

## History through Movies: The United States

*Charles Sauter*

### INTRODUCTION

Do your ears ring with the cries of “Miss! Miss!” even though you are a man? Do you catch yourself saying “*Sientete!*” or “*poquito, poquito*” as second nature? Have you ever taken a student’s note and later laboriously attempted to translate it into your native tongue? If so, then you probably work, as do I, as a teacher in a predominantly Hispanic school. And if you work, as I do, in a *middle* school, and if you are like me at all, then the effects of working with that age group would have rubbed off on you, leaving you short-tempered, demanding, and impatient. Consequently, I shall get to the point. The following essay presents a series of lesson plans, henceforth referred to as the ‘unit,’ and a narrative describing the processes that produced that unit. The title of the unit is “*History through Movies: The United States.*” The focus of the unit will be on history, not on movies. I will explain in more detail further in the text. I designed the unit to address the needs of my eighth grade US history students. However, there are ideas and techniques concerning the use of movies in the classroom that may be useful to teachers of different grade levels or disciplines. So, I beseech you to read on and I will at least try not to bore you into surfing ever onward.

### REASONS TO USE FILMS IN THE STUDY OF HISTORY

This unit aims to bring the study of history to life. Films about history allow people to empathize with characters from the past. When a viewer creates a relationship with that character, the past develops a third dimension. It comes to life. Unfortunately, my students often lose interest in history when it is presented through dry texts. They fail to create the mental images that would assist them in grasping the real life dramas played out on the stage of history. Movies, when used in conjunction with traditional reading sources, will assist their imagination and guide them to the acquisition of greater imaginative powers. In addition to developing their imagination, I believe that viewing movies that portray a historical era will increase the students’ level of retention. This will occur as either a result of simple fascination with the movie shown, or as a product of being exposed to different methods of instruction.

Perhaps in a ‘perfect’ world, students would adapt to the teaching styles of their tutors. They would quickly grasp the means by which their teacher expresses his distilled knowledge, and then they would receive that information without complaint. However, in this world we know that not all students learn the same way, and, unfortunately, not all teachers seem to care. As a teacher of sometimes attention-deficient eighth graders, I am confronted by a need to use varied approaches in a never-ending struggle to bring my

subject material to life. One way to reach students, who might otherwise not be open to learning, is to appeal to different learning styles. Visual media appeals to many different types of learners, even if only by changing the pace and style of instruction. Other advantages exist, as well, when one introduces video into the classroom. Specifically, students whose first language is not English may profit from the added emphasis on the visual.

At an ever-increasing pace, technology is changing the world. Today, a person can read virtually any book ever written while not moving from the chair at their computer table. Television, for good or for bad, is reaching into more homes than ever, while TV programs delve into more topics than ever before. In addition, people of all ages, but young people especially, have become accustomed to gathering information from both television and movies. Consequently they have developed, unbeknownst to themselves, a substantial potential for gaining knowledge from electronic media. Like an aligning of the planets for the astronomer, the convergence of these social developments provides a golden opportunity for educators. A resource, efficient and plentiful, lies waiting to be tapped. It is the responsibility of teachers to both find the means and shape the resource for bringing it into the classroom. In this unit I will utilize lessons that tap into that potential. Students will learn to view technology as a means of both education and entertainment, not simply entertainment alone. Furthermore, the students will learn to search out educational shows on television, as well as feature films, and be able to view them with a new, more critical eye.

We are all aware of the spate of recent episodes of violence in our schools. Some of the blame has fallen on Hollywood and the other producers of electronic media. The products from these sources often seem to promote violence, portray drug use in a positive light, or objectify women. The reality of what society accepts and these flights of fantasy that Hollywood frequently creates are worlds apart. Yet this is a fact that often bypasses children of today, especially those lacking strong family supervision. Indeed, the gratuitous violence in today's movies presents a stumbling block for this unit. I am not concerned that my eighth graders would not be able to handle what I would show them. In fact, I am sure they watch far worse. However, without the modeling of appropriate ways of interpreting these violent stimuli, society will go on producing maladjusted youth. In taking the time to discuss the manner in which the special effects create these illusions of violence, you will provide young people with the tools they need to distinguish proper from improper. We must help students step outside the story, when necessary, and to objectively perceive the nature of any one movie's illusion. Teaching them to question the technical side of movie making will allow them to see the rest of picture, so to speak. The timeliness of addressing this situation could never be more appropriate. One reason a unit like this is a worthwhile undertaking, consequently, would be to teach students the importance of differentiating between the real world and Hollywood's world. Critical film viewing is a skill that all people, in fact, need to develop.

