

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL GROUP presents



How History is Depicted in Film: STUDY GUIDE

An Educational Resource Addressing History & Film

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Table of Contents

Overview: Message to the Educator	3
Curriculum Connections (Grades 9 - 12).....	3
Student Outcomes	3
Why Media Literacy in History?.....	4
What Are Media and Historical Literacy?	5
Media Literacy.....	5
Historical Literacy.....	5
Viewing Skills: Using Film in the Classroom.....	6
“The Pause”	6
Breaking up the film	6
Home viewing	6
Copyright	6
Age appropriateness.....	6
Parental permission	6
Before Incorporating Film into the Classroom	7
Film Viewing Questionnaire	7
Points to Ponder When Viewing Movies.....	8
Questions for Before and After Watching Historically Set Films	9
Pre-viewing questions:.....	9
Post-viewing questions:.....	10
Activity Ideas	11
Activity Idea One: Compare Two Versions of the Same Story	11
Activity Idea Two: D-Day	11
Activity Idea 3: Making History!.....	12
Activity Idea 4: Pitching History!	12
Feature Films to Consider.....	13
World War I.....	13
World War II.....	13
Ancient Civilizations	13
American History	13
Additional Sources	14
Websites	15

Overview: Message to the Educator

Film is a popular medium often used to depict events and tell stories from history. The depiction of an event or era in a “Hollywood” film may not be historically accurate and it can play a strong role in developing an understanding or perception in the mind of the viewer. The following is a curriculum resource designed to assist educators develop critical viewing skills in their students as they incorporate historically set films into their coursework; equipping students with the necessary tools to dissect elements of the film including the historical facts, story and perspective represented.

The Youth Education Department at the Toronto International Film Festival Group aims to provide children, youth and students new academic opportunities and social experiences by introducing them to the language and power of the moving image. Working with education experts, our curricula are designed to address contemporary social issues and provide a wealth of synergistic programming with the Ontario Ministry of Education. For more information please visit reellearning.ca, our online film-literacy resource for educators.

Curriculum Connections (Grades 9 - 12)

History	English (Media Literacy)	World Studies
Media Studies	Film Studies	

Student Outcomes

- Awareness about how to respond to films
- Understanding of the various ways in which film is constructed
- Film production skills
- Understanding of where to access additional information about films and the historical facts they portray.
- Development of critical-viewing skills
- Ability to deconstruct film to determine underlying message/theme

Why Media Literacy in History?

- I. Historians are not the only ones who “write” about history; history is a popular topic among filmmakers. However, there are many limitations placed on a filmmaker including budget, time and resources that can impact the historical accuracy of their films.
- II. Students are exposed to media representations, thus, it is necessary they develop skills to navigate their way through the plethora of historical images and stories they encounter in media.
- III. As historically set feature films are frequently about someone else’s history, it is important that Canadians be equipped with skills needed to contextualize these films. For example, World War II is a popular topic in mainstream cinema, yet such films rarely depict the Canadian experience.
- IV. Films are a construction of reality. Marketing, budgets and time all influence the construction and creation of a film. Critical-viewing skills help equip students with the necessary toolkit to deconstruct a film and it’s portrayal of an event.
- V. Although no medium can offer a “perfect” representation, film can present an opportunity for empathy with historical events and for recognition of their significance to the present era.

What Are Media and Historical Literacy?

Historical films compress and simplify the past. Filmmakers interweave fact and fiction to create interesting versions of historical stories that are compelling and accessible but not necessarily accurate. Therefore, students require specific skills to navigate the plethora of media messages in relation to the history presented.

Media Literacy

Media Literacy encompasses the critical analysis of media (television programs, movies, advertisements, etc.) and the development of media-production skills. Some key media-literacy concepts include the assumption that all media are constructed, that all media convey messages directly and indirectly and that audiences negotiate meaning.

In relation to historical movies, media literacy provides students with the skills to deconstruct the films and analyze the filmmakers' choices regarding what to include, exclude or alter in their versions of history.

Historical Literacy

This skill set assists in the negotiation of meaning and understanding when encountering historical information and artifacts. Elements of historical literacy include facts and historical narratives, research skills, the notions of empathy and significance, critical analysis and artistic representations of history.

The development of media literacy and historical literacy are learned through ongoing processes. The two together enable students to navigate through the ever-changing images and representations of the past.

