

The Past in Motion: Teaching History with Movies

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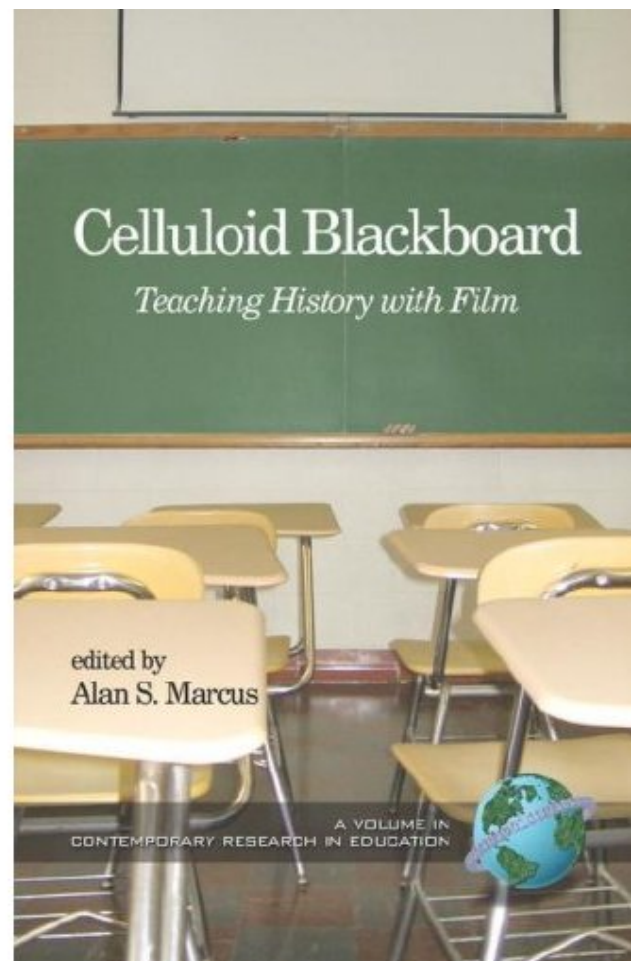
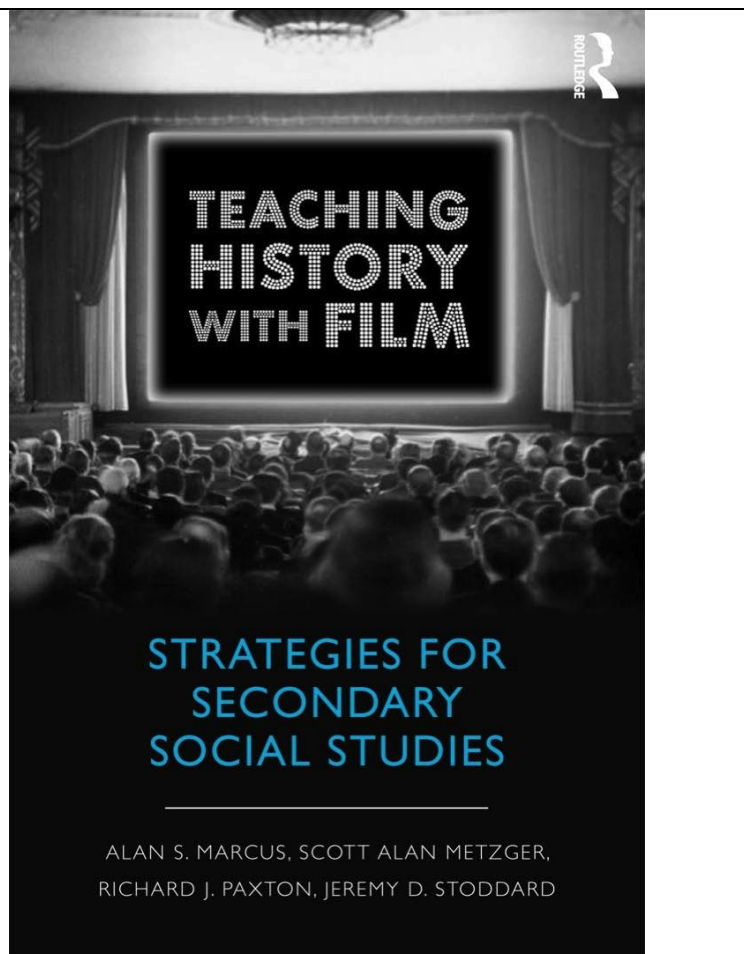


“Conventional history has recorded the motion picture as a phenomenon but ignored it as a source. Social and intellectual historians draw freely from fiction, drama, painting; hardly ever on movies. Yet the very nature of film as supremely popular art form guarantees that it is the carrier of deep enigmatic truth.”

Arthur Schlesinger (1979), introduction to American History/American Film.

Movies in the History Classroom: The Perception

“Friday was usually movie day. What could be more perfect for teacher and students alike than a cinematic experience to celebrate the closing of a tedious week of education? The teacher could rest his voice—and his feet—after four days of intensive lecturing. And the students—well, movies in class gave us a chance to catch up on our sleep, eat potato chips, and sit and discuss the weekend’s coming events” (Maynard, 1971, p. 3).