Indeed, some of the films discussed in this unit contain graphic violence. While the students themselves may not raise objections to the violence, the other groups involved in the educational process, parents and administrators, might. As a teacher, I often wonder how parents can raise children to act they way I have seen them act. I am not able to answer, although I can say that we are not free to allow ourselves to worry about such matters. True, the irony that teachers need professional certificates to deal with children eight hours a day, while any unnamed individual needs to meet considerably far fewer requirements to *produce* children and then deal with them *twenty four* hours a day does not go unappreciated in the field of education. However, we have a professional standard to uphold. We, as teachers, owe it to ourselves to act in all matters with a concern for every possible contingency of the public trust. Only through maintaining that standard we will be able to demand a fair ‘market’ value and a fair ‘societal’ value for our services. Therefore, the proper protocol must be followed in gaining permission to show these films.

## **SIX MOVIES TO USE IN TEACHING UNITED STATES HISTORY**

There are a number of movies dealing with actual events and/or real individuals from US history. There are even more movies that, while they do not attempt to stay true to the facts, are simply set in a particular time period. Both types have their uses. Almost any movie, for that matter, could be used in a classroom setting, just as any event, idea, or object could be used as a source of a teaching moment. There is one possible exception, though, for I have found that the best movies, the ones that my students connect with most easily and completely, are the ones that are relatively new. Show a video over twenty years old and you will be taking a chance on losing your entire class for the next week.

I have chosen six movies to focus on for the purpose of using in my classroom. The movies can be divided into three sets of two. Each set deals with a particular period of United States history. Only two of those movies will be dealt with in depth in this unit. I must caution you. If after reading this unit, you do choose to show any of these movies in class, please remember that some of them are R-rated. Permission must be asked of your various administrators *for all of the movies*, and then, depending on the age of your students, permission slips will need to be signed by parents. None of these movies are suitable for elementary students and you may feel that some of them are unsuitable for middle school students, as well. Please preview them before showing them to your students.

### **Colonial America**

The first two movies include *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), directed by Michael Mann, and *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) directed by John Ford. These movies deal with the relationships between Native Americans, Colonists, and the British.

Unfortunately, while *Drums Along the Mohawk* is widely considered a classic, students of today often show little respect for that delineation. Therefore, I caution those who would, without great preparation, subject young people to a sitting of the old, black and white movie.

*The Last of the Mohicans*, based on the book of the same name by James Fenimore Cooper, is the story of a heroic white man raised by Indians. Cooper wrote a series of novels concerning this same character. In this ‘episode,’ the hero, Deerslayer, escorts the daughters of a British major through hostile territory and then protects them from the wrath of a vengeful Huron. One early scene in particular portrays the bind in which American colonists find themselves during this crucial time in history. Caught between the political machinations of England and France and struggling with Indian problems of their own, American colonists begin to think of themselves as a separate and independent entity. This scene, in which British soldiers indignantly rebuke colonists who are slow to establish a militia to join the fight against the French, would really help establish a visual reinforcement of the budding conflict between English and colonists. Other scenes portray battle styles of the time and help explain why the British came very close to losing the French and Indian war. Furthermore, the clothing, equipment, and scenery will give students a fair idea of life at the time.

I would recommend showing this movie to your students. I believe it would captivate them with its lush imagery and sweeping scope. It portrays a few bloody scenes which may not be appropriate for all, although it certainly will interest the students. On the other hand, there are historical inaccuracies. The best place to find out what those are would be on the Internet. Try the web-sites listed in the bibliography.

### **A Pair of Revolutionary War Movies**

The second set of two will be the movies I discuss here in detail. *Revolution* (1985), directed by Hugh Hudson, and *The Patriot* (2000), directed by Roland Emmerich, both employ big name stars. Hudson is known for his successful *Chariots of Fire*, but this other product of his failed to garner either critical or box office success. The movie does have much to offer, though, and it makes a nice contrast to Emmerich’s film.

