The Inconvenient Truth about Teaching History with Documentary Film: Strategies for Presenting Multiple Perspectives and Teaching Controversial Issues

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ABSTRACT. How can teachers effectively use documentary film to teach history, and toward what goals? This article addresses these important questions by: (1) exploring what we know about secondary teachers’ practices with documentary film and secondary students’ beliefs about documentary film as a source of knowledge about the past, (2) proposing a rationale for the use of documentary film that supports the goals of history education, and (3) discussing examples of documentaries that can be shown to further the rationale presented. Although there are numerous suitable purposes and methods for using documentary film, we argue that two of the most powerful and appropriate are as a way to explore multiple perspectives and as a way to teach about controversial issues.

Keywords: controversial issues, documentary film, historical perspectives, secondary history

In our experiences as teachers and teacher educators we have witnessed the often-limited and sometimes controversial examples of teacher practice with documentary film. These incidents, along with our observations of dozens of lessons using documentary film in secondary history classrooms, left us pondering the power and possibilities of documentary film as a teaching tool. What is clear is that many teachers do not recognize that documentary films present value-laden perspectives; they, instead, view them as objective sources of information (Hess 2007). In addition, these teachers are not equipped with explicit strategies for helping students understand the complexities of historical documentary films. Such incidences also raised many more questions than provided answers: What do we as professional teachers know about teaching with documentary film? And, how can teachers effectively use documentary film to teach history, and toward what goals?

This article addresses the important question of how teachers, particularly secondary history teachers, can effectively use documentary film to teach history. First, we briefly explore what we know about secondary teachers’ practices with documentary film and secondary students’ beliefs about documentary film as a source of knowledge about the past. Next, we propose a rationale for the use of documentary film that supports the goals of history education. Finally, we present examples of documentaries that can be shown to further the rationale presented. Although there are numerous suitable purposes and methods for using documentary film, we argue that two of the most powerful and appropriate are using documentary film as a way to explore multiple perspectives and as a way to teach about controversial issues.
**What We Know about Secondary History Teachers’ Use of Documentary Film**

We know surprisingly little about how secondary teachers’ use documentary film to teach history. What we do know is that the use of film (documentary and feature) by teachers across all subjects has increased in the past twenty years (Corporation for Public Broadcasting 1997) and that access to films and film-viewing equipment is not a barrier to showing films (Marcus and Stoddard 2007). According to one study, television, video, and films are the most frequently used media in classrooms, used more than newspapers, magazines, or computers (Hobbs 1999, 2006). PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) programming is the most popular single source of video content among teachers (Grunwald Associates 2002), suggesting that documentaries may be widely viewed. Teachers’ rationale for using film ranges from solving problems of classroom management and poor planning to motivating students and using film for supporting student learning of content (Cuban 1986). Although these findings are helpful in understanding some teacher practices, their usefulness is limited because, for the most part, they do not focus exclusively on documentary film and/or on history classrooms.

One study that specifically asked secondary history teachers about their documentary film use found that just over 82 percent of teachers reported using some portion of a documentary film on average at least once a week (Marcus and Stoddard 2007). Less than 9 percent report using documentary film once a month or less, and zero teachers reported using no documentary film. These data provide some evidence that documentary film is being used extensively. We need additional research to understand why and how it is being used so that more scaffolding can be provided for teachers to help them use this resource well as well as to understand how students learn about the past through documentary film.

**What We Know about Secondary History Students’ Reception to Documentary Film**

In a study that explored how students analyzed and interpreted film in their high school history classes, students rated documentary film as a particularly accurate and trustworthy source of knowledge about the past (Marcus 2007). When given the prompt: “documentary films are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information” at the beginning of the school year, the mean of student responses was a 4.07/5 using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). When asked again at the end of the school year, the mean for the same prompt was 4.10/5. These means, indicating that the students believed documentary film was accurate and trustworthy, were roughly equal to their beliefs about the accuracy and trustworthiness of textbooks, primary sources, and their history teachers (4.43). Students also reported that documentary film was more accurate and trustworthy than the Internet, feature films, the government, and fellow students (see table 1).

