

Learning Through the Lens: How Hollywood Shapes the Way We View History

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Abstract

This curriculum unit will focus on censorship of films throughout the 20th century. The target audience for this curriculum will be 8th grade social studies students, however, it can be altered for us in 7th or 9th grade social studies classes. This unit focuses on how censorship of films has influenced viewers to see a more innocent and forced portrayal of life and events in American history. Students will participate in a variety of activities involving looking at primary documents and analyzing film clips to discuss how and why films have told myths.

Overview

This unit is designed for 8th grade social studies classes at Jay Cooke Elementary School. Jay Cooke is located in the Logan neighborhood within the Philadelphia School District serving about 500 students from grades K through 8. Roughly 83% of the students are African American, 8% are Hispanic and the remainder is white, Asian, or American Indian. All students qualify for free lunch. 10% of students in grades 4-8 are proficient in ELA, 90% are below average. Overall, Jay Cooke scored a 4% on the 2016-2016 School Progress Report and is in the turnaround network.

This curriculum is designed to introduce different topics of history through film. There is so much one can learn from a movie outside of the running time. One can see, based on the tone, budget size, writing, directing and acting how the world was when the film was shot. Unlike books, where you can create a whole world with the stroke of a pen, in film you must put together something that people of a certain generation want to see, with the resources that are available at the time. They age in the best way possible, as we can see what people had to work with in the past.

Rationale

Jay Cooke is one of the lowest performing schools in the Philadelphia School District, which places it in the category of what is commonly referred to as the “turnaround network.” Despite the extra help the district gives to these turnaround schools, almost all students at Jay Cooke are below average in their reading levels, which makes it extremely difficult to keep the students on pace with Common Core standards. Many teachers in these turn-around schools, including myself, are forced to rework their curriculum in ways that both challenge the top of the class while also being simple enough to be understood by the lowest level. What I hope to prove with this unit is that this can be done with any topic, no matter how broad or complex. The core points and message of any class can be reworked to not only teach underserved children new and interesting material, but also support the basics of the PA common core.

A way to help combat this is by showing film clips, which helps them have a better grasp on a new concept. Not only do films provide a visual for students, but they also provide sound. When a book is read, students have to think about where and when the story takes place to imagine the language, music and accents that the book would entail. Being able to watch a film will allow students to have a deeper knowledge of what people in that time and place sounded like and what music they listened to. Films create a much more powerful view of that era than books do in a shorter period of time.

Creating this curriculum and teaching this unit would help my students achieve a greater understanding of how the world was over the course of the 20th century. The beauty of these films is that they give viewers what that point in time was like, whether it’s the technology, the fashion, the housing, the language, the social issues, viewers get to live in that time period while watching the film. This curriculum will look at what popular myths Hollywood has told during certain historical moments. For example, the 1915 film "Birth of a Nation" depicted the Ku Klux Klan as heroes whilst the black men (white actors painted in black face) were depicted as foolish. Despite the films racism and inaccuracies, it was extremely popular. Why is that? Students will discuss questions like this and more while analyzing film clips from various films.

This unit will also look at how censorship has changed over the past century. Films have gone from being slightly censored by the National Board of Review to strict Production Code guidelines to a rating system that does not change films, but offers an age range for viewers. Students will look at how directors have been affected by censorship across different topics, ranging from interracial relationships to having a comedic toilet scene in their film. This unit focuses on how censorship of films has influenced viewers to see a more innocent and forced portrayal of life and events in American history.

Background

“History of Hollywood,” was the first course I had taken that gave me an in depth view of how Hollywood works and the history of movies. Throughout this course, I have been able to understand how films have told myths, partly because of the censorship regulations. Throughout the 20th century films have become less censored, which has led to more realistic portrayals of American Life and fewer myths. Films have always been controlled by a handful of companies that control everything people see on screen. However, regulations for how films are rated have changed tremendously over the past century.