*The Patriot* takes place in South Carolina in 1776. Benjamin Martin, the hero, and I do not use the term lightly, owns a rather idyllic plantation. A widower with a veritable litter of children, he beneficently lords it over his small realm. When the Colonial Assembly convenes in Charles Town, he attends with his family. While there, his eldest son joins the Continental Army against his father’s wishes, after which Martin returns to his home only to find that the war has followed. One particularly dastardly British officer shoots and kills Martin’s second eldest son. From there, Martin is implacably drawn into the violence he wishes to avoid. In one unbelievable scene he wipes out an entire column of Redcoats with only the help of his two youngest, pre-

adolescent sons. He quickly becomes the leader of a band of guerilla style militiamen who harass Lord Cornwallis' Redcoats more efficiently than Bugs Bunny ever tortured Elmer Fudd. Indeed, Martins exploits border on the cartoonish. At one point he tricks Cornwallis into believing he holds as prisoners captured British officers that none of the British seem to know about. Fair enough, these things can happen in war. The problem is he has them standing within sight of the British encampment, and, of course, the officers turn out to be nothing more than scarecrows dressed in uniform. Cornwallis, the epitome of gullibility, conveniently looks at them only through a spyglass and promptly swallows all this without blinking. Truly, how could the colonists lose a war against such simpletons? Consequently, the British resort to evermore ruthless actions to bring to heel the evermore successful Martin. This, in conjunction with Martin's (and by proxy, the filmmakers') supposed distaste for the horrors of war, conveniently justifies the violence in the movie. At one and the same time, the movie declaims the evil of war and then goes on to graphically depict the violence, effectively glorifying it. Does it sound like I do not like the movie? Well, the truth is I have a love/hate relationship with it.

In typical Mel Gibson fashion, he stars in a movie that is a study of stark contrasts. Gibson's character represents all that is noble, his adversaries, while clever and formidable, personify evil. In the Gibson reality, good ultimately vanquishes evil. Improbabilities abound as a result. The trick played on Cornwallis is one example; there are others. The rub is that I do not think this will stop the students from enjoying the movie, though, and therefore I accept the flaws in order to reap the rewards. In fact I wonder if anything other than this over-the-top, full-blown Hollywood monster would actually hold, even pique, my students' interest. They are only eighth graders, and one thing I have learned about eighth graders in my six years of teaching them is that you can only get so much blood from a turnip. Yes, I know that does not make sense...neither do eighth graders.

Yes, this movie leaves a great deal to be desired. Martin is an anachronism; a man of twentieth century sensibilities living in the eighteenth century. As a historian, I want to inveigh against this type of revisionism. My gut reaction is to view this as an unadulterated act of egotism on behalf of the moviemakers. After simmering down, though, I decided to give Gibson and company the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps they were simply trying to come to mutually satisfactory ground between historical accuracy and crowd-pleasing Hollywood hoopla. Ultimately, it benefits me more, as a teacher, to approach a movie like this as an opportunity to discuss something already in the students' eyes, something that does have historical value. Any historical inaccuracies can be manipulated to serve good purposes or at the very least as take off points for discussion. Furthermore, it could be worse. It could have been directed by Oliver Stone and delved into a second gunman conspiracy at the Hamilton-Burr duel. (Who else stood to gain from the death Hamilton?)

One interesting theme to discuss with students is the relationship between the father and his eldest son. This son is the real patriot of the movie. It is he who signs up for the Continental Army. It is for his sake that another son dies and that the father is drawn into the war. In fact, Benjamin Martin does not truly understand or care about the Revolution until after this oldest son is killed. Only then does he, quite literally too, 'embrace the flag.' What makes this most interesting is the fact that the second movie I want to discuss follows almost the exact same blueprint. In *Revolution*, a man loses everything to the hardships of war. He does not care to be involved in the social upheavals of war; he just wants to be left alone to do his thing. Inevitably, he is drawn into the conflict where he finds danger, death, love, and finally redemption. Sound familiar? It should, I think it is one of the enduring myths of Hollywood. You can find this character anywhere from recent gang films to old westerns to science fiction. In the case of *Revolution*, the son is integral in drawing the father into the war. This is one comparison

### **The Civil War**

Lastly, in an effort to round out the school year I studied two films about the Civil War: *Glory* (1989), directed by Edward Zwick, and *Gettysburg* (1993), directed by Ronald F. Maxwell. Unlike the previous pairings, these two movies do not have much in common. They do, however, each offer something valuable to the study of the time period in question.