For more information on media literacy and historical literacy, please check out the Suggested Resource section.

Viewing Skills: Using Film in the Classroom

“The Pause”

If you are using the entire film, pausing to discuss a certain section can take away from the film experience. If you must use any pauses, strategically pre-determine them.

Breaking up the film

As movies are long, it will most likely be necessary to break the film into two to three segments. It is important to select an appropriate time to interrupt the film up e.g., immediately after a major event.

Home viewing

This alternative allows the student to experience the entire film all at once. However, as it is outside of the classroom, the teacher has no control over the experience, nor can they make sure the student does see the film.

Copyright

In order to show films in the classroom, you must have permission from the distributor. Most school boards own a license agreement for particular distributors (Audio-Cine Film Inc. or Criterion Pictures, Inc.). For those films that are not covered by your school's agreement, you may have to pay a small fee. You can also avoid copyright issues by using short clips. [For more information, see Copyright Canada - <http://www.cb-cda.gc.ca/new-e.html>]

Age appropriateness

Ideally teachers should use PG-13-rated films. You can use clips to avoid questionable content of a higher-rated film. Topics to be wary of include sex, drugs, offensive language, controversial cultural perspective and violence. If you feel you must use a questionable clip or film, get school and parental permission. Film classification is provincial – the Ontario Film Review Board (ofrb.gov.on.ca) has information for Ontario.

Parental permission

For any films that contain questionable content remember to get school and parental permission to show the film or even the clips.

Before Incorporating Film into the Classroom

Prior to starting a unit that includes media/historical literacy, have students fill out a questionnaire on their viewing habits. This provides you with an understanding of where the students are in relation to film, especially historical films, and what they know or do not know about the particular history to be studied. Here are some possible questions:

Film-Viewing Questionnaire

1. What kinds of films do you prefer to watch: romance, comedy, romantic comedy, slapstick/satirical comedy, thriller, action, horror, documentaries, independent films, art films, classics, historical, epic, other?
2. Have you seen any of the following films? List either those films that are about the history being taught at this point in the class or ask them if they have seen any films about the specific historical characters, events or eras, or list a variety of films for them to check off.
3. How often do you watch movies?
4. List the last two movies you have seen. List the title, description, actors / characters they played and any historical references. What did you think about the films?
5. Do you think “Hollywood” type historical movies can teach you about history? Why? How?
6. Can Hollywood historical films ever be accurate? In what ways?
7. How can you tell if a film is historically accurate?

Points to Ponder When Viewing Movies...

- Who made the movie? Who is the director and what do you think about this director?
- Whose perspective is being shown and whose is not?
- How might I learn more information on this topic?
- Does this seem accurate?
- Were there any moments that felt out of place? Why?

It is also important to provide students with information on the “Language of Film.” Music, lighting, sound effects, camera angles, special effects, costumes and more all play a very important part in creating atmosphere and conveying emotions and messages in film. Check out the Sprockets Film Guide on the Reel Learning website for more information: reellearning.ca/Sprockets-Film-Guide.aspx

Questions for Before and After Watching Historically Set Films

The following are possible pre-viewing and post-viewing questions to use before and after a film or even film clips.

Pre-viewing questions:

1. What is the difference between a fictional feature film, a docudrama and a documentary?
2. What are some of the differences between a Hollywood blockbuster and an independent film?
3. What do you know about this particular film?
4. Before watching the film, what do you think the significance of the title is?
5. How can you determine the accuracy of a feature film set in or about history?
6. Have you seen any films on this particular historical topic we are about to study?

Prior to watching a film, the teacher can also ask specific questions geared towards the particular history students are going to be seeing in the film.

Post-viewing questions:

1. What message(s) is the filmmaker trying to convey?
2. Whose point of view is expressed in the film? Whose is missing?
3. Were the characters believable? Why or why not?
4. Are the setting, décor and costuming believable?
5. Who is the target audience?
6. Provide a plot summary.
7. Which scene(s) stick(s) in your mind?
8. Did you like the film? Why? Why not?
9. What did the movie teach you?
10. Ask some history questions – such as how events or people were portrayed in the movie.
11. Is this a true story? How can you tell if it is or not?
12. Ask students to imagine they are a woman or a minority living during the particular era that was shown in the movie and have them describe their feelings or reaction to a particular event.
13. How does this scene make you feel? What techniques did the filmmaker use to make you feel that way?
14. Are there any other questions that came to mind about what you saw?

