

TEACH HISTORY WITH FILM: A LITERATURE REVIEW AND A HISTORICAL FILM ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Teaching students about historical events and being critical about them is still a challenging task for some teachers. Teaching history with films offer a different challenge for teachers and students to learn history, however if films are used merely as entertainment in a history classroom, it will lead to uncritical and inaccurate view of the past and reinforce students' historical misconceptions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to review the benefits and best practice of teaching with historical film. This study provides a historical film analysis Mongol as reference for teacher's best practice of teaching history with film.

Keywords: teaching history, film, benefits, best practice

Introduction

Teaching students about historical events and being critical about them is still a challenging task for some teachers who wish to improve their instructional design. The extensive studies to improve teaching instructions bring changes in teaching and learning process. One of the changes is teaching students with film. Teachers begin to use film in the classroom as an education for purpose has a long history, yet not many teachers capable to achieve a lot of potential the movie can offer in the classroom.

Historical films, documentary films and many films themed as historical have and continue to influence the collective memory the publics and students' collective memory of the past. "What matters most is not whether the film is 'good' or 'bad' but how it is used and for what educational ends" (Marcus et al, 2010). When teachers thoughtfully use films in the history classroom, they stand to emotionally engage students with the past in ways other mediums lack while equipping them with the media literacy skills needed to thrive in an age of vast information. However, if films are used

merely as entertainment in a history classroom, films can engender an uncritical and inaccurate view of the past and reinforce students' historical misconceptions.

This study aims to review the best practice of teaching history with film and a short historical inaccuracies analysis of a film *Mongol* (2008) based on National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

Method

The method of this study is qualitative research and descriptive analysis (Nassaji, 2015). The research is done with a literature review and the descriptive analysis of a historical film.

Benefits of historical film

Teachers often bring historical films to the classroom as a mere opening section of a topic to gain students interest or use film as a reward and entertaining means (Woelders, 2007). Teaching students with film have considerable number of benefits. Henceforth, the following passages compile several benefits films offer to learning process through literature review.

First is review of Masson in a chapter "Rhetorical Devices in Classroom Films after 1940" (2012). Masson mentioned that a film can be an effective teaching instruction if teacher choose the film wisely supported by a well-designed lesson plan. The first advantage is films bring abstract ideas to concrete, certainly a film consists of audio-motion pictures transmits the 'outside' world into classroom more effective than other learning medium. Modern students learn faster when they are confronts with actual, real-life situations in front of them. The second is a film reproduce movement of the past, thus students learn with their senses. Modern teaching instructions requires students to learn with all their capacities for their knowledge to last. The third advantage is a film as an accessible mean for public education. Facts of the past are not exclusively owned by the intellectuals. Films are important means for education, they offer broad audiences a broader point of view of memory from past and give audiences more senses learning experience.

The second review is from Russel in his book "Teaching Social Issues with Film" (2009). Using film to teach controversial issue in history, sociology classroom can build students ability to filter what's important for their worldview. Russel wrote that examining controversial issue through films helps students learn to deal with conflict they find in real life. Russel

mentioned the importance of having films accompanied by media literacy. He continued, students can learn to debate and make logical reasoning to clarify and justify their opinion when taught controversial issue. Films make it easier for students to digest controversial issue, especially in this vast and instant media attacking our teenagers' students.

The third review is from Martin in a chapter titled "Teaching, Learning, and Understanding of Public History in Schools as Challenge for Students and Teachers" (2018). Martin stated that students are aware of "mental pictures" of the past. They learn from multiple mediums around them, whether historically accurate or not. "Students too frequently see history as a single story that is certain and complete" (Martin, 2018). Teachers bring films to the classroom and challenging students to do comparison between the primary resources and secondary resources (films, documents, other motion pictures) while perplexing them with questions, present opportunity for students to evaluate.

The fourth is from Deshpande (2004) who approached films as a bridge between written history and visual history to charm public (students) to learn about history. Films have charm to draw attention and socially acceptable for public. Deshpande claimed films can highlights various things from histories, attract mixed feelings, such as emotional trauma, where many students fail to comprehend from written history.