*Gettysburg* details the actions of the most famous battle of the war. It is a movie about an event rather than people, and therefore the plot may not appeal to many students. Its main value comes from its adherence to the facts. It is a good portrayal of what a Civil War battle would have been like for the soldiers, officers, and civilians who experienced it. *Glory* is the mostly factual story of the 54th Massachusetts regiment, one of the first black regiments in the Civil war. Anchored by a nice group of actors, this movie will have far greater appeal to typical students than the previous one. There are a few bloody scenes depicting, once again, the horrors of war. If the students truly see these scenes as being anti-war in nature, both here and in the other movies, then I believe there is some worth to the depiction of violence. However, I would make sure that students, in order to draw a line between fact and fantasy, discuss the technical elements of the scene. Reducing movie violence to an analysis of technique and methodology will go a long way to ameliorate any negative psychological repercussions.

### **OVERVIEW OF LESSON PLANS**

First and foremost, I have designed this unit for my own use. I chose to pursue this topic as a result of a weak link in my teaching repertoire; that is, I do not naturally possess the hyper-kinetic teaching style that allows some of my colleagues to mesmerize a room full of students through sheer oratory skill alone. Apart from restraining vigilance, I think

most teachers tend to drift toward pedagogy, and I am no exception. Meanwhile, ad-libbing leaves me sounding as stale as old parchment paper. In light of this fact, the paths to knowledge in my classroom need to be trail-marked with outside influences to maintain the course towards a fresh and lively atmosphere. As a custodian of the road to knowledge, I reject the tolls of silence and servility imposed by tyrannous teachers. Yet equally do I disdain the growth of the inhibiting weeds of disrespect and contumely. Instead, I try to balance my approaches. I do not look down on assistance, in fact I actively search for ways to supplement my strengths and shore up my weaknesses. In creating this unit, I turn to other sources to provide stimulation, or more accurately, variety, to the students, and this leaves me free to ask, and demand serious attention to, weightier questions.

During the initial phase of this unit, my students will, simply put, learn to watch films for historical information. This goal contains a host of potential pitfalls, as well as a myriad of teaching moments. Therefore, it is important that the students are carefully prepared prior to beginning the unit. Proper preparation will circumvent many potential problems. The students need to be instructed on how to watch a movie in an objective and observant manner. This goal will necessitate the use of an entire lesson, if not two. It is of critical importance. I imagine that this will be an eye-opening experience for both the teacher and student. Students probably possess a keener eye for the intricacies of critical observation than teachers would expect, at least in the realm of movie or TV viewing. After all, the youth of today are already veterans of what amounts to probably thousands of hours of experience, and, while young people may sometimes not have developed mature thought processes, their powers of observation are no less sharp than those of adults. Students do not always observe what we adults expect, either. They quite capably pick up unintentionally humorous or uncomfortable situations, while things that seem obvious to their elders go by unnoticed. Therefore, students might often appear to fall somewhat in the category of ‘idiot savants.’ This is especially true since their familiarity with the jargon of professional criticism is probably low, thus creating simultaneously an individual with a low level of critical vocabulary and knowledge but a quick and potent level of non-verbal comprehension.

Another good reason for extrapolating prior knowledge lies in the ‘ability level’ phenomenon. Students will undoubtedly arrive in the class possessing different ability levels. This is always one of the greatest challenges of teaching. Within one classroom, one may find wildly divergent ability levels, and the challenge of engaging all the students to the utmost of their capabilities separates the excellent teacher from the mediocre one. Many solutions exist; unfortunately a discussion of them would take us beyond the scope of this narrative. In any case, this challenge is one that all teachers face in all classroom settings; therefore, no special attention shall be given to that topic in this unit, other than to say each teacher should address it in his or her own way.

So, my first act of the unit shall be to plumb the levels of critical awareness

possessed by my students, as you may well wish to do with yours. Accessing prior knowledge provides a valuable foundation on which to create lesson plans big or small, but the more ambitious one is in one's plans, the more important it is that all students are able to draw on at least a minimal background knowledge. In my case I will first provide a timed worksheet activity on movie watching. The students will watch a movie clip. Then the worksheet will be passed out. The questions will be designed to discover how much detail they noticed, and also how much they know about film making. I may even sneak in a higher level question or two concerning the intentions of the filmmakers. Then, after we discuss the answers, we will discuss the skills needed of a "movie critic."

The second act of the unit shall involve you, the teacher, who now must ask yourself what you know of the movie industry. Some teachers have a background in theatre, and these individuals might possess the technical background necessary for complete critical analysis of films. Probably the majority of teachers, and undoubtedly of students, does not have the knowledge of the technical side of the industry to produce a proper critical analysis of a movie. Specifically, I am referring to such aspects as camera angles, panning, zoom effects, various lighting effects, sound effects, and other tricks of the trade. Therefore, some note taking will be in order concerning the movie industry, especially the many technical variables each director uses to produce his own personal vision. I would use the same film clip, if possible, used in the previous questionnaire in order to help students explore examples of these techniques. Repeated use of the same clip will drive home to the students just how much substance can be fitted within just a few moments of film. This will reinforce the point that the students have never viewed a film in as complete a manner as a film can be viewed.