It all began with Edison joining with other companies, such as American Mutoscope and Biograph, to have complete control of the American Film Market. These companies formed The Trust, which sought to control every aspect of the film industry, from the sale of film, to the approval of the censor board. However, the state censor boards controlled most of the distribution because of the 1915 decision by the Supreme Court, known as “the mutual decision” stating that filmmakers are not protected by the first amendment of free speech. This decision was made to resist the unexpected changes in American society through motion pictures. This decision did not have any certain standards in which a film was considered “immoral” because they would have to look at each case specifically. The courts insisted that motion pictures must be treated differently than the press because

...they may be used for evil, and against that possibility the statute was enacted. Their power of amusement and, it may be, education, the audiences they assemble, not of women alone nor of men alone, but together, not of adults only, but of children, make them the more insidious in corruption by a pretense of worthy purpose or if they should degenerate from worthy purpose... They take their attraction from the general interest, however eager and wholesome it may be, in their subjects, but a prurient interest may be excited and appealed to. Besides, there are some things, which should not have pictorial representation in public places and to all audiences... We would have to shut our eyes to the facts of the world to regard the precaution unreasonable or the legislation to effect it a mere wanton interference with personal liberty (Fowett).

Thus, this decision let studios know that films were simply a business and should be used as entertainment through their ideas and events. The courts knew that motion pictures could spread ideas and influence viewers but they did not want those influences to be evil. From 1916 into the 1950s thousands of motion pictures carried the legend "Passed by the National Board of Review" in their main titles. The board was a de facto censorship organization. Producers submitted their films to the board before making release prints; they agreed to cut any footage that the board found objectionable, up to and including destroying the entire film (Sklar, 1994). Because films were becoming

more and more popular, the courts wanted to ensure that films would not portray America in a bad light.

During World War I, federal laws were enacted to oversee films for wartime purposes. In early 1917, executives from Vitagraph, Famous Players-Lasky (Paramount's official name at the time), Mutual, Fox and several trade magazines, joined Universal in sending President Wilson a telegram pledging "combined support for the defense of our country and its interests." Reminding Wilson of Hollywood's ability to influence the opinions of its daily 12 million US cinema patrons, the signers offered to form a commission "to place the motion picture at your service in the most intelligent and useful manner." (Alvarez, 2010). Most studios agreed with creating positive propaganda and the government praised the films that promoted enlisting in the war. Stars and studios were advertising and selling government war bonds. Charles Chaplin was one of the many directors who contributed films to the war effort. He wrote and directed "Shoulder Arms" in 1918, which was a humorous film about a heroic soldier and "The Bond", also in 1918, which shows that liberty bonds are more important than the bonds you have with friends and family. By this time, the Espionage Act was put into place, making it illegal for Americans to criticize the government, constitution, military, nor the flag. In Pennsylvania, the state attorney general threatened to revoke licenses for cinemas exhibiting films that could endanger enlistment. Similar measures were discussed in New York State. In Maryland, the governor arranged with the state censor board to recall previously approved films containing any mildly anti-war sentiments or grim scenes of battlefield carnage (Alvarez, 2010). These films did not necessarily tell myths, but they did show a biased argument for war.

In 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) was formed to arrange codes for complaints from censor boards and informed producers of their views. General William Hays led the MPPDA.

Although studios did not have a lot of control over the content of their films, studios did have control of the theatres due to block booking. Theatres were forced to purchase an entire set of a studios' unseen films instead of just one film. As the years went on, theatres grew tired of having little say in what movies they showed and formed the Allied States Association. They requested to eliminate block booking. Unfortunately, this request would not come true until 1948.

By 1930, the MPPDA created the production code, which stated, No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin. This code prohibited nudity, excessive drinking of alcohol, scenes of passion, miscegenation, ridicule of religion, sexual perversity, rape, etc, from being shown in films. However, many producers do not follow this code until Joseph Breen becomes the head of the Production Code Administration in 1934. Breen strictly enforced the code and movie

makers had to receive the PCA's seal of approval on every film. If they didn't, they would get a hefty fine. Breen spent hours reading through scripts and revising parts that went against the code. This caused an abundance of films that did not show realistic portrayals of life in America. Films with the PCA seal of approval were more innocent. They told myths that people would ALWAYS be punished for crimes or wrongdoings. For example, in Keighley's 1935 "G Men", government officials are the heroes and the criminals are punished for their crimes. Additionally, in Wilder's 1944 "Double Indemnity", the main characters are killed for their adultery and fraudulent crimes. Another example can be seen in Kazan's 1951 "Streetcar Named Desire", the main character is punished for his suggested rape by having his wife leave him. Not only could films not show favoritism towards the "bad guy" but also countless other ridiculous details were banned. Films could not show cows being milked, couples in the same bed, foreign languages that were not translated, not even toilets!

