

MEDIA REVIEW

Hollywood (and studios beyond) meet world history – how do they do?

Hollywood or history: An inquiry-based strategy for using film to teach world history, edited by Scott Roberts and Charles Elfer, Charlotte, NC, Information Age Press, 2021, 530 pp., \$72.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-64802-303-3

Educational films produced for teaching about history have existed almost since the origins of the medium. The serious examination of “Hollywood” films, including films that broadly fit into the historical feature film category, however, has only really been considered in the past 50 years and only began to gain acceptance within the historical community with John O’Connor’s work in the 1980s. In his essay in the edited volume *Image as Artifact*, O’Connor (1990) outlined a typology of how historians may consider film as part of historical inquiry: as representations of history, as evidence for social and cultural history, actuality footage as evidence for history, and the history of the moving image as industry and art form.

Hollywood or History: An Inquiry-Based Strategy for Using Film to Teach World History, a volume edited by Scott Roberts and Charles Elfer, is part of the *Hollywood or History* series published by Information Age Publishers. The premise of the *Hollywood or History* series includes a method for conducting inquiry into history through Hollywood films that aligns primarily with O’Connor’s first categorization of film as representations of history. It is a massive volume consisting of 30 chapters organized chronologically. The volume is structured around nine historical periods spanning the beginning of human society to the 20th Century, with a group of chapters situated within each historical period section.

Each chapter is structured similarly in the form of a replicable lesson plan, including the intended grade level and subject/topic, relevant example state standards, and national standards (e.g., Common Core, National Council for the Social Studies). The chapters also include a detailed list of resources, including specific timed clips and online locations for accessing the film clips to use in the lesson. Chapters also include a detailed plan for engaging students in the film(s), as well as assessment strategies, vocabulary support, and discussion questions. The plans include links or references to suggested resources, including primary sources, to research the historical topic and compare with the film representations. Many chapters also include sample graphic organizers or other handouts to assist in this analysis. The inclusion of these elements across 30 chapters leads to a total length of well over 500 pages for the volume. This length and the price situate the volume as a worthy reference book for high school history departments to share among world history teachers or for a teacher resource library within a media center (along with copies of some of the films on DVD—teachers may want to watch the whole film).

In this review, I provide some highlights from the volume, specifically the ways in which many of the chapters thoughtfully go beyond the *Hollywood or History* premise to provide opportunities for students to engage in an analysis of how films are representations of the past that go beyond the accuracy of the film’s representation in relation to the historical record, how films can be a way to understand how the past is framed during the time of the film’s production, or as a reflection of the views of the context of production. The latter use, which O’Connor

described as film as evidence for social and cultural history, is a strategy that is underutilized with films in history classrooms and yet may be one of the most powerful.

The starting point for the chapters in the volume, following the Hollywood or History premise, is that they include activities in which students are placed in the role of evaluating films to “make claims about whether a film selection is 100% History (all fact), 100% Hollywood (all fiction) or somewhere in between” (p. xiv). For example, a chapter from the “Traditions, Religions and Empires” period focuses on ancient Greece and uses the film *300* (Snyder, 2006). This film is based on a 1998 comic book by Frank Miller and retells the Battle of Thermopylae during the Greco-Persian Wars. The chapter provides teachers with the resources and activities students need to examine the material culture represented in the film, the decisions of the filmmakers, and how the film’s rendition of events differs from primary sources. In this chapter, authors Colleen Fitzpatrick and Paul Yoder center lesson activities around prime questions such as “How is the material culture of ancient Greece represented in the film? Why do the directors/producers of a film make certain costume and set design choices? and In what ways does the film *300* (in)accurately depict ancient Sparta?” (p. 125).

In this example, the film activity may serve as an engaging way to explore material culture from ancient Greece and the historical rise and fall of ancient city states and nations in the region, as well as to start to frame Hollywood films as representations loosely based in history. Explicitly asking students to consider the filmmakers’ choices and the use of “(in)accurately” in the question above frames for students that the film cannot possibly be accurate—as it is loosely based on the ancient historical record, which has its own historiographical issues, and because the source material for *300* is a comic book telling of these events. The questions provided and clips selected for this activity, along with additional resources for teachers to replicate and use with students, can open the door for teachers to both examine the history of this period as well as begin to give students the epistemic understanding of how films present history and the language to talk and think about historical Hollywood films.

