venue itself may have afforded certain advantages (the big screen for the PowerPoint presentation and the movie, the special location), it imposed considerable disadvantages (difficulty minding so many students at one time, hearing questions and comments, and writing in a vast, dimly lit space). Furthermore, the

arrangement may have a different meaning for students. The auditorium may not be an adult site to them—after all, it is most often where they experience fun student productions and school assemblies. Furthermore, being in-school but out-of-class with large numbers of their friends may represent not a more serious, adult arrangement but instead a more festive, escapist atmosphere.

Regina went into her lesson with great hopes for doing something different and adventurous with this film. She envisioned combining a guest speaker, PowerPoint lecture, movie, and small-group and cross-class discussions together into a powerful learning experience. When the circumstances of schooling got in the way, she transformed the student activity into a safe, traditional assignment—silently and individually written, with little feedback and no debate over ideas. Regina put the blame not on the structure and nature of schooling but rather on her loss of control and on her students' behavioral choices. Nor did she seem to view the change in assignment as educationally less valuable for her students. At the least, *To Live* accomplished her chief goal of helping her students visualize the truth about Mao's era of communism.

It would be interesting to know what Regina's students thought about the experience and what they learned. Unfortunately, Regina did not arrange for me to interview any of her students. Furthermore, the nature of the observed lessons (a vast group of students in the auditorium on the first day, students required to work silently at their desks the second day) prevented me from collecting even indirect students comments. However, I suspect that turning the discussion questions into individual written responses likely reduced students' intellectual engagement. With less than an

hour to write out responses to 15 multipart questions, it seems unlikely that their solitary reflections were as deeply engaged as active, guided discussions could have been.

Learning history. So what did Regina’s lesson accomplish in terms of teaching and learning history? Table 4.1 summarizes the instructional experience viewed along the functions laid out in the pedagogical content analysis framework (chapter 3).

Table 4.1

Regina’s Lesson Viewed in Terms of Pedagogical Functions of History Films

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | Regina chose a fictional story that accurately depicts broad historical events in recent Chinese history: the Revolution of 1949, the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s |
| Period representation | Giving students a feel for what the experience with communism in China from the late 1940s-1970s was like was a major part of Regina’s lesson |
| Historical construction | Regina’s interest in how Chinese communism used propaganda and attacked symbols of traditional culture led her to point out to her students where they appeared in the film |
| Social construction | Because the film was made by Chinese filmmakers, Regina accepted it as an authentic representation; she did not interrogate how it constructed gender, children, or class differences; the absence of Chinese ethnic minorities was unnoted, and “China” and “Chinese” remained monolithic concepts in her lesson |
| Empathy | One of Regina’s chief motivations for using this film is because it relates its historical narrative through a Chinese husband and wife and their daughter and son, a family structure recognizable to teenagers and one to which they can relate |
| Moral response | Regina did not directly explore with her students the film’s conclusions about the communist experience in China; instead she focused on how the film’s narrative differed from typical American cinema (<i>To Live</i> does not end with a satisfying story resolution but merely with the characters continuing to live out their lives) |

Given the motivations that Regina brought to the lesson, it is not surprising that empathy appears as one of the lesson’s strongest learning functions. More surprising is how the lesson did not engage students with how China’s communist past connects to our world today. Regina said that awareness of these kinds of issues was one of her purposes

behind the lesson, but the lesson, as I observed it, lacked explicit engagement with moral response. Why was the communist experience good or bad for China or the world? How does China's communist experience position the country in its relationship to the U.S. and the Western nations today? Instead of these kinds of questions, Regina's questions (see Figure 4.1 above) chiefly asked students to consider cultural differences between Hollywood movies and Chinese cinema (in which, unlike Hollywood movies, happy endings are not expected). Regina's questions reflected her desire to expose students to world cinema but did not directly connect the film's themes to our world today.

Despite her belief that a Chinese-made movie is more authentic, Regina did not really explore what made the film accurate or realistic. She pointed out some elements of period representation (costumes, for example) and historical construction (the communist propaganda slogans), but she did not consider elements of social construction. For her, the construction of the Xu family (husband, wife, daughter, son, and eventually son-in-law) was useful for establishing student empathy. Her purposes did not include exploring how men, women, and children were constructed or what defines being "Chinese" in a land of linguistic and ethnic diversity. Perhaps second only to empathy, Regina's use of *To Live* served the important function of content coverage. Through an engaging story narrative with characters to whom students could relate, the film presented factual information about key events in China in Mao's era.

Taking Stock

Regina's case represents one possible mode for using history feature films in the classroom—as a special event in which multiple classes of students come together to spend the day watching and talking about a film. The goal of her lesson was to let

students see the real China, emotionally visualized through a feature film made by Chinese filmmakers (rather than Hollywood) who were so truthful that the film was banned in China. When the circumstances of schooling and working with adolescents got in the way of Regina's ambitious plan, she sacrificed the adventurous post-film discussion activities involving all her classes and replaced them with a pop quiz and individually written short responses, traditional activities that fit easily into the normal structure of schooling.

Before moving on to the next case, it is worth considering what we can learn from Regina. Her lesson demonstrates film as a multisensory instructional tool. Film can be an extra input, reinforcing students learning and supporting visual learning styles. Regina's case also raises a couple of cautions. A film's fit with youth culture is an unavoidable concern. Regina worried whether students could learn from films that were too old, especially if in black-and-white. Also, her case points to a possible maturity gap. How can a teacher know when to intervene if students are unable to cross the divide between their own culture and a film's foreign (either national or temporal) context? There is a tension between letting students respond naturally to a film and stepping in to address cultural insensitivity, but there is no easy answer.

Marie: Teaching Race and Slavery in Suburban Michigan

Marie is an experienced teacher around age 40. She has been teaching for about 15 years and holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education with a focus on social studies and language arts. She teaches at Waynesburg Middle School in a middle-class, suburban district located in the countryside near Michigan's capital area. A total of 515 students attended Waynesburg MS in 2005-06, of whom 491 (95%) were

White/Caucasian. All 23 of the eighth graders in the observed class were White/Caucasian (there is only one African American student in the entire eighth grade at Waynesburg). Waynesburg area was once a rural farming town, but over the past two decades has become a flourishing suburban bedroom community. The Waynesburg MS facility was formerly the town's high school, turned into the middle school when the town built a new, larger high school in the early 1990s. The old building has been refurbished and expanded in recent years and still is in good condition. Marie's classroom is sizable with plenty of desks, has whiteboards instead of chalkboards, and features a row of tables with many up-to-date computers linked in a network. An avid supporter of youth literature, she had lined up along the front and back walls of the room dozens of young-reader's historical fiction paperbacks, which she encouraged students to check out and use on for projects.

The observed movie lesson was part of Marie's unit on the Early Republic in U.S. History for the required eighth-grade Social Studies class. Her students were mostly 13 years old. Marie's teaching load consisted of four sections of Social Studies plus a Yearbook elective class. This has been her typical load for the past five years. For this unit, she showed her students Episode 4 of *Roots*, the landmark 1977 ABC television miniseries adapted from Alex Haley's novel. Directed by Marvin Chomsky, the miniseries relates the African American experience through the story of African slave Kunta Kinte and his family over several generations. Episode 4 takes place around 1824 and centers on Kunta Kinte's daughter, Kizzy. Marie's room has a large television mounted on the wall and its own VCR. Students watched the episode at their desks.

The Teacher's Intentions and Views on Film

The motivations Marie brings to her film-based instruction reflect her strong beliefs about what is appropriate for student learning. She typically uses a large amount of video media in her history lessons. “As far as actual informational resources, [video media are] between 20 and 25 percent of what I use.... It depends a lot. I have some units where I use a lot more video,” she told me. Like many teachers, Marie feels that film is inherently more appealing to students:

It’s a heck of a lot more interesting, it just is. You also have diverse learners and it helps those kids to better be able to encompass the materials you’re going for. It just helps broaden their understanding in so many ways. I think it’s another tool to teach with, and it’s not any better or any worse.

In her view, films are another to reach students with different learning styles—much like Regina’s description of film lessons as “multisensory” instruction. Yet Marie was quick to add that films are still a tool, which means that teachers must consciously activate their potential. In a later conversation, Marie clarified her caution:

Part of my reason for showing movies...is because I’m trying to give kids another perspective and something a little more interesting than the text but very solid education, historical. I can defend how I use those educationally in my classroom, and if I can’t defend those educationally I shouldn’t be showing them. Film choices, in Marie’s view, must be defensible both in terms of historical content as well as in their educational function.

As a result, Marie feels that teachers have a definite obligation regarding the movies they choose. In our last interview, Marie summed up her concern:

This may be the old lady in me, but the violence issue, it's gratuitous violence....

I think that Hollywood has gone too far in that direction. Everything has to be graphic, which comes out of the culture of video games, which tends to, and I'm going to go philosophical here just a little bit, but in my opinion it tends to really desensitize our kids, and my personal philosophy on education is that is not part of my job to desensitize or dehumanize tragedy, especially tragedy of the past.

Marie's caution against graphic violence suggests a limit to her earlier notion, shared to some extent by all four teachers in my study, that movies motivate student interest. When I laid out a hypothetical scenario about showing a violent war movie to students, Marie replied, "When you talk about motivating kids, what are you motivating them with? Blood and guts?" Graphic violence, even if historically realistic, is not necessarily appropriate content for her students.

The storyline of *Roots* contains serious historical violence, but Marie felt it was still educationally defensible for her eighth graders. In our last conversation, she explained her distinction between gratuitous violence and purposeful impact.

Everything in [*Roots*] has a purpose, everything has an emotional impact. And I think that's where I draw the line between gratuitous violence and what might be necessary to tell the story. You can certainly indicate, as you see in the "Roots" video, the horrificness of the beatings, of the foot being cut off, of the rapes, but you don't watch them. You don't have to see it happen to have the impact.

In other words, her film choice was educationally appropriate because the violence contained in the film was purposeful not gratuitous, indirectly implied not directly experienced.

Furthermore, Marie felt her film choice was important for students to experience despite the intense content. Early in our interview, she told me:

[*Roots*] is violent, but I think the reason that I've continued to use this is that it implies, there is not a lot of visual, it's mostly implied. It was originally produced for television during the 70s, which restricted a lot of the violence that I see in more modern ones.... Probably the most difficult is the brutality, the psychological as well as physical brutality and the intent behind it that typically kids have not been exposed to before this.... [*Roots*] is also a reality piece so it does illustrate well the truth of this time in our history and the attitudes of racism and the attitudes of cultural superiority that truly, in my opinion, plagued our country at this time, so I think it illustrates that very well.

For Marie, *Roots* has three particular virtues. It was made for TV three decades ago, which limits the explicit violence. Had it been made more recently, Marie implied, she might be more wary. It exposes students to issues of brutality that they probably have not considered before. It illustrates historical reality and conveys an ethical stance that she wants to reinforce. She added,

I would have a hard time *not* using [*Roots*] because I think it is a powerful educational tool, and at this age kids are at that point where they need to be forming their own opinions about culture and tolerance and diversity, and this is something that gives them some very good places to start with that.

In other words, *Roots* teaches not just historical content but also a practical worldview. Marie wants students to form their own opinions, but *Roots* conveys an appropriate direction.

Marie has used *Roots* in her classroom for many years, but she has not always shown this particular episode. Sometimes she has cut Episode 4 when pressed for time or because she feels some students might not be able to handle it. After I observed her lesson, she told me:

I have skipped [it] in the past because of the implications of the rape.... If I have had a particularly immature group of students, I have skipped that particular episode based on their other behaviors, other actions, other issues. I have skipped that one, or parts of it. Sometimes I don't skip the whole thing, I'll just skip parts of it, because that one does have some intimacy that some kids can't handle, as a group they're just not ready for it.

Even though *Roots* is an unrated television miniseries that does not contain explicit images, Marie worries that not all students can cope with the mature themes. This affects how she approaches the lesson with her students. She explained,

You have to make sure you set it up. Some of the movie is disturbing. Some of the movie takes a mature viewing. There are things that are, though the movie is unrated, you do want to make sure that everybody's onboard as far as some of the things they do see. It does take a little bit more mature audience, and I caution my kids about that.

In Marie's judgment, her lesson needs to prepare students for the difficult, troubling implications contained in Episode 4. Kizzy's master forcibly extorts sex from her. Kizzy falls in love with another slave, Sam, but has to stand up to him because he thinks that, as a man, he should dominate her. These issues need to be "set up" for

students. In other words, these issues reflect how she intentionally mediates the film for students.

Typically, Marie shows the entire *Roots* series to her eighth graders over the school year. She describes African American history as a theme infused throughout her curriculum, not as a stand-alone unit. Each episode is shown when the class is studying the era in which it takes place—thus, Episode 4 is shown during the Early American Republic unit. She detailed her curricular vision in our first interview:

This is continuum piece. The *Roots* video helps my students understand the African American experience from the beginning of slavery in our nation through the historical times we study. I use this to have them see a different perspective...because typically our books are written from a White, European, American experience. The heroes and the deeds are towards the Manifest Destiny, so to speak.... It's important for our kids to understand the diversity in our culture and where they came from. So I use this as a tool to help reinforce that.

Marie perceives a deficiency in typical history textbooks—they valorize White expansion and settlement (Manifest Destiny) while omitting the perspectives of other racial groups. *Roots*, then, provides her with a way to integrate African American perspectives more substantively across her U.S. History curriculum.

Ultimately, Marie said her chief motivation in using *Roots* was the moral development of her students as human beings living in a diverse society. She told me:

Roots is designed to help kids think about the way we treat each other as human beings. Bottom line, what are our thoughts, what are our actions in regards to

how we treat each other as human beings. And to ask them to consider the humanity in all directions, of their actions.

Marie evinced wariness about indoctrinating her students. She repeatedly expressed a desire for them to consider the issues for themselves and form their own opinions.

Nonetheless, she used *Roots* to convey particular moral themes.

Observing the Lesson

Marie was quite particular about what specific days I could come to her classroom. Her schedule for the unit was crowded and included a field trip to a local theater to watch a play about Thomas Jefferson. She invited me to come on the Friday before the Monday field trip, but school was cancelled by a snowstorm. When I arrived on the next invited day, I discovered that she had already started showing the *Roots* the period the previous Thursday. She had not originally planned on starting the video on that day (hence why I had not been invited to come), but she explained she had extra time and suddenly decided to start the video. Students watched about the first 15 minutes of the episode on Thursday.

When I arrived in the room on Tuesday morning, “Era of Growth and Prosperity 1790-1827” was written on the front whiteboard. As the students entered, Marie passed around a worksheet with 10 true/false questions and two short-answer questions about the remaining portion of Episode 4 (see Figure 4.3). The students already had a similar worksheet covering the first portion watched last Thursday (see Figure 4.2).

Roots Vol. #4 day 1

Directions: Read and mark statements 1-10 as T or F based on what you think, then as you watch the video correct each statement to be true adding information as needed.

1. Kunta Kinte's (Toby) [sic] names his daughter Kizzy. Kizzy means girl in Mandika
2. The doctor (Toby's master) promises that if his slaves follow his rules he will never sell them away from each other.
3. Missy Ann is the Doctors [sic] niece and best friends with Kizzy.
4. "too bob" is African for friend.
5. Kizzy's ability to read and write makes her a more valuable slave.
6. Noah talks to Kunta Kinte about marrying Kizzy.
7. Tom Moore warns the Doctor about slave uprisings.
8. Missy Ann respects Kizzy and wants slavery abolished.
9. Missy Ann wants Kizzy to be her slave and Kizzy agrees to be sold.
10. Kizzy believes that slaves are not as smart as whites and that women are not as smart as men.

Reflect and respond to the following questions as a way to communicate your understanding of the culture of slavery in Virginia around 1805:

11. How do masters control their slaves, besides physical punishment?
12. Why is Kizzy sold and who's [sic] fault is it?

Figure 4.2. Marie's first student handout.

Roots Vol. #4 day 2

Directions: Read and mark statements 1-10 as T or F based on what you think, then as you watch the video correct each statement to be true adding information as needed.

1. Tom Moore treats Kizzy with respect.
2. Kizzy has a baby boy named Kunta.
3. In 1824 a Mr. Bennett arrives with his slave Sam to buy Tom Moore's slaves and farm.
4. Tom Moore is in the cattle business.
5. The slaves are allowed to have Sunday gatherings and picnics.
6. Kizzy tells her boy who is father is.
7. Tom Moore respects his wife and treats her well.
8. Kizzy is reunited with her father Kunta Kinte.
9. Sam and Kizzy marry and leave with Mr. Bennett.
10. Tom Moore wants Kizzy's boy to be a farm hand.

Reflect and respond to the following questions as a way to communicate your understanding of the culture of slavery in Virginia around 1824:

11. Explain why Kizzy believes it is important to know where she comes from.
12. Explain what George plans to do.

Figure 4.3. Marie's second student handout.

Most of the questions on both handouts are about character or plot details (e.g., 6. Noah talks to Kunta Kinte about marrying Kizzy). The principal purpose appears to require the students to pay attention—only by closely following the story details will they be able to discern the false statements and correct them. Only three items are about factual information regarding the lives of slaves (Day 1, 5. Kizzy's ability to read and write makes her a more valuable slave; Day 2, 5. The slaves are allowed to have Sunday gatherings and picnic) or about a broader historical issue (Day 1, 11. How do masters

control their slaves, besides physical punishment?). However, a few items about plot details (Day 1, questions 2 and 7, and Day 2, questions 1 and 11) seem designed to get students to pay attention to scenes that confront the difficult issues of racial exploitation or the theme of African American history that Marie threads across her curriculum.

After the bell rang, Marie asks the class, “Who can summarize what happened in the first part of the episode?” Only one young man offered a brief response and it was not audible across the room. Marie gave her students an extended summary of the series so far and asked a handful of questions about specific characters. “Who teaches Kizzy to read and write?” she asked. After some students mumbled inaudible responses, Marie stated that Kizzy was taught by her young owner. “What is Kizzy’s son’s job?” she asked as a follow-up. The students did not seem to know the answer, and Marie appeared a little bothered. Shortly after starting the video, she approached me privately and explained that the students did not know because Kizzy’s son had not yet appeared as an adult character in the film. She admitted that she is so familiar with the story she often thinks ahead in the plot without realizing it.

About 10 minutes into the period, Marie picked up showing the video where it left off last Thursday. The video played for approximately the next 45 minutes. Marie worked at her teacher’s computer at the back of the room. Her student-teacher from a nearby university was also present, working at another computer in the opposite corner of the room. On a few occasions, Marie’s attention was drawn away from the computer or the classroom. On one occasion, the building principal stopped by to speak with her, and twice she stepped out of the room for a minute. On the whole, the students were quiet and mostly attentive. Very few heads were down on the desks or looking around the

room. Periodically, some students craned their heads to look at the clock on the rear wall but soon returned their attention to the screen.

Only a few scenes appeared to provoke student reactions. In one scene Kizzy and Sam, two slaves who belong to different owners, become lovers. They quarrel in bed after Sam tries to order Kizzy around; she is too proud to be treated like a slave by Sam. Some of the students squirmed in their seats in the subsequent romance scene, but they remained silent. In a later scene, Kizzy's owner Tom Moore plays host to a visiting slave-owner. Moore offers his guest the hospitality of his slave quarters, implying that he may sleep with whichever slave woman he likes. The visitor declines the offer, but Moore (much to the irritation of his wife) goes on his own to visit Kizzy's quarters and extort sex from her. Again, some students squirmed at their desks, and a few exchanged uncertain looks or whispered to each other. Toward the end of the episode there is a powerful scene in which Sam's master grows angry with him and threatens to forbid his marriage to Kizzy. Sam bows down and begs forgiveness. Kizzy sadly watches Sam's powerlessness. Several students exchanged curious looks. Marie, working at her computer, did not appear to notice.

At the end of the episode, Marie gave the students a few more minutes to finish the worksheet. After they finished, she asked whether they think slavery is as brutal in this episode as in the previous episodes (in which a slave had his foot cut off when he tried to escape). A few students murmured "no" but were not asked to elaborate. Marie explained to the class that the abuse of slaves shifted from "physical punishment" to "psychological control." She added that Kizzy's situation reflects this, but she did not go into any detail about what Kizzy suffered. After this brief discussion of the episode (less

than a minute), Marie instructed the students to turn in their worksheets before leaving. About five minutes later, the bell rang and Marie dismissed the students.

When I returned the next day, Marie informed me that she was moving on to a different portion of the unit and did not invite me to visit again. There was no further discussion of *Roots* during that unit. Her students spent the whole period working on their “standards based assessment” individual projects for the unit (see Figure 4.4). The project was the main grade for the unit. While there was no discrete assessment for the film (besides the daily questions), the students were allowed to include anything they learned from *Roots* in their project. Marie admitted to me that usually not many students choose to incorporate *Roots* into their project, but every year there are some who do.