Stoddard (2009) similarly found that students viewed documentaries as trustworthy sources of information as compared to their textbooks and other classroom readings.

The implications of these findings for teaching are significant. Students’ beliefs about documentary film as an accurate and trustworthy source of knowledge about the past are problematic if we expect students to be critical consumers of film. This is especially an issue with documentary films because they are often perceived as trustworthy when compared to their feature film counterparts because they more closely resemble written history in form and narrative (Rosenstone 2006). Teachers must provide significant scaffolding and practice for students to develop

| TABLE 1. Student Responses to Scaled Statements  
(Scale 1 – 5; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) | All (pre-) n = 46 | All (post-) n = 46 |
<table>
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<tr>
<td>My history teachers are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary source documents (letters, photos, etc.) are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information.</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary films are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school textbooks are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet is an accurate and trustworthy source of historical information.</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature films are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information.</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government is an accurate and trustworthy source of historical information.</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students are accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information.</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.55</td>
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* p < .01  
the skills with which to understand a film’s perspective, place the film within a broader historical context, and compare the film to other sources of historical knowledge, among other tasks. Recent studies suggest, however, that at present students’ experiences in secondary history courses do not provide them with the tools or dispositions to view documentaries critically (Stoddard 2009).

How might history courses prepare students for a lifetime of viewing documentaries more critically? And, how does the use of documentaries and the development of critical viewing skills fit in with the larger goals of history and citizenship education?

The Goals of Documentary Film and the Secondary History Classroom

Documentary films shown in secondary classrooms can significantly contribute to the goals of history education, particularly the overarching objective of preparing citizens for life in a democracy. Three key goals for history education that prepare citizens are: promoting reasoned judgment, promoting an expanded view of humanity, and deliberating over the common good (Barton and Levstik 2004). Documentary film is exceptionally well suited to support these three goals.

Promoting reasoned judgment requires students to “reach their own conclusions about the causes of historical events, their consequences, and their significance” (Barton and Levstik 2004, 37). One way to promote students to draw their own conclusions is to have them analyze and interpret various pieces of evidence about what happened in the past. Documentary film can serve as one type of evidence that can be analyzed for accuracy, compared to other sources, considered in its historical context, and examined for author subjectivities. Many documentaries offer unique perspectives or perspectives not often prevalent in classroom textbooks or curricular guidelines; therefore, these films contribute to the promotion of reasoned judgment in ways that other sources might not. Given the likelihood that students will continue to see documentary films into adulthood and their relatively uncritical disposition toward these films, highlighting the perspectives in films is important.

Advancing an expanded view of humanity includes “taking us beyond the narrow confines of our present circumstances and confronting us with the cares, concerns, and ways of thinking of people different than ourselves” (Barton and Levstik 2004, 37). Documentary film can expose students to multiple perspectives, which as mentioned are often only marginally included in textbooks, and can provide students with a mechanism for understanding the beliefs and decisions of people in the past. In addition to the first-hand accounts and editorial perspectives often included in documentaries, these films also provide the perspective of the film’s producer and reflect the political and social values of its period of production. This exposure, with appropriately scaffolded activities, encourages an expanded view of humanity.

Deliberating the common good asks students to discuss and debate issues that “promote consideration of the common good” (2004, 39) and, as Barton and Levstik suggest, could focus around issues of justice in the past and today. The topics of many documentary films revolve around issues of justice and provide students with an engaging and provocative way to explore these issues, particularly regarding various controversial subjects. Like many nonmainstream perspectives, controversial issues are often avoided in textbooks and other curricular materials, leaving teachers to locate resources on their own. However, deliberating those issues is considered a valuable method to develop critical democratic citizens (Gutmann 1999; Parker 2003; Hess 2002). Documentary films may function as additional resources for teachers, providing one source of evidence and perspectives on various issues. Debating issues of the common good helps students to view documentary films more critically and prepares them for participation in a democracy.