While the initial premise of the volume is to have students evaluate the accuracy of the historical representations in film, including plot, visual elements, and even dialogue, many of the chapters in the volume go well beyond these elements in terms of both historical analysis and inclusion of film and media analysis. For example, a chapter in the “Early Civilizations” period by Tim Monreal and Jesús Tirado titled “Seeing the Mayans/Issues of Representation in Media” explicitly positions students to consider issues of representation in the film *Apocalypto* (Gibson, 2006). They frame their analysis of issues of representation around questions such as “Are representations of other cultures in films connected to legacies of oppression and marginalization? and How do we make film more accurate and reflective of the past/current struggles that groups/cultures face(d)?” (pp. 275–276). This framing helps students to more critically analyze the sensationalist representations of Mayans in the film, as well as consider the social and political context of when the film was made (also part of O’Connor’s typology) and ongoing issues affecting Indigenous Central American peoples.

Given the structure and scope of the volume, the book covers an immense range of historical periods and foci. For example, the period titled “Traditions, Religions and Empires (1000 B.C.E.-300 C.E.)” includes chapters focused on films representing Greek and Roman empires, as well as a chapter by Beth Corrigan and Qian Wang that engages students in examining Disney’s *Mulan* through a framework of Confucianism. Chapters at the end of the volume and the end of the 20th century section (1945–2000) focus more closely on global issues of human rights and genocide, much of which was part of the Cold War. This section includes a chapter by Keith Rivero and John Myers that focuses on Argentina’s “dirty war” against leftist groups in the 1970s and 1980s as depicted in the film *La Historia Oficial* (Puenzo, 1985).

Many of the films and chapters focus on topics taught broadly across world history curricula and standards while others focus on less well-known historical events that may be a welcome addition for teachers attempting to break out of the Western Civilization-focused canon of world history that still dominate in some states. Of course, any choices for the volume are limited to films that are available and events that are included in state or national standards, the alignment to which is included in each chapter. Therefore, the chapters and topics still largely focus on Western epics from history given the prevalence of films made about these events, and the films, in turn, are dominated by Western film studios and directors. As a result of this dominance of the English language and mainstream film production and distribution, Africa and other regions of the world are almost entirely absent from the volume, likely given that few films made about history in these regions are easily accessible. Many of the chapters do include opportunities for teachers to engage students in considering the power of Hollywood in shaping our understanding of the past—and I would encourage teachers to take these opportunities liberally!

Unlike an earlier volume of *Hollywood or History*, which focused primarily on US history, there is a challenge to examining world history through the lens of “Hollywood” unless a very broad interpretation is made as to what counts as a Hollywood film. Here again, the authors in the volume were encouraged to not stick solely to Hollywood studios and to look for films produced in different parts of the globe. Most notably, the chapters focused on *The Global Age* (1450–1770) and *Revolutions* (1750–1914), as well as the 20th century chapters, steer further away from Western history—though many of the films may still largely adhere to Western perspectives and narrative styles.


For example, the chapter by Anne Aydinian-Perry included in the “Revolutions” period focuses on the representations of boarding schools and forced assimilation of Australian Aborigines through the critically acclaimed *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002). This chapter focuses on the global issue of colonization and the oppression of Indigenous peoples using genocidal policies such as boarding schools focused on assimilation, as well as how the film played a role in pressuring the Australian government to apologize soon after the film was released. In this way, the chapter, similar to the chapter by Monreal and Tirado referenced above, goes beyond a focus on accuracy to also open the door for teachers to explore one of O’Connor’s other uses of film—examining it as a primary source of the time and context of production and how it was received. This use of film is among the least used, but historically useful, strategies for incorporating film as part of historiographical analysis of how history is presented today. My one critique of this chapter and many of the others is the extensive space (nearly 12 pages in this particular chapter) used to list out state and national standards instead of providing more depth to the history of the film and what was represented in the film, which would provide teachers with additional background information to ground the lesson.

As one can imagine, selecting the topics for a volume like this, even with 30 chapters, means that much is left out in terms of films and the topics within world history that they represent. However, chapters could also be used as models for films representing similar histories. For example, the question sets and issues of an authoritarian power engaged in suppressing a revolution as highlighted in the dirty war chapter in Argentina (20th Century period) may also be adapted for use with a film like *Battle for Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966) given the focus on leftist revolutionary movements—and the role that torture and other implementations of imperialism and subjugation play in both films. One other shortfall of the volume is that there is no index that includes a list of films included in the chapters and indications of which may be from U.S. studios or others from across the globe, whether the film is in English or would need to include subtitles, etc. There is also no overall index for a quick look to see which chapters focus on strategies to teach about racial stereotypes or issues of representation of gender in film, for example.

Overall, the volume serves as a worthy introduction and resource for teachers considering how to engage students in world history topics through film. In particular, the activities and materials in the chapters provide an easy starting point for teachers to introduce analytical strategies and epistemic understanding of how films represent the past and present and, in turn, shape how we view history.

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