

# Pointing the view:

## HELPING PUPILS TO VIEW HISTORICAL FILM CRITICALLY

— Jane Card



### Introduction

#### The teaching potential of film

Films about historical events seem like the nearest thing we can give our pupils to a time machine. In commercial film, the physical appearance of the past has often been carefully researched, thus a snippet from *Gladiator*, for example, can give pupils some idea of how the Roman army fought.

Film with varying degrees of historical content affords:

- The “*What have the Romans done for us?*” sequence from *The Life of Brian* can **provide a humorous introduction to Roman civilization**.
- **Different interpretations of King John** can be lightly introduced with his portrayal as a cowardly cartoon lion in Disney’s *Robin Hood*.
- **Old newsreels are invaluable:** I show the newsreel of the Suffragette Emily Wilding Davison disrupting the Derby in 1913, but with the modern commentary turned off. When asked what they have actually seen – rather than accepting what they had been told was about to happen- pupils debate fiercely whether what they had seen was accident or deliberate martyrdom.

#### The distortion of history by film

If taken at face value, however, commercial films **distort** our pupils’ perceptions of the past. The movie *U-571*, for example, showed an American crew, not a British one, capturing the Enigma coding machine from a German submarine. In Britain, this caused public outcry and debate in Parliament. Historical films mix fictional events and characters with those that were real to make a good story.

- **They simplify events** so this story can be easily assimilated, preferably with “goodies” and “baddies” and a large dollop of romance.

- **Huge effort** goes into accurate reconstruction of the physical past in sets and wardrobe, but anachronisms are unavoidable. Costume has to look appealing.
- **Language has to be modernised.**
- **Nuances of behaviour are missed** – for example, an Edwardian lady would not smoke in public as Kate Winslett’s character does in *Titanic*.
- **Characters are anachronistically shown** to hold ideas with which modern viewers can sympathize.
- **Gaps in available evidence** – when we just don’t know what happened – have to be filled with plausible events.

Research suggests that young people assume a high degree of “truth” in film, which can thus perpetuate stereotypes and myths about groups such as North American Indians or sixteenth century Catholics and individuals such as Elizabeth I or William Wallace.

#### Viewing film critically

However, if we help pupils to see that a film consists of the **film maker’s choices**, and to consider **what effect** those choices have on the audience, they learn how media can manipulate us – a useful skill for children bombarded with advertising images and slogans.

#### Skills of objectivity

These skills can aid the study of historical interpretations: **history in film often reflects contemporary concerns** so the *Fire Over England* (1937) suggests parallels between the then threatening European situation and the attempted Spanish Armada invasion of 1588. How can we set primary pupils on the path to such sophisticated historical thinking? Here are two possible methods.

- One is simply to **contrast a film extract** with the available historical record.

- Another is **to use public information films and government propaganda**, such as those produced during World War II available from the Imperial War Museum or simply through Amazon. They exploit the same techniques as feature films – emotive music, combinations of images to imply a meaning, careful choice of commentary – and because these convey unambiguous messages, their techniques are more easily analysed by pupils. Furthermore, their brevity enables them to be played repeatedly in one lesson to aid detailed scrutiny.

### Comparing film with historical record:

#### Elizabeth's speech at Tilbury

- 1 **Show the clip** from *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*
- 2 **Ask pupils** what they can see. Focus on "Elizabeth's" loose hair, complete armour, and that she is riding astride.
- 3 **Encourage pupils** to contrast the film images with **the painting**, contemporary though not by an eye-witness and with **the still** of Glenda Jackson in the 1970s BBC series *Elizabeth R.*

**4 Reveal to them** that no respectable Elizabethan woman would publically wear loose hair or ride astride, and that contemporary sources mention Elizabeth wearing a breastplate but not full armour. There is no strictly contemporary record of Elizabeth's Tilbury speech but you could compare the film version with a simplified account made from the Luminarium site.

**5 Ask pupils**, working in groups, to suggest **how** and **why** the makers of *The Golden Age* chose to change what historical records tell us. They may suggest some of the following: the film version is more exciting/glamorous/shorter/easier to understand/has a bigger impact.

### Conclusion

History is all about drawing inferences from evidence. Our pupils need to be able to analyse film as critically as other historical sources.

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## Case Study 2: Using a public information film

*Westward Ho!* (1940) from *The British Home Front: Women and Children at War* (DVD from the Imperial War Museum; most easily located through Amazon).

**Younger pupils** find it hard to work out the message of a film from scratch. But if told that it is trying to make them think in a particular way, and asked to work out *how this is done*, they are very perceptive.

1. **Explain that *Westward Ho!* was designed to persuade parents to evacuate their children** to safety before any bombing or invasion took place. The task of the class is to pick out the tricks used to get the message over.
2. **Explain that they will see the film three times.** During the first showing, pupils just watch.
3. **Divide the class into groups** with different tasks.
  - **Group 1** should listen to the music at the start and end, and report if it was happy or sad, and how it made them feel.
  - **Group 2** should count (roughly) how many children they see laughing and how many crying, and report these numbers.
  - **Group 3** should listen and report back on happy/"nice" words, and when they occur. Examples to look for: *safe/safety/smiling fields/seaside/kind.*
  - **Group 4** should report back on episodes where the children seem to be having fun. (Examples could be the train ride, the car ride, playing on the beach.)
  - **Group 5** should scrutinize the change of mood at the end of the film. (It features mothers from countries already invaded urging evacuation). They should report back on the reasons given for evacuating children to a safe place.
3. **Show the film a second time**, then let each group attempt their task.
4. **Show the film a third time**, so pupils can confirm their ideas.
5. Let **each group report back**, recording their ideas on the board.
6. This exercise can be the basis for a variety of activities.
  - **A discussion** on why such a film was necessary in 1940- why parents were reluctant to send their children away.
  - **Oral group** "film reviews" describing how the film persuades its audience, and how effective the "film critics" thinks it is.
  - **Drama work** devising short scenes advocating evacuation or some other topic from World War II, such as growing vegetables, not wasting food or fabric, being careful with information ("Careless talk costs lives!"), or volunteering for the Home Guard. Google images has an excellent selection of such sources.
  - **Combined with other sources**, including *Living with Strangers* and *I* on the same DVD and, other material from [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/world\\_war2/evacuation/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/world_war2/evacuation/) or [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFXXYv04uCc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFXXYv04uCc) the film can form a basis for a diary entry by an evacuee. **Negative information** about evacuation can be found, for example on [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/children\\_and\\_world\\_war\\_two.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/children_and_world_war_two.htm) and older children, can use the diary to contrast what their families might have expected evacuation to be like compared with that actually happened to them.