Activity Ideas

Activity Idea One: Compare Two Versions of the Same Story

There are many films with the same or similar historical topic or that are set in the same era. Comparing these films engages students in critical thinking and involves them in deconstructing films, determining their messages and investigating their accuracy.

Possible films to compare:

- *U-571* (2000) and *Enigma* (2001). How does each film portray how the allies acquired an Enigma machine.
- *Elizabeth* (1998, starring Cate Blanchett) and a documentary on Queen Elizabeth I (there are many to choose from). There are numerous films that are about or that feature Elizabeth I.
- *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). Both portray First Nations cultures in North America. Use these films to generate questions on portrayal and compare to the history of Canadian First Nations.

A great resource to consult for films on specific topics is the *Video Hound's Golden Movie Retriever*. It is published annually and contains detailed information on many films.

After watching each movie, have students complete a comparison chart (plot, characters, events, timeline and any other historical details that seem pertinent). Not all films are completely alike in story but showing differences can be that much more important. After this, supply articles, photos and other resources from that particular era and have students do their own research investigating one or two of the differences. Have them present their findings to the class and supply an essay for assessment.

Activity Idea Two: D-Day

Show a few clips from *The Longest Day* (1962) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and have students write a short piece about D-Day (what it was and what happened). Then have them look at pictures of the Canadian experience and read two or three accounts of the Canadian experience and then re-write their piece on D-Day. Provide a lesson on D-Day and, if you have the time, show them a Canadian documentary on D-Day (for instance, films available through the National Film Board). Now have them research and write a full essay on D-Day (what it was, why it happened and a description of the Canadian experience.) Finally, ask them to re-read all the pieces they have written and write a response to how their perceptions of D-Day changed. All pieces should be submitted for assessment.

Activity Idea 3: Making History!

Incorporate lessons on making movies in a particular unit. Include clips from a few different films on the specific topic in your lessons. The culminating activity of the unit is the creation of a two - to four-minute film on that particular person, event, place or artifact just studied. They are to utilize what they have learned about film and the knowledge acquired from the lessons, books, primary documents and film to create their own short film. This could be in any style: documentary, fiction or animation. It should include major historical components of what was studied in class.

Activity Idea 4: Pitching History!

Have students create a proposal (group assignment) for a Canadian history film on a topic in which they are interested. They are to research and write a short synopsis. Ask them to consider whether they would change any of the facts or include fiction. They are to provide explanations of why or why not they chose to alter facts. This could be an end-of-year project that takes into account the previous media lessons and film production lesson as well as classes on media literacy and the history content. Items to include:

- the history
- treatment/synopsis
- detailed proposal
- problems with marketability or story line
- an explanation of why any historical facts were altered or omitted

Students will pitch their idea to the class and share the actual historical story, after which peers provide their opinions of the idea and ask questions.

Feature Films to Consider...

World War I

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930) Directed by Lewis Milestone.

Gallipoli (1981) Directed by Peter Weir.

Lawrence of Arabia (1962) Directed by David Lean.

World War II

The Longest Day (1962) Directed by Bernard Wick.

Saving Private Ryan (1998) Directed by Steven Spielberg.

Ancient Civilizations

Spartacus (1960) Directed by Stanley Kubrick.

Gladiator (2000) Directed by Sir Ridley Scott.

American History

Glory (1989) Directed by Edward Zwick.

Additional Sources

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Websites

thedirectorintheclassroom.com/

Resource for filmmaking in the classroom. It includes resources on all aspects of filmmaking so teachers can incorporate filmmaking into their units.

mediapede.org/filmhistory/

Resources for high-school and junior-high teachers of history. Includes film-teaching guides for the films *The Crucible*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Lone Star*, *1776* and *The Truman Show*.

teachwithmovies.org

For a small fee, educators can gain access to learning guides and lesson plans based on 270 movies covering much of the K-12 curriculum in the United States.

stfrancis.edu/historyinthemovies/

Dr. Cathy Schultz, history professor at St. Francis in Joliet Illinois, comments on films and their accuracy with regards to history.

historyinfilm.com