Summative Assessment of the Era of Growth and Prosperity 1790-1827

We have been studying the era of ‘Growth and Prosperity’; the years which followed the American Revolution saw growth and change in our nations’ political, economic, geographic, and social structure. This assessment project is designed to help you pull all of the information that you have been learning together, to assist you in making sense of the impact of this time, not only on the era that immediately followed it, but also on your lives today.

Directions:

1. Complete 10 of the learning options for you must do the 3 * options but may choose your other 7.
2. Each option is 10% of the grade
3. You must complete and turn in one option each day

Learning Options

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| *Vocabulary Complete the vocabulary pages from this era add 6 current vocabulary words from today | Inventions/ Technology Research 1 invention or new technology from this era | Biography Research a significant individual from this era | Graphing Data Create a graph that illustrates change during this era |
| *Maps Neatly label and color a map that shows growth and change from this era | World Events Evaluate significant international events from this one from this era | Economic Trends Identify and explain 5 economic concepts from this era | CDVs² Evaluate changes to the Constitution during this era |
| *Timeline Create and accurate timeline of at least 12 events from this era | Poetry/Song Evaluate a poem or song from this era | Primary Sources Identify and evaluate one primary source document from this era | Common Culture Identify at least one example of cultural change from this eras |

Figure 4.4. Marie’s unit assignment.

² CDVs stands for Core Democratic Values, a list of rights and qualities that define a democratic society made for the State of Michigan’s K-12 Social Studies standards and benchmarks and used for the state’s standardized assessment (MEAP). Like many social studies teachers in Michigan, Marie had official CDV posters on her classroom walls.

Marie's Reactions to the Lesson

A few weeks later, when I asked how she felt the student work for the unit went, she talked only about the in-class worksheet questions. She told me:

Oh I was very impressed with the quality of their responses.... The questions that they did in direct connection to the movie, those I thought they, for the most part, were very well done. They elaborated, this is how I know they got this empathy, this is how I know the things I know about their understanding of all of this. It's from their responses to those. They do a good job of elaborating on those, for the most part.

The list of questions that were given each day with the film, then, formed the basis for Marie's assessment of the lesson. Even though almost all of the questions were about the movie's characters or plotting, she felt their responses reflected an understanding of the era and historical empathy. When I asked specifically about the unit project, Marie responded by talking about the subsequent unit's project, a book report about a youth historical-fiction novel. In her mind, it seemed, the summative assessment project was completely separate from the *Roots* lesson.

In our last interview, I asked Marie how she thought the film lesson went overall. Her response reflected her perception that all her students developed the kind of historical empathy that was at the heart of her instructional purposes. She said,

I think it went very well, I really do. I think the kids really got the focus of the psychological enslavement. They understand the families, they understand the generations, they understand the humanity of the people who were enslaved and how those who enslaved them asserted their philosophy of humanity. Those who

enslave these captives think of them not as human but as property and do not respect them as human beings, and that is really where my focus is, and I think the kids get that very well. And I think they really begin to understand and to question why this occurred, and begin to relate it to the economic issue and how money and economy can drive [people].

These are complex historical issues and worth exploring, but they were only obliquely raised in her discussion after the video and not necessarily required for the unit's assessment project. Of course, Marie teaches *Roots* across the entire year and I only observed her use one episode. It may be possible that Marie returns to these issues more explicitly over her year-long work, even if I did not see any indication in this particular lesson.

Understanding Marie's Lesson: Dangerous Topics, Safe Coverage

Marie uses the *Roots* series for content (slavery) and thematic (historic racism against African American) reasons. She carefully structured this lesson along so that the episode fit with the time frame of the unit (1790-1827). Her lesson seemed designed to minimize interference by the circumstances of schooling. The film was an in-class extra not required for the unit's main assignment. As a tool simply for extra content coverage, Marie could show it whenever convenient for her busy school calendar: positioning the film around field trips, before the holiday break and the end of the semester, and splitting it up over two available school days.

She chose to show this episode because it let her students visualize what slavery was like—without graphic images. *Roots* covers painful topics (slavery, racism, racial violence) in a safe, manageable way. Her lesson aimed at reinforcing multiculturalism

and diversity by exposing her White students to the African American experience and the problems of racial tensions in U.S. history. Yet she carefully limited student engagement. In her lesson, racial tensions were framed as past events that students needed to be aware of but were not examined as problems today. This *Roots* lesson obliquely covered uncomfortable racial problems in history without forcing the teacher to deal with their contemporary versions.

For Marie, *Roots* is part of a thematic thread woven throughout her course. Sprinkled across the semester and shown when their time setting coincides with historical chronology in the course units, the episodes let Marie present African American history as an ongoing curricular theme to her almost entirely White student population. Marie's lesson using Episode 4 reflected her careful thinking about the broader historical themes. She was aware of the episode's implications of racial brutality and rape and concerned they might be too much for immature students, but she chose to use the episode because it depicts the different ways in which slaves were abused.

However, these adolescents were left to absorb the film's disturbing implications with little support from Marie. Of course, she is hardly alone among teachers in not wanting to explicitly confront issues of sexuality in the classroom. These are among the most uncomfortable topics for many teachers to talk about with children. When Marie did talk about them, the rape of Kizzy and the humiliation of Sam were only obliquely referenced as "psychological abuse." It is not that this characterization is factually problematic. Slave-owners hegemony emphasizing psychological control over slaves is well established in the historiography of American slavery (Genovese, 1972; Morgan, 1998). By obliquely handling the topic, though, Marie may have confronted students

with these unpleasant film depictions without providing the historical context to make them understandable. Few of Marie's worksheet questions (see Figures 2 and 3) related the episode's plot to actual historical content.

Evidence from Marie's students. Marie arranged for me to talk briefly with two of her eighth graders. Steve is White and 13 years old. Nikki is White and just turned 14. When I asked why they thought Marie showed *Roots*, their responses reflected Marie's principal instructional intentions:

Steve: I think the reason was because we're studying that time period in history, and so it kind of goes along with what we're learning from the textbooks...and helped us to understand from different points of view.

Nikki: And because it shows a lot about slavery and how it happened. Like instead of textbooks and [still] pictures, it doesn't always be the same and always mean the same. But, like it shows it to you, that's exactly what happens.

Steve: It gives you as close to a first-hand experience as you can get.

Nikki: Yeah.

These students readily picked up on the episode's fit with historical chronology in their textbooks. It made sense to them based on their textbooks, yet went beyond the textbook.

Nikki and Steve's comments reflect the potential of film to help students visualize the past by showing what it really could have been like. Getting her students to empathize with the plight of Black slaves was one of Marie's major goals. She was concerned about the power of graphic images but felt that *Roots* largely avoided them. Nonetheless, powerful images stuck in these students' memories. When I asked if there

was a movie watched in school that they remembered vividly and learned a lot from, Steve told me,

The ones that I really remembered, I think it was in the second *Roots* video, when it showed all of the slaves on the ship being transported. And that kind of showed a lot, that kind of showed how much they didn't care about them back then, and it's kind of sad to see that.

Nikki agreed that *Roots* was one of the most memorable films she had watched in school. She added, "The movie that showed me a lot was [*Roots* episodes] 3 and 4, because it again showed them shipping and them being sold off and worked, and some of them worked to death, and whipped."

These students took away from the films vivid impressions of general features of the past, but neither said much about specific historical content learned. They visualized what the slave trade and plantation slavery might have looked like, but they did not talk about any deeper understanding of how these events related to broader U.S. history.

When I asked what the movie taught them or made them feel about our world today, they told me:

Steve: Well, it kind of made me feel our world was a bit more fair and equal to all people, because there's no slavery, there's no segregation against Blacks or anything like that. So it kind of made me feel better, but you still feel bad while watching the movie because we did do such cruel things to them.

Nikki: Yeah, like I feel bad for the Blacks then, but we still have some racism now against Blacks. Like, people aren't always nice to them. We usually use

them as like—I don't know what to call it. Sometimes we take control of them or whatever.

Steve: Yeah, but it's a lot less strong than it was back then.

Nikki: Like we don't whip them or anything.

These students picked up on the messages of multiculturalism that Marie wanted to reinforce, but the oblique manner of using *Roots* seemed to result in naïve readings of the past and the present by these students. They were aware that racial discrimination still existed in the world today, but Marie's *Roots* lesson did not appear to help Steve and Nikki situate slavery in the broader context of racial tension and violence in U.S. history. They felt bad about past suffering and admitted that there were still problems today, but they did not seem to have explanations for racial tensions in the past and yet believed that, by and large, contemporary racial attitudes were much better.

Learning history. So what did Marie's lesson accomplish in terms of teaching and learning history? Table 4.2 summarizes the lesson viewed along the functions laid out in the pedagogical content analysis framework (chapter 3).

Table 4.2

Marie's Lesson Viewed in Terms of Pedagogical Functions of History Films

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | This episode of <i>Roots</i> is set mostly in 1824, during the period covered by Marie's unit; the episode features very little content about actual events in the history of slavery or in national US history, focusing mainly on character development |
| Period representation | One of Marie's chief purposes in using this film was to depict living conditions of slaves and interactions with White slave-owners in the antebellum South |
| Historical construction | Marie framed this episode as a continuation of the story of African Americans; she did not discuss the film's background (adapted from Alex Haley's novel, <i>Roots</i> was made in the 1970s in the wake of Black empowerment movements) or how that background may affect the film's construction of the past and the people in it |
| Social construction | This episode comments on the exploitation of slave men (Sam's humiliation) and slave women (Kizzy's rape), as well as slave men and women in relation to each other (Kizzy's self-assertion to Sam); it constructs Whites as actively cruel (Kizzy's owner Moore) or passively good (Missy Ann, Sam's owner, Moore's wife); Marie did not make explicit or investigate these constructions with her students |
| Empathy | Marie's worksheet and discussion focused on the film's character development, which emphasizes the perspectives of the Black characters |
| Moral response | Marie's worksheet and discussion emphasized a shift from physical to psychological control of slave by their owners, yet she avoided pointing to or naming specific instances from the episode; slavery was framed as a lamentable past injustice in general terms, a consequences of White landowners pursuing economic self-interest; no explicit connections were made to racial tensions in subsequent eras |

Given what little discussion Marie had with her students (only one minute), what could be accomplished in terms of these pedagogical functions was limited. It is possible that she spent some time framing the episode for the students on the first day, but she did not describe doing this to me. The episode itself usefully represents American culture in the South in the period before the Civil War, and Marie astutely mapped the episode onto this chronological point in her curriculum. By itself, though, the episode features very few actual historical events. These exist in the background—the recent Compromise of

1820 and the soon-to-come Nat Turner uprising in 1831 are good examples. Marie did not specifically relate the film to the factual historical background, and for many students the episode may have seemed historically generic or mostly about the characters.

Issues of historical and social construction were nearly invisible to me in the lesson. I observed no consideration with the students of how film's historical narrative was constructed. Nor did the lesson address how the film constructs the social identities of its characters. Kizzy is a slave with knowledge of her family past, unlike most of the other slaves. Whites appear in the episode as actively cruel (like Tom Moore) or passively good (those characters who help or at least do not actually harm Black slaves). None of this appeared in Marie's lesson, as I observed or as it was explained to me.

Ultimately, Marie's lesson seemed to accomplish the functions of empathy and moral response only in the shallowest sense. It is not difficult for adolescents to feel for those who suffer, and *Roots* very effectively encourages compassion for the slaves' perspectives. Likewise, Marie tried to convey a moral response regarding physical and psychological control, but only obliquely. The outcome struck me more like sympathy than deeper empathic, historical understanding.

Taking Stock

So what can we learn from Marie? Her case represents another possible mode for using history feature films in the classroom—as part of a thematic thread woven across the broader curriculum. The goal of her lesson was to provide her predominantly White, middle-class students with an interesting, and emotionally powerful (but not gratuitously graphic) depiction of the African American experience, a perspective she finds underrepresented in textbooks and official curriculum. Like Regina, Marie supports film-

based instruction as a way to appeal to diverse learning styles (similar to Regina's "multisensory" instruction). Additionally, Marie demonstrates how history feature films can be meaningfully integrated as a major theme into broader curriculum. Her film-based lesson is not a one-shot deal: It reflects sustained, curricular interconnected use of film. Marie's case also raises a couple of cautions. Graphic imagery and gratuitous violence in movies are legitimate worries for teachers. Do they actually add anything to the learning experience? Marie did not think so, and thus argued that they were not necessary or appropriate in the classroom.

Part of this reflected what was personally comfortable for Marie. Perhaps this is why she did not want to make the uncomfortable issues implied in *Roots* explicit for her eighth graders. But the issues were present nonetheless, and the students were left to grapple with them relatively unaided. Marie's case points to the importance of providing explicit support for students when facing disturbing events in a film—but also to how touchy and difficult it can be, especially with younger students. This may be way Marie took such a safe, conservative approach to using *Roots*, having her students answer straightforward true/false questions mostly about plot details and engaging them only in a controlled, very brief post-film discussion.

Isabel: Connecting with the First World War

Isabel is a beginning teacher in her early 30s. She holds a bachelor's degree with a major in History and a minor in English, and completed initial certification in Social Studies around 2001 from the nearby university. For the past three years she has been teaching at Ottawa High School in a heavily middle-class, suburban district close to Michigan's capital area. Nearly 1,500 students attended Ottawa HS in 2005-06, of whom

73% were White/Caucasian. The school's 190 Asian American students were the second largest demographic (13%). Of the 19 students in the observed class, 16 were White/Caucasian (two were African American, and Isabel believed one was multiracial). The Ottawa HS facility is fairly new, built in the mid-1990s, and in very good condition. Isabel's classroom is like virtually every other classroom in the building, a room of moderate size with space for perhaps up to 30 desks, an attached side room for the teacher's use, large whiteboards instead of chalkboards, a computer for the teacher, and a large television mounted on the wall. Many teachers, including Isabel, have a video projector in their room with which to show PowerPoint presentations, videos, and DVDs.

The observed movie lesson was part of Isabel's unit on World War I for U.S. History, a social studies course required for graduation. Her students were ninth graders (mostly 14-15 years old). Isabel's teaching load consisted of two sections of U.S. History and three sections of American Government. This number of preps has been typical of her load in previous years, though she has not taught the Government class in several years. For this unit she, she showed her students a 12-minute excerpt from the 1994 Hollywood movie *Legends of the Fall*, distributed by Tri-Star. Though it is rated R, the scene that Isabel showed contains only mild profanity, some graphic violence, and no sexuality, and she did not require a parental permission slip from her students. Directed by Edward Zwick, *Legends of the Falls* is a tale of a family from the U.S. West in the early 20th century. Isabel showed a scene from fairly early in the film. On the Western Front in 1915, three American brothers join the French Foreign Legion to fight in the war, and the youngest brother is brutally killed by German soldiers.

The Teacher's Intentions and Views on Film

Isabel's motivations color the kinds of video media she chooses for film-based lessons, as well as how she uses them with students. In our first conversation, Isabel described how she uses limited but varied amount of video media in her classroom.

I try to use [video media] at least once a unit....[every] two, three weeks. And then if I have any short clips of Hollywood movies to bring in, especially if it's something recent that I know they've seen, it's great because they may have seen it and have no idea what [the historical reality] was.... I like the [movie] clips, the clips are good.

So, Isabel frequently tries to integrate short segments, often just 10-20 minutes long, from movies into her lectures. Film titles she specifically mentioned using in other units every year include *Far and Away* and *The Cotton Club*.

She also explained that she uses what she considers to be quality documentaries in every unit. Her comments identified a serious concern she has about educational documentaries: "I try not to go overboard, because you can, but I try to use a nice mix of exciting documentaries. There's nothing worse for the students than boring documentaries. They hate those, and they won't do anything."

Like Regina, Isabel seems to prefer an exciting history feature film over a dry documentary, even if the documentary is technically more factual. Occasionally, this has led to problems. Isabel related her experience with a parent who was a history professor at the nearby university. He heard that Ottawa teachers were showing parts of Steven Spielberg's 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan* and complained to the school principal, insisting that the teachers show a black-and-white documentary made shortly after the

war instead. “That typical kind of documentary stuff, that puts kids to sleep,” Isabel said by way of explaining why she did not use the parent-recommended documentary. In discussing educational documentaries more generally she added, “I had some good ones that I have been personally riveted [by], but I have shown them in class and [the students] are just dying. They’re like, ‘Oh my gosh, isn’t there any color in the 1940s?’ You know, they just can’t focus.”

Isabel’s skepticism about black-and-white film ran throughout our conversations. In our interview after her lesson, she once more brought up the *Saving Private Ryan* situation and told me, “With high school kids, you’ve lost them as soon as it’s not in color.”

This running concern reveals that appealing to student interest is a dominant motivation for Isabel, as it was for all the teachers in the study, and it influenced why she chose *Legends of the Fall*. Isabel noted that factual documentaries on the war are available—she owns a copy of the History Channel’s *The Great War*. She told me:

I haven’t really found a great, pizzazzy one, and they’re obvious not in color, and it’s old film, and so it’s difficult for 14-year-olds to connect with these. But, these [movie clips] are really short, they get vested really quickly, they can remember everything from it, so if it’s nice and concise I like to use that one.

Isabel decided to use *Legends of the Fall* because it contains a short scene with a story and characters that readily appeal to students. This motivates student interest and, in turn, she believes that this supports learning. Isabel went on to explain,

Be it good or bad, [students] really do connect with modern, in-color video. You know, movies, they’re going to remember it. So something that’s quick, concise,

that has all the elements I need and they're going to be interested in, and if I can use it as a springboard at all. And [the WWI lesson] kind of needs that. It's exciting because it's a war, but it's also a war that happened, to them, in the Stone Age—they can't connect with it. So [the movie clip is] something that really kind of lets them connect.

In her view, the First World War is inherently distant to students. A movie clip from popular culture (the film stars Brad Pitt in one of his first big roles) can get students interested in watching a topic to which they otherwise might not be able to relate.

However, there are risks in using history feature films. Covering content is another motivation important to Isabel, and she explained how movie-based lessons can have drawbacks.

The problem with Hollywood, too, is you always have to say, 'What's wrong with it? What are the bad things? What's incorrect?' Because there always are. Or, there's things that they generalize. So you can't just present this to the kids and say, "This is the truth. This is absolutely what it was like." But I think, in addition just to using clips like this, there's another lesson: to make them smart consumers.

There may be a temptation for teachers to show history feature films as if they were factual documentaries, to let students think they are historical reality. Isabel believes this is a problem that teachers need to confront. In doing so, the teacher not only covers content with the film clip but also reinforces smart viewing habits in students. This is important, Isabel explained to me, because Hollywood history movies have “a

tremendous influence [on what students think]. If it's on the screen, it's real, that's absolutely what happened, it's the truth."

By integrating the short clip from *Legends of the Fall* into her lecture on the U.S. entry into WWI, Isabel hoped to appeal to students' interest in realism in an instructional way that would support content learning. For some students this historical topic, she said,

has no bearing on their life. They can't see it as relevant or real. These are old dead people, and [the movie clip] at least makes it real for them. For the ten minutes they watch it, it is real—these people exist, and this is how it would look. So it just seems not so distant, it seems quite present.

This conception of the use of the film to provide visual reinforcement was a recurring theme in Isabel's conversations with me. Like both Regina and Marie, Isabel hoped that, by using a film, she would provide an additional level of stimulus to student learning beyond listening and reading. When reflecting on the lesson afterward, Isabel thought that the film clip "gave [students] a visual of what [WWI] would be like, a color, modern visual. It's hard to kind of get them to imagine really what is No Man's Land, what is it like, why is it so bad." WWI trench warfare was also treated in the textbook and her lecture notes, but the film clip helped students envision them better than words alone could. Isabel was careful to note that the film clip was not a replacement for the textbook or lecture notes:

[The movie] is just a reinforcement, basically, of the text. The stuff that we talk about in class. There isn't really any extra information, I guess, that's in the movie that isn't in the book, but it makes it more accessible. Because they read it

and it's just 'blah, blah blah.' So at least this makes it a little more accessible for them and they can remember.

However, Isabel also wondered if the movie's emotional realism is a double-edged sword. Like Marie, she was concerned that her chosen film might be too violent or disturbing.

It shows this character, who we become really invested in in a few minutes, being murdered, and the kids at the end of the clip—they're kind of upset. And it's not as if it's anything bloody or gory.... It's something about the emotional projection in this. You know, that he's blind, because he's been affected by the gas, and he's tangled, and he can't get out, and he's crying for his brother, and his brother's coming, and it's just so like, "Oh my gosh." And you know what's going to happen, because you see the Germans right there setting up the machine gun, and you know. So I'm worried about making someone really sad or upset.

Isabel revealed in our conversation that the other year she showed the film clip, some of the female students got worked up over it and Isabel had to calm them down by repeatedly reminding them that it was "just a story." Her U.S. History course has been moved from the 10th grade to the ninth this year, so Isabel has thought carefully about whether to do this film-based lesson with the younger students for fear of repeating that episode: "Maybe I'm being ultra-sensitive, but I always try to do that. You just don't want to get a call from a parent, 'You have damaged my child! They're having nightmares!' But, I didn't want it to be something that was very upsetting."