Here I must pause to clarify a rather important point. I will not be seeking to create a room full of art critics, thumbs cocked and at the ready. History is my forte and history is my job. We will spend time discussing the motives and techniques of the moviemakers (actors, directors, producers, I clump them all into one undistinguishable mass); however, the primary objective of discussing history will remain foremost in consideration. When I use the term "critic," I mean to imply an individual able to maintain objectivity, thus enabling unimpassioned analysis of the various qualities of a film.

During the course of this unit, my students will learn to approach films in two ways. First, they will learn to study films so as to learn basic historical facts. For instance candles were everywhere present during colonial times because electricity had not been invented. Students will be directed to look for the manner in which the moviemakers addressed this fact. Did the movie address this fact or was it simply ignored? Keep in mind that these are eighth grade students-- inner city, at-risk, English-as-a-Second-Language students. They will not necessarily be expected to discern obtuse historical fallacies or anachronisms, such as whether or not George Washington really wore red epaulets during the winter encampment at Valley Forge. My students do not

possess the prior knowledge to delve deeply into questions of historical accuracy. Instead, the instruction will lead the students to look for differences between their lifestyles and those of the past. Questions that will be raised will include some of the following: What types of technology are apparent? How would living with only these technologies impact one's life? How did people treat one another? Were any groups treated differently than they are today? What motivated the characters in this movie? Do similar things motivate people today?

Another approach to movies that we will utilize deals with the issue of the director's intentions. The students will begin to develop the ability to question the motives and intents of the filmmakers. They will examine films that cover similar or identical time periods, yet these films will have different visions of that era. For instance, we will study both *The Patriot* and *Revolution*. These two films are set in the Revolutionary War, and have many other similarities in plot, but the visions they create of life at that time are entirely different. The former is uplifting and clear, while the latter has an almost dirty and hazy quality to it. The students will be asked what they think motivated the two directors. "What were the directors trying to accomplish in creating a movie that looked like this?"

## **LESSON PLAN ONE**

As a class, we will learn to deconstruct movies through the use of critical analysis. The students will not only sharpen their perceptions in regards to viewing media, but they will also come away with an increased knowledge of and appreciation for the history of the United States. Basically, we will focus on particular scenes, but the students may also deserve the reward of watching a movie in its entirety. Therefore, we will preview certain scenes from two movies concerning the Revolutionary War. Then, we will watch each movie individually, critiquing them and finally comparing them with each other. Throughout the process, historical themes and facts will be focus of the unit.

This lesson plan deals with the need for starting all students on the same page. The first activity students will tackle entails viewing a clip of a movie. In this case, I will use a one and a half minute scene from *The Patriot* where a colonial family is shown going about their daily business, which includes reading the mail. While employing this particular scene is the visual equivalent of throwing a meatball across the plate, I still choose to show it because it is one of the most important in the entire movie, at least for my purposes. It reveals many common aspects of life in the 1700s with which people of today no longer deal. The family is shown sitting in front of the fire, not the television. Ubiquitous candles dominate the background, muskets hang above the fireplace, and clothes show off frills, ruffles and the precursors of modern day ties (especially interesting if the teacher wears a tie-as a means to 'tie' the past to the future). The purpose of showing this clip is to determine how many students notice details and to get

all students to understand that they will be expected to pay attention to the details from now on.

While we *will* discuss the reasons for the American Revolution and the social upheaval of the times, we also want to also focus in on the small details of everyday colonial life. As I already mentioned, my students lose sight of the fact that history is the study of people just like themselves. Highlighting the mundane and, through discussion, elevating it, we will inject a shot of vitality into the study of history.

If this particular scene does not seem appropriate to you, then by all means use another. Do not, however, skip this lesson. I feel that this component of the overall unit is very critical. If the teacher does not properly model the viewing movies with a critical eye, then students will miss out on fully half of the purpose of this unit. One of the pitfalls of showing movies occurs when too little instruction is provided. We are all aware of the stereotype of the uncaring teacher who always shows videos and does so simply to avoid having to work. In fact, I myself remember being able to rely on one of my own high school history teachers to show a movie or video like clockwork. While that may work for some students, others will be left out. Therefore, students must be taught to observe a movie as a resource or even, dare I say, as work. They must focus on gleaning the screen for props that reflect the times. They must learn to force their attention outside the center of the screen and observe the periphery, for that is where one finds those details of everyday life.