Teaching History with Documentary Film

Two pedagogical strategies using documentary film that directly buttress the goals of history education—promoting reasoned judgment, promoting an expanded view of humanity, and deliberating over the common good—are to show films to introduce multiple perspectives and to show films that teach about controversial issues. One example of a film that can be shown to expose students to multiple perspectives is When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts. An example of a film that can be shown to examine a controversial issue is Bowling for Columbine. The discussion of these two films below is not meant to be a specific set of guidelines ready to implement but a means to illustrate how documentary films can support teaching about multiple perspectives and controversial issues. The choosing of specific films and topics is too dependent on teacher goals and context for us to offer a cookie-cutter approach to using all documentary films.

Multiple Perspectives

Documentary films are “perspective-laden narratives” that can expose students to a variety of issues, events, and people that they might not encounter in their textbooks (Hess 2007, 195) or through other classroom resources. Godmilow (Godmilow and Shapiro 1997, 81) claims that most documentary films are not documentaries at all but “films of edifications” with the purpose of persuading the viewing audience. Yet, despite many films’ ideological messages, many viewers interpret the films as objective (Erdman 1990). Rather than ignoring or downplaying the filmmaker’s perspectives in an attempt to remain “objective,” teachers can ask students to seek these perspectives out and interpret them with the purpose of developing an expanded view of humanity and promoting reasoned judgment, requiring students to evaluate the evidence used in support of a film’s perspective and to use the film to better understand others’
beliefs and actions. Perspectives in film should not be eschewed or removed but highlighted and examined (Hess 2007). Teachers should also ask students to consider why particular perspectives were selected for inclusion in the film; what was the goal of the filmmaker in presenting them?

One example of a film that offers engaging and important perspectives is *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006). This film, which aired on HBO, is Spike Lee’s account of the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the residents of New Orleans and is particularly critical of the local and federal governments’ responses to the crisis. In addition to its overall perspective and message that condemns the role of the government in New Orleans’s recovery, the film provides a variety of perspectives, including those of local residents, government officials, and celebrities. Within each of those perspectives are various views of the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the people of New Orleans and on the government’s role in recovery. Lee particularly highlights the African American community, a perspective often omitted or marginalized in the traditional history curriculum (Stoddard and Marcus 2006). Lee is very clear that he intended to highlight certain perspectives in his film. He is “outraged” with the federal response to the crisis and hopes the film will refocus the attention of Americans on the disaster (HBO 2006).

To help students recognize and understand the perspectives in the film, teachers can ask students to examine the tragedy through having them chart or record the various perspectives in a table while they are viewing the film. For example, each student could be assigned one perspective such as the media, the government, the African American community, and other local residents. On their chart they would fill in information such as how their assigned perspective is represented (or left out) in the film and the key issues raised by that perspective. Students could then do a jigsaw, meeting with peers who focused on other perspectives and sharing information. By asking students to recognize different perspectives, they have a task during the viewing that forces them to view the film that will also help scaffold their understandings.

An alternative example is to ask students to individually “shadow” a specific character in the film (e.g., Mayor Nagin), rather than a more broad perspective and then come together through an activity to share their perspectives. Similar to the perspective activity, students would record information about the person they shadowed, such as who the person is and his or her role/position, the person’s viewpoints about what happened in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, whether or not the student personally agrees or disagrees with the person’s viewpoints, and so forth.

In addition to the perspectives offered within the film, it is important that teachers engage students in also recognizing the overall perspective of the film as intended by the producers and as reflective of the social and political beliefs of the time of production. The perspective can be identified through an examination of the themes that run across the various in-film perspectives and through an analysis of the students’ affective responses to the film and how it shaped their beliefs about the events. For example, teachers could ask, “What do you think the director wants you to feel about the events?” and “Why did the director choose to include these particular perspectives in this way?” Teachers could document students’ views pre- and postviewing and help them to debrief their reaction to the film with how the film made them feel. These sorts of media literacy exercises can be most helpful in engaging students in recognizing the overall views expressed in a documentary and, in turn, help them to understand the subjective and constructed nature of documentaries in general. As a follow-up, teachers could ask students to watch short clips of the film and examine Lee’s filmmaking techniques and how those techniques contributed to their feelings. In particular, students can explore the way Lee used music to evoke emotion, used a variety of footage to establish context and perspective, and used interviews with residents to promote empathy.