Isabel had clear ideas about that she wanted her students to get from her film-based lesson. Numerous times in our conversations she talked about how she thought it

was important for students to be able to distinguish WWI from WWII. She complained that WWII is “romanticized” by so many movies, but little is available about WWI. She knew of only one other feature film, *The Lost Battalion*, originally aired on the cable network A&E. She did not know enough about that film to use it, but she admitted that “one thing with [that film] I would like is that it shows what doughboys look like.” She clarified why this was important to her:

The kids don’t understand. You have to really show them some pictures. Well, how do you tell the difference between a WWI soldier and a WWII? Not that that’s specifically [state assessment]-testable, absolutely important information for them to know, but it’s something they do remember and it’s fun and I think, you know, it’s valid for them to know that there’s a difference.

Isabel’s comment points to a tension between officially important information (like what could appear on a state assessment) and information that she finds fun or interesting—which she thinks helps her students empathetically visualize the past. Providing students with a visual image of what WWI looked like was an important goal for Isabel. After watching *Legends of the Fall*, she believed her students could visualize WWI and distinguish it from WWII:

They know what a gas mask looks like, they know that it was used in WWI, they know that barbed wire was used in WWI, they see the difference. So hopefully, and I don’t know if I accomplish this in 10 minutes, but if they were turning on the TV and they saw a WWII movie they would understand why it’s different from WWI. They could tell someone that.

Isabel did not talk about her own particular political or ethical stances very much, but she admitted to infusing a particular worldview in some of her units.

I guess I'm very idealistic but...when we get into units with war, I try to be very non-romantic about it because I think the popular media and patriotism will say how romantic it is.... Not that war is bad, but we've talked about you wish you could live in a world where people would peacefully discuss their issues.

In other words, Isabel wants her students to visualize WWI because the reality challenges romantic notions of war that students encounter in patriotic popular media. She backs away from a pacifist philosophy ("not that war is bad") but advances a "very idealistic" stance that the world might not need war. The film clip is not about grand strategy, militarism, international politics, or other vast forces typically associated with WWI. It is a dramatic story of one young man's brutal death in No Man's Land. There is no romanticism or glorification of war in this visualization of WWI.

Isabel has shown this scene as part of her WWI unit for the past several years, but she has never shown the whole movie. Isabel developed a PowerPoint presentation for her lecture on WWI and showed the film clip at a specific moment in the presentation. With her laptop computer and VCR connected to the projector, she easily switched from the PowerPoint to the video. Her students watched the film clip while at their desks during regular class time. Isabel provides us with yet another unique mode of instruction—a teacher with access to and knowledge of how to use technology that allows her to utilize smaller portions of film flexibly.

Observing the Lesson

My first visit to Isabel's classroom was on a Thursday morning. Isabel began teaching shortly after the bell. She stood by the computer projector in the middle of the room. The lights were completely off while the students watched the slides and took notes. For the next 40 minutes, her PowerPoint presentation addressed the Great War in Europe, trench warfare, and causes for the U.S. entry into the war. Virtually every slide prompted her to ask at least one question directed to the class generally and answered by individual students throughout the room at their own volition.

The questions seemed to aim at activating students' memory of previous lecture notes or reinforcing specific factual answers. She asked, "Why the U.S. was angrier with Germany than England?" Submarine warfare as her answer. When discussing how the U.S. entered the war partly to ensure Allied debt repayment, she asked, "Which group had warned that the war was about ensuring profits?" Several students quickly offered "socialists" as the correct answer. A series of questions about the U.S. in 1917 sought only one-word answers. Did the U.S. have a big military at start of war? (No.) How did the U.S. bulk up its military? (Conscription.) Is selective service still around today? (Yes.) Several questions later in the hour were similarly short and colorful. Why were American troops called Doughboys? (Because of their dough-like belt polish.) What were the British and Australian troops called? (Tommies and Aussies.)

Some questions, however, asked for more. After explaining that African American soldiers served in segregated Army units, Isabel asked why African Americans would volunteer or agree to serve in a segregated military. Several students offered responses involving patriotism. Isabel agreed, adding that African Americans also

wanted to “elevate their race” in the minds of the whole American public. One young man then mentioned that there were Black soldiers in the Civil War because he saw it in “that movie” (undoubtedly the 1989 film *Glory*, also directed by Edward Zwick).

Throughout the lesson, Isabel confronted student questions for which she did not have immediate answers. One young woman asked whether drafted troops were paid. When Isabel talked about how the U.S. paid for the war, a student asked what a “bond” was. While discussing segregation in the U.S. military during WWI, one young man asked when African Americans were allowed to serve in the Navy and Marines. Isabel simply admitted she didn’t know. Trench warfare was a major topic in her presentation. One young man asked whether the Allies used poison gas. Several students asked how trench foot and mouth were contracted. Another young man asked when dead bodies were removed from the trenches. The questions showed that these students were interested and engaged, but most went beyond the immediate purview of Isabel’s lesson. Sometimes Isabel offered brief responses, other times she admitted she did not know—but either way, she had to keep the lesson moving forward as planned. Isabel’s case demonstrates the challenge of responding to students without letting the planned lesson get off track.

Toward the last 10 minutes of the period, Isabel announced that she was starting the movie clip about WWI. This surprised me, because originally Isabel had told me she would show the clip on the second day. There was a general tumult of excitement. Many students shouted out specific film titles they hoped to see—one shouted *Gallipoli* (an Australian film about WWI starring Mel Gibson), while another student called for *The Patriot* (another film with Mel Gibson, but set during the American Revolution). She

told the class that *Legends of the Fall* is a fictional Hollywood story. The American characters join the French Foreign Legion in order to fight, because American troops were not fighting in Europe prior to 1918. She explained that, despite its fictional premise, the film still shows some of the realistic aspects of fighting in WWI. As the film clip began, Isabel narrated who the three brothers are as they appeared on screen.

About half-way through the clip, at the point the brothers are recovering in a field hospital after a battle, she stopped the video and told the students they would finish the movie clip tomorrow. In the few remaining minutes of class, she passed out a take-home worksheet assignment produced to go along with the course textbook. Then she asked the class what kinds of military “elements” they did not see in the movie clip so far. The students did not seem to understand the question, so she observed for them that there were no tanks or jeeps in the movie because armies mostly relied on horses during in WWI. She closed the class period by asking the students what they thought about the movie so far—reminding them that it is a fictional story. The bell rang before there was time for any student to respond

Isabel began class the next morning by reviewing the first portion of the movie clip from the previous period. After a brief discussion about which characters got hurt in the battle scene, Isabel pointed out to the students how the movie contrasts what the three brothers are experiencing in France with the comfort of their family waiting for them at home back in the U.S. While starting up the VCR, she asked students to pay attention to what military elements they do see and do not see in the movie. This second portion of the clip featured a surprise German attack on the French position. Without pausing the film, Isabel pointed out how the Germans used poison gas. When the youngest brother

stumbled into barbed wire, Isabel asked the class what probably had happened to him.

One student simply shouted that he was going to die, so Isabel explained that he had been blinded by the gas. The brutal killing of the youngest brother by a German machine gun provoked audible sad moans from several young women.

It took just a few minutes to finish the movie clip, and Isabel immediately followed up with a class discussion. First, she asked the class about the elements they knew about WWI that were in the movie clip. Several students quickly mentioned machine guns and trenches. One student asked why the Germans wasted machine gun bullets to kill the youngest brother, who was just one enemy trapped on barbed wire. Isabel replied that she did not know because the movie was not based on any real battle. The student did not press the point further, and no other students nominated things they saw in the film. Isabel pointed out the gas masks and poison gas, which led to a noisy series of questions from several students about the functioning of poison gas and how quickly it kills. Isabel responded only by saying that she was not certain how it works, though she believed it was the same gas used for the gas chamber.

Next, she asked what military elements the students did not see in the clip. One student pointed out that there were no airplanes. Isabel prompted the class to recall that there were no tanks or jeeps in this movie clip. Her point sparked tangential student questions about Red Cross ambulances and when the U.S. military adopted the policy about discharging a man whose brothers had all been killed in the war, which the student said he saw in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. Isabel briefly responded that Spielberg's movie is not entirely a true story and then moved on to the next part of

the lesson before students made other comments. The discussion lasted about seven minutes.

Over the rest of the period, Isabel finished her lesson on the U.S. in WWI. She swapped videocassettes in the VCR and played a 12-minute documentary video (produced by the course textbook publisher, largely using black-and-white photo stills) about the American WWI ace pilot Eddie Rickenbacker. When the documentary concluded, Isabel asked if there were any questions about the PowerPoint lecture or the Rickenbacker documentary. There were none.

Isabel moved on to other topics and did nothing further with *Legends of the Fall*. She scheduled the unit test for the following week and subsequently gave me a copy of the exam. The test consisted of 19 vocabulary/date matching questions (using a bank of 33 terms) and 31 multiple choice recognition-style factual questions. None of the questions specifically drew from the movie or indirectly about the movie, though several were about U.S. involvement in the war. One question was about the issue that Isabel stressed in her film lesson, WWI military technology:

30. What technological advance did Britain develop and use in WWI?

- a. Poison gas
- b. U-boats
- c. Tanks
- d. airplanes

Isabel had told me that she never planned on doing a separate assignment for the film or including questions drawn from the film on the test. When I asked her why, she observed an important limitation on the instructional use of film:

You have absenteeism, and generally you can't say to them, "Go home and watch *Legends of the Fall* at this particular scene." So you can't recreate that. Most of what I do, though, is to highlight either things that they read about or things that they talked about and there wasn't any visual to go with it. So it's just kind of there's this information, and hopefully this will tie it all in, help them remember it, help them have a visual...just so they have this memory tool.

Isabel, points out that movies are not textbooks issued to students for home use. They must be limited to classroom use. Student assignments or tests cannot rely too specifically on the film because that would unduly penalize students who missed it. Thus, the film clip became an extra "memory tool" for the students who were there. Isabel's film clip injected into her instruction became like a booster shot for assessment—she would not tie any specific required items in a test to the film, but she hoped that students would do better on the test in general because they watched the film.

Isabel's Reactions to the Lessons

In absence of formal work involving the film clip, I asked Isabel how she felt about her students' participation and discussion. Isabel noted that her students did have homework assignments "because they're reading at the same time they're learning these things in class. They're kind of paralleled." The textbook reading, worksheet, lecture, and movie clip were all intended to be mutually reinforcing. In terms of student learning:

[The students] seemed to be able to recall all of the terms very easily. You know, what is No Man's Land, and the gas and the tanks and the spikes, and everything we kind of talked about they remembered. So they were pretty aware of that. And they always the gas masks on the horses, they always remember that. So it

seemed to really get them to connect at least the basic vocabulary words pretty easy.

I asked Isabel for her reaction to the lesson overall. “I think it went okay. It was a little rougher than in the past,” she replied. She added that some periods had a very thorough discussion, but the period that I observed did not seem up to it. She noted that these students seemed less seriously engaged in watching the film:

When I asked them to look in the background and look at stuff. “What did you see?” And they’d say things like, “Stars.” And so it’s a maturity issue.... I don’t know if they took it as seriously, or focused as seriously as I would have liked them to.

Understanding Isabel’s Lesson: Maximizing Control, Limiting Engagement

Isabel used film to increase student interest by helping them visualize and care about a past event that she feared they could not relate to otherwise. She injected the film clip into her instruction as a kind of “booster shot”—an extra reinforcement to student learning. As an extra booster, Isabel did not want to tie any kind of new required content to the use of film. The students may have learned from the film clip that horses were used in WWI or that poison gas was a deadly weapon, but how these factual elements related to the outcome of the war or how the war changed American life and society were missing. No explicit connections were made to the Rickenbacker documentary, which also emphasized a military technological innovation (airpower).

For Isabel, *Legends of the Fall* provides extra visual and emotional stimulus. By spending only 12 minutes of class time, she was able to bring to life what it might have looked like to fight on the western front in WWI through a short, moving historical story.

Isabel's lesson reflects the tightest possible connection between choice of film and curricular content. She exerted maximum control by selecting a portion of the film that contained specific elements she wanted for her lesson and inserting it directly into her instruction at an appropriate moment. Isabel's method was particularly efficient in terms of time by simply not showing the bulk of the movie with characterizations and plots (like the major romantic storyline in *Legends of the Fall*) unrelated to the lesson goals.

Her maximized control tried to insulate her lesson against inference by the circumstances of schooling. She nestled the film within a scripted PowerPoint lecture—although even this degree of control did not guarantee timing, for she ended up starting the film clip earlier than she planned and thus split it up over two class days. By using the film as an extra “booster shot” of instruction she avoided the problem of absent students. Isabel may have wanted to do more ambitious teaching with *Legends of the Fall*, but absenteeism and limited instruction time—both unavoidable circumstance of schooling—dissuaded her.

However, it may be that such a short, instrumentalist use of film encourages an excessive focus on the most literal of content. In Isabel's *Legends of the Fall* lesson, the relationships between the brothers and their family back home in the U.S., representing social conditions at the time, remained undeveloped. Isabel did not discuss any historical themes from the WWI-era with her short clip but instead focused exclusively on literal details: horses, gas masks, weapons. It is not that these details are unimportant but that disconnected from broader issues they can lack meaning or significance. Isabel's lesson did not use the film to teach new information but specifically to reinforce particular topics from her lecture and textbook. But this narrow use of the film as content source

avoided making connections to broader historical issues, raising themes beyond the lesson focus, or engaging deeply with students' own questions and ideas about the topic.

Evidence from Isabel's students. Isabel arranged for me to talk with two of her ninth graders. Peter is White, around age 14, and describes himself as a history buff. Jack is also White, around age 14, but did not admit much personal interest in history. Their responses reflected awareness of some of Isabel's goals as well as some of her concerns about history movies. When I asked Peter why he thought his teacher showed the film clip, he said, "It shows some of the technologies used, like machine guns and mustard gas and what not. And that was important to what we were studying. It gave some of the information about that time era from a different perspective." Peter picked up on Isabel's emphasis on the role of technology and her desire to help students visualize a bygone era.

When I asked what they learned from the film clip, Jack echoed Isabel's content focus on technology in WWI. He learned most about "all the technologies they made back then, like planes and tanks and stuff like that...it was pretty interesting how they made all that stuff." Peter further emphasized the visual power of film in discussing what he learned:

Our textbooks can't really show you what's going on, it can kind of describe it, but [in the film] you could really see...there was a lot of chaos. People didn't know what was going on. And there was a lot of death and people dying, and it just showed how horrible WWI really was.

Peter and Jack's views also lent credence to Isabel's belief that students respond more positively to story-based feature films than factual documentaries. When I ask what Peter thought about the movie, he told me:

I thought it was enjoyable, and it made the class more fun...because that's cooler than the [educational videos] that normally we have at our school because they're just like old people recounting what happened. But, [*Legends of the Fall*] was kind of more exciting and you kind of got to see it in action, even though it wasn't really real, but it seemed pretty realistic.

Jack agreed and added that the movie was "not like all those old people telling what it's like, but you're sort of like in it and it shows the action of it, and I think it makes me want to watch it more. It's a lot more interesting." Isabel worried that educational documentaries, especially older black-and-white films, turned off many students. Both Jack and Peter said they were more interested in the movie than in typical documentaries which feature "old people" talking about what they experienced.

Less certain is the depth of the students' intellectual engagement in Isabel's film-based lesson. When I asked if they learned real history by watching movies like *Legends of the Fall*, Peter and Jack concentrated on the narrow topical focus in Isabel's lesson and only in loose, general terms. Jack remembered that Isabel wanted him to learn about technology but got turned around on her point:

Sometimes Hollywood movies, they'll put in what it was like, but they'll add some things that are not true. Like I think in [*Legends of the Fall*] there was like horses but they were really using jeeps and stuff like that. So I think some things they exaggerate a little, like they get confused on.

Jack recalled that technology was important but forgot the deeper idea that the mechanized vehicles were new during WWI. Peter believed that the movie was mostly factual because it showed the kinds of technologies that Isabel emphasized in class:

I just think that they're mostly based on fact, but there are mistakes with them. Or things that are kind of stretched to be more entertaining, because that's the point of them, to be more entertaining.... I'd put [*Legends of the Fall*]...probably a little bit closer to factual just because it has some of the technologies and they were right and that's how they used them and everything.

Both Jack and Peter recognized that history movies like the one they watched in class were fictionalized to some degree in order to be more entertaining, but they accepted its underlying factuality because elements in the film clip matched the particular content focus in Isabel's lesson. No deeper intellectual engagement with WWI or its place in the evolution of warfare and military technology was needed.

Learning history. So what did Isabel's lesson accomplish in terms of teaching and learning history? Table 4.3 summarizes the lesson viewed along the functions laid out in the pedagogical content analysis framework (chapter 3).

Table 4.3

Isabel's Lesson Viewed in Terms of Pedagogical Functions of History Films

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Content coverage | Isabel chose a clip that depicts WWI combat on the Western Front; it features key military technology (poison gas, artillery, machine guns) discussed in her lecture |
| Period representation | The clip is set on the French front in 1915 at the height of trench warfare (a major topic in Isabel's lecture), yet the film's fictional skirmish has no trenches; Isabel did not discuss with students how the film's battle scene better represents the fluid situation in 1918 (after US entry) rather than static trench warfare of 1915-1917 |
| Historical construction | The film's three brothers are Americans serving in the French Army; Isabel repeatedly pointed out that the film narrative put the brothers in the French Foreign Legion as volunteers because the US was still neutral in 1915 |
| Social construction | There is a major female character in the film, but she appears only briefly in the clip; Isabel pointed out how the film constructs a difference between the conditions suffered by the three brothers on the front and the comfortable lives back in the US |
| Empathy | Isabel mobilized students' natural sympathy for the film's characters (three young, handsome brothers) to magnify student interest in the lecture topic |
| Moral response | Isabel downplayed connections to broader issues and dismissed student comments that deviated from the lesson's topical focus; Isabel purpose was to dramatize the horrors of WWI and elicit student responses to machine guns and poison gas |

Given Isabel's narrow focus in using the film, content coverage stands out in terms of pedagogical functions of the history film. Her lecture emphasized trench warfare and the role of new military technology in the war, and so she chose a film clip that prominently features poison gas, artillery, and machine guns. Yet, the actual fighting amidst trenches is not featured in the film. The film's fictional story needs for the youngest brother to be killed by the Germans as the middle brother is running to save him, and trenches would interfere with this visual image. The most historically salient feature of WWI warfare—vast networks of defensive trenches that were devastatingly lethal to attack—is not actually really portrayed by the film clip.

Historical and social construction were minor issues in Isabel's lesson. The filmmakers, in order to have their American characters experience the First World War at its worst, place the three brothers in the French Foreign Legion in 1915. Isabel pointed this construction out to her students each day when stressing *Legends of the Fall* is a fictional story. The only use to which Isabel puts the film in terms of social construction is to contrast the harsh wartime experiences of the brothers with the comfortable lives of their family back home in isolationist America.

Empathy was emphasized in Isabel's motivations for using this film in her lesson. Fearing that the topic of gruesome WWI combat was too distant for her teenage students, she used the film clip to make the topic visually real to them through the experiences of the film's three brothers. The scene packs considerable emotional power. Placed early in the film, the scene's purpose is to set up the emotional states of the two surviving brothers for the rest of the narrative. The death of the youngest brother is meant to be traumatic, and Isabel utilized students' natural sympathy for these young (and all of them handsome, it should be added) brothers to magnify student interest in the topic.

Yet, it cannot really be said that Isabel's lesson generated deeper moral response. Isabel had a narrow instructional purpose for using the film—seeing gas masks, poison gas, machine guns. The only moral response Isabel sought to elicit was a general reaction to the horrors of WWI like poison gas and machine guns, but this failed to appreciate why people during WWI felt compelled to use them (to say nothing of why even more terrible weapons are used by armies today). Her lesson capitalized on empathy to motivate student interest. Moral responses to the broader issues in the era of the First World War went unexamined.

Taking Stock

So what can we learn from Isabel? Isabel's case represents a third possible mode for using history feature films in the classroom—as an extra visual aid or mnemonic tool injected into regular instruction. The goal of her lesson was to help her students remember details about WWI by visualizing what it would have looked like. Her case represents a teacher actively editing a film, choosing a select portion of it and flexibly applying it to a specific educational end.

Like Regina and Marie, Isabel praises movies as a good way to help students remember things. The visual and emotional stimulation of movies makes them more memorable than any school textbook. Her film-based lesson demonstrates astutely flexible use of film for specific purposes. Most history movies are two or three hours long, often requiring four or five days of class time to show in full. Injecting film clips into instruction exerts maximum teacher control over the film, selecting just the short portions that are directly relevant to the lesson's topics and purposes. Films used this way are a nice extra, because if the film is required for formal lectures, assignments, or activities then the teacher confronts the problem of absenteeism. A movie used in class is not like a textbook, with a copy given to every student which they can “make up” later.