The last review from Center of Media Literacy (2009) provides several advantages of teaching history with film:

1. Meets the needs of students to be wise consumers of media, managers of information and responsible producers of their ideas using the powerful multimedia tools of a global media culture.
2. Engages students . . . bringing the world of media into the classroom connects learning with "real life" and validates their media culture as a rich environment for learning.
3. Gives students and teachers alike a common approach to critical thinking that, when internalized, becomes second nature for life.
4. Provides an opportunity for integrating all subject areas and creating a common vocabulary that applies across all disciplines.
5. Helps meet state standards while, at the same time using fresh contemporary media content which students love.
6. Increases the ability and proficiency of students to communicate (express) and disseminate their thoughts and ideas in a wide (and

- growing) range of print and electronic media forms—and even international venues.
7. Media literacy’s “inquiry process” transforms teaching and frees the teacher to learn along with students—becoming a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.”
 8. By focusing on process skills rather than content knowledge, students gain the ability to analyse any message in any media and thus are empowered for living all their lives in a media-saturated culture.

Those points emphasize the significant of media literacy for students. Vast development of media affects people’s worldviews, attitudes on something and values they hold.

The conclusion is films offer numerous benefits for history teachers. Films enrich written history with multiple charms that attract broader audiences, draw mixed emotions, arouse students learning senses, and open rooms for students to be inquire about history.

What is a good teaching instructional for film in history class?

Numbers of advantages teaching with films in history class are the consequences of a well design teaching instructions and a well-chosen film. Woelders (2007) suggest some ideas teachers can take as consideration when they design a lesson plan with film:

Table 1: Woelders (2007)

Misuses of Film for Teaching About History
1. Showing age and content inappropriate scenes
2. Disallowing opportunities for students to discuss, question, pause film, or re-view film sequences.
3. Using film to reward students
4. Using film to maintain order or to keep students quietly seated.
5. Using film solely to give students a sense of the past or legitimizing a film as historically accurate.
6. Demanding students passively record facts from a film without challenging their authenticity or accuracy by comparing them to other sources.
7. Showing a film to provide a break from direct teaching, or to make time for marking and other classroom duties.
8. Using film as a time filler or as easy work for teacher on call.
9. Using “read the book-now watch the film” approaches.

10. Showing films in their entirety when students could focus their viewing on shorter, more relevant clips & excerpts.
11. Showing films without previewing the film, or thoroughly researching the film's content and alternative perspectives.

Most teachers fail to open room for discussion and prompt students to review narration the film, investigate the fact-cross check with other primary and secondary resources and lastly played the entire film which is time consuming instead of discussion. Teachers often missed the chance ask students to investigate whose narratives being represented in the films, which leads to students losing chances to learn in full capacities in history class.

Woelders suggests teachers to implement inquiry approach in the classroom to encourage students develop and practice “authentic application of historical knowledge evaluative and analytical thinking critical ability necessary to interpret a range of different kinds of media persuasive communication skills using a variety of presentation formats” (Woelders, 2007).

He continues his suggestion to divide lesson planning into three sections:

Table 2: Woelders (2007)

PRE- VIEWING:

1. Access what students already know about the topic.
2. Formulate questions about the topic that the film might address.
3. Predict what the film will show or what will happen.
4. Identify what your purpose for viewing the film is.

ACTIVE VIEWING:

1. Ask questions - look for answers to questions- seek clarification and understanding.
2. Predict what will happen next - check predictions.
3. Describe what you see and how it makes you feel.
4. Re-watch parts that do not make sense.
5. Use contextual clues (foreshadowing, music, mood etc.) to determine the meaning, purpose, and perspective of the film.
6. Create notes, charts, graphics, concept maps or webs as you view the film.

7. Make connections to what you already know.
8. Make personal connections to characters and events in the text.
9. Pause the film reflect, write, discuss.

POST VIEWING

1. Summarize the important ideas and information.
2. Retell the key events accurately.
3. Make generalizations, ask questions and reflect on the content.
4. Re-watch sections if necessary
5. Compare the film to other accounts and information sources including primary sources.
6. Make personal connections to chapters in film.
7. Pause the film - reflect, write, discuss.

ASSESSMENT:

1. Make evidence-based inferences, speculations, and conclusions from a variety of sources.
2. Present final conclusions with others in a forum posting, drama, essay, editorial, film, journal, presentation, debate.

Russel (2009) suggests teachers to do two evaluations when they use film. The first evaluation is teachers' evaluation about the film. Teachers review film's content and scenes for the appropriateness and relevancy to schools' curriculum. Second is students' evaluation, they review the film while at the same time challenge their critical thinking to find out the historical inaccuracies and any powerful message teachers set for students to achieve after the learning process.