In addition to the perspectives offered, the film provides considerable historical evidence for students to evaluate including video footage from during and after the hurricane hit, formal interviews, and television news clips. Teachers can have students evaluate how the evidence supports Lee’s point of view and compare it to other evidence that may support other perspectives. A culminating activity might include putting FEMA “on trial” for their response or the media on trial for their coverage of the tragedy. For more specific activities, see the film’s education guide that has one of the most extensive, thoughtful, and engaging set of guiding questions and activities that we have seen for any film (see Crocco 2007).

*When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* is a powerful tool for expanding students’ views of humanity and promoting their reasoned judgment. Its images and audio are powerful, provocative, and engaging. It offers a unique overall perspective while also presenting multiple perspectives. It uses a variety of evidence to make its point. It succeeds where others fail in directly addressing issues of race and in criticizing the media and government. This film, and other documentaries with similar characteristics, is a tremendous resource for teachers. There is no shortage of other films that provide unique perspectives and are suitable for showing. Just a few examples include:

- *America and the Holocaust* (1994), a critical look at U.S. policies during World War II related to the Holocaust;
- *The War* (2007), World War II through the perspectives of American families from four U.S. towns;
- *The Fog of War* (2003), a perspective on the Vietnam War from Robert McNamara, secretary of defense for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson;
- *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Nazi propaganda film;
- *Why We Fight* (1943), the Frank Capra series commissioned by the U.S. government during World War II. Initially shown to the troops but later also to the public to encourage support for the war effort.
Helping students explore a film’s perspective is not just important as a way to expose them to new perspectives but also as a skill to help them interpret documentaries they will view on their own. Considering the trust students place in documentary film as a source of knowledge about the past, this skill is exceptionally important.

To help teachers choose which documentary films to show, Hess (2007) recommends that teachers ask whether the perspectives the documentary filmmaker has chosen to represent about a topic are important for students to be exposed to and suggests vetting films to show based on whether they present powerful historical evidence. This is an important exercise for teachers in choosing a film, but it is also a critical exercise for students when analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating a film. However, documentary films are not adequate as a stand-alone source and should be shown in conjunction with other sources and perspectives (Stoddard 2009).

Controversial Issues

History classes are a natural place to include lessons on controversial issues, and documentary films are often excellent tools through which to introduce and examine those issues. Although discussing controversial issues in secondary classrooms is itself often contentious and can overlap with ideologically battles taking place outside of school, it is an essential mechanism for supporting students’ ability to deliberate over the common good, including the ability to take a stand on an issue and weigh evidence from multiple sources (Hess 2004).

Bowling for Columbine (2002) is an excellent example of a film that, when used in conjunction with other sources, can provoke student discussion while offering informed and engaging analysis. Bowling for Columbine, directed by Michael Moore, presents a strong stand on the issue of gun control, blaming the lack of gun control for some violent behavior in the United States, particularly as compared to other countries. (Moore claims the film is not “about gun control,” but is about “the fearful heart and soul of the United States” (Bowling for Columbine 2007)). Although some are critical of Moore’s “in-your-face” style, and his films are often controversial, he clearly informs the audience of his opinions and proceeds to offer his perspective on the issue with evidence such as interviews with experts, news reports, statistics, and personal accounts. The common good is easily deliberated in the classroom by debating the issue of gun control through discussions of the right to bear arms, the prevalence of violence in many communities, and of individual versus group rights. What is especially interesting about the film is that Moore does not attempt to mask his views or make a subtle statement, but instead is clearly subjective and provocative, making the film a good case for helping students to identify the perspectives in film.