Isabel's case raises an additional caution. One thing that makes movies so appealing is their psychological power and dense information load. This can open up a virtual Pandora's Box of questions and issues students might want to discuss. The teacher cannot possibly have answers to everything on the spot, and opening the door to anything students might want to ask can threaten control over lesson timing. Thus, the use of film clips confronts a tension between control and depth. The price of limited,

mechanistic use of film may be an overly literal, mechanical tone for the kinds of knowledge emphasized and an avoidance of deeper intellectual engagement.

Kellie: Witnessing the Horror of the Holocaust

Kellie is a beginning teacher around age 30. She holds a bachelor's degree with a major in International Relations from a prestigious undergraduate program. For the past five years she has been teaching (along with Isabel) at Ottawa High School. Of the 26 students in the observed 10th-grade class, 23 were White/Caucasian of European extraction and two more were of Middle Eastern origin; one student was Asian American. Kellie's classroom is like virtually every other classroom in the building, of moderate size with space for 20-some desks, an attached side room for the teacher's use, large whiteboards instead of chalkboards, a computer for the teacher, and a large television mounted on the wall. Like many other teachers' rooms, Kellie's room also has a video projector with which to show PowerPoint presentations, videos, and DVDs.

The observed movie lesson was part of her unit on World War II and the Holocaust for World History, the second Social Studies course required for graduation. Her students were 10th graders (mostly 15-16 years old). Kellie's teaching load consisted of three sections of World History and two sections of elective courses. Kellie has had different preps every year, but every course assigned to her for 2005-06 she has taught at least one time in the past. For this unit, she showed her students the 2002 movie *The Pianist*. A French-German-British-Polish joint production distributed by in the U.S. by Focus Features, the Oscar-winning film is rated R for graphic violence and some profanity. Directed by Roman Polanski, *The Pianist* is an adaptation of Polish classical pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman's own account of his experience in Warsaw during WWII.

Kellie's is the only teacher who used a film she had not shown before. She is also the only teacher to change her film selection. Initially, Kellie had planned on showing *Life is Beautiful*, the 1997 Italian film directed by and starring Roberto Benigni. However, after talking with me, Kellie came to question whether she should show *Life is Beautiful*. Though it was not my intention to challenge or affect her film choice, Kellie was dissatisfied that she was unable to articulate precisely what she hoped her students would learn from *Life is Beautiful*.

The Teacher's Intentions and Views on Film

Compared to the other teachers in my sample, Kellie uses video media in her history classroom only lightly: "In World History...maybe every three weeks, maybe. Usually more documentaries [than movies]." All other videos shown in class up until January were documentaries. *Life Is Beautiful* was to be the first movie. "I haven't shown a [feature] film yet [this year], and I feel like, one, it's a nice break for the students, but they also are actually learning something, too." Kellie was the only teacher in my study to note, even in passing, that showing a movie in class was meant to be a pleasant reward for students in addition to any other motivations.

Kellie and Isabel were both affected by a department-wide curricular reorganization at Ottawa HS. The Social Studies Department had recently moved U.S. History down to the ninth grade and World History to the 10th grade. This was why Isabel was concerned that her *Legends of the Fall* clip might not be as appropriate for ninth graders as it had for 10th graders. Kellie got the opposite side of the coin, with older students in her class than previously. However, the curricular reorganization imposed problems of its own for Kellie's use of film. While the other three teachers in

my study worried that coverage pacing and the demands of state standards assessment would cut into the amount of time they could use for film-based lessons, Kellie pointed out how even localized curricular changes could raise problems in this regard:

We've changed our whole World History curriculum, so it's more current now.

Like second semester is supposed to lead us up to modern-day issues, whereas before we started with the Renaissance and we got to World War II. So now starting with the Industrial Revolution and we're getting to more current things. So there's not a lot of films that I know I'll be showing because everything is changing.

For the movies that Kellie knew she would use in class, she—like the other teachers in my study—emphasized their potential for motivating student interest. The trick is to relate the past to students' lives emotionally. She told me, "I think teenagers get the most out of films that relate directly to their lives. Any movie that they feel a personal connection to is going to have more impact." Her first reaction to *Life Is Beautiful* was that it would make an easier emotional impact on students because it showed a father and his child in a concentration camp. Kellie has a personal passion for films that touch her emotionally. She described herself to me as a "total movie junkie." Recently, she was deeply moved by two films from 2005, *Crash* and *Hotel Rwanda*, and was thinking about ways to bring them into her classes. "If it makes an impact on me, if it makes me cry. That's the test," she laughingly told me, for whether a movie was a good choice for her classroom.

Like Marie and Isabel, Kellie evinced an awareness that the emotional power of a movie possibly can go too far for some people. In our conversation after her film-based lesson, Kellie revealed a concern she had about a particular student and it was resolved:

One of my students is Jewish, and she had watched [*The Pianist*] last year, and I was concerned about her because she had said that she wasn't wanting to go [on a class field trip] to the Holocaust museum [in southeastern Michigan] because she was very sensitive to all of it. So I was a little bit worried about her. But, I guess I didn't think that would ever come up. Especially a Jewish student, I thought she'd be more wanting to watch it maybe, to learn more about her history. But it turned out fine. She had seen it before, and she had watched it with her parents.

Kellie's concern fits the pattern emerging across the teachers who participated in this study. Some films are emotionally intense, in large part because they contain disturbing or painful content. Some students are more sensitive to this than others—due to maturity (as Marie and Isabel suggested) or to personal family background (as suggested by Kellie and her Jewish student). These concerns shaped how teachers thought about using film. In the case of films that teachers still had concerns about, they looked to parents as the ultimate arbiter. If it is fine with the parents, then it is fine in the classroom.

Another concern for Kellie, as it was for Regina and Isabel, was how easily students accepted the fictionalized accounts seen in movies as reliable historical accounts. She said,

You hear them saying things like, "Oh yeah, is that like what happened in the film? Like what happened in *Pearl Harbor*?" So I think when they see a movie

they forget that it's a movie. They're like, "Oh, this is a movie about history.

Well, this is how it really must have happened."

Kellie further elucidated how this informs her use of them as an educator:

[Movies] definitely influence [students], and I guess if I can as a teacher get them to take a critical look at those history Hollywood dramas, maybe they can bring that with them and say, "Okay, I need to actually not just take it for what it is and look a little bit more deep[ly] into it."

How a movie covers content, then, is an important motivation for Kellie. It means using a film in ways that help students distinguish historical fact amidst the fictional story. When I asked her how this style of film use looked in the classroom, she related an example:

Using [the film] more to say, "Okay, here's what the film presents what happened, let's talk about what really happened".... Using Hollywood films to say, "Okay, this is how Steven Spielberg is presenting this. What's the real story behind it?" So getting them to critique it and look a little more in depth, not just taking it for what it is.

Just as Isabel felt that an important purpose of a film-based lesson was to train students to be smart consumers, Kellie wanted to help students learn how to critique historical dramas.

Our first interview explored Kellie's motivations for choosing *Life Is Beautiful*.

At first she believed it was an effective choice and pointed out the film's merits:

I just think the film is done really well.... Some of them have never seen a foreign film before with subtitles, so I think it's important for them to get used to

seeing a foreign film and being exposed to that. But...when I first saw [the film]

I really loved it, so I just want them to love it, too.

For Kellie, the film was a personally moving experience. She wanted to share this personal passion with her students. As an added extra, showing it in class would expose students to subtitled foreign films, something they might not ever see on their own.

However, the film also had other virtues to recommend it. She explained,

[*Life is Beautiful*] basically takes a tragic experience and turns it into something hopeful. So it's not a gruesome, Holocaust, shocking film, and part of the reason I chose it too is that it's not rated R. That's another thing to keep in mind with sophomores. I don't want to deal with parents and permissions slips, and so it's like a safe Holocaust movie. But just the fact that it takes something really tragic and turns it into a story. And it's told through the eyes of like a child, so I think the students kind of relate to that maybe more than showing something like *The Pianist* or something like that.

Thus, Kellie's original film choice represented a safe selection. In her view, it would still engage student interest in the Holocaust without being too disturbing or depressing. It could function as entertainment, education, and inspiration all at once. It would raise problems neither with parents nor with students. Yet, Kellie was not altogether sold on the choice. When I asked her if she had considered using other Holocaust films instead, she admitted that Ottawa's social studies teachers had talked over other possibilities:

The Pianist was one that we all kind of thought about, but most teachers, we talked about this yesterday, were like, "Oh, that's rated R, I think that you might

get some phone calls.” So I think the rating is a big thing to consider when showing films.

However, as she talked about the educational purposes of the choice, Kellie began to reconsider the safe choice. When I asked what she hoped her students would learn about the past from *Life is Beautiful*, Kellie mused,

I hope that it will teach them, first of all, just about what it looks like to be in a concentration camp.... The film is more of a story and not so much a focus on the harsh reality, so it’s really more an entertainment than anything. And now I’m thinking maybe I shouldn’t show this movie. I guess I need to think about that—what I am really trying to get them to gain by watching all of this?.... It’s not based on a true story... *The Pianist*, there’s more reality to that.

In responding to my question, Kellie confronted a tension in her motivations. First, she wanted them to visualize what life in a concentration camp was like, in much the same way Isabel wanted her students to visualize the WWI battlefield. Kellie wanted to reward students with a “nice break,” an entertaining film. She also had a personal passion for the uplifting, hopeful *Life Is Beautiful*. But then she began considering her conflicting intentions. As a teacher she wanted to uplift her students’ spirits and entertain them, but she also wanted them to learn content. *The Pianist*, a film with “more reality,” would better serve this purpose. Even though it is R rated, even though it contains more disturbing, controversial material, and even though it would require parental permission slips, Kellie ended up choosing *The Pianist*.

At the end of Kellie's WWII/Holocaust unit, I sat down with her and asked her to walk me through her decision to use *The Pianist* instead of *Life Is Beautiful*. She explained,

I think what it came down to is that I see more value in showing a film based on a real person, a real event, and I liked the idea that it was a story of resistance, which is something the students don't hear about a lot, the Jewish resistance.... Whereas *Life Is Beautiful* is a great movie, it's more uplifting, more happy, but it's not based on a real person. And so I think it just really came down to a story versus historical fact.

Kellie's historical fact/fictional story dichotomy was important to her thinking about teaching and learning history. Fictional stories are entertainment. They may be inspiring and even enlightening, but in Kellie's view they still cannot cover historical content as effectively as films closely modeled on factual events.

Kellie detailed why *The Pianist* worked so well for her lesson. She emphasized its close connection to course content, then speculated about the kind of moral development the film provided students:

We talked about resistance [to the Holocaust] quite a bit, and [*The Pianist*] definitely covered resistance, which again is something that's not really taught, about Jewish resistance. Just getting a feel for anti-Semitism in Poland, among the Nazis, of course, and just how brutal the Nazis were when they didn't necessarily need to be. We talked about that quite a bit, like they're given orders to do one thing but they take it a step further with nobody looking over their shoulders, like they're always going the extra step of brutality. Just some of those

things I think the film really showed, so those were the things we wanted to go over in class.

Closely bound up with Kellie's conceptions of content coverage was a particular worldview—by which I mean a psychological schema or ideological lens for perceiving and making sense of the world and history. For Kellie, teaching about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism was linked to the broader issue of brutality and the corruption of power. The Nazis heaped insult on injury—not only did they commit mass murder, but they engaged in petty cruelties to boot. *The Pianist* fit with her worldview and helped her convey this message in her classroom.

Kellie was hesitant to openly discuss worldviews with students. In general, avoiding revealing her own ideological stances was important to her, so she would not alienate students with contrary political beliefs. She told me, “I think it’s sort of your duty as a teacher” to present a neutral approach to issues. I asked her if she would ever admit her personal beliefs to students. She replied,

No, I would never. My students ask me, “Well, what do you think?” And I never tell them. I’m like, “It doesn’t matter, I want to know what you think”.... I hear about teachers who do that sometimes, and I just think it is a bad idea to do that.

This may help to explain why Kellie was intimidated when I asked her what she hoped her students would learn about the world from her film lesson:

Oh boy, that’s scary. I think it will hopefully teach them that we have to remember these tragic events that happened in the past, and we’ll be talking a lot about that. Like, what do we do to punish people who participated in this? What can we do to ensure that something like this never happens again, and have we

really progressed as a society, as people, that something like this wouldn't happen. That's a perfect point to bring in, like Bosnia, the Serbs, [Rwanda]. Have we really progressed that far and what can we do to make sure we have. ["We" being] the world community. Human beings in general.

For Kellie, there are lessons to be learned from the Holocaust that generalize to other times and places. These lessons concern human beings' inhumanity to other human beings. According Peter Novick (1999), many scholars in American Jewish historiography have argued that the Holocaust is unique and incomprehensible. From Kellie's perspective, the educational value of the Holocaust is not in its uniqueness or incomprehensibility but in its generalizable applicability. The worldview that Kellie subtly conveyed in her film-based lesson stressed the universalism of the Holocaust as a moral lesson about excessive brutality, hatred, and human progress.

Observing the Lesson

Kellie debated which film to show right up until the weekend before. I did not know what film I would be watching until I arrived in the classroom the first day. Kellie showed the whole film over four class periods, not all of them consecutive. The class had a field trip to a Holocaust museum in the Detroit area that Friday, and Ottawa schools were closed for a holiday the following Monday. Her students watched the film at their desks during regular class time.

My first visit was on a Monday morning. Kellie started the period by collecting parental permission slips, including one for Friday's field trip to the Holocaust museum and one to watch *The Pianist*, and then finishing up student in-class presentations left over from the Friday before. Afterward, Kellie talked for a few minutes about the film's

production background, Adrian Brody (who won the Oscar for his role), and the director Roman Polanski. When Kellie told the class how Polanski's wife was murdered by the Manson family, one young woman asked if the killers were rock-star Marilyn Manson's family. It did not seem to be a joke, and Kellie clarified that she meant Charles Manson, a name most students did not seem to know. A moment later, Kellie brought up the rape charges that drove Polanski from the U.S., and another confused young woman asked whether it was Polanski or Manson who raped the teenage girl. To quiet down the subsequent tumult, Kellie responded that these were topics better left for another course.

Kellie passed out a small handout with five questions which the students were assigned as homework. Figure 4.5 recreates the handout:

Questions to answer on *The Pianist* – Due Tuesday, 5 points

1. Who directed the film? Why was he so passionate about doing the film?
2. Why did Szpilman's book go unnoticed for so long?
3. Who was the German captain who discovered Szpilman?
4. What ends up happening to this captain?
5. How did Adrian Brody (who plays Szpilman) prepare for the role?

Figure 4.5. Kellie's first student handout.

Though no student asked and Kellie did not state it or provide any websites, the tacit expectation was that the students would use the internet to find the answers. The first four questions all position the film as a true story. In looking them up online, students would discover that the film very closely followed Szpilman's memoir and that the director was passionate about recreating events that really happened in Poland. The

fifth question reflects Kellie's hope that students will enjoy *The Pianist* as a movie by focusing on the film's headlining Hollywood star.

Over the following 10 minutes, Kellie directed student attention to the front whiteboard and provided some background information about the Holocaust, particularly the Warsaw Ghetto. Kellie's first question ("Where is Warsaw located?") was simple enough, and many students answered, "Poland." However, questions from the students in response to Kellie's notes demonstrated the graver complexity of the topic. One young woman asked if the whole city were a Jewish ghetto or just part. Another female student asked where the idea of ghettos came from. When Kellie described how the Jews in the ghetto were intentionally underfed, a young woman asked, "Why were they fed at all?" Kellie tried to respond briefly to each question without getting bogged down.

With the 20-some minutes remaining in class, Kellie started up the DVD and video projector. Kellie explained she was showing the film because it does a "good job showing what the situation was really like." The movie played for the rest of the Monday period and for most of the period on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Kellie finished the movie and the Holocaust lesson the following Tuesday (after the field trip and holiday).

Most of the class periods began with some activity or interaction prior to picking up where the movie left off. At the start of Tuesday, Kellie spent five minutes with the class on the questions handed out the day before (Figure 4.5). Kellie then presented some additional notes on the Warsaw Ghetto. Some of the information looked to be in response to students' questions from Monday. There were details of the population of the Warsaw Ghetto, about deportations to the camps, and about the 1943 uprising in the

Warsaw Jewish ghetto. These notes sparked some new questions. One young woman asked if the Germans wanted to eventually kill every Jew, even those who survived the camps, or did they want some as slaves. Kellie responded that Germany wanted to destroy all Jews, not to keep slaves for economic reasons. Another young woman then asked if Germany wanted to destroy all non-Aryans, and specifically mentions the Gypsies. Kellie replied that the Germans targeted certain groups, but to her knowledge they did not want to destroy peoples like British or French.

She did not present additional notes on the other days, but each period began with some time spent on announcements, specifically getting students ready for Friday's field trip to the Holocaust museum. The students were reminded that it would be a serious rather than entertaining trip—though some time was spent debating which fast-food restaurant the buses would stop at for lunch.

While her students watched the movie from their seats, Kellie remained at her desk. There was a noticeable shift in the students' demeanor as the film progressed. In the part of the movie showing Szpilman's life before the war as a classical pianist on Polish radio, there was a general restlessness. Some students chatted under their breath or played with materials on their desks. However, by the time the war breaks out, the students were quiet, and watching the screen very intently. They remained almost uniformly riveted for the rest of the movie. Throughout the days there were a few distractions (a student talking privately with Kellie at her desk, a student coming in late, a young woman flipping through papers at her desk), but it is surprisingly how quickly most students returned their attention to the movie.

The Pianist contains many disturbing scenes of brutality and suffering that provoked noticeable reactions among students. A female student originally from Germany seemed to have consistently strong reactions. Kellie confided to me that she was always worried this film would be hard for this student because she apparently had expressed some guilty feelings about the Holocaust. In a scene when German troops raid an apartment and push an old man in a wheelchair to his death out a window, one young woman closed her eyes and looked away. In another scene, a starving man wrestles a can of beans from an old woman; they spill on the road and he devours them on the pavement. Another student looked away in disgust. In a later scene, German soldiers raid a warehouse and a Jewish girl who asks what they want is shot point-blank in the forehead. Several students visibly jumped at the gunshot, and one young woman covered her mouth with her hand, staring wide-eyed at the screen.

Most of the student reactions, though, looked to me to be from confusion. Students frequently whispered questions and sometimes Kellie responded, but often the questions could not be heard by the whole class. For example, in one scene a German soldier inspects a bag that Szpilman is packing with hidden weapons for the resistance; the soldier finds only grain and throws it in his face. A young woman softly asked what happened, but Kellie did not seem to hear her. In another scene, Szpilman worries that he may have jaundice. A female student turned around to the young man behind her and asked, "What's jaundice?" The young man shrugged. The chaotic battle scenes depicting the Warsaw uprisings seemed to provoke the most confusion. Kellie tried to briefly explain what was happening without pausing the film. Some questions revealed the teacher herself was confused, too. Toward the end of the movie, Captain Hosenfeld,

a German officer who befriends Szpilman, is in a prisoner-of-war camp. One young woman asked Kellie if the guards watching the prisoners are Polish. Kellie answered, “I think some of them are.” The guards shown were wearing Russian uniforms—an example of how history films often contain esoteric information not readily obvious to a casual viewer.

The Pianist depicts complex, intricate historical elements in intriguing, often subtle ways. Occasionally students picked up on the intricate content and asked questions, but often the most nuanced content went unnoted. As I observed the lesson, I wondered if students could perceive and understand powerful historical subtleties in a movie when they are not made explicit by the teacher. For example, the scene in which Szpilman’s family is deported to the death camps depicts three different groups with power: German troops, Polish auxiliaries, and Jewish police; a Polish guard beats an old Jewish man to death with his rifle butt when he makes a commotion. Could the students perceive and understand these distinctions of power hierarchy on their own? Shortly later there is a scene in which German troops pull out a group of Jewish workers at random and shoot them in the head. Kellie’s students were totally silent, all staring at the screen. The Germans frequently used collective punishment to control captive populations, but could the students perceive this in light of what looks like random, malicious brutality?

The scene depicting the April-May 1943 Jewish uprising is another important one. Szpilman asks the female patroness helping to hide him, “What good did it do?” She believes that it allowed the Jews to die with dignity and will encourage the rest of the Poles to rise, too. The character’s point is historically contentious. Had the ethnic Poles risen along with the Jewish ghetto, they might have posed a more serious threat to the

German occupation, but singly both were destroyed without serious damage to German forces. Could students understand this complication without having it directly addressed in the lesson? Another scene plays on the film's historical construction of spoken languages. During a New Year's celebration, drunken German troops order Jewish workers to sing something cheerful; the Jews sing the Polish national anthem, which the Germans guards do not understand (since in the film English is used in place of Polish but German remains in German). A few of Kellie's students giggled quietly at what seemed to them a strange scene. Could students pick up on subtleties in language without having them made explicit? The film ends with text blocks reporting what happened after the war: all that is known of Captain Hosenfeld is that he died in a Russian prisoner of war camp in 1952. That is seven years after Germany's defeat.