Movie Use in History Classrooms

- Movies are one of the most common teaching tools in the history classroom (Marcus & Stoddard, 2007; Marcus, Paxton & Meyerson, 2006).
- Young people are immersed in visual representations of the past—watched in movie theaters, on television and computer screens, and now on portable DVD players and even cell phones (Wineburg, 2001; Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005) .
- Yet, when social studies teachers look for models of effective movie use in history classrooms, the bookshelf is surprisingly bare.

Rationale

- Many teachers are comfortable with documentary films, but history feature films are often seen as problematic
 - Factual accuracy (fictionalized, dramatized)
 - Time and content (language, violence, sex) constraints
 - Disciplinary concerns (what is learned, how, and why?)
 - Passive learning
- Yet teachers are drawn to using movies in classroom
 - Motivation or excitement (movies as youth culture)
 - Helping students to visualize the past (make it come alive)
 - “Storytelling” for conveying historical perspectives

How can commercial motion pictures be used to learn history?

- Purposeful and connected to broader learning goals
- Tied to learning activities beyond just watching a particular movie
- Used to build “historical film literacy”-a variety of media literacy

Potential risks or drawbacks of history movies in the classroom

- Conflating imaginary and real people/events
- Seeing the past only through current values (presentism)
- Movies as unique and problematic kind of historical document (visual, entertaining, some fastidious, some with overt or hidden message)
- Serious time and content knowledge is needed to address these concerns

Frameworks for Educational Uses of Film

Developing Empathy

- **Caring (about the past and for its consequences)**
- **Perspective Recognition (identifying past views and values)**

Developing Analytical or Interpretive Skills

- **Primary Source (document contemporary to the period)**
- **Secondary Source (document about a past period)**

Raising Controversial and Historical Issues

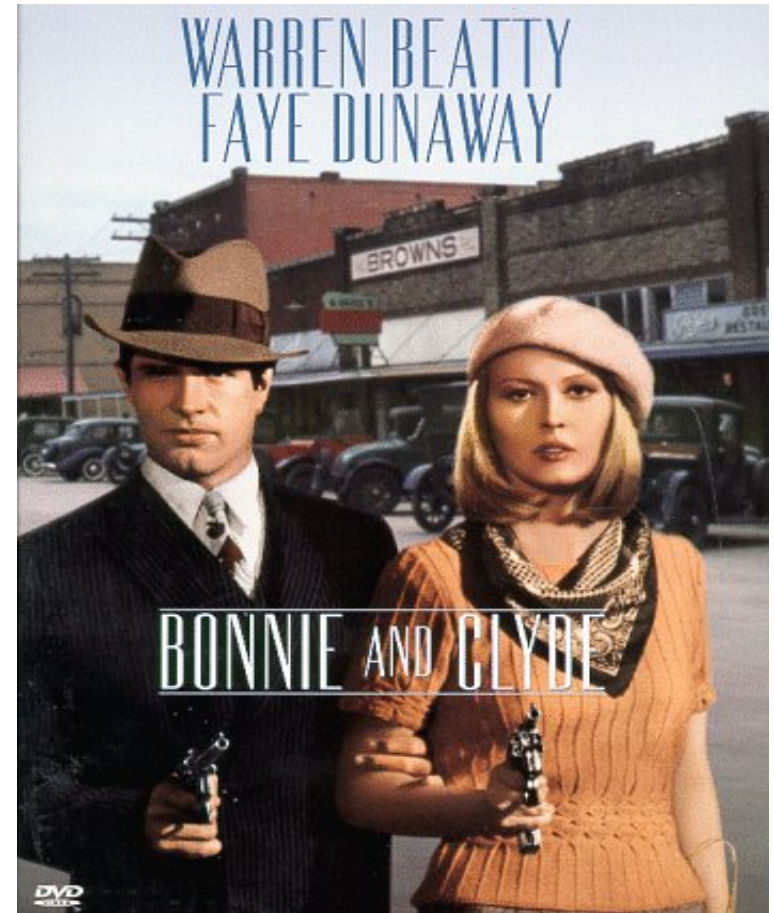
- **Contemporary Controversial Issues (linking past to present)**
- **Historical Issues (linking present to past)**

Bringing the Past to Life

- **Visualizing the Past (recreating/representing past eras)**
- **Film as Narrative (storytelling for a particular perspective)**

Case #1 – Film as a Primary Source

Teaching the 1960's with *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)



Context

- School: Independent, New Mexico
- Students: College bound, White and Latino
- Teacher: Ron Briley
- Course: Modern U.S. History through Film