More unsightly than the bedroom was the bathroom. A marriage bed might be cut in half; a toilet must remain invisible. In the innocuous *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950), a family comedy whose contempt for birth control Breen could only applaud, an innocent reference to the children needing to see "Mrs. Murphy"—that is, visit the bathroom—generated sheets of memos and counter memos between the Breen Office and Twentieth Century-Fox when Breen forbade the toilet, or lack of toilet, humor. Though acknowledging Fox's arguments were "not without merit" and that the film was "on the whole a pleasant, wholesome story of family life," the Mrs. Murphy scene went a bit too far. To approve it, wrote Breen, would "set a precedent that would threaten disaster for the future." A bath, a shower, or a sink might be shown, but a commode is not seen, a flush is not heard (Doherty, 2009).

Breen looked at every detail in the scripts and that bothered filmmakers the most, however, these strict guidelines, allowed filmmakers to be creative with word play and come up with other ways that the audience can assume something else is going on. For instance, instead of showing a sex scene, you would see the camera pan over to a fireplace and assume that the characters were having an intimate moment. Still, audiences would have to read between the lines to understand what was going on. During WWII, Breen still followed the code, stating that wartime films should be for entertainment; they should still be moral, not patriotic. Breen wanted the films to be uplifting towards America; however, they were myths of what the 1940's were actually like. "In the 1940s, cinema delineated little but a fairy tale world of uncomplex heroism and romantic love, sustained by toupees, fake bosoms, and happy endings," remembered cultural historian Paul Fussell, himself a grizzled combat veteran, looking back with bile. "It was a medium whose conventions equipped it perfectly for the evasion of wartime actualities, and it adapted to its new requirements without in any way changing step" (Doherty, 2009). It was hard to say whether people wanted to go into a theatre and see the actualities of war;

blood, violence, loss, but people were able to get the real stories when they watched the commercial newsreels and combat footage.

The government continued to hold control over Hollywood in the 1940's and 50's by ensuring that all studios are not to knowingly hire a communist. Many filmmakers and actors were blacklisted and had to leave America in order to continue making films or acting. Most of them had to find a different job while some committed suicide.

Finally, theatres started to gain a little bit of control in Hollywood. The 1948 Paramount decision stated that they end block booking and relinquish distribution arms and theatres. This allowed more independent filmmakers to showcase their movies, and a weakening of the production code, which in turn, led to fewer myths in movies and more realistic displays of life in America. Soon after the theatres gained control, filmmakers won the battle for free speech. The 1952 Miracle Decision finally protected motion pictures under the first amendment and decades of censorship ended in American cinemas. Directors started to integrate all the previously prohibited content into their films, some people enjoyed them, while others still fought to revise and ban them. Preminger's 1956 "The Man with the Golden Arm" depicts drug abuse and Kazan's 1956 "Baby Doll" depicts erotic content; both are only a few ways films started to branch out and include taboo subjects in their plots. As the 1960's went by, restrictions on subjects started to be lifted. As TV's became more popular, The National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters adopted its own self-regulatory document, the Television Code. The living room screen was free to depict kidnapping and drug addiction (Doherty, 2009). Directors even made fun of the Production Code in certain films. For instance, Preminger's 1959 "Anatomy of a Murder" has a courtroom burst out laughing because of the word "panties". Directors no longer needed a Code Seal and preferred to push the moral standards aside to show their creativity. In 1966, Valenti took over the MPAA and shredded the old Production Code. He wanted directors to have creative freedom but also self-regulate their content. By 1968, Valenti officially created an alphabet rating system ranging from family-friendly to adults only. G suggested for general audiences, M suggested for mature audiences, R suggested for persons 16 and over unless accompanied by an adult, and X suggested persons under 16 not admitted (Doherty, 2009). In 1978, the rating system was named, Classification and Rating Administration (CARA). Now, these ratings have turned into G, PG, PG-13, and R. As a result of this new rating system, directors have been able to input their own style into films, known as auteurism. They have been able to create films containing various subjects and allow the audience to make their own judgments.

Objectives

This unit is intended for an 8th grade history class that meets every other day for 45 minutes, however, it can be adjusted to fit in 6th and 7th grade history classes and could also be integrated into English classes.