Teachers can prompt students with questions before, during or after the films. The following is a set of questions Russel (2009) provide for teachers can use:

- Who made this film?
- When was this film created?
- What is the purpose of this film?
- Who supported/sponsored this film?
- What is the target audience of this film?
- How is this film made for that audience?
- What cinematic techniques were used?
- Why were these techniques used?

- What is this film implying or saying about the issue, event, person, place, etc., that is being portrayed?
- What is missing from this film?

A well-prepared teaching instruction is the vital point to effectively teaching history with film. Martin (2018) suggested teachers to assign students with authentic assessment. Martin proposed the idea to situate students as the producer of the film. In the post-viewing activities, teachers can situate students to be the producer of a historical piece. Martin defined the assessment as “the authentic experiences in research” (Martin, 2018). The products vary from written historical piece such as web pages, essays, poems or unwritten historical piece, i.e., video, podcast or songs addressing the historical event to real audience.

Teachers should assign the assessment in history class for students aiming for broader audiences, outside of the classroom. Teachers can collaborate with local museums, local historical spots, or the neighbouring schools.

Historical Film Analysis and Teaching Best Practice

The following passages is the descriptive analysis of a historical film *Mongol: The Rise of Genghis Khan*, which was published in 2008, directed by Sergei Bodrov. The analysis is about how the film best suited to Massachusetts Framework Social Studies 2018. The critics address the shortcomings of the film and any practical concerns for using the film in the classroom settings. Answering to what extent the film be acceptable and the drawbacks of it.

The historical movie *Mongol* recounts the life of Genghis Khan or Chinggis Khan, whose original name was Temüjin (means blacksmith), the first Great Khan of the Mongol Empire. *Mongol* is an Oscar-nominated movie by Sergei Bodrov, which depicted Genghis early and turbulent years before he rose to power. Bodrov narrates some critical events in Genghis' life started from the moment he engaged with his influential wife Börte, then, Genghis' father was poisoned to death by Tatars clan, and betrayal from Genghis clans and friends. *Mongol* shows the struggle of Genghis when he was enslaved, and escaped from slavery, and his encounters with his future allies in bloody wars. *Mongol*, while problematic in some respects, presents invaluable learning opportunities for students in history. In this paper, I discuss said opportunities and offer recommendations about how *Mongol* can assist the

teacher in enhancing students learning experiences in historical inquiry and thinking.

Mongol tells Genghis Khan struggled in his early life, which is not written in many historical documents and textbooks, while it accommodates two curriculum standards. This movie first suits connects to Mass Framework 2018 in WHI Topic 3, 2D of the 2018 Mass Frameworks: “The Mongol Empire (1206–1368 CE), its role in the Silk Routes, the rule of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, contacts with Europeans, and the cultural achievements of the Yuan Dynasty (1221–1368) and early years of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) in China”. The second, this movie matches into C3 Framework for Social Studies D2. His.3.9-12 “Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context”. Mongol portrays Temüjin’s (he wasn’t named Genghis Khan yet) life was a difficult struggle for survival, which hardened him and made him a supreme survivor and warrior. Several events depicted in the movie such as Temüjin started to struggle when his father died when he was nine years old, led him later to expand his territory to Tatars’ land (who poisoned his father). Then Temüjin was captured as a slave, and this experienced later prompted him to outlaw slavery. There was also an event when Temüjin went to war to save his wife Börte, which later she became a strong woman leader, whom Temüjin trusted, she governed the Mongols when he travelled to conquer other regions.

The film holds the power to teach students about cognitive empathy (Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010). Bodrov narrates Mongol as a biography about Temüjin, and there are some scenes presented where Temüjin talked about Mongol’s proverbs or principles, and later, he was proved to obey them. For example, a scene where Temüjin joined hands with his childhood friend to save his kidnapped wife because he believed “a man chooses his wife” (Dobrov, 2008). After that, there is a scene where he went to war with his former ally because of his principle to unite Mongolians to make it stronger. At last, there is also a scene Temüjin killed his former followers who once betrayed him to follow their Khan whom they killed after that because Temüjin’s principle “never betray your Khan” (Dobrov, 2008). While those events led the film to some bloody wars, there are also a few scenes where empathy from others helped Temüjin to escape from captivation. Mongol helps students to recognize the perspectives and experiences of people from the past (Marcus et al., 2010). Mongol opens the

opportunity for students to learn about some reasons people killed and had war in the past.

