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# Media Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom

BY GREG NIELSEN

Previous generations of students learned about history from reading the textbooks, listening to teachers, and analyzing primary source documents. Today, these forms of instruction take a backseat to learning about the past from such media as Hollywood commercial film, YouTube, Netflix, and video games. Visit the social studies area of any high school. There is a high probability that a historical film or documentary is being shown in one or more of the classrooms. A study conducted by Stoddard & Marcus that surveyed 84 high school history teachers found that, "more than 90% reported using some portion of a feature film an average of once a week."

More than a hundred years ago, the inventor of the movie projector, Thomas Edison, said, "I believe that the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational system and that in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely,

the use of books." Although his prediction has not come to pass, film media has become a major educational source both in and out of the classroom. Students live and breathe media. Therefore, teachers must find ways to teach students to be active, rather than passive, media viewers. This requires teaching historical media literacy. A five-step process can help teachers teach this much needed 21st-century standard.

## Step 1

### Choose an Appropriate Film

Choosing an appropriate film can be daunting and time consuming. Besides following the school district's, film guideline policy, teachers must view the film for age appropriateness. They must decide how the film will be used to accomplish a unit's goals and objectives. Also, they must research the film's historical accuracy by comparing its contents to primary and secondary sources.

The teacher must know students' likes and dislikes. Films

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made two, three, or more decades ago, especially if they are in black and white, often disengage students. On the other hand, the latest box-office smash hit can have a powerful immediate appeal but do little or nothing to accomplish active viewing skills.

### **Step 2** **Introduce the Film** **with Pre-Viewing Activities**

Ask what students already know about a film's historical focus. Have them formulate questions about what the film addresses and predict what the film may show or not show. Finally, work with students to identify the purpose for viewing the film in the larger context of a unit, lesson, chapter, or historical document.

By explaining why the film was selected and the purpose for watching it, the teacher encourages active viewing. Also, students may benefit from viewing a plot overview, especially if they are not familiar with the historical period or event being covered. Depending on goals and objectives, a variety of questions can be introduced, such as: What characters do you like and dislike and why? Identify the different perspectives the film depicts—are they similar or different than what the textbook emphasizes? What does the film communicate about other ethnic groups, gender roles and political, economic, and social values?

### **Step 3** **Provide Students** **with Active Viewing Tools**

Ideally, a film should be watched more than once. Encourage students to take notes while watching the film a second time on their own. You might suggest that they:

- Look for answers to pre-viewing questions.
- Identify and jot down themes.
- Use charts, graphic organizers, and idea maps to accomplish goals and objectives.
- Pause the film to reflect, write, and discuss.
- Re-watch scenes that are confusing, controversial, or challenging.
- Take keyword notes about how the film makes them feel.

### **Step 4** **Engage Students** **in Post-Viewing Activities**

In pairs, small groups, and as a class, students can summarize the important ideas, themes, perspectives, and historical accuracy of the film. Students should compare the film to other sources including the textbook, academic quality research, and primary sources.

A host of inquiry-based activities can be used to foster evaluation, comparing, identifying, discussing, explaining, and exploring. Here are three examples:

- Evaluate a significant scene and review the chronology, setting, costumes, and other historical details and actions. Compare the

evaluations with other historical sources. Have students draw their own conclusions about biases and authenticity.

- Identify and discuss the messages the film conveys both openly and in the subtext. Why are they there? Do the writer, director, and producer have an agenda? If so, what is it?

- Explain and explore a historical perspective or character's point of view in the film. Have students put themselves in a character's shoes and write about what the character experienced in the past. Have them research the historical record using primary sources like diaries, newspaper accounts, letters, and photographs.

### Step 5 Assess Students' Historical Film Literacy

Finally, teachers need to assess students in meaningful, engaging, and valid ways. They can have students present their conclusions using a variety of assessments, such as submitting their journal entries about the film along with their research, writing an essay based on primary sources that draws evidence-based conclusions, writing and producing a one- or two-minute documentary that summarizes the film's perspectives or authenticity, or creating and presenting a poster that uses primary source images and historically accurate captions. ■

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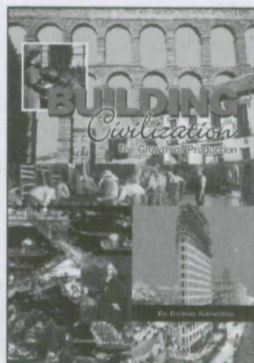
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## Appendix A

### Possible Pre-viewing Activities:

- Introduce the film to students
- Explain the purpose for viewing the film
- Relate the film to students' prior knowledge, everyday lives, and other content areas
- Clarify any cinematic terminology
- Discuss what is required during the viewing of the film
- Discuss assignments that will follow the viewing of the film
- Discuss the background of the film

### Possible Viewing Activities:

- Have students take notes
- Have students complete a Guided Activity
- Have students answer questions created by the teacher
- That film can be shown in its entirety or in segments
- The lights can be off or on.

### Possible Post-viewing Activities:

- Have a class discussion
- Have a class debate
- Offer some kind of written assessment
- Have Students Evaluate the Film

(Russell, 2006)

## Appendix B

### Teacher's Film in the Classroom Checklist

- Followed school and district policy \_\_\_\_\_
- Have parental/guardian permission \_\_\_\_\_
- Viewed film for appropriateness \_\_\_\_\_
- Are there any controversial/sensitive topics/scenes? \_\_\_\_\_
- Established and written goals and objectives \_\_\_\_\_
- Film shows different perspectives. What are they? \_\_\_\_\_
- Film fosters historical and cultural empathy \_\_\_\_\_
- Film has some accurate historical significance \_\_\_\_\_
- Will hold students' attention \_\_\_\_\_
- Length suitable for time frame \_\_\_\_\_
- Prepared pre-viewing activity \_\_\_\_\_
- Prepared viewing activity \_\_\_\_\_
- Prepared post-viewing activity \_\_\_\_\_
- Written discussion questions \_\_\_\_\_
- Written film summary \_\_\_\_\_
- Written and defined key vocabulary words \_\_\_\_\_
- If film clips are being used, have been selected \_\_\_\_\_
- Has the technology been tested and found ready \_\_\_\_\_