The objectives for this unit include:

- Organize censor regulations into a timeline including person(s) in charge of censorship boards.
- Read about certain historical events and watch film clips related to that event, analyze whether Hollywood is telling myths.
- Critique director's choices after watching film clips.
- Identify propaganda used in wartime clips and discuss their purpose.
- Create your own wartime propaganda for a historical event in the past.
- Debate if censorship was necessary back then and if we should still have censorship regulations today.
- Watch various film clips changed by the production code and debate whether the film would have been better had it not been revised.

Strategies

This unit will require students to actively watch and listen to film clips, read passages, take notes, critically think, and share opinions as they examine a wide range of films, primary sources, and more from the past century in order to understand the changes Hollywood has made in the past century.

Students will use a wide range of strategies including:

- Graphic Organizers: Students will be using a timeline graphic organizer to plot important dates and events, take notes on film clips, and Venn diagrams to compare and contrast.
- Rewind and Re-watch: After discussing certain parts of film clips, I would replay the clip for students to see certain parts of the film that they did not catch the first time or point out something that they did not notice the first time.
- Vocabulary: Review important vocabulary before reading primary sources or passages about historical events.
- Think-Pair-Share: After students watch film clips, they will turn and talk to their partner about what they thought about the clip and then share their thoughts with the class.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One	
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Article: "Background: Historical Context on World War I"- Primary source documents- Chart Paper- Markers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Graphic organizers for film analysis - “Shoulder Arms” film - “The Bond” film
Timeline for Completion	1-2 45 minute class periods
Objectives	<p>SWBAT read arguments for and against the US staying neutral during WWI and watch film clips that were promoted as propaganda because of the federal laws enacted for the government to oversee wartime clips.</p> <p>SWBAT analyze whether Hollywood is telling myths through the propaganda and debate whether the US should have gone to war or not.</p>
Standards	<p>Standard - 5.4.8.D Describe how mass media influences our view of international events.</p> <p>Standard – 8.1.8.B Compare and contrast a historical event, using multiple points of view from primary and secondary sources.</p>
Evaluation Tool	Graphic Organizer, Group Chart Paper, Participation, Do Now, Exit tickets
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Graphic Organizers: Students will be using a timeline graphic organizer to plot important dates and events, take notes on film clips, and Venn diagrams to compare and contrast. - Rewind and Re-watch: After discussing certain parts of film clips, I would replay the clip for students to see certain parts of the film that they did not catch the first time or point out something that they did not notice the first time. - Vocabulary: Review important vocabulary before reading primary sources or passages about historical events. - Think-Pair-Share: After students watch film clips, they will turn and talk to their partner about what they thought

	<p>about the clip and then share their thoughts with the class.</p>
<p>Step-by-Step (Day One)</p>	<p>Step 1 (Opening Activity): Students will read an article, “Background: Historical Context on World War I” about background information on events leading to US involvement in WWI. Students will answer the question: What were the reasons that the US became involved in WWI in 1917? As a class, we will discuss the circumstances that led to war and the complexities of neutrality.</p> <p>Step 2: Students will be divided into 4 groups of 5. Each group will receive two primary source articles on varying viewpoints. Each group will discuss the articles and answer the following questions about both articles on chart paper.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the article title? What newspaper is it from? 2. Who is the author or the group represented? 3. Does it support sending American troops to war? Is it opposed to participation: Or, does it present a different issue entirely? 4. What support is given for the author’s position? 5. Do you agree with the article? Why or why not? ("Chronicling America: Uncovering a World at War EDSITEment", 2014) <p>Step 3: Play clips from Charlie Chaplin’s 1918 film, “Shoulder Arms”. Ask students to take notes on what viewpoint they think the director of this film wants the audience to agree with. Discuss with students the purpose of the Committee of Public Information (CPI) that Woodrow Wilson created after the US declared to go to war with Germany during WWI. Explain that the CPI influenced public opinion of the war by attempting to glamourize war with romantic adventures and patriotic heroism. The committee encouraged public support for the war through pro-war films, posters, and other propaganda. Students will respond to questions regarding the film on a graphic organizer (See Appendix A). Teacher will then play Chaplin’s 1918 short film “The Bond”. Students will jot down notes about the message this silent short film is trying to give the audience. Explain to students that many studios, actors and filmmakers agreed to show support to the war effort through their films and advertisements; Charlie Chaplin was one of them.</p> <p>Step 4 (Closing): Exit Ticket: Do you think the government was telling myths to Americans by convincing them that the US being involved in war is a good thing? Do you think glamourizing war</p>