Celluloid Verisimilitude



Movies as Primary Sources

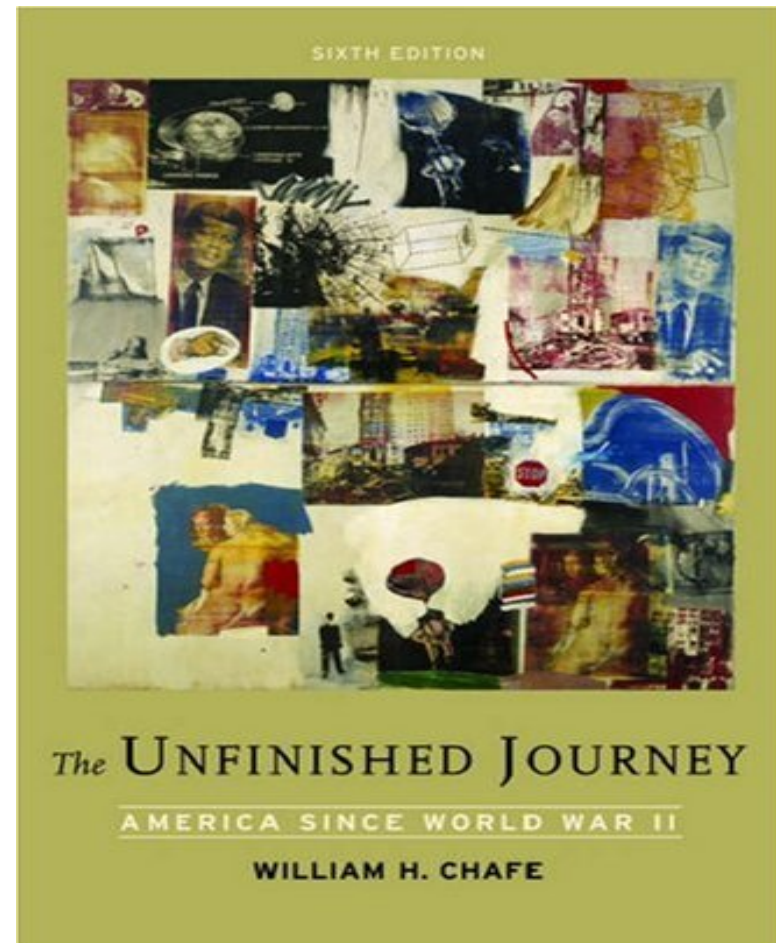
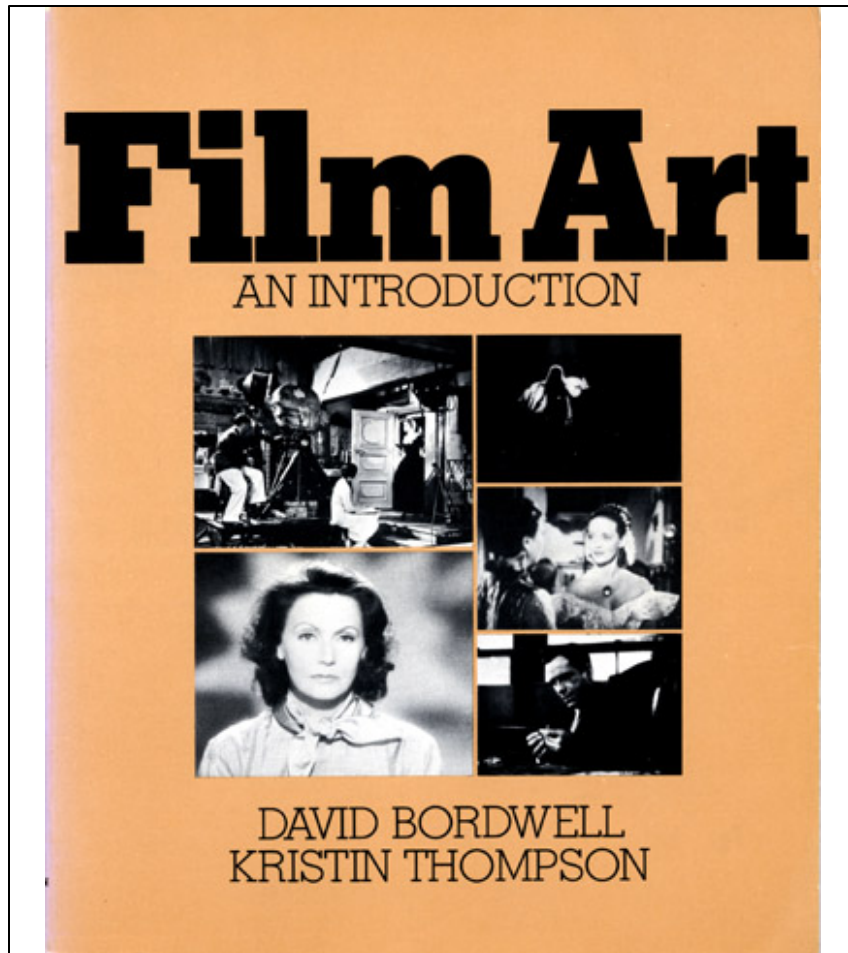
“I’m thinking of the films to be somewhat of a primary source to try to get at what people were feeling—trying to get at the values, the ideology of the time period,” Briley says.

“How does the film reflect the time period? Not so much in terms of the details of the film, but the milieu, the ideology, the values, the world view.”