Ironically, it is on the periphery where films usually stay truest to history. Moviemakers most often fudge when it comes to the plot, as the temptation to create larger than life characters exerts a strong pull. After all, great characters make great stories, no matter what the time period. Moviemakers probably find it easier to keep the details accurate, rather than the story line. They also have help in maintaining accurate details, whereas keeping the plot interesting may fall squarely on their shoulders. Therefore let us not accuse the director unfairly for selling his soul to pursue a white whale; Ahab himself has his redeemable qualities.

In any case, this scene, which starts at five minutes and ends at six-and-a-half minutes (to the best of my calculations), will suit the knowledge level of my students perfectly, as it is full of easily discernible historical data. A worksheet goes with this scene. As to the method of delivery, I leave that up to the individual teacher. You may chose to hand out the worksheet first, go over it beforehand, then show the clip, or you may chose to show the clip, hand out the worksheet, then show the clip again. There are as many different ways to go about it as there are classes with different personalities. Since I have a Pre-Advanced Placement class (Honors), regular classes, and classes with high numbers of Special Education and ESL students, I will probably not repeat any given system. I usually play it by ear. In my ESL and Special Education classes, I will probably show the clip, discuss, hand out the worksheet, read it and talk about it, then

show the clip again. On the other hand, my Pre-AP class would probably be clawing at the walls if I were to try that method on them. All I can say is, it's up to you.

I include two worksheets at the end of this narrative (see appendix A and B). One is to be used specifically with this scene, and the other is a generic worksheet to be used to fit your needs. Depending on the length of your classes, this may or may not take the entire class. I suggest showing another clip from another movie during the same period. Discuss the details of the props and the motivations of the characters. Discuss the vision and intentions of the Director, too. Anything to get the students to look at movies in a new light, to look beyond the surface level, and to understand that movies can serve many purposes.

## **LESSON PLAN TWO: *THE PATRIOT***

After careful consideration, I arrived at the conclusion that showing students *The Patriot* first would be the best. This movie is more uplifting, more engaging, and more fun than *Revolution*. I feel that if the students start off on the 'right foot' and enjoy the unit from the start, they are more likely to stick with *Revolution* in its darker, slower moments. Whereas if the students get 'turned off' by the slower pace and gloom of *Revolution* then they will be less likely to pay attention to the unit as a whole.

Students will copy a list of the names of the main characters. Students will then be divided up into groups. Each group will be assigned a main character. The groups will be responsible for following that character through the story. They will put themselves in the shoes of the character and do their best to chronicle the events that move and the emotions that drive that character. Some embellishment might be allowed if that suits you. The groups will have the objective of casting their character in the best possible light. The most important thing here is for the students to empathize with the characters. Each group will report back to the class in the form of a diary that will be read aloud by either one or all of the group members. Then, by careful steering of the final discussion, the students will gain insight into how plot can be manipulated to create a desired effect on the audience.

The movie is about two-and-one-half hours long, so it should take almost a whole week to view. Once the lesson is explained and the objectives are covered, we will get right to the movie. I will undoubtedly pause occasionally to reinforce some of the concepts we discussed during lesson one. However, that will be the focus of the next lesson, so I will not spend too much time on it here. As the movie is being shown the students should be considering their assignment. Then they should be allowed twenty minutes at the end of each class to discuss their findings. Another class period, or a part of one, will be needed to complete the assignment before the presentations. Finally, as a means of closure, the students should discuss the way the filmmakers created sympathy in the audience for certain characters.

### **LESSON PLAN THREE: *REVOLUTION***

Between the lesson described above and this one the teacher will take the time to expose students to terminology of the trade. I suggest using the book *The Art of Watching Films* (see bibliography) as a resource for researching that terminology. Simply put, the objective of this unit will be to identify techniques used by film-makers to create a mood. In this lesson the students will get to watch a movie set in a similar time period but with a different feel. Therefore, in this lesson we will focus on the techniques used to alter atmosphere.