	through films gave Americans a false interpretation of how war actually was?
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Lesson Two	
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Production Code - Highlighters - “Streetcar Named Desire” film - “The Selected Letters of Elia Kazan” book - Chart Paper - Markers
Timeline for Completion	2-3 45 minute class periods
Objectives	<p>SWBAT read and understand the new Production Code regulations set by Joseph Breen in 1934 and assess the importance of these regulations.</p> <p>SWBAT watch films that have been revised by the Production Code and debate about whether the audience has been told myths because of the changes forced upon the directors.</p> <p>SWBAT to read letters from directors to Breen’s office to speculate why certain subjects could not be seen in films and determine whether films should still be held to the same standard as the Production Code Era.</p>
Standards	Standard – 5.3.8.H Describe the influence of mass media on government.
Evaluation Tool	Graphic Organizer, Group Chart Paper, Participation, Do Now, Exit tickets
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Graphic Organizers: Students will be using a timeline graphic organizer to plot important dates and events, take notes on film clips, and Venn diagrams to compare and contrast. - Rewind and Re-watch: After discussing certain parts of film clips, I would replay the clip for students to see certain parts of the film that they did not catch the first

	<p>time or point out something that they did not notice the first time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vocabulary: Review important vocabulary before reading primary sources or passages about historical events. - Think-Pair-Share: After students watch film clips, they will turn and talk to their partner about what they thought about the clip and then share their thoughts with the class.
<p>Step-by-Step</p>	<p>Step 1 (Opening Activity): Students will be given a copy of the Production Code to read and highlight/ take notes on any parts of the code that they find interesting or have questions about. Think-Pair-Share: Students will share their thoughts with somebody sitting next to them and then share aloud.</p> <p>Step 2: Students will watch “A Streetcar Named Desire” while taking notes on which scenes they believe are in violation of the production code. After watching the film, students will work in groups to discuss and create a list of the various production code violations.</p> <p>Step 3: In groups, students will review different letters between Joseph Breen, and Elia Kazan, the director of the film, using the book, “The Selected Letters of Elia Kazan”. Students will discuss in groups, which scene the letter is about, what Breen/Kazan is saying about that scene, what changes need to be made, and what reasons are given for the alteration. Students will write the answer to these questions on chart paper and share with the class. After each group presents, the whole class will have discussions about whether they believe the revision needed to happen for that part of the film.</p> <p>Step 4 (Exit Ticket): Students will write an opinion paragraph on whether they believe if the production code should have restricted films from showing the taboo subjects that are listed in the code, such as, sex, murder, crime without punishment, religion, obscenity, profanity, etc. Students will be given a graphic organizer to help with their writing (See Appendix B).</p>

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Content Standards

Standard – 5.3.8.H

Describe the influence of mass media on government.

Standard - 5.4.8.D

Describe how mass media influences our view of international events.

Standard – 5.3.8.J

Compare democracy to totalitarianism.

Standard - 6.2.8.A

Describe the interaction of consumers and producers of goods and services in the state and national economy.

Standard - 6.4.8.B

Compare the standard of living in different times and places.

Standard – 6.5.8.C

Explain the organization of different types of businesses.

Standard – 8.1.8.B

Compare and contrast a historical event, using multiple points of view from primary and secondary sources.

Standard – 8.3.8.A

Examine the role groups and individuals played on the social, political, cultural, and economic development of the United States.

Standard – 8.3.8.C

Summarize how continuity and change have impacted U.S. history.

Standard – 8.3.8.D

Examine how conflict and cooperation among groups and organizations have impacted the growth and development of the U.S.

Appendix A

Graphic Organizer for Analyzing Film in Lesson One

“Shoulder Arms” (1918) Directed by Charlie Chaplin	
Who is the enemy in this film? How are they portrayed?	
How is France portrayed in this film?	
What “lesson” does this film give to the American audience at the time when WWI was coming to an end?	
“The Bond” (1918) Directed by Charlie Chaplin	
What is Chaplin’s stance on the US involvement in war based on this short film?	
What is Chaplin trying to persuade Americans to buy in this short film? Why?	

Appendix B

Graphic Organizer for Exit Ticket on Lesson Two

Name:

Do you think the Production Code Administration should have restricted films from showing the taboo subjects that are listed in the code, such as, sex, murder, crime without punishment, religion, obscenity, profanity, etc.? Why or why not?