

Film and the Teaching of Global History

by Norman Markowitz

For social studies teachers, it can be really hard to find movies and videos useful for the teaching of history. Part of the problem is that mass media turns history into tabloid stories. The “History Channel” devotes its largest blocs of prime-time coverage to Adolph Hitler and WWII, war as both military minutiae and action adventure, and the history of cars, airplanes and disasters. However, there are some fictional films that go beyond the Hollywood “dream factory” tradition to help students understand the relationships that shape historical events. These movies make facts exciting in the action adventure sense and are also relevant to understanding global history.

Spartacus (1960)

Great Empires and the monuments and misery they produce have been central to global history. Along with Hollywood fantasies about ancient Israel, Egypt and Rome (Charlton Heston as both Moses and Ben Hur, Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra), there is one Hollywood historical film that provides insights into what the ancient world was actually like. *Spartacus* starred Kirk Douglas and Lawrence Olivier and was directed by Stanley Kubrick. The movie uses adventure and melodrama to portray the most famous slave rebellion in the ancient world. Spartacus was trained as a gladiator to fight for the enjoyment of the wealthy. He led a great slave rebellion and was eventually crucified by order of the super-rich Crassus, an ally of Julius Caesar. The film shows how Roman “glory” was constructed with slave labor held in check by brutal repression. Rights were reserved for owners and those who were owned depended for survival on the kindness of master. This film can be used to consider questions such as, “What defines a free man and a slave?”; “How were the distinctions between master, freeman, and slave developed and sustained?”; “How did class distinctions contribute to both the rise and the eventual fall of the Roman Empire?”

The Return of Martin Guerre (1993)

Feudal societies, based on landlords and peasants, whether they were formerly tied to the land by the Lord-Serf relationship in Europe or informally through debt and dependency as in China, has characterized much of human history. These feudal social relationships, broadly defined, continue in many rural areas of poor countries today. To give students some sense of what life was like in such a society, one might look at France in the 16th century, two hundred years before the fall of the Bourbons in the remarkable film, *The Return of Martin Guerre*. It is the story of a man coming home during an interval in the hundred years war (the European feudal world was one of endless wars for land and booty between rival Lords). He assumes the identity of another man and tries to make a new and better life for himself in a world of peasant villages where everything and everyone had its defined place. Martin (Gerard Depardieu) confuses his wife (Natalie Baye) who has not seen him in nine years, and barely knew him anyway, by his kindness. The villagers are shown in their appearance and body language to be people living in a another time. Their bodies are stunted from restrictive diets and a lack of medical care as they huddle among themselves in the interval between birth and death. Occasionally they are visited by the minions of the officials and judges and lords who stand outside their world--- better dressed and fed and sources of an unchanging theologically based authority. These are the authorities who hang the false Martin and condemn his wife to life with the true one.

Burn (1970)

Western Europe and England grew rich and powerful through the colonization of the Western Hemisphere and the introduction of chattel slavery to work in mines and produce sugar, cotton and other products for world markets. Gillo Pontecorvo’s brilliant *Burn* examines the relationship between slavery, “freedom,” and imperialism. Sir William Walker (Marlon Brando), a British agent, comes to Quemada, a Portuguese slave colony in the Caribbean, to start a revolution. He finds a leader, Jose Delores (Everesto Ma rquez) among the oppressed Blacks and helps to create a rebel army which pressures the planter elite to abolish slavery and set up an “independent republic” totally beholden to Britain and the Royal Sugar company. A decade later, Walker uses the British army to put down a new

rebellion led by the man he used to overthrow the Portuguese, establishes a military dictatorship and burns much of the island.

Comparisons at the time were made to both Vietnam and the ghetto riots in the U.S. and the Nixon administration used its influence to limit theater showings. The movie makes the point that political independence without economic independence is in effect trading one master for another. In one particularly powerful scene, Walker argues that it is in the interest of the planters to abolish slavery and turn the slaves into wage laborers. Pointing to a prostitute, he mentions that she is paid for a service, by the hour, and for nothing else, unlike a wife who must be fed and clothed and eventually buried. "Which is more convenient," Walker contends, the wife or the prostitute, the "slave or the paid worker." The price of Royal Sugar on the London Stock exchange is ultimately far more important than the rights, or even the lives, of people. The film provokes comparisons with the U.S. occupation of Iraq (Halliburton plays the role Royal Sugar). Students react to the film's stark ending - Walker is stabbed to death as he prepares to leave the island. Someone who used terrorist violence to spread "civilization and progress" was eventually consumed by the violence he had created.

The Organizer (1963)

In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution rapidly transformed the organization of work and conditions for the working class in Western Europe and North America. In response, Socialist movements became identified with struggles for workers' economic and social rights and the political rights of all people. In Europe, the socialists were the first important parties to advocate democracy. The remarkable Italian film, *The Organizer*, whose original Italian title was *Comrades*, highlights these developments by following a socialist teacher, the "Professor," a political refugee (Marcello Mastroianni) who helps workers organize a strike in a town in Northern Italy.

The Professor first meets the workers in a night class directed by a fellow socialist who is trying to teach them to read and write so that they can become citizens and voters. The bearded nearsighted Professor is more a bumbling Ichabod Crane figure than a hero, but he uses his education and experience to help the workers overcome their divisions and carry out the strike. Although the strike ends in defeat and the teacher ends up in jail, everything has changed. The workers learned to act and work together and plan a campaign to elect the teacher to parliament.