The students will watch the first scene of the movie wherein the colonists pull down a statue of King George in New York City. In this scene music, lighting, and costume all create a somber, foreboding, and even frightening atmosphere. We will discuss other movies from their own experiences in which similar techniques are used. Then we will watch the next thirty minutes of the film, up until the time that the British complete the victory at the Battle of Long Island. During this time the students will look for three examples where music creates a mood. The students will also find three places where make-up alters the mood of the movie and three places where lighting has an effect on the atmosphere. After making their lists the students will share with the same groups from the previous lesson. In the groups the students will share their findings and look for patterns or recurring methods. For instance: Is the sky always darkest when the colonists are shown preparing for war? Does a certain recurring strain of music occur when the British appear? After class wide discussion, these findings, between five and ten, should be listed on the board or on an overhead. Then each student should write down the reason why they think the moviemakers created such effects. The purpose of this exercise is, as with the previous movie, to gain insight into the methods which filmmakers use to make a statement.

### **LESSON PLAN FOUR: COMPARE/CONTRAST**

As a means of reviewing both the subject material and the movies in question, the students will next be instructed to complete a compare/contrast essay. This will appear principals calling for interdisciplinary cooperation, as well as provide students with reinforcement for the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills writing.

The students will have seen the movies in their entirety, and any of the three pairs of movies could be used. I will start the students off on the essay in my class; they will continue the essays in their English classes. My co-workers never seem to have too many problems with helping out in these cases. I would expect the students to complete a graphic organizer and at least an outline in my class. They might also finish a rough draft before moving on with their essays to their English class. Their English teachers could assist them with polishing the rough draft into a finished product. If your students

do not all have the same English teacher you may run into some difficulties. This lesson is probably best used in a school where close collaboration exists between teachers. If you do not work closely with other teachers, you could still tackle this activity. You would need to do it all yourself.

The graphic organizer will set up the essay, therefore it may well be the most important part of the lesson. Students will make a “T” chart. One side will be dedicated to the first movie, the other side to the second movie. They will simply list characteristics of each movie. I have actual film techniques and director purposes in mind as the focus of this lesson. Therefore, one student might write “somber and eerie music” under *Revolution*. This was a technique used by Hugh Hudson to produce an effect. This could be contrasted to Emmerich’s use of strong lighting to produce an upbeat mood in *The Patriot*. If you would prefer not to focus on techniques, other options are possible. You could have the students compare historical accuracies, for instance. Keep the lesson outline the same; just substitute the content.

In any case, each essay will be five paragraphs long, with the first and last being the introduction and conclusion, respectively. The middle three paragraphs will be the body of the essay. The second and third paragraphs will detail characteristics found only in either one of the films. For instance, paragraph two will list characteristics of *The Patriot* only, and paragraph three will list only characteristics of *Revolution*. The fourth paragraph will list all the characteristics both movies have in common. This activity will also take more than one class period.

Many other small activities can be interspersed throughout these lesson plans. In fact every day my students complete warm-up exercises at the start of each class. These last about five minutes, and they help set up the topic of the day. I often require short lists of things we have discussed before and will again. Here is a list of possible warm-up exercises:

1. Name five techniques filmmakers use to create mood.
2. List five everyday items a colonial family would use but we don’t.
3. Name five characters from *The Patriot* (2000).
4. Name five characters from *Revolution* (1985).
5. List five things Benjamin Martin did that were superhuman.
6. When the South Carolina assembly met, what arguments were made.

## CONCLUSION

There are many other ways to utilize films in the teaching of history. I hope these ideas can be used as a springboard to greater things. Even if these movies listed here do not seem to fulfill your requirements, perhaps the strategies could be used to meet your needs. Then, if all else fails, perhaps there still exists an outside chance that you will simply be inspired to use movies in the pursuit of higher education. For films are merely

a source of great teaching potential, they are also a way of life for many of our students. Whether we like it or not, movies have become a major part of our lives. It only makes sense to develop a means for creative dialogue in our students so that they can take advantage of movies instead of letting the movies take advantage of them.

## APPENDIX A

This generic questionnaire would be given at the very beginning of the unit. I did not design it with any particular scene in mind, and, with some alteration, it could be used with most scenes. It is intended to accomplish two goals. On the one hand, it would give the students some idea of the skills they would develop during the course of the unit, and on the other the scores would provide the teacher the data necessary to tailor the unit to fit the needs of each individual class.

I would probably choose a scene from a movie that I would later show the students. I would not choose a scene in which a great deal of action was occurring, of course, but one in which a few actors are engaged in a conversation and perhaps some movement takes place.

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### Introductory Questionnaire

Directions: Answer the following questions as best you can. Use the space provided.