Could students realize what these dates mean in terms of the coming Cold War without having it directly pointed out by the teacher? Of course, simply having historical elements like these addressed by the teacher is no guarantee that students will learn anything about them. My point here is not that students will necessarily learn subtle historical elements in films if they are pointed out by the teacher—but that most students almost certainly will not learn this kind of information unless it is made explicit by the teacher (directly or indirectly) through lecture, discussions, writing, or other activities.

I returned for one last day of observations the following Tuesday morning, after the field trip and the Monday holiday. Only eight minutes remained in the movie, and afterward Kellie passed out a worksheet with five new questions (see Figure 4.6). The students were given around 10 minutes to write individual responses.

The Pianist

Please answer all questions on this sheet of paper.

1. If you were given the choice to join the Jewish police as Szpilman and his brother were, what would you do and why? What would be the consequences of your decision?
2. What did you like about the film and why? What did you dislike?
3. What were the most important things you learned from the film?
4. Did this film help you understand the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, WWII, and/or the Warsaw uprising? Explain
5. What questions does this film leave you with?

Figure 4.6. Kellie's second student handout.

Over the next 25 minutes, Kellie discussed the questions with the whole class. First she asked if there were things in the film that students did not understand. Most questions revolved around the film's plot or characters. Only one student question was about actual historical content (How were the Jews able to fight the Germans in Warsaw?).

Kellie's worksheet sparked very interesting discussions about students' moral responses to the film. Referring to Question #1 a young woman asked, "Why would any Jews join the ghetto police?" One student pointed out that the Germans were killing all Jews regardless, but another student said that Jews did not know that at first. The young woman subsequently pressed for more details about the police, and Kellie framed the dilemma as a tension between getting better treatment versus betraying your people. Intermixed in the discussion were student responses about what they would do in that situation. Most said they would not want to join the police because it would be like helping the Germans. One young woman pointed out that none of the students had ever

been in a desperate situation like the Warsaw Jews, and though she hoped she would not join, she was not certain what she would actually do. The next young woman said she was persuaded by the previous student's point—who knows what you would do in a desperate situation?

Afterward, Kellie pointed out some of the film's historically accurate details. As before, most comments and questions revolved around human personalities. Was the romance plot real? Why did Captain Hosenfeld ask Szpilman to play the piano for him? The German-born student tried to focus on broader history by arguing that by the end of the war most Germans were questioning the Nazi government. Kellie steered away from this new direction by replying that the class would talk about that issue later.

Almost a third of the discussion time was spent talking about how the students "liked" the movie. Kellie asked for a show of hands of who liked the film, and almost all students raised their hands. She asked how many found it hard to watch, and maybe a third kept their hands up. The same handful of students did most of the talking. Several students said that they wished the film had depicted more about Szpilman personally. Kellie suggested in response that Polanski did not do this because he wanted Szpilman to appear numbed by the horrible experience. Two young women agreed—one said that she had read how people in the concentration camps often reported feeling numb, and another in the back of the room had previously read an account by a Holocaust survivor who reported all people in the camps expected to die.

Kellie concluded by asking if there were other things students wanted to know. One young woman said, "How can people be so cruel to each other?" This inspired Kellie to ask whether any students wanted to know if the Nazis were punished. A few

students mumbled yes, and Kellie said they would address that topic later in the week. There were a few overlapping student questions and comments about what happened to Hitler himself, but they were indistinct and not taken up. Kellie ended the discussion by passing out a textbook worksheet to go along with the assigned homework reading. The students packed up, lined up at the door, and talked among themselves until the bell rang three minutes later.

The WWII and Holocaust unit was finished just before the end of the school's first semester. Rather than requiring that students complete a separate assessment, Kellie included 23 questions that she might have used on a separate WWII/Holocaust unit test on her semester exam (which was approximately 141 questions in length). Of the 23 multiple-choice questions, seven related to the Holocaust; four of them were specifically about defining genocide, none specifically involved events depicted in *The Pianist*.

Kellie's Reactions to the Lesson

Later, when I asked her how the student work went, Kellie did not bring up the test. Instead she talked about the writing and discussion in class:

I think it went well. A lot of time when you have these kind of opinion questions, students will just write a sentence to get it over and down with. Like, 'Okay, I got my opinion down, that's all I need.' But students who typically don't write a lot were writing a ton of things, because I got the feeling that they really cared about it and were really interested in it and were kind of shocked and inspired by the story.

For Kellie, the value of the lesson did not require a separate test or assignment. Her chief purpose was to motivate student interest in the Holocaust and to provoke an emotional response, to get them to care, to get them to see what the Holocaust was like.

The students' written responses to the questions and the in-class discussion gave her the evidence she needed:

[The students] all seemed to have a lot to say about it when we had the discussion questions, follow-up discussion. Just reading through the responses, they said they learned a lot. A lot of them said it was hard to watch, but they said this is not an easy time period to study, so they were glad it was a brutally honest film. I just feel that using something that really happened, looking at the ghetto, the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, and Szpilman's story, just having a real story was really helpful, they really understood part of what the uprising was all about.

Kellie's perception of what the students gained from the lesson mirrors the diverse motivations she brought to it. The film lesson was a rewarding break that most students liked, it motivated student interest in the topic and helped them visualize the Holocaust, it provoked an emotional response that fit with the universal humanitarian themes Kellie hoped to stress, and most importantly it covered "real" content.

Ultimately, it was this sense of authenticity that Kellie kept coming back to in validating her film choice. Not that she felt the lesson was perfect. When I asked how she might teach the lesson differently, she pondered, "I think that would have been interesting to research more. I think I should read Szpilman's memoirs.... I would have [students] read...an excerpt. That would be good." For Kellie, the best way to improve

the lesson would be to make it even more authentic, to get even closer to Szpilman's real experiences by reading his own words.

Understanding Kellie's Lesson: Visualizing the Past for Humanitarian Development

Kellie used film to increase student interest in a difficult, potentially overwhelming topic by giving them an emotionally powerful, moving visualization of one part of the story. Combined with the museum field trip, she aimed to make her students care about the Holocaust and its broader humanitarian meanings. However, other movies like *Life Is Beautiful* could have met this function. So why did Kellie choose *The Pianist*? First, *The Pianist* is closely based on real events and its characters were actual participants in those events. This film choice is an authentic historical story that she felt better met her content goals. Second, *The Pianist* depicts Jewish resistance, an element about which Kellie seemed to be personally passionate. *The Pianist* allowed her to bring resistance into her lesson more viscerally than perhaps any other mode of instruction.

For Kellie, *The Pianist* is part of an in-depth departure from the regular class routine. Her film-based lesson in many ways meshed with the field trip to the Holocaust museum. Both represented in-depth departures from the rest of the unit and significant investments of time. Taken together, the field trip and the film-based lesson provided students with a powerful, emotional experience that encouraged them to care about the Holocaust, not just as an historical event but as a universal human problem. Though she did not explicitly link the Holocaust to more recent genocides, she indirectly mobilized the film's themes to get students thinking about transcendent humanitarian issues. Perhaps this is best reflected in the question on her second handout (see Figure 4.6 above)

asking the students what they would have done in Szpilman's position. From this perspective, the Holocaust was not just a past event but a way to think about moral humanitarian behavior more universally.

Interestingly, Kellie did not emphasize the connection between the two events in class (though she may have on the field trip). She and her students talked a little about the field trip at the start of the Tuesday period while getting ready to finish the movie. A few students did make connections between the Warsaw Ghetto in the movie and the Holocaust museum during the discussion after the film. However, the lesson did not explicitly connect the movie's subject to the broader unit topic, World War II. The Warsaw Ghetto happened, just like the Holocaust happened, but how both affected or related to the Second World War remained unexplored in the days that I observed. Hence, this lesson represents a departure from the rest of the unit.

Kellie's lesson helped her students visualize the horror of the Holocaust and consider some of the ethical dimensions of genocide, but she contained the degree of deeper intellectual engagement. The Holocaust is such a vast and disturbing topic that she could not deal with all the complexities of its historical context, allow students to explore their own personal reactions more deeply with the whole class, or rigorously debate what genocide remains a global problem even after the Holocaust. Opening such a Pandora's Box of wide-ranging issues probably would have been unmanageable. Thus, she contained the issues of the Holocaust in her lesson within a more manageable and general scope of humanitarian development.

Evidence from Kellie's students. Kellie arranged for me to interview three of her 10th graders. Julie was the German-born student mentioned above. She and her family

have lived in the U.S. for most of her life. Amy is a White teenager who described herself as someone who takes school seriously. Brad was one of the few students in class not of European ancestry. He identified himself as Arab American and said that his family came to the U.S. from a sub-Saharan African country more than 10 years ago. Kellie wanted her students to visualize the terrible truth of the Holocaust through an emotionally powerful film, and all three students responded positively to her intention. I asked the students why they thought their teacher showed *The Pianist*:

Julie: I think she choose to show it because it showed us like it was documentary. It didn't sugarcoat things, or it didn't say like how people were nice, it didn't show the best times.

Amy: I think she showed it to put a face on numbers, because you can look at all the numbers and they can tell you six million people were killed. But, I think that just watching the movie and being able to see it happen, it's a really different experience.

Brad: She shows us a lot of [still] pictures during class to try to give us the feel of it, but she could never really show it to us until we watched the movie. And we really get a better experience from it than just looking at a bunch of pictures. You get to hear the people and understand everything they're going through.

Julie, Amy, and Brad liked *The Pianist* and agreed with Kellie's goal of making the reality of the Holocaust come alive through dramatic film.

It is interesting to point out that, while the students admitted to enjoying watching movies in school as a relaxing break from the regular routine, they were not automatically accepting of every film. Amy recalled,

In the 7th grade, we were studying a unit on the Middle East and we watched [the 1992 animated musical] *Aladdin*. That's pretty much the least historically accurate movie there possibly is. I have no idea what my teacher was thinking. And she wasn't even like, "This movie shows a lot of stereotypes, you know they're false." It's like, "Okay, we're watching *Aladdin* because we're studying the Middle East." I think a lot of times teachers don't do very good jobs of picking movies.

Brad also shared a similar experience: "I was in Biology class when we were doing the Ice Age and everything about that, we watched [the 2002 animated film *Ice Age*].... We had to actually identify all the animals and everything was so boring." For these students, the problem lay in a disconnect between the film choice and its instructional use. Amy could conceive of a good use for *Aladdin* (exposing false stereotypes), but she believed the teacher simply picked a bad film to show because it nominally fit the topic. Brad felt the instructional use of *Ice Age* was tedious and pointless. Kellie's lesson was powerful and effective for them because they clearly saw the connection between her film choice and educational purposes.

Kellie did not choose *The Pianist* lightly. She worried that the graphic R-rated film could disturb some students. Julie reflected on how the film disturbed her:

Like when I saw the Nazis push the grandfather over the balcony, that really got to me. And when they shot the woman in her face, that was horrible. And sometimes I don't feel proud to be German. I don't know. I can't say I'm disappointed with who I am, but it's hard for me to think that we did that.

The Pianist opened up painful feelings for Julie that she was left to grapple with alone. Collective guilt for atrocities and historical shame are tough intellectual questions, but they went beyond the purview of Kellie's lesson. Kellie was right, it seems, to worry about the troubling implications of her film choice but she could not open up the post-film discussions too include them explicitly without risking loss of control over the topic, classroom conversation, and lesson momentum. Kellie very much wanted students to reflect morally on the film and topic, but she sought to contain the reflection within manageable, broadly general humanitarian boundaries.

Amy, Brad, and Julie picked up on Kellie's broadly humanitarian approach to thinking about the Holocaust. The Holocaust seemed less an incomprehensible, unique historical event and more an understandable, broadly applicable moral lesson transcending historical context. When I asked what the movie taught them, Julie told me: "It really makes me feel that our generation never, ever let anything happen like this again. And I think that it's our job to not let this happen again." She later added,

It really just boils down to how cruel humanity can be. It boils down to what happens when we let prejudice and hate come so far that we kill six million, no seven million people, seven million Jews to cleanse the race. And that's really horrible.

Amy also echoed the idea of prejudice and hate out of control. She told me:

It kind of made me feel like, 'How could people do this?' I know we talked about the Treaty of Versailles and how like everything kind of lead up to it, but it's like [the German perpetrators] aren't human beings.... And it's like so that happened in the past, but could it happen again today? Like there have been genocides

since then, and it's just kind of hard to think about how people just let this hate completely rule their lives.

She agreed with Julie that preventing genocide from happening again was a universal lesson of the Holocaust and global duty. She said, "Americans shouldn't just be concerned with the United States. I mean, we should be concerned about the world. It's our world, we're all human beings. It's not about like race or country."

Brad, like Julie, had a very personal reaction to *The Pianist*. When asked what he learned from the film he said, "I was really looking at racism, because I'm an Arab American myself and ever since 9/11 I've gotten so many racist remarks.... It just reminded me like how serious racism can get in one spot and how it can spread so easily." He later added, "It reminds you it's not just the Jews, it's like everybody.... Like the racism against Blacks, it shows you really the true side and how people let things get out of control. It's not just one race, it's like so many." For Brad, the Holocaust became such a universal humanitarian lesson that it had less to do with the specific attempt to exterminate the Jewish people and more to do with the dangers of racism writ large that could strike any racial group at any time.

What these three students say they learned from Kellie's lesson suggests that deep intellectual engagement with hard, enduring historical issues is elusive in how even smart, well-intentioned teachers use feature films to teach history. The problem is not that Kellie used a Holocaust movie to get her students to think about universal humanitarian concerns; such a moral response is probably natural and healthy in a democratic society. But if Kellie's lesson was successful in getting these three students to ask questions about how the Holocaust could happen, why people do such terrible

things to other people, and how to prevent genocides in the future, her lesson did not help students confront the hard political, social, economic, and historical complications behind those questions or grapple with difficult answers. These students readily embraced “never again” in response to the Holocaust but were unable to articulate how to achieve it or why racial mass violence has continued to the present day.

Learning history. So what did Kellie’s lesson accomplish in terms of teaching and learning history? Table 4.4 summarizes the lesson viewed along the functions laid out in the pedagogical content analysis framework (chapter 3).

Table 4.4

Kellie’s Lesson Viewed in Terms of Pedagogical Functions of History Films

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Content coverage | <i>The Pianist</i> dramatizes Nazi-occupied Poland in rich detail, yet its main subject (the Warsaw Ghetto) is only a narrow subset of her broader WWII/Holocaust unit |
| Period representation | Kellie framed <i>The Pianist</i> as a movie about the Holocaust, yet its narrative never actually goes to the death camps; Kellie’s field trip to the Holocaust museum served as a useful companion experience to the film’s limited representation |
| Historical construction | Kellie was aware of the film’s basis in Szpilman’s autobiography and put faith in the veracity of its historical constructions by its reputation; the film’s rich, subtle details (uniforms to distinguish different groups, use of different languages, etc.) were not pointed out to the students who likely could not notice them on their own |
| Social construction | <i>The Pianist</i> constructs the transcendent humanity of Szpilman and his family; their commonalities as Polish citizens are stressed over their Jewishness; Kellie discussed the Jewish characters mainly in human terms and rarely uniquely as Jews |
| Empathy | Transcendent universality was at the heart of Kellie’s lesson in questions like, “What would you have done if you were in Szpilman’s place?” |
| Moral response | Kellie used the graphic brutality depicted in the film to dramatize the horrors of the Holocaust; Kellie’s lectures emphasized the Nazis’ attempted genocide of the Jews, after the film she stressed the universality of the Nazis’ moral crimes over the uniqueness and incomprehensibility of Jewish suffering |

Content coverage and historical construction stand out in Kellie's lesson in ways that indicate how problematic these pedagogical functions can be in the classroom. *The Pianist* is filled with rich historical detail about the German occupation of Poland, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. However, the focus of this content coverage (the Warsaw Ghetto and uprising) is, ultimately, a narrow subset of the broader unit (the Second World War). In a similar vein, the film lesson was designed to cover the Holocaust—yet the period representation of *The Pianist* actually never includes the death camps where the vast majority of murdered Jews died. The death camps are part of the backdrop, of course (in the film Szpilman's family are loaded onto trains to the camps), but the film narrative is not really about them. Kellie's unit, however, provided students with a visceral encounter with the camps through the field trip to the Holocaust museum. Thus, there is an impressive totality to Kellie's lesson, reflecting the potential need for film-based lessons to provide extra content beyond a film's scope.

Kellie made an important place for historical construction in her lesson. From the beginning, she stressed to students that the film was an adaptation of Szpilman's autobiography, a true story. Her initial homework assignment (Figure 4.5) required the students to research how the film came to be made, choices that director Polanski made, and background details about the events. Though Kellie had not read Szpilman's memoirs, she put faith in the film's veracity by its reputation as a true story. Furthermore, *The Pianist* presents a difficult challenge because it is rich with details like uniforms, language, weapons used to convey subtle information about how the historical narrative was constructed. Kellie did not directly engage her students with these details, and it seemed unlikely that her students could intuit them on their own. Not explicitly

engaging students in such rich details of historical construction seems to under-use the film's potential, but explicitly engaging students in them requires considerable class time and expertise. With limited time and energy, teachers face a dilemma in how much of a film's potential they can afford to engage explicitly with students.

Kellie's lesson framed the Holocaust as transcendent and universal human experience. Her post-film discussion aimed at eliciting empathy in this regard by asking students to contemplate what they would do if they were in Szpilman's position. That the Holocaust targeted Jews (overwhelmingly) was downplayed and its universality highlighted in getting students to think if something similar could ever happen to them and, if so, what they would do. The lesson's overarching moral response to the Holocaust was as a human tragedy transcending historical context. Kellie stressed the universality of the Nazis' crimes over the uniqueness and incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. The message was, as one young woman astutely noted, "How can people be so cruel to each other?" Of course, in many ways this is a very relevant question since there is still racial/ethnic hatred and mass violence ongoing in the world today, but Kellie's lesson did not engage very deeply with the historical complexities of the student's question.

Taking Stock

Kellie's case represents one more possible mode for using history feature films in the classroom—as an in-depth departure from regular class routine to engage in deep, prolonged study of a particular topic. In Kellie's case, deep study did not mean simply watching a movie for several class periods; her in-depth experience included supporting lectures and a field trip to a Holocaust museum. Her goal was to let her students see the

horror of the Holocaust through a visually graphic, emotionally powerful, and highly authentic feature film and to generalize universal moral lessons of the Holocaust.

Kellie did what was necessary to adjust her film-based lesson to the circumstances of schooling. She secured parental permission slips because of the film's R rating for disturbing violence. She showed the lengthy movie over five class periods, even though doing so sprawled over two different weeks (due to the field trip) and required her to spend a few minutes at the start of each class period trying to figure out where her students remembered leaving off at the end of the previous period. Furthermore, she provided students with discussion questions and framed the film in a way that contained the range of student engagement. Her film-based lesson motivated student interest within manageable boundaries, without letting student enthusiasm spill over into uncontrollable questions and discussions that would have taken too long or would have been too complicated to handle within reasonable time limits.

Kellie's lesson demonstrates the potential for teachers to use history feature films to support in-depth study of a historical topic. She combined the film with content lectures and a trip to a Holocaust museum to maximize the unit's comprehensiveness and educational impact. Kellie's case also points to some difficulties. Film choice can be an intricate process. She changed her mind about what film to use based on her educational goals, but she did not make this decision lightly. A film's fit with community and school cultures and standards is an unavoidable concern—both Kellie and Isabel talked about the Ottawa HS parent protesting the classroom use of *Saving Private Ryan*. Kellie was hesitant to use the R-rated *The Pianist*, but ultimately she faced this added risk because she felt it was the sounder educational choice.

History movies like *The Pianist* contain a dense information load. It is difficult for teachers to find the time or develop the subject matter expertise required to deal with such historically rich detail. When students are not guided toward deeper intellectual engagement with the film's historical content, they are likely to gravitate toward what is most naturally comprehensible to them—personalities. Thus, in Kellie's lesson most students wanted to talk about what Szpilman was really like, his psychology, and what happened to his family or other characters in the film rather than seeking to relate Szpilman's experience and the events depicted in the movie to the broader historical themes in the WWII/Holocaust curricular unit.

Seeing the Past Through Safe Coverage

As we look across the four cases, we see that Regina, Marie, Isabel, and Kellie chiefly used history feature films to help students visualize the past. Regina wanted to show her students what communism in Mao's era was really like for China. Marie wanted her students to see the brutality of slavery in American history. Isabel wanted to show her students what fighting in the First World War was like. Kellie wanted her students to see the suffering endured by Jews during World War II as well as Jewish resistance to the Holocaust.