Teachers can use the film as a secondary source in history class. Film usually “can distort the past, limit the number of perspectives discussed, or present biased accounts...and have no footnotes” (Marcus et al., 2010), which means it opens chances for students to interrogate and investigate the historical inaccuracies. *Mongol* has some chronology and facts inaccuracies. For example, a scene where Temujin's father was killed, he was there, while he was left in Borte's clan after the engagement. The next is when Temujin attacked Merkits (who kidnapped Borte), there was one crucial figure missing from the story. There are also some dramatizations presented by Dobrov during the event when Temujin was enslaved by Tangut Kingdom. These inaccuracies are challenging for students to investigate.

Thus, the teacher needs to prepare students some supporting prerequisite knowledge about the purpose of watching *Mongol* and guiding questions on handout to help students identify and investigate the inaccuracies or dramatization. First, the teacher can ask students to fill the table of “real and reel,” students examine which scenes seem real and fake according to them. Second, the teacher needs to pause at some selected scenes as mentioned above to lead students to think historically “What do you think was the impact of this slavery on Temujin future?”, “What did you think about this attack, was that fine to kill people to get your wife at that time? Was it fake?”, “Why did Temujin killed his former follower for killing their Khan?”, “Did Temujin listen to his wife's opinions?”. These questions may lead students to think critically about the film. Third is, the teacher can ask students to shadow some main characters in the movie, such as Temujin, Borte, and Jamukha and identify what decisions they made, and later discuss what possible factors led them to do that. Forth is, the teacher can ask students to search some facts about Temujin's achievements during and after his reign, this activity will help students to connect his achievements with his previous experiences in the film. Students will eventually experience learning opportunities while also enjoying the epic sceneries and cultures depicted in the film.

Mongol promotes exciting learning experiences, yet at some points, it also has shortcomings. First, this film heavily puts Temujin's point of view at the center. *Mongol* does not provide many points of view from Temujin's opponents. This is problematic because students may justify Temujin's choice to unite *Mongol* only because of his goodwill, not because of his ambitions.

This perspective could also lead students to think that other clans (Merkits and Tatars) deserved to be attacked because they are villains. Second, *Mongol* contains many bloody scenes and an intimate scene of Temujin's couple, which are not suitable for students at a certain age, even adults are uncomfortable watching people bleeding and butchering each other. Therefore, the teacher is obliged to wisely select the scenes of the film and consider students' emotional stage and maturity.

Third, *Mongol* is claimed as a semi-historical film by many critiques, which means it contains half-truths about Genghis life (see appendix A). There are many historians who interrogated the facts about Genghis' early life based on a book which was written shortly after his death *The Secret History of Mongols* (http://altaica.ru/SECRET/cleaves_shl.pdf) as a primary source. Furthermore, the primary resources about Genghis' early life are hardly found. Thus, Dobrov tries hard to compress all important events that happened in roughly two hours. *Mongol* omits to present some notable figures and recreates some historical events' timeline.

Fourth, the teacher should avoid some potentially disturbing scenes, such as the bloody wars and mature action. The possible drawbacks could be students may overlook Genghis as one of the bloodlust leaders despite his wisdom and influential leadership.

Dobrov inserts some old proverbs and narrates Borte's significant role in the story. Proverbs presented in *Mongol* give a chance for students to see the whole movie timeline was driven by the life principles drawn from those proverbs. Students will learn that individuals or groups acted and decided something because they had their perspectives and backgrounds, which are reflected in what they believe. Moreover, Borte's role as a woman who assisted Genghis to reach his glory is fairly depicted in the movie, while in some documents and textbooks, her role as a woman is sometime overlooked by many.

In conclusion, the teacher can use film *Mongol* as their aid to practice students' historical thinking as secondary resources. The first option is the teacher could use this film as the opening part of their unit to raise their interest in Genghis Khan and later his grandson Kubilai Khan's influence in the silk route. The second option is to utilize *Mongol* in the closure part of the unit to recollect why Genghis Khan recorded excellent achievements and becomes one of the famous leaders in history. Therefore, the teacher should carefully prepare the article or brief students about the purpose of watching

the movie, wisely select the scenes from the film and last carefully plan the learning activity during and after the film.

Conclusion

First, teaching history with film offers countless opportunity to improve students' critical thinking, their inquiry and evaluation abilities to reconfirm many distorted facts they found in any historical resources whether primary resources or secondary resources. Second, teachers can use films to bring the 'outside' memory of the past into the classroom while challenging students to learn with all their senses through film and media literacy. The last is, what matter is not a film is good or bad to learn about history, but how it is used by teacher as an educational end.

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