1. What were the names of the characters in this scene?
2. What did Character A say to Character B after they sat down?
3. How did Character B respond?
4. List any musical instruments (or sound effects) you heard.
5. What emotions did Character A reveal?
6. Where did the scene take place?
7. What was Character B wearing?
8. True/False: Character A was wearing a watch.
9. What was outside the window?
10. Which actor was more believable? Why?
11. Do you think the script was good? Why or why not?
12. How do you think the director wanted you to feel about Character A?

## **APPENDIX B:**

This questionnaire may be used along with the scene from *The Patriot* that I mentioned above.

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### Introductory Questionnaire

Directions: In this scene a father and his two sons receive the mail. Answer the following questions as best you can. Use the space provided.

1. What did the father have in his hand while walking down the stairs?
2. What are the two boys doing when the father enters the scene?
3. What is hanging above the fireplace?
4. What is on the small table in the close-up shot?
5. At one point the father sighs loudly. Why?
6. What music and/or sound effects did you hear?
7. What does the older boy read?
8. How did the boys feel about getting the mail?
9. Why do you think they felt that way?
10. Do you think all the light provided in this scene came from the candles? Why or why not?
11. About how many times did the camera cut away?

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Internet Resources

*Internet Movie Database.* [www.us.imbd.com](http://www.us.imbd.com)

A big and busy database of movie information. It includes a board for posting comments on movies, which provides for some interesting reading.

*Teach With Movies.* [www.teachwithmovies.com](http://www.teachwithmovies.com)

A slightly opinionated web-site that lists films which are appropriate for use in the classroom and across all disciplines. A separate list of films deemed inappropriate for classroom use offers insight into the thought processes of the creators of this web-site. Overall, this is a useful resource that I recommend to any teacher considering movies as a means of instruction. You will find some very good ideas in a range of subjects. Furthermore, this site offers actual lesson plans for use with certain films.

*The History Channel.* [www.historychannel.com](http://www.historychannel.com)

The web-site created by the folks who brought you the twenty-four-hours a day history-programming network on cable. Most pertinently, the site has a section called "History versus Hollywood" wherein films are discussed by historians or, where possible, actual witnesses to the event. Then the films are rated as to their accuracy. Unfortunately, relatively few films have been covered as yet.

### Teacher Sources

Boggs, Joseph M. *The Art of Watching Films.* Menlo Park, CA: The Benjamin Cummings Publishing Co., Inc., 1978.

This book is a must read for teachers not familiar with the technical jargon and techniques of the film industry. Boggs takes on the very basics of film making in a straightforward manner. It is an interesting read for anyone who has ever found themselves wondering just what that movie critic meant when he made references to parts of the movie.

Carnes, Mark C., ed. *Past Imperfect.* New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995.

An excellent blend of details about and criticism of the fiction in selected 'historical' films.

Hardy, Phil, ed. *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Westerns.* Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1994.

Even though this book advertises itself as being about Westerns, many Revolutionary War and frontier movies are covered. So too are Civil War era flicks. This year by year look at Hollywood releases of Westerns provides an

interesting perspective of a different type of history - the history of Hollywood's struggle to respond to what was popular.

Toplin, Robert Brent. *History by Hollywood*. Urbana, IL: Univ of Illinois Press, 1996.

The introduction of this book may help one develop ideas as to how to approach the teaching of history through movies. Also, the author, from personal experience, discusses some issues a film-maker undertaking a historical work would face. It would be good to discuss this side of the coin with students.

### **Annotated Filmography**

*Drums along the Mohawk* (1939), John Ford

A famous movie by a famous director, this is a movie best left to older, more mature students who can handle, or learn from the more formal style of the Golden Age of Hollywood.

*Gettysburg* (1993), Ronald F. Maxwell

Another movie with which less patient students will grow restless. This in depth look at the famous battle is a history buffs dream come true. As true to the facts as possible, you will learn all you need to know about Gettysburg after watching this film.

*Glory* (1989), Edward Zwick

Based largely on the facts surrounding one of the first all black regiments. This movie boasts some excellent actors and it illustrates some of the issues behind inter-racial relationships and the Abolition movement. A truly awesome and inspiring movie which I highly recommend.

*Last of the Mohicans* (1992), Michael Mann

A beautifully filmed movie with great production value. It may help explain complicated Native American relationships with the Europeans.

*The Patriot* (2000), Roland Emmerich

Discussed in depth within the narrative. Well worth watching with some reservations.

*Revolution* (1985), Hugh Hudson

Discussed in depth within the narrative. Creates a nice comparison with *The Patriot*.