Lucia (1968)

At the beginning of the 20th century, virtually all of Africa, Asia outside of Japan, and Latin America were either colonies, protectorates, or spheres of influence of the great powers. World War I can partly be understood as part of the battle between the industrialized nations to dismember the weak Ottoman and Chinese Empires, control the backward Russian Empire, and exploit labor and natural resources without any controls. Humberto Solas Cuban film, *Lucia*, (1968) brings important parts of this history together as it tells the story of three young women named Lucia. The first Lucia (Raquel Revuelta) is a woman of the Cuban upper class during Cuba's war for Independence against Spain. While her brother fights with the guerillas she inhabits a world of dark heavy dresses, social isolation and sexual repression. A man who seduces her turns out to be a Spanish agent who gets her to betray the guerrillas. In a world of passion without justice, she stabs him to death.

The second Lucia (Eslinda Nunez) is a young middle class girl during the liberal uprising against the Machado dictatorship in the early 1930s. She stands with her boyfriend, Rafael, a young idealist and his friends in the fight that ousts Machado. But the new government becomes corrupt and her boyfriend takes arms again, only to be shot down.

Early in 1959, Fidel Castro made a famous speech in which he said that the revolutions of the 1890s and the 1930s had failed to achieve independence and social justice but this revolution would not turn back. The third Lucia (Adela Legra) is an illiterate young woman in the revolutionary Cuba of the 1960s with an old-fashioned male chauvinist husband, Aldo. Lucia learns to read and write and successfully challenge Aldo's authority. Aldo is gently mocked and men and women learn to work together cooperatively and develop better personal relationships.

While the history of Cuba and the United States are interwoven during these periods of history, this movie presents events from a Cuban perspective. The United States intervened directly in the Cuban revolution of the 1890s during the Spanish American War and indirectly in the 1930s to support the military strongman Fulencio

Battista. It also sponsored the Bay of Pigs invasion and assassination attempts against Fidel Castro. Despite this, the Cuban people continued the struggle to make their own history. Students should address the different meanings of independence and freedom in a poor dependant country like Cuba and a rich country like the United States.

Gandhi (1982)

Two very different films, *Gandhi* and *The Battle of Algiers* are valuable for teachers of contemporary global history. Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, uses the techniques of the great Hollywood biography films of the 1930s to tell the story of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the leader of largest anti-colonial revolution in human history. Gandhi (Ben Kingsley) starts off as the sort o British educated colonial servant imperialists mocked as a "brown Englishman." After being thrown out of a first class car on a train in South Africa, he becomes a leader of the Indian minority community and a philosopher-activist who combines aspects of Hindu thought with concepts drawn from other anti-imperialist and humanist currents. After Gandhi's return to India, the movie examines British manipulation of the Hindu-Muslim conflict, and such decisive moments in Indian history as the Amritsar Massacre of 1919, the Salt March, the Quit India Movement of World War II, and the British Empire brokered partition. In discussing the film, students can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Gandhi's philosophy, the reasons why it mobilized tens of millions of people, and its legacy for today.

The Battle of Algiers (1966)

Gillo Pontocorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, a Franco-Italian production, tells a very different story. Here revolutionary violence and counter-violence is essential to everything that happens. As violence leads to counter-measures, the line between "guerrilla fighter" and "terrorist," developed to distinguish those who attack military and police targets to fight colonizers or occupiers (guerrillas) and those who attack civilians(terrorists), becomes blurred. The film focuses on Ali (Brahim Haggiag) a young Algerian petty criminal in and out of reform school and jail who joins the National Liberation Front (FLN) and becomes one of its leading activists. The FLN strikes first at collaborators with the French and the local vice lords in the Arab slums of the Cashbah and then at French police. The French respond with provocations in the Cashbah and the torture of prisoners. The FLN responds with bombings of restaurants and other public accommodations, killing French civilians. Although the French defeat and destroy the urban guerrillas in the short run, nothing is resolved. Eventually, Charles de Gaulle comes to power in France and the French withdraw from Algeria.

Although the FLN is to a considerable extent romanticized in *The Battle of Algiers*, the film raises many questions that students could address. Even though the FLN is successful, independent Algeria remains a very poor country whose people today are a ghettoized minority at the bottom of metropolitan French society. While the FLN employs Muslim religious rituals to mobilize support, the present military government, which defines itself as continuing the traditions of the FLN, has fought a long and bloody war against rightwing Muslim guerrillas which has claimed tens of thousands of lives. Students might compare Gandhi and Ali, the two situations and the two outcomes. Teachers might also ask students to think about why the Black Panther party recommended that its members see the film thirty five years ago and why the Pentagon in 2003 held special screening of the film for officers and civilian advisors involved in the occupation of Iraq.

These are all of course considered "radical" films or films on radical topics. But virtually all serious work that opens up debate in social studies has to be if it is going to go beyond conventional wisdom and agreed upon denials in order to understand the social forces that create history. The topics these movies address, slavery and racism, colonialism and imperialism, capitalism and socialism, the meaning of freedom, can never be fully answered. But not to address them condemns students to ignorance of global history and contemporary society.