Their cases suggest why history teachers are drawn to using feature films in the classroom. For teachers looking to make their students care about history, movies uniquely supply the past with a semblance of "reality" through human stories, motion, and sound. Movies humanize the past by visually depicting recognizable people (movie stars playing identifiable roles) in comprehensible situations (contained, linear narrative plots). This ability to make the past come alive ("It's kind of like you're there," in the

words of Kellie's student Amy) is something to which students respond positively. The youth-culture appeal of movies makes them attractive to teachers, although their allure to adolescents can wane over time as popular culture shifts; as a film ages, it can seem less a part of contemporary youth culture and more an artifact of an older generation (hence why several of the teachers avoided using black-and-white films). Thus, teachers often carefully pick movies both to cover content and stimulate student interest.

History movies have considerable educational potential to depict the past in ways that raise provocative educative questions and that go beyond traditional teacher-centered modes of instruction like lecture and textbooks. And yet, the four teachers in this study did not actually use movies in ways different from how other classroom texts are normally used—the movies were set-up by teacher-directed lectures, guided by teacher-supplied questions, and examined (in varying degrees of length) through teacher-scripted discussions. Nor did they use the movies to fuel deeper intellectual engagement with the historical topics. If these four teachers are typical, it seems that the revolutionary potential of history feature films is difficult to realize in the classroom. Why?

To understand why teachers are likely to use non-traditional instructional texts like movies in conservative, traditional ways, we must consider the nature of schooling. Larry Cuban (1984/1993) has described high schools (the level at which three of the four teachers in this study taught) as a graveyard of progressive, student-centered reform ideas. Teachers, he argues, historically have hybridized new instructional ideas largely within the scope of traditional, teacher-centered approaches because their pedagogical choices are situationally constrained by the structure of schooling. Movies may be no exception. Teachers who want to bring movies into their classroom still must deal with

the fixed organization of school (periods, bells, terms, prescribed curricula), students of diverse backgrounds and learning abilities, parental concerns and expectations, and community norms. These circumstances of schooling may get in the way of what David Cohen (1988) has called “adventurous” teaching. Cohen (1988) describes teaching as an “impossible profession” because of the risks and uncertainties involved in working with young people for human improvement. Thus, teachers tend to favor traditional modes of instruction in which their control is maximized and vulnerability minimized.

Given the complicated circumstances of schooling, Magdalene Lampert (1985) has asked, how do teachers manage to teach? Teachers, she points out, must cope with a host of competing dilemmas. Lampert (2001) explains,

The problems in teaching are many. Teachers face some students who do not want to learn what they want to teach, some who already know it, or think they do, and some who are poorly prepared to study what is taught. They must figure out how to teach each student, while working with a class of students who are all different from one another. They must respond to the many authorities who tell them what to teach. They have a limited amount of time to teach what needs to be taught, and they are interrupted often. (p. 1)

These were issues that Regina, Marie, Isabel, and Kellie grappled with in their film-based lessons. They wondered whether all of their students were mature enough to handle or understand the movies. They responded to school, community, or curriculum pressures about what films and topics they could teach. They faced limits on instructional time—Regina and Isabel said they wished they could do even more with film but felt they could

not afford the class time for it. Just like any other instructional choice, then, movies are constrained by practical considerations.

The circumstances of schooling get in the way of substantive, meaningful uses of history films. Kellie already devoted five periods to *The Pianist* and would have been hard-pressed to spend even more time on student-directed discussions or exploring complex questions. Getting students to recognize the evils of genocide is manageable; getting them to understand the difficulties in stopping genocides since the Holocaust is harder and more time-intensive. Showing select film clips as an addition to her lectures was manageable for Isabel; spending more time on whole films would take time away from covering curriculum standards. Using *Roots* to expose her White eighth graders to African American history was manageable for Marie; confronting the legacy of slavery and racism with adolescents would be much more intellectually demanding and controversial. These teachers reconciled their use of film to the realities of schooling, with the result that their film-based lessons were relatively safe, traditional, and not particularly engaged intellectually. Regina, the one teacher in this study who tried to use film in a non-traditional way by bringing all her classes together for a full day to watch the film and then spend a couple hours in the afternoon discussing the movie, was completely foiled by the circumstances of schooling. Her lesson conflicted with organization of the school day, many students could not get out of their classes for the entire day, and hourly bells triggered a migration of coming and going pupils. Schedule conflict with the school band scrubbed Regina's plan for the afternoon of discussion and disrupted her control over the behavior of 100 or so students under her charge. Regina

was forced to jettison the planned film discussions and turn her questions into a silent, individual writing assignment.

Mary Kennedy (2005) cautions that there are “nonnegotiable circumstances of teaching” which educational reformers need to keep in mind: “Teaching requires a large number of students to occupy a small space; students are novice thinkers and are highly likely to veer off in unanticipated directions; and children are physically active, quickly bored, and frequently restless” (p. 234). Whatever the revolutionary potential of history feature films, their instructional use is not free from the circumstances of teaching. Indeed, movies may prove especially challenging because, unlike textbooks, worksheets, and other traditional school materials, they are not exclusively in the teacher’s domain. Movies are in the popular-culture domain and part of students’ personal lives. This characteristic can mean that students get excited when movies come into their classroom, but also that they may want to do things with movies that the teacher is not prepared for or does not want to address. History movies can open up a Pandora’s Box of questions or observations from students, and teachers cannot deal with them all.

As a result, teachers need to keep control over the timing and flow of film-based lessons. If they give up too much control, the classroom can become chaotic and cacophonous and the lesson can get off track in terms of time and focus. This may explain why in the four cases I observed so many instances of what Kennedy (2005) calls “dismissal”—teachers putting off students’ questions and comments (I don’t have an answer for that now... We’ll talk about that issue later...). A film’s dense information load could result in potentially endless student questions and comments, so the teacher

must keep the lesson on track and not get bogged down, even if this means avoiding issues that individual students find interesting or important.

Maintaining control may come at the cost of deeper intellectual engagement with the film. All four teachers in my study sought to contain the depth of intellectual engagement by guiding their students to focus superficially on plot, characters, or comfortable moral lesson rather than to debate the films' historical content or controversial messages about the past and our world today. The teachers wanted to take advantage of the visual and emotional power of movies and to stimulate student interest, but on their terms and within controllable limits. It seems counterintuitive that teachers would seek to arouse student enthusiasm by showing movies but then contain the level of student engagement with the film and its historical topics. Kennedy (2005) offers an explanation:

If teachers succeed in engaging students intellectually, then students, in their enthusiasm, are likely to share their partial thoughts and their misconceptions with the group, creating for teachers the problem of how to respond to these comments while also keeping the larger group on track and maintaining momentum. Given how frightened teachers are of distractions, it is easy to imagine that many teachers would actually prefer *not* to have students too enthusiastic about the content, because they would rather *not* have students volunteering all their thoughts. (pp. 122-123)

In other words, teachers cannot risk letting the classroom become a verbal free-for-all because students may veer off in unexpected or distracting directions, raise inappropriate or unwanted questions or topics, or share confusing ideas about the film or

history. Deeply engaged student-centered approaches to film-based lessons could become too unwieldy, too raucous, and too long. As Kennedy (2005) points out, “Teachers can't permit too much engagement, because the more engaged students are with an idea, the more they will want to pursue it. Yet eventually they must move on” (p. 124). Thus, teachers try to develop practices “that keep intellectual engagement within manageable boundaries” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 123).

In her study of elementary classrooms, Kennedy (2005) found that teachers “appeared to seek an optimal level of student engagement that was not too low but also not too high” (p. 183). Based on the four cases in this study, I suggest that this is likely to be true for the instructional uses of history movies even at the secondary level. Regina, Marie, Isabel, and Kellie wanted their students to like the chosen movies and get interested in their topics, but discussion was largely teacher-scripted and limited (around half an hour for Kellie, around seven minutes for Isabel, less than one minute for Marie, and cancelled altogether by Regina). The four teachers had specific goals for using film and did not want to risk straying beyond them.

History movies, then, may end up being used to passively engage with manageable historical content. Teachers can use dramatic films as visually and emotionally stimulating reinforcement of content; the four teachers in my study were hesitant to rely on them for coverage of required content. What to do about absent students and uncertainty about requiring content from films on tests were reasons these teachers cited. As a result, their film-based lessons became a nice “extra” for students who happened to be there for it. Such optional lessons may be less likely to require or encourage active intellectual engagement.

Maintaining student compliance is an inescapable aspect of teaching. Like any other instructional interaction, film-based lessons are constrained by the dynamics of tacit bargaining between how much rigorous learning teachers can ask of students in return for their continued cooperation (Sedlak, Wheeler, Pulling, & Cusick, 1986). Linda McNeil (1986) has noted that teachers, outnumbered by pupils and feeling the tenuous nature of their authority, simplify content and reduce academic demands in exchange for classroom order and student compliance. It is a phenomenon that Reba Page (1999) has called “kickbacks” and “kicking back”: The teacher avoids angering students or their parents by making minimal demands, and in return the students get to avoid rigorous work.

Most students like watching movies, and teachers may be attracted to using films because students typically cooperate with film-based lessons. When the movie is appealing, appropriate, and connected to understandable instructional ends, students are happy to watch them in class even if they do not do much with them. But as Amy’s frustration with *Aladdin* and Brad’s complaint about *Ice Age* demonstrate, uses of film that seem purposeless or brainless can be resented by students. On the other hand, adventurous film-based lessons that require rigorous intellectual engagement and demanding work may threaten student compliance with the teacher. The middle course for film-based lessons is safe coverage—using movies that comfortably fit within school climate and local community culture as extra visual reinforcement for basic historical content in ways that avoid unnecessary controversy or parent and student backlash. Of course, this is not to say that it is impossible to use films in the classroom in adventurous or academically demanding ways, only that the circumstances of teaching make it exceedingly difficult.

Teachers may tend toward using films in traditional, teacher-centered, fact-oriented ways because this is safest. Movies often raise profound moral questions (for example, *Roots* and the legacy of slavery in the U.S., or *The Pianist* and moral responses to hate and mass violence). But teachers face dangers if they bring profound moral questions into school—they surrender some of their control and become more dependent on students' thinking, and they potentially open themselves to charges of indoctrinating children and could face angry parents. Also, they themselves simply may feel uncomfortable addressing profound or painful issues (such as social justice, racism, genocide, or rape) for which they may not have clear understanding or answers. Speaking about moral issues with others, especially children, is treacherous territory. Thus, even though teachers are drawn to the visual and emotional power of history movies, they may be equally drawn to traditional, safe ways of teaching with them.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: The Place of History Feature Films in Historical Literacy

This concluding chapter summarizes what we can learn about the interactions between history films, teachers, and students. First, I return to the guiding questions that prompted this study and consider why teachers use history movies in the classroom. Next, I consider some intellectual competencies that relate to learning about the past from history movies and connect them to a vision of historical literacy. Finally, I discuss some practical implications of history films on teaching and learning in the classroom and suggest directions for further research.

Addressing the Questions

I begin by returning to the questions that drove this inquiry. The first question: “What can students learn about the past, the people in it, and its relationship to our world today from history movies?” What students can learn from the instructional use of history films is shaped by the film’s qualities and the ways that the teacher’s lesson activates them. Teachers have no control over what a commercial feature film contains. They can choose a particular film over another, or they can selectively use only particular scenes or elements in a film to meet a specific purpose, but ultimately they are constrained by the chosen film’s content and composition. If a teacher’s lesson fails to use the movie in purposeful, meaningful ways then it may end up solely as passing entertainment or time filler. Two of Kellie’s students (Amy and Brad) negatively reflected on teachers who showed movies (*Aladdin*, *Ice Age*) that did not strike them as appropriately connected to a lesson or unit. They were neither entertained nor impressed by these experiences with movies in the classroom.

Understanding the educational potential of history movies requires a schema for considering a film's historical content, representations of eras and people in the past, and themes and messages about the past. In this dissertation, I have offered a framework for pedagogical content analysis of history films along three pairs of related pedagogical functions. Content coverage and period representation examine issues of historical fact and fiction in a film's narratives and how it presents the past. Historical construction and social construction examine how a film actively constructs both an approach to history as well as people in history. Empathy and moral response examine how a film encourages the viewer to react to the past. Viewed cumulatively, these pedagogical functions point to what a film teaches about the past and the kinds of deeper historical questions films can raise. In classrooms, one of the most valuable things that a pedagogical content analysis can do is to base instruction and activities in thematic educative questions that emerge from a careful consideration of the film.

Furthermore, it is important to contemplate history movies as a new mode of historical storytelling. Each history feature film is grounded in a style of storytelling shaped by the twin dynamics of authenticity and imagination—the need to be real and to be creative. Many films carefully blend factual history and fictional drama together to make metaphorical statements about the past (Toplin, 2002b). Activating the educational potential of history movies requires negotiating this tension. Learning content knowledge is an important purpose for studying history in schools, so being attentive to historical accuracy is very appropriate when looking at instructional uses of history movies. But most history movies (at least commercial mainstream releases) are not meant to be scholarly works. Toplin (1996a) suggests that if critics hold history movies to the same

standards as published works of history “we are almost certain to be disappointed, for filmmakers must attend to the demands of drama and the challenges of working with incomplete evidence” (p. 10). Historians also must deal with incomplete evidence, but their written medium is not necessarily dramatic. Thus, imagination is an essential element of filmic historical storytelling. It is also a crucial reason why the dramatic history feature film is a popular and respected part of popular culture. Imagination lets filmmakers communicate messages about the past and draw connections to the present beyond what a strict adherence to evidentiary authenticity could allow.

The educative potential of history movies is inseparably tied to issues of historical storytelling. History movies balance the need for authenticity with imagination to create emotionally powerful visual and auditory statements about the past in light of the present. In some ways, they are similar to works of written history. Historians, too, are influenced by present-day interests and concerns and must make choices about what perspectives to include, how to interpret historical uncertainties, how to divide up periods of time. Scholarly, written history, however, is constrained by professional standards (disputed and evolving but a real presence nonetheless) for evidence and argumentation. Filmmakers, coming from traditions of storytelling, have greater freedom to use imagination in how they approach perspectives, uncertainties about the past, and periodization of time. This power of imagination gives filmmakers license to incorporate myths—longstanding, influential cultural notions and beliefs—into their stories. Regardless of whether or not they are strictly historically accurate, myths resonate emotionally and psychologically with viewers who are part of its cultural context. Toplin (1996a) has observed:

Not surprisingly, myth has found a prominent place in movies about the past. In studying the record of cinematic history, the challenge is not simply to denounce myth's presence but to distinguish between falsely distorted myths and impressively imaginative efforts to speak the truth through mythic images. (p. 13)

In other words, history movies have the potential both to distort the past as well as to communicate deeper historical truths through mythic, imaginative storytelling. Awareness of this dynamic is necessary to tap into the full educational potential of history movies.

Films have the power to stimulate historical thinking in meaningful ways, but whether they will accomplish this in the classroom depends on what teachers do with them. Rosenstone (2002) usefully describes three ways they can be used to further historical thinking. Films can "vision history" by providing some idea of how events and people of the past looked/sounded; they can "contest history" by critiquing unquestioned, received notions about the past; and they can "revision history" by using expressive modes of visual representation link aesthetics to moral judgment about the past and the present (Rosenstone, 2002, p. 478).

In my study, all four teachers used their film choices to en-vision history for their students. They wanted to help students imagine and understand the past by bringing the past "to life" visually. Most of them also wanted their students to re-vision history to some extent as well (Regina with the dark side of Maoist communism, Marie with the psychological trauma of slavery, Kellie with the humanitarian tragedy of the Holocaust). That is, they worried that students did not possess developed views on important intellectual, moral, or ethical topics and used films to stimulate development in a desired

direction. I am not certain if the teachers I observed were able to contest history in their film-based lessons. This may be the most difficult way to use movies because it intentionally makes comfortable notions about the past uncomfortable. To the extent that it courts controversy, contesting history could stir up trouble with parents. Perhaps for these reasons, teachers are hesitant to attempt it.

The second question: “What movies do teachers use in the classroom, in what ways, and to what purposes and educational ends?” When it comes to movies, teachers are drawn to what Rosenstone (1995b; 2002) has called “history as drama” or the “dramatic feature film”—dramatized, narrative historical storytelling. They are not the only visual media teachers use; all four teachers in my study also used historical documentary videos in their classes and said they used more of them than feature films. Films are not used in uniform ways and not necessarily in their entirety; in my study, Regina showed *To Live* as part of an all-day special event (although coming and going as they did, not all students experienced the full day), Marie thematically threaded the *Roots* series across a semester, Isabel injected a short clip from *Legends of the Fall* into a lecture presentation, and Kellie showed an entire film (*The Pianist*) divided up across several class periods. Thus, the four teachers demonstrated that movies have a surprising flexibility in how they can be used. They did not demonstrate any one dominant way that teachers use films, and even the kinds of discussions and questions that came after the films varied considerably.

My limited sample confirms what other researchers have noted—that history teachers eagerly employ a range of movies in their classroom instruction. Stoddard and Marcus (in press) surveyed teachers and found that they frequently used *Glory*, *Amistad*,

Schindler's List, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Dances with Wolves*. In addition to the films I observed, the teachers in my sample mentioned other titles that they also use or have used before: *The Alamo*, *April Morning*, *The Cotton Club*, *The Crossing*, *Disney's Tall Tales*, *Far and Away*, *Forrest Gump*, *Gallipoli*, *Gandhi*, *Gettysburg*, *Gladiator*, *The Godfather Part II*, *Hidalgo*, *Kundun*, *The Patriot*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *Traffic*. Regina has shown other international films like *Osama*, *My Life as a Dog*, and *The Seven Samurai*, and Kellie previously has used the Italian film *Life Is Beautiful*. All four teachers stressed, to some extent, a belief that the vicarious realism of feature films appealed to students in a way no other instructional material could, including documentary videos. Regina and Isabel said that they always preferred to use feature films (especially newer ones) instead of documentaries (particularly older ones) whenever they could find appropriate titles.

The four teachers in my study challenge the conventional folklore that teachers show movies in class just to take up time. None of these teachers used movies as a way to avoid teaching—they used them as consciously selected tools to meet curricular and/or instructional goals. This is not to say that a pleasant “break” for the teacher and students from the normal classroom routine cannot be a consequence. But all my teachers seemed to have carefully constructed rationales for why they used a film in their lessons.¹ For each teacher, the desire to get their students to care about the past and its connection to our world today was central. These teachers harnessed the visual and emotional power of history dramatic feature films in their lessons, engaging their students with a narrative story told from a human perspective to which they could relate. However, these teachers

¹ Of course, this could result from my presence. Teachers might have not wanted to admit that they used films for a break or have an observer witness them doing so. Either way, the teachers' rationales and plans existed mainly in their heads. I asked all of them for copies of their unit plans, but none of them had written plans to give me. Only Kellie gave me a photocopied packet that contained her lecture notes and some internet printouts she used for background.

also strove to keep students' intellectual engagement with the films and historical topics within manageable boundaries. They did not want to risk too much student enthusiasm or intellectual engagement, which could raise awkward or unplanned questions or issues that threaten the teacher's control over lesson timing and momentum. Thus, the teachers tended toward safe, traditional, teacher-directed uses of films as classroom texts.

Why Do Teachers Use History Movies?

All four teachers in my study used films for their lessons because they found a title that aligned up with particular topics and brought them to life for students in a way no other instructional technique could. It is not that these teachers felt they had to use a movie for their units. They certainly had other options. But once these teachers had found film choices that they felt were a good fit for their curricular units, they brought them into their classrooms eagerly—and, in the cases of Regina, Marie, and Isabel (who had shown their film choices for the past several years), repeatedly.

Why are these teachers, and others like them, drawn to history feature films in their lessons? I can theorize some possible explanations. Something about movies as an art form seems to resonate with what history teachers feel is a key purpose of studying history and social studies in schools. These subjects are part of the liberal arts and humanities, which have a longstanding purpose in a democratic society of humanizing future citizens, inculcating in the next generation broad, civic-minded sensitivities. Dramatic history movies are, by their very nature, a visceral, emotionally powerful way to experience history. As we have seen, empathy is a central function of movies. History movies, like school history curriculum, play a humanizing role as well—they seek to generate empathy on the part of the viewer with perspectives in the past and to

communicate deep-felt moral or ethical responses. Teachers may be drawn to history movies in history classrooms because of their shared humanizing potential.

In addition to their humanizing role for the individual, movies are also socializing experiences. They exist in a wider context beyond the classroom. Films are circulated nationally and increasingly globally at the same time. Movies are in theaters and video stores, on television and the internet, and circulate in public discourses involving millions of people who see them. They become part of what Wertsch (2002) calls a “cultural toolkit”—the commonly available pool of text resources that provide narratives people employ to describe their world and their place in it.

Teachers may be drawn to history movies specifically because they are cultural texts outside the standard school curriculum. They possess a popular relevance to young people that official curricular texts never will. Movies exist in a broader social discourse that lets students actively participate in what meanings they choose to make of them, while the traditional textbook represents an official version of what somebody else says is important. Thus, history movies can give students a sense of ownership over the lessons and understandings they draw from them. Inasmuch as films usually reflect on cultural norms and values of the society in which (or for which) they are made, their socializing role is closely linked to their humanizing role. This makes them doubly potent for teachers.

Simply put, movies can do something that textbooks cannot. There are other texts and experiences that may play similar roles (reading novels, viewing art, visiting museums), but those instructional tools were not the focus of this inquiry. Furthermore, they lack at least one of the components of the feature film—novels typically are not

visual, graphic art lacks movement and sound, museums are not narrative human dramas. As instructional tools, films permit teachers to address a range of different (and sometimes conflicting) motivations at once. For example, they can allow teachers to give students a pleasant break from normal class routine while at the same time “covering” more course content or presenting a particular worldview the teacher feels is important. They can even make space for the teacher to attend to personal needs while still providing students with powerful learning opportunities—if the teacher cannot be physically present, it is still possible to have an educationally effective film lesson if he or she does the upfront work of scaffolding the viewing experience for students through preparation, extra support resources, and classroom activities. Given their tremendous flexibility, cultural significance, and power to make students care about the past, it is hardly surprising that teachers are so drawn to the instructional use of history films.

Toward a Theory of Historical Literacy

So how can history feature films meaningfully inform learning about the past? It is necessary to consider how they connect to historical literacy. Literacy, at heart, is the mastery and application of communication. It involves perceiving and comprehending messages and ideas, analyzing their explicit and implied meanings and the manner in which they are conveyed, and formulating communicable messages and ideas in response. Traditionally, notions of literacy have revolved around reading and writing text (Lankshear, 1999). However, Lankshear (1999) points out an important sociocultural component. Literacy is socially constructed—reading and writing are sociocultural interactions grounded in political, economic, and historical practices. Most texts, especially commercial ones, are produced for broader audiences by creators who are

themselves influenced by sociocultural factors. It is helpful to think of literacy more generally as understanding social communication, including not just traditional print texts but also newer media like video and film.

Furthermore, bodies of knowledge are types of communication, as information and ideas are exchanged between practitioners and learners. Thus, it is possible to think in terms of subject area literacy—the mastery and application of communicating information and ideas in a content domain, like history. In the late 1980s, the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools published *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education* (Gagnon, 1989). The contributing scholars offered a rich picture of historical literacy as intellectually engaged, humanistic, and based in rigorous content knowledge. In other words, historical literacy involves both learning something meaningful about the past and doing something meaningful with that knowledge by applying it to broader, significant concepts. This view of broader significance as a defining characteristic of historical literacy is visible in two national standards for history curriculum released over the past 10 years (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996; World History for Us All, n.d.). These standards documents counsel teachers to relate particular subject matter to larger patterns of historical meaning and significance.

In the classroom, history feature films become sociocultural, audiovisual texts “read” by students. What makes history movies challenging to use instructionally is that they represent a variety of different things. Movies are commercial products made for profit by a mass industry (Giroux, 2002). They are popular entertainments that exist as a part of youth culture and are appropriated into young people’s lives in a variety of different ways (Buckingham, 2003). They are public texts that people can commonly

refer to when communicating ideas about the world in the past and present (Wertsch, 2002). They are depictions of information or understandings about the past intentionally constructed in particular ways to convey particular messages (Rosenstone, 1995b). The task of the teacher is to scaffold the viewing experience for students in ways that help them make navigate these different features of film.

However, as we have seen in this dissertation, it can be precarious for teachers to use movies in intellectually engaged ways. The structure of schooling—periods, bells, interruptions, coverage, pacing, assessments, fixed curricula—often puts up barriers to deeply rigorous film-based lesson. It is quite possible for movies to join many other common instructional tools that do not particularly contribute to historical literacy. Wineburg and Martin (2004) complain that in many classrooms an obsession with internet search engines, computer slideshows, and other visual displays undercuts real historical literacy, which requires reading primary and secondary sources, analyzing their meaning, and writing about this historical thinking. Applying their warning to film-based lessons, history movies risk becoming a distraction from historical literacy if students only passively engage with a film's ideas and content and do not have to think very hard or communicate what they learn.

Divorced from historical literacy, history feature films can end up doing very little or, even worse, doing mischief. The dominant narrative in a well-made history movie is emotionally powerful, memorable, and persuasive. When students watch history movies without the support of sufficient content knowledge and nuanced understandings of history, a possible (perhaps probable) outcome is for the filmic account to “colonize” their thinking about the past—taking up residence in the mind as a kind of literal truth, as

VanSledright (2002) and Wineburg, Mosborg, and Porat (2000) found when talking with students about the historical events behind the Disney's *Pocahontas*. If history feature films as classroom texts are to help students develop competencies in historical literacy, they need to be “read” by students in a lesson that guides them in identifying important information and ideas about the past and relating this knowledge to broader patterns of historical significance.

Competencies for Historical Literacy

So what might some specific competencies look like and how could instructional uses of history feature films support them? Here I nominate five that reflect major proficiencies in historical thinking advocated in research literature on history education. By no means is this list exhaustive or exclusive, nor is it in order of primacy, but it is a useful starting point toward a theory for historical literacy that incorporates a role for visual media like feature films.

Learning and using content knowledge. Like any academic subject, history contains a surfeit of detail that cannot possibly be covered entirely. Identifying important content and arranging detailed facts in support of a broader, significant conceptualization of the past is essential to rigorous historical learning. Wilson and Sykes (1989) have argued that good history teaching involves more than just memorizing facts—good teaching helps students see the creative forces behind history writing and the tentative, interpretive nature of historical knowledge.

History feature films can be powerful tools for meeting these goals. They reconstruct a past event or imagine what the past was like during a dramatic or engaging moment (a very common example are history movies set during wars). In this way,

history movies enable students to learn factual information about a historical topic or period while being entertained (by the action scenes, human stories, or emotional subplots). History movies contain numerous details about the past as well as fictionalized elements that are used to build the narrative story. When students passively engage with a history film in the classroom, they may focus only on the most obvious details or the details of greatest personal interest. Intellectually engaging film-based lessons, on the other hand, can help students discern significant historical information, distinguish fictional elements, and consider the film as a historical statement created by filmmakers to present particular themes and interpretations of the past. History movies can be a powerful way for teachers to present history as knowledge to be *used*—in examining and developing interpretations of the past, and in constructing broader patterns of significance—rather than simply *memorized*.

Analyzing narratives. As Wertsch (2004) observes, people express historical consciousness through “narratives” that help them organize the chronology of events important to themselves and their society. Narratives can be specific stories about the past or abstract, generalizable themes that function like templates when people talk about the past. Texts about history are also built on narratives—through the particular stories told, the details arranged together, and the meanings ascribed. VanSledright (2004) describes the “novice” thinking that many schoolchildren bring to working with texts, believing that “the meaning is in the text, it is unmediated by the author, and it is their job to extract it correctly” (p. 344). Shifting students toward expert thinking requires them to practice the kinds of heuristics used by practitioners in the domain—reading

intertextually (corroborating evidence across sources) and reading for subtexts (inferring subtle or implied meanings).

History feature films are narratives about the past, conveying messages both explicit and implied (subtexts). Movies can give students a powerful opportunity to analyze historical narratives. Historians use a “sourcing heuristic” to evaluate the perspective of a text as a human creation, but students are often oblivious to how the source shapes a text (Wineburg, 2001, p. 76). Reading a film text critically can approach the thinking behind the sourcing heuristic. Why is this film depicting the past in this particular way, from the perspective of these particular characters, and using these particular images, stories, or themes? How do these images, stories, and themes shape the way the past is presented and received by the viewer? History movies, especially mainstream commercial films, typically offer one dominant narrative about the past undistracted by counter-narratives. For example, *The Patriot* offers a narrative of heroic Americans triumphing over the arrogant British. This is one possible account open to critique. Film-based lessons have great potential to help students see the past as a constructed narratives supported by evidence and interpretation. Students can learn to analyze historical narratives by reading a film for explicit meanings and subjects, corroborating or challenging a filmic account of the past across other sources (such as textbooks), and recognizing alternative accounts to the one presented by the film.

Considering cultural positioning. Texts, including history films, are culturally situated. They are made by people at a particular place in time, located within a particular culture, and with particular cultural meanings in mind. Understanding how a text is positioned within its culture (shaped by the time and place of its production) as

well as how a culture positions the text (its uses within a society) is another important competency for historical literacy. History movies start out as texts *about* the past. Over time, movies become documents *of* the past that can be used like primary sources from previous eras (Matz & Pingatore, 2005). Movies influence the way people across generations think about and collectively remembered the past. For example, the iconic understandings of what the 1960s were like for Americans communicated by the 1994 film *Forrest Gump* reinforce the memory of certain historical elements (hippies, protests against the Vietnam War) while forgetting dissonant counter-narratives like pro-war rallies (Wineburg et al., 2000).

In this way, history movies afford opportunities for students to encounter the past as social memory, with films functioning as cultural texts that communicate widely recognized identities and understandings of the past. Why was a history film made at a particular place and time? How do the film's themes and images conform to or contrast with the broader culture of its time? These are the kinds of questions relating to the deeper nature of films as texts that can be explored by considering the cultural positioning of a history feature film.

Discerning presentism. Wineburg (2001) argues that historical thinking is an “unnatural act” because engaging with the past on its own terms can feel strange and difficult for us in the present. Much easier is *presentism*—“the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present....a way of thinking that requires little effort and comes quite naturally” (Wineburg, 2001, p. 19). Confronting presentism is a problem that history feature films are well suited to meet. Though they visually bring to life the past, history movies are products of the present. Films that approach the past on its own terms

can be strange, uncomfortable, and confusing to contemporary viewers. Thus, filmmakers often read the present onto the past, using a historic event as a metaphor for current concerns, attitudes, and values that are easier to sell to contemporary audiences. For example, *The Patriot* almost entirely excises White racism from its South Carolina militiamen heroes in favor of the anachronistic but more comfortable attitudes of racial harmony. Viewers today might like these kinds of historical heroes better, but this presentist depiction does not help us better understand what occurred in the past or why. Intellectually engaged film-based lessons provide sufficient content support and guidance in viewing the movie to discern presentism in filmic accounts of the past.

Historical empathy. Meaningful history learning requires the ability to understand the perspectives of different peoples in the past. Otherwise, past perspectives become undifferentiated and highly simplified, resulting in an unsophisticated reading of the past in terms of heroes and villains, right and wrong, all judged by how well they fit with present-day perspectives that past actors might not have valued or even recognized. Historical empathy is an emotional and psychological competency that requires the viewer to recognize and identify with certain perspectives in the past. Barton and Levstik (2004) distinguish two modes of empathy for making sense of the past. Perspective recognition involves rational examination of past perspectives, explaining historical actions in terms of the attitudes, beliefs, and intentions of the people of the past. Empathy as caring involves making personal connections to history through topics we want to learn, moral judgments, and a desire to help by applying what we learn from history to our world today.

As visually and emotionally powerful depictions of the past, history movies are a powerful way to experience historical empathy in the classroom. Some movies try to depict perspectives in the past on their own terms—for example, the 2004 version of *The Alamo* shows Travis and Bowie as unrepentant slave-owners. But other movies construct past perspectives in a manner that makes them more comprehensible or even attractive to contemporary audiences—as *The Last Samurai* does with the reactionary samurai rebels of the 1870s. Part of the potential of history movies lies in educating students to recognize different historical perspectives as well as when filmic narratives construct past perspectives in contemporized ways. The other part lies in the emotional appeal of films to make the viewer care about the past through its characters and the historical situations in which they are shown. Historically literate viewers are able to make their own moral judgments about people in the past while understanding the historical conditions behind the events they are judging and the reasons why they happened the way they did.

In sum. These five competencies form a vision of historical literacy that emphasizes learning rigorous content knowledge, applying it to broader patterns of historical significance, and communicating informed understandings about the past. History feature films can contribute meaningfully to the development of each of these competencies. However, tapping the full educational potential of a history feature film requires deep intellectual engagement with the movie as an interpretive, constructed, and sociocultural text. As Marcus (2005) writes, “The power of film to develop historical understanding is lost unless teachers cultivate students’ ability to interpret film, which we might call their historical literacy” (p. 62).

Considering Competencies in Regina, Marie, Isabel, and Kellie's Lessons

The cases of these four teachers demonstrate the challenges in using film-based lessons to reinforce historical literacy competences in students. As observed in chapter 4, these teachers' lessons, by and large, passively engaged with history films within manageable boundaries. Each teacher tried to reach for something more in her film-based lesson, but some aspect of the context of schooling got in the way of the higher competencies they hoped to address.

Learning content knowledge was reflected to some degree in each lesson, but using that knowledge in substantive ways eluded the teachers. Regina showed *To Live* because she wanted students to understand what communism was really like in Chinese history, but the difficulty of scheduling an all-day event for all of her classes prevented every student from seeing the entire film and impeded her hopes of engaging in larger conversations about what students learned from the film. Marie used *Roots* to cover slavery in the early American Republic, but possibly because of her concerns about dealing with disturbing content with immature students she did not explicitly go into much depth of detail. Isabel used a short, focused clip from *Legends of the Fall* specifically to depict military technology from World War I; she sometimes wished she could do more with movies but felt time was limited by the pace of curricular coverage. Kellie showed *The Pianist* as a way to cover the Holocaust and Jewish resistance and spent much of one class period having her students write about and discuss the film, but the lesson did not do much to help students put the specific events in the film in broader context of their significance for World War II and global changes in the 1940s. Ultimately, none of these teachers' lessons required students to make much use of what

they learned from the movies. The films were optional or not a part of unit assessments and remained simply extra reinforcement of covered content for those who saw them.

Analyzing narratives and discerning presentism were not reflected in the observed lessons. These teachers used films much as they would a textbook—as a singular, authoritative depiction of content. None of the lessons analyzed filmic narratives as partial or possible accounts of the past, guided students to consider how the film’s story, characters, or images conveyed particular messages about the past, or look at how present-day attitudes affected the film’s outlook on the past. Considering cultural positioning was also largely ignored. Regina’s lesson tried to get students to consider the cultural positioning of *To Live* as a Chinese film, but the distractions of the school day disrupted her control over the large number of students and her planned group discussion was replaced by individual writing that did not require students to think about this issue and communicate their ideas to other students.

Historical empathy was the competency most palpably addressed by these teachers. As I speculated above, teachers seem to be attracted to the visceral and emotional power of history feature films to get students to care about the past. Historical figures become real people in real situations with which students can more readily relate. Regina wanted her students to experience what communism was like through the eyes of one Chinese family. Marie wanted her students to empathize with the abuse suffered by African Americans under slavery. Isabel wanted her students to feel the lethality of World War I military technology through the tragic story of the three brothers. Kellie wanted her students to witness the Holocaust through the experiences of a Jewish

survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto. They all hoped that the films would motivate student interest and encourage students to engage with the topic—within manageable bounds.

In the end, none of the teachers made much space for students to reflect on historical perspectives as depicted in the films or to communicate their own moral judgments about people in the past. Doing so would have presented the risk of losing control over the momentum, timing, and direction of the lesson. As a result, these teachers encouraged limited historical empathy, trying to cash in on the emotional power of films to invite manageable student enthusiasm without opening up the classroom to the potential flood of student-initiated reactions, questions, and ideas that might distract the teacher from her specific content goals, planned organization, and momentum. The teachers strove to keep discussion within the limits of time and topic for which they were prepared. Marie, who seemed most sensitive to confronting her young students with disturbing content, avoided discussing how her students felt about *Roots* almost entirely.

The cases of these four teachers represent the challenge of using history feature films in the classroom to support student historical literacy. Films have considerable potential to help students learn and use content knowledge, analyze narratives, consider cultural positioning, discern presentism, and experience historical empathy. But pursuing any of these competencies in depth requires meaningful intellectual engagement with the film. This, in turn, requires a substantial investment of teacher preparation time (to position the film and acquire necessary subject-matter knowledge) and classroom time (to let students watch, reflect on, and talk about the film and their own historical thinking in response to it). Given the many competing demands placed on teachers, it can be very difficult to make such investments of time. Likewise, encouraging deep intellectual

engagement with film texts risks opening up the classroom to students' novice historical thinking and their partially formed, potentially distracting questions, ideas, and directions. Thus, teachers may be strongly tempted to use history feature films in safe, traditional, teacher-centered, fact-oriented ways that minimally address some of the competencies of historical literacy while keeping maximum teacher control over how the film and its historical messages are used in the classroom.

Practical Implications on Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

In part, I undertook this study because I am a history educator who is an avid and critical consumer of films. So I end this dissertation as a teacher and scholar, exploring some possible problems and limitations for the classroom uses of history movie that emerged from this study as well as some potential avenues for future research.

First, there are implications about learning historical content from film-based lessons. The teachers in my cases did not really engage students in the historical details of the film in much depth. Discussions and activities involving the film tended to be short (barely a minute in Regina's classroom). The teachers carefully chose their films in order to illustrate curricular content, but not to cover it exclusively. All teachers were wary of using a movie by itself to teach content. It may difficult for teachers to gauge what students actually learn from watching movies. Isabel told me she was certain that students would remember what technology was associated with WWI from *Legends of the Fall*, but one of her students (Jack) could not remember whether the technology was from WWI or WWII. This little bit of confusion points to a larger problem that students may be paying attention to different elements in a movie than what the teacher hopes they are learning.

Second, the film-based lessons I observed tended to be teacher-centered and fairly traditional. Regina was probably the most ambitious in scope by trying to arrange a special assembly for all her classes and to organize discussion groups after the film, but her film-then-discussion formula was not fundamentally different from what other teachers did and she jettisoned her film discussion when circumstances made it impractical. Do these four cases reflect the fundamentally conservative nature of teaching? None of the teachers used the films to do anything that would be unusual or particularly critical in a lesson that did not use film. None of the cases used film to expose students to the interpretive nature of history, to examine the ways in which the identities of different social groups are constructed and depicted in our culture, to debate or question conventional interpretations or textbook characterizations, or to debate ethical or moral tensions in history. This raises an important question about the uses of empathy—in application does it tend to be limited merely to emotional catharsis?

Third, the teachers in my cases heavily emphasized using movies as a way to motivate students. All of them said that engaging student interest or provoking an emotional response was a chief goal. But some teachers worried that an emotional response could be too strong. Marie was passionately opposed to gratuitous violence and disliked using war movies in class. Kellie was concerned that *The Pianist* would be too emotionally painful for her students to watch. It is possible that such an emotional emphasis may encourage a naïve reading of history. The teachers in my study were less likely to deal with emotionally charged issues in depth. The two girls who watched *The Pianist* told me that people should do more to stop hatred and mass violence, but their

answers on how were vague and did not show much understanding of the complexities that have daunted attempts to prevent or stop genocide or ethnic cleansing.

Fourth, there may be a “maturity gap” for schoolchildren watching history movies that depict other cultures. We should not be surprised when adolescents laugh at things adults consider inappropriate or make fun of differences. During *To Live*, for example, some boys loudly mocked the acting style of the Chinese lead actor in a scene when he was crying after his wife left him. This was not a very masculine way of portraying grief in American movies. Teachers may need to watch for these moments and use the opportunity to confront cultural differences rather than overlooking immature reactions. If not, students could potentially take away from movies negative stereotypes about other cultures.

Fifth, is there a “shelf life” for history movies in the classroom? Several of the teachers in my study talked about wanting to use recent movies. They were afraid that as a movie got older, it wouldn’t appeal to students any more. Regina thought that *To Live* from 1994 was on the verge of being too old. Isabel wished she could find a newer movie that showed the same elements as *Legends of the Fall*, also from 1994. At a certain point, a movie no longer feels a part of youth culture. It feels like an artifact from a previous generation. Teachers may need to approach older films differently than more recent films starring contemporary movie celebrities.

So what would it take to prepare teachers to use films in more adventurous ways? I recommend that what would help teachers most is explicit preparation in using films as both instructional tools and cultural texts in the classroom. My study suggests that teachers do not need to be convinced that movies are worthwhile or that movies may be

inaccurate or distort the past. The four teachers in my sample were already sold on the educative potential of movies and were eager to use them. All of them were fully aware of the factual limitations of movies, and some had received training in this regard (Kellie and Isabel both told me about an East Asia studies seminar that addressed accuracy problems in *The Last Samurai*). What these four teachers lacked were a range of powerful pedagogical strategies for teaching through film.

