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ABSTRACT

This project seeks to bring an immediacy and interest to historical events through the use of Hollywood feature films. Some of the films used to promote interest in history are "Inherit the Wind," "All the President's Men," "The Birth of a Nation," and "Reds." Films used in the class should be available on videocassettes because they are less expensive to buy or rent than the reel-to-reel format. The instructor may show short scenes from several films, to allow students to choose one film to view at their leisure. After viewing the film, the student reads a teacher-prepared essay on the film, critiques the content, and suggests parallels with other historical events. From a list provided by the instructor, the student selects a report topic. Papers may be rewritten until two weeks before the end of the semester, as the student continually refines research and writing skills. The project may be adapted for use in other subjects. (SM)

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HOLLYWOOD FILMS AS A TEACHING TOOL

by

Marlette Reborn

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Hollywood Films as a Teaching Tool

by Marlette Reborn

Instructor of History

I teach history, and I have a problem. Actually, I have two problems. For one thing, my students have a preconceived notion that history is dull because it deals only with events long ago and faraway, and that the discipline is fundamentally irrelevant. In addition, my students have inadequate writing skills which need to be improved. Rather than simply complaining about this state of affairs, I have developed a project which seeks to bring an immediacy and interest to historical events and which further attempts to get students writing about something which interests them. Specifically, I use Hollywood feature films to enrich and enliven my classes in a project that could easily be adapted to other disciplines.

The films I have chosen either portray major historical events, such as Inherit the Wind (the Scopes trial) or All the President's Men (Watergate), or have major historical events as background, such as the American Civil War in The Birth of a Nation or the Russian revolution in Reds. Furthermore, these films must be available on videocassettes which are cheaper to buy than reel-to-reel films are to rent, and which moreover allow students with busy schedules to see the film at their leisure, stopping to view a scene again if necessary. This is not a project in the history of film or film making per se, however. Thus, Citizen Kane, though very important for the development of film editing and camerawork, is omitted.

The project works like this. A student views the film, either using the videocassette at the college or renting one for a nominal fee, or he

sees it on cable television. The student then reads an essay I have written which sets the film in historical perspective, critiques information in the film, and suggests parallels with other historical events. The student chooses a topic from a list I provide, topics which run the gamut from traditional book reports, to small and large research projects, to interpretive essays. Moreover, students are encouraged to develop their own topics, which they have been very creative in doing. Each topic involves pre-arranged credit. Therefore, the student either receives credit for the paper, and so completes his contract, or he does not. I mark the papers and permit students unlimited rewriting to be accomplished within two weeks towards the end of the semester.

The project has many advantages. My students are more visually than print oriented, and so react favorably to films in a way they do not to print material. Moreover, in critiquing a film, students utilize skills they already possess and hone life skills they will benefit from long after they leave the class. Equally important, they are developing new skills of writing and research, a task they will do more cheerfully if they are interested in a topic in the first place. Finally, instructors need not be film specialists, nor even familiar with the film, because they grade the project papers on the basis of knowledge they already possess, such as how a good research paper, book report or essay should look.

This project can be used in classes other than history, of course. For example, The Grapes of Wrath could be used to investigate how a film differs from a novel. One student in fashion design researched the costumes in Beckett (and found them inaccurate), while another interested in acting used Marlon Brando's performance in On the Waterfront to discuss the method school of acting. A music major did an excellent paper on the

"Pineapple Rag" after seeing Ragtime. The project has even been used with success in computer science, a colleague in San Antonio has students look at War Games, and research what kind of computer could have been used.

Even in the realm of history, the project allows instructors greater flexibility in meeting student needs. Some students interested in specific areas of history which I can cover only briefly in a survey course, for example, have used the film project to study these further. Thus, women's studies are addressed in the essay on Adam's Rib, a Spencer Tracy/ Katherine Hepburn vehicle, while Indian history is important for Fort Apache. If a student would like a reading list on a certain topic, say the social consequences of the French revolution, an instructor could simply pull out the topics list for Danton, and have a ready made bibliography, a real godsend for harried teachers who frequently do not have the time to develop such bibliographies for all students who ask for one

Most instructors using this project do not show the entire film in class, preferring instead to have students view it at their leisure. However, a particular scene or several short scenes from different films could be shown in class to illustrate a specific point. I regularly show a clip from Top Hat with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to explain developments in modern dance, for example. In most cases, media specialists can create a individual cassette containing only the portions of the film you want. This avoids the problem of fussing with several cassette tapes trying to find the appropriate material.

The project has met with great success at Austin Community College where I teach. Once students understood that the use of films was not an invitation to sloppy work, they came to appreciate the chance to explore a

topic they chose on their own. Some told me with great pleasure of the conversations their viewing of the film engendered with their families, and everyone agreed the project had sharpened their critical viewing and writing skills. Finally, no one who saw films like The Deerhunter or Charlie Chaplin's City Lights ever again thought of history as being dull!