As with any film that examines a controversial issue, resources representing other perspectives must be provided. For example, teachers can organize a class debate over the issue of gun control. To prepare, students can draw from a variety of sources including Moore’s film, documents from the National Rifle Association, newspaper articles, excerpts from relevant court cases, and the U.S. Constitution. The additional benefit of using films as a source for deliberation of a controversial event is the rich visual evidence they contain and their emotional aspects that can motivate students to participate. During the debate, students can be asked to represent various views on the issue of gun control ranging from complete freedom to own guns to gun ownership with some restrictions, such as on types of guns or waiting periods, to no private gun ownership. Rather than focusing on a debate “winner” the ultimate goal is for students to understand the various positions on the issue and to be able to articulate those positions backed by reasoned argument and evidence.

Another pedagogical model that would help students to understand the issues, ideas, and values of the film and its perspective on the issue is a Socratic-style seminar (Parker 2003; Ball and Brewer 1996). Socratic seminars could be used not to debate an issue but to use a film to gain a better sense of the issue itself and at least one perspective on the issue as represented in the film. Seminars work naturally with a rich documentary film that powerfully presents an issue or problematizes a historical event through questioning the evidence being used, the arguments being made, how the film represents the views of the time and place it was made and its producer, and the purpose of the film overall.

To facilitate a seminar discussion on a film, however, several steps need to be taken to adequately prepare students to participate. Seminar discussions rely on students being able to use data from the film to warrant their analysis during the discussion. Therefore, the teacher needs to structure some kind of “ticket” necessary to enter the discussion that has required students to capture evidence from the viewing. For example, students can fill in a table or graphic organizer that asks them to chart their affective reactions, what they have seen, and what questions have been raised at different points during the film. The answers to these prompts can help them to store data from the film and their reactions, much like taking notes in the margins of a speech or article being used for a discussion. If the documentary has a number of characters who are not readily known, the teacher may also want to provide images of the characters with their names so that students can refer directly to them during the discussion. A seminar discussion of a film, when done well, will help students to understand the issues, ideas, and values of a film and the controversial topic it explores, along with a sense of the film’s producers’ purpose in making the film.

In the case of Bowling for Columbine, Michael Moore’s purpose is to push the audience to question whether we have adequate gun controls measures in the United States. Moore uses a variety of types of evidence, and most students will need assistance to make sense of the “evidence” that ranges from expert testimony to specific data to “person on
the street” interviews—all produced to evoke emotional responses. An effective strategy is to stop the film after the first ten to fifteen minutes (and perhaps at other points) to check for student understanding. The teacher can talk through the various forms of evidence being used and ask students to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence in supporting the main argument. This activity during film viewing will scaffold the subsequent seminar discussion.

Other examples from among the many films that afford opportunities to explore controversial issues include:

- **Sicko** (2007), U.S. healthcare system;
- **An Inconvenient Truth** (2006), global warming;
- **The Thin Blue Line** (1988), death penalty;
- **Super Size Me** (2004), fast food and obesity in the United States—it is particularly critical of McDonalds;
- **Born into Brothels** (2004), the lives of children of prostitutes and their families in Calcutta.

Teaching controversial issues in secondary history classrooms must be carefully planned and sensitively executed, keeping in mind students’ views and feelings, a school’s community environment, and current political debates in society. However, including those issues in class, and in a meaningful way, is critical for students to learn to deliberate about the common good and develop into citizens who can maintain a thriving democracy.

**Conclusion**

Documentary films are uniquely engaging because of their powerful audio and visual format and their ability to reach a wide audience. They are also viewed fairly uncritically by secondary students who fail to recognize their subjectivities and location within a broader social and political context. Considering that students have a lifetime of viewing films ahead of them, teachers’ use of film in the classroom is crucial. Most recent films offer the added benefit of extensive online resources including data to back up their claims, lesson plans, and other materials for teachers, as well as links to other resources. These online assets ease the preparation for teachers and provide students with additional resources.

Preparing citizens for life in a democracy is an important goal for history education as it relates to promoting reasoned judgment, promoting an expanded view of humanity, and promoting deliberation over the common good. The perspectives of documentary films and the evidence they present offer the potential to support this goal if teachers include documentaries as a means to discuss multiple perspectives and as a way to learn about controversial issues.

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