Teacher education in the U.S. commonly exposes beginning teachers to strategies for literacy and interrogating written texts but not necessarily visual media. It is not as if teachers are hopelessly benighted on their own. The four teachers in my sample were doing what they could with films in absence of a developed range of tools and strategies needed to tap the potential of film-based lessons. What teachers are likely to do on their own, however, is safe, traditional, teacher-centered instruction with films. Social studies teacher education could lay the groundwork for more adventurous film-based teaching by incorporating explicit preparation that 1) models how to find and use content knowledge to help students evaluate historical accuracy, 2) trains teachers to recognize a film's approach to historical storytelling and its uses of authenticity and imagination, 3) educates teachers about films as cultural texts that communicate overt and implicit social messages connecting the past to the present, and 4) confronts the challenges of representing films and their historical content to diverse students, who already bring to watching the film their own personal background, knowledge, and experiences.

In conclusion, there are several possible avenues for further research. First, what do students actually learn from movies? An important direction would be to investigate if there is any link between film-based lessons and student performance on assessment. It

might be that films deeply stimulate memory and recall—or that films’ narrative storytelling and visual and auditory composition distract or distort memory and recall.

Second, how much of what students think they know about history comes from movies? Many students watch a lot of movies, but what is uncertain is how widespread history movies are in students’ cinematic experiences and whether they see them mainly in school or on their own. Furthermore, it would be intriguing to gauge students’ historical knowledge to see if films they report having seen affect their responses to questions about the past. For example, are fans of *Gladiator* more likely to respond to questions about the Roman Empire with answers that reflect the movie’s account?

Third, do students in different settings respond to and learn from films differently? This dissertation, based on its volunteer sample of convenience, deal entirely with predominantly White, middle-class, suburban public schools. It would be worthwhile to investigate specifically how students of color, students in urban schools, economically disadvantaged students, and students in religious schools react to film-based lessons or think about history movies as representations of the past.

Finally, what might adventurous teaching with history movies actually look like? This dissertation has suggested some important concepts and useful characteristics, but it remains to be seen what higher-order, student-centered, inquiry-based teaching with films would look like in the classroom. Careful “model practice” studies in which educational researchers and classroom teachers collaborate to design, implement, analyze, and report on these kinds of film-based lessons could provide a more complete picture.

APPENDIX A: SCHOOL CONSENT FORM

When Hollywood Comes to the History Classroom: Educational Uses of Commercial Mass-Media History Motion Pictures

One or more of your teachers, _____, is interested in participating in a research project exploring how history motion pictures are used in the classroom to teach students about history and what students learn about the past from watching them. With the school's permission, the researcher will visit the school during a unit when the teacher is using a history film in class, talk with the teacher about the choice of film and educational goals, observe the class while the students are watching and conducting activities relating to the film, and interview the teacher and a sample of students in the class about history movies in the classroom. This research is for a doctoral dissertation in the College of Education at Michigan State University. The study will produce scholarship contributing to the field of history education.

The dissertation research will be conducted in late 2005 and early 2006. The researcher would visit the teacher's classroom when a history motion picture is shown, talk with the teacher about the film and educational goals, look at the unit plan and observe the class while the students are watching and conducting activities relating to the film, and interview teacher and a sample of students. The researcher will not to interfere in any way with the normal functioning of the classroom. Interviews with the teacher will be arranged at times convenient to his/her schedule. Interviews with the small sample of students will be brief (30-60 minutes), held at their convenience, and ideally conducted in pairs (so that no student will feel awkward in a one-on-one interview with an outside researcher). Interviews will be audio-recorded (with participant consent) for research purposes only and kept confidentially within the university research setting.

Your identity, your teacher's identity, and the identity of your students and their parents will be kept strictly confidential throughout the study and in any written manuscripts or oral presentations resulting from the study. Data collected will be securely stored and accessed only by researchers working with the study, all of whom are bound to maintain confidentiality. Results of the study will be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified. The privacy of everyone involved will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Granting permission for the teacher and classroom to participate in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to allow participation, or later discontinue participation, and you may refuse to permit participation in certain procedures. There are no penalties or consequences whatsoever for doing so. There are no personal benefits to participation in the study, but participating may contribute to a better understanding of how schools teach and help students learn history. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Suzanne Wilson, Principal Investigator (e-mail; phone). For any questions about the protection of human subjects of research, please call Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects by phone or email.

If your school district consents to allow the researcher to conduct this study, please provide the researcher with a **letter to that effect on official school/district letterhead and signed by an authorized principal/administrator**. To meet university policy, the letter should contain the following or similar language:

"I have carefully read the description of the study and the procedures for conducting the study. I agree that participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time during the study. I give permission for the named teacher(s) and their classrooms to participate in this study."

APPENDIX A: TEACHER CONSENT FORM

When Hollywood Comes to the History Classroom: Educational Uses of Commercial Mass-Media History Motion Pictures

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring how history motion pictures are used in the classroom to teach students about history and what students learn about the past from watching them. This research is for a doctoral dissertation in the College of Education at Michigan State University. The study will produce scholarship contributing to the field of history education.

The dissertation research will be conducted in late 2005 and early 2006. The researcher would like to visit your classroom when you are showing a commercial history motion picture to your students, to talk with you about the film and your educational goals, to look at your unit plan and observe your class while the students are watching and conducting activities relating to the film, and to interview you and a sample of your students. Beyond your normal class time, you will be asked to spend no more than 3-4 hours on interviews before, during, and after the lessons. Interviews will be audio-recorded for research purposes only and kept confidentially within the university research setting.

Your identity and the identity of your students will be kept strictly confidential throughout the study and in any written manuscripts or oral presentations resulting from the study. Data collected will be securely stored and accessed only by researchers working with the study, all of whom are bound to maintain confidentiality. Results of the study will be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or later discontinue participation, and you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions. There are no penalties or consequences whatsoever for doing so. There are no personal benefits to your participation in the study, but participating may contribute to a better understanding of how schools teach and help students learn history. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Suzanne Wilson, Principal Investigator (e-mail; phone). For any questions about the protection of human subjects of research, please call Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects by phone or email.

_____ I have carefully read the description of the study and the procedures for conducting the study. I agree that my participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw my participation at any time during the study. I agree to be a teacher participant in this study.

Signature

Printed name

Date

APPENDIX A: PARENT/STUDENT CONSENT FORM (OBSERVATION)

When Hollywood Comes to the History Classroom: Educational Uses of Commercial Mass-Media History Motion Pictures

Your child's classroom is participating in a research project exploring how history motion pictures are used in the classroom to teach students about history and what students learn about the past from watching them. Part of this research involves observing the teacher and students during lessons in the classroom. This research is for a doctoral dissertation in the College of Education at Michigan State University. The study will produce scholarship contributing to history education.

The dissertation research will be conducted in late 2005 and early 2006. The researcher will visit classes during a unit when a Hollywood history movie is shown, observe how the teacher and students make use of the film, and listen to in-class discussion/activities about the film. The researcher will watch and listen in the background, taking notes about what occurs and is discussed in the classroom. The purpose for observing students in classes is to better understand how history films affect student learning.

Your identity and your child's identity will be kept strictly confidential throughout the study and in any written manuscripts or oral presentations resulting from the study. Data collected will be securely stored and accessed only by researchers working with the study, all of whom are bound to maintain confidentiality. Results of the study will be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Your child's participation in these observations is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to allow your child to be observed or later discontinue participation, and in such case the researcher will not include your child in the observation notes about what occurs in the classroom. There are no penalties or consequences whatsoever for doing so. There are no personal benefits to your child's participation in the study, but participating may contribute to a better understanding of how students learn and know history in schools. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Suzanne Wilson, Principal Investigator (e-mail; phone). For any questions about the protection of human subjects of research, please call Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects by phone or email.

_____ I have carefully read the description of the study and the procedures for conducting the study. I agree that my child's participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw my consent at any time during the study. I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian's signature

Student's signature

Parent/Guardian's printed name

Student's printed name

Date

APPENDIX A: PARENT/STUDENT CONSENT FORM (INTERVIEW)

When Hollywood Comes to the History Classroom: Educational Uses of Commercial Mass-Media History Motion Pictures

Your child's classroom is participating in a research project exploring how history motion pictures are used in the classroom to teach students about history and what students learn about the past from watching them. Your child is invited to participate, with your consent, in an interview for this study. This research is for a doctoral dissertation in the College of Education at Michigan State University. The study will produce scholarship contributing to history education.

The dissertation research will be conducted in late 2005 and early 2006. The researcher would like to interview participating students, ideally in pairs. The interview will take around an hour, at a time convenient for you and your child (during or after the school day). The researcher will schedule the interview with your child in advance. The interview will ask your child to talk about history movies and what he/she has learned about history from watching them. The purpose for interviewing students is to include their thoughts and reactions to history movies in the study. The interview will be audio-recorded for research purposes only and kept confidentially within the university research setting.

Your identity and your child's identity will be kept strictly confidential throughout the study and in any written manuscripts or oral presentations resulting from the study. Data collected will be securely stored and accessed only by researchers working with the study, all of whom are bound to maintain confidentiality. Results of the study will be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Your child's participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to allow your child to participate, or later discontinue participation, and your child may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions. There are no penalties or consequences whatsoever for doing so. There are no personal benefits to your child's participation in the study, but participating may contribute to a better understanding of how students learn and know history in schools. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Suzanne Wilson, Principal Investigator (e-mail; phone). For any questions about the protection of human subjects of research, please call Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects by phone or email.

_____ I have carefully read the description of the study and the procedures for conducting the study. I agree that my child's participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw my consent at any time during the study. I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian's signature

Student's signature

Parent/Guardian's printed name

Student's printed name

Date

APPENDIX B

Observational Framework for Classroom Use of History Films

September 2005

Rationale:

The purpose of this instrument is to guide and structure observations involving the use of history motion pictures in the classroom. The forms record information about the school site and classroom, about the instructional context, and about the chronology and events/activities that take place in the classroom during each observed hour/period. The attached analytical framework will be used to code and interpret the observational data.

Directions:

- This instrument contains three separate forms: *observation site overview* (1 page); *observation daily record* (4 pages); *analytical framework* (2 pages).
- Upon first visiting a research site, fill out an *observation site overview* form. This needs to be completed only once for each research site.
- Each time the classroom is observed, fill out an *observation daily record* form. A new form needs to be filled out every hour/period observed.
- Use the daily record form to note the amount of time spent on different events/activities in the classroom. Record the time at which a new event/activity begins. Especially focus on the amount of time spent showing the movie, time spent talking about the movie, and time spent on in-class activities/assignments relating to the movie.
- Also, use the form to take notes on the questions and comments raised in-class. Record the speaker (e.g., White female student and other pertinent characteristics) and a concise description of what was said. In addition, for any question record whether it was addressed (directly responded to), unanswered (not addressed with factual information), unrecognized (unheard or ignored), or avoided (redirected, delayed, or bypassed) by the teacher.
- On the last page of the form, record any observations and analysis of teacher actions and student actions involving the movie. This is where notes that do not fit into the other categories on the form may be recorded.
- After completing observations and interviews at a research site, use the *analytical framework* to help organize, code, and interpret the observational and interview data.

Observation Site Overview

[Fill out this one-page form once at the start of visitations to a site.]

Classroom Context:

| | |
|--|--|
| Teacher Name | |
| School Site/Location | |
| Course Name/ Department | |
| Grade Level | |
| | |
| School/District Characteristics: socio-economic status; urban/rural/suburban; physical location | |
| | |

Student Context:

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|
| # of Students | | # of Males | | # of Females | |
| # White | | # Black | | # Native American | |
| # Hispanic/Latino | | # Asian/Pacific Islander | | # Other/Multiracial | |

Instructional Context:

| | |
|--|--|
| What is current unit topic? | |
| What is the textbook(s)? | |
| What movie will be shown? | |
| | |
| Scheduled dates for the unit: start of unit, showing the movie, assessment? | |
| | |
| | |

Observation Daily Record

[Fill out this four-page form for each class hour/period observed.]

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Teacher observed | |
|------------------|--|

| | |
|----------|--|
| Observer | |
|----------|--|

| | | | |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|
| Site of observation | | Date of observation | |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| Hour/period observed | | Total classtime available | |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|

| Special circumstances or notes for the hour/period observed: |
|--|
| |

Classroom Chronology:

[illegible]

Classroom Conversation Log:

[illegible]

Field notes: Teacher actions

- Describe and write down preliminary analysis for teacher actions in the classroom relating to educational activities and the teacher's stated instructional goals.
- Pay special attention to teacher intentions for using the movie (*covering content; motivating student interest; rewarding student behavior; maintaining the teacher's emotional health; complicating historical interpretations provided by textbooks; advancing a particular world-view*), and pedagogical categories (*content coverage/period representation; historical construction/social construction; empathy/moral response*) for classroom activities involving the film.

Field notes: Student actions

- Describe and write down preliminary analysis for student actions in the classroom involving, relating to, or in response to the use of the movie.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol for Classroom Teachers

[Directions: Interview the teacher privately. Audio-record the interview for subsequent transcription and coding. If the teacher says something that inspires the interviewer to ask a spontaneous question not on the script, record both the question and the teacher's response to it.]

Background Interview

- I. **Introduction:** Begin by explaining the purpose of the study to the participating teacher. Go over the details in the introductory letter sent earlier to the teacher.
- Explain that there will be one interview before and one after the film is shown in class.
 - Interviews will be audio-recorded for research purposes only. All recordings will be kept within the research setting to protect privacy to the maximum extent allowed by law.
 - Explain that consenting to participate does not commit the teacher or any of the students to further involvement in this dissertation beyond the observations and interviews.
- II. **Consent:** If the teacher agrees to participate, hand over the consent form to be signed.
- III. **Background questions:** Read: "Thanks for letting me come into your classroom and watch you teach. First, I have some background questions I'd like to ask in order to learn about you."
- 1.) Tell me about your background as a teacher. How long have you been teaching?
- A. Where did you go to college? What degrees and certification do you hold?
 - B. What is your teaching load like this year? Is this year's load typical?
- 2.) How often do you use video media (television programs, educational videos, movies, documentaries) in your classroom?
- A. Can you tell me some of your favorite titles that you show in class each year?
 - B. What Hollywood history movies do you show in class each year?
- 3.) Where do you get the video media you use in class?
- A. Are there other resources you would like to use but can't? If so, what are they?
 - B. What would it take for you to get those materials?
- 4.) What topics are you covering in the unit I'll be observing?
- A. Why did you decide to use a history movie in this unit?
 - B. *Ask the teacher for a copy of the unit lesson plan, if possible.*

Pre-Film Interview: Conduct this interview before the film is shown in class.

I. Choosing the history film for this unit:

- 1.) What movie did you choose to show for this unit?
 - A. Why did you choose it?
 - B. What else do you think I should know about this movie?
- 2.) Were there any other movies you considered choosing instead of this one?
 - A. If so, what were the other titles?
 - B. Why did you select the movie you did over the other possible titles?
- 3.) Did you have any concerns about choosing this particular movie to show in class?
 - A. If so, what are the concerns?
 - B. How did you think through the pros and cons of using this movie?
 - C. Why did the concerns not dissuade you from choosing this movie?
- 4.) How does the movie chosen for this unit compare with other history movies you have previously shown in the classroom (either last year or earlier this year)?
 - A. Is the movie you picked for this unit typical of what you've done in the past?
 - B. Are there any ways that it is different from what you've done in the past?
- 5.) Are there other movies that you've shown in the past, or that you are planning on showing in the future, that you think are better than this movie (in terms of educational value and quality)?
 - A. If so, what makes these other movies better?
 - B. If not, what makes the movie chosen for this unit better than the others?
- 6.) Can you tell me a little about what you want the students to do during or after the film?
 - A. Will any questions on the unit test be based directly on the film? [How many?]
 - B. Will portions of the unit test indirectly draw from the film? [In what way?]
 - C. Will activities relating to the film be graded? [What portion of the unit's points?]
 - D. Will activities relating to the film be included in an overall participation grade?

II. Teacher intentions in using history films:

- 7.) What do you think is the generally best reason for a teacher to use a history movie in class?
 - A. What do you think is the worst reason?
 - B. Are there other reasons why you've used movies in class in the past?

8.) What do you specifically hope your students will get from watching this movie in class?

- A. What do you hope it will teach them about history?
- B. What do you hope it will help them think about our world today?

III. Teacher opinions about history films:

9.) Based on your experience working with kids, do you think Hollywood history movies influence how they think or what they know about the past?

- A. If yes, how much influence? In what ways?
- B. If no, why are students not influenced by history movies?

10.) I'd like to hear your opinions on two statements about Hollywood history movies...

- Statement 1: "The motion-picture industry has an obligation to historical fact. Since so many people see their movies, filmmakers should tell the truth about the past as much as possible."
- Statement 2: "The motion-picture industry is in the business of entertainment. Filmmakers should have complete freedom to tell fictional stories and make things up about the past."

Post-Film Interview: Conduct this interview after the film is shown in class.

I. Reflecting on the film used:

1.) Are you glad you chose this movie to show to your students?

- A. If yes, why was it the right choice?
- B. If no, what film do you wish you had used? Why?

2.) Did you discover any benefits to using this movie in class that you didn't expect?

- A. Did you find any problems that you didn't anticipate?

3.) Overall, how do you think the movie lesson went?

- A. What goals for the unit do you feel the movie lesson met?
- B. Do you feel the movie lesson fell short of any of your goals?
- C. Would you make any changes to this movie lesson if you taught it again?

4.) How do you feel the student work with the movie went?

- A. Would you make any changes to the student work if you used this movie again?

II. Thinking about teacher intentions: Read: "I'm going to read some short scenarios involving history movies in the classroom. What are your thoughts about the teacher's goals and choices?"

- 5.) A teacher has been assigned world history as a new prep. He gets to the unit on the modernization of Japan and, because he himself doesn't have any background in Japanese history, decides to show the Tom Cruise movie *The Last Samurai* to cover the content.
- 6.) A teacher wants to make her unit on World War II more exciting for her students. She shows them Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* to motivate interest in D-Day.
- 7.) A teacher has just completed a unit on ancient Greece and Rome that required his students to work hard. The next week he shows them the Russell Crowe movie *Gladiator* as a fun reward.
- 8.) A teacher is facing a family crisis. She needs to miss several days this week and doesn't have time to work up alternate lesson plans. Her students have been studying the United States before the Civil War, so she has her students watch the 2004 version of *The Alamo* that week.
- 9.) A teacher feels that his district's required textbook is biased against the U.S. in the Vietnam War. He shows the Mel Gibson movie *We Were Soldiers* in class to challenge the textbook.
- 10.) A teacher is an advocate for gay rights. She shows scenes from Oliver Stone's *Alexander* in which Alexander the Great expresses romantic love for a male friend. She hopes that teaching students about homosexuality in history will advance greater acceptance for gays today.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol for Students

Read: “Thanks for talking with me today. I want to ask you some questions about your reaction to the history movie you watched in class and what you think about history movies. I need to audio-record our conversation, and I want you to know that the recording will be used only for my research. The recording won’t be shared with your teacher, parents, or classmates. Do you have any questions for me?”
[Address any concerns raised.]

I. Student reactions to the film used in class:

- 1.) What did you think about the movie you watched in class?
- 2.) Would you have watched this movie on your own, on TV, video, or DVD? Why or why not?
- 3.) Why do you think your teacher chose to show this movie?
- 4.) Did you learn anything from watching this movie in class?
 - A. What did the movie teach you or make you feel about the past?
 - B. What did the movie teach you or make you feel about our world today?
- 5.) Tell me what you thought about the work you did in class involving the movie.
 - A. How did the work help you understand the movie better or get more out of it?
 - B. How did the work help you learn more about history from the movie?

II. Student reactions to history media in general:

- 6.) What’s the best Hollywood or TV movie about history or set during the past that you’ve ever seen (in school or on your own)?
 - A. What made this movie so good?
 - B. Do you think this movie could be used in school? Why or why not?
- 7.) How often do you watch videos (movies or educational programs) in your social studies classes?
 - A. Do you think this is too much, not enough, or just the right amount?
 - B. Can you tell me about a time when you watched a history video in class and really learned a lot from it? What was it, what happened to make it so memorable?
- 8.) Do you like watching Hollywood movies about history in school? Why or why not?

9.) When you watch Hollywood history movies, do you believe you are learning about real history?

A. Have you ever watched a history movie and then read about that period of time in order to learn whether something in the movie was true or made-up?

B. How much of what you know about the past do you feel you've learned from movies?

10.) I'm going to give you a list of ways people learn about history. This list is in alphabetical order, but I'd like you to put them in order of how much influence you think they have had on what you know about history. So you put the one you've learned the most from first, and the one you've learned the least from last...

- Books (either books required at school or books you found on your own)
- Family (talking with parents, grandparents, and other relatives)
- Movies (Hollywood moves either in the movie theater or on TV, video, or DVD)
- Museums (including other kinds of historic sites or monuments)
- Teachers (what you learn at school)
- TV programs (educational shows on TV, like the History Channel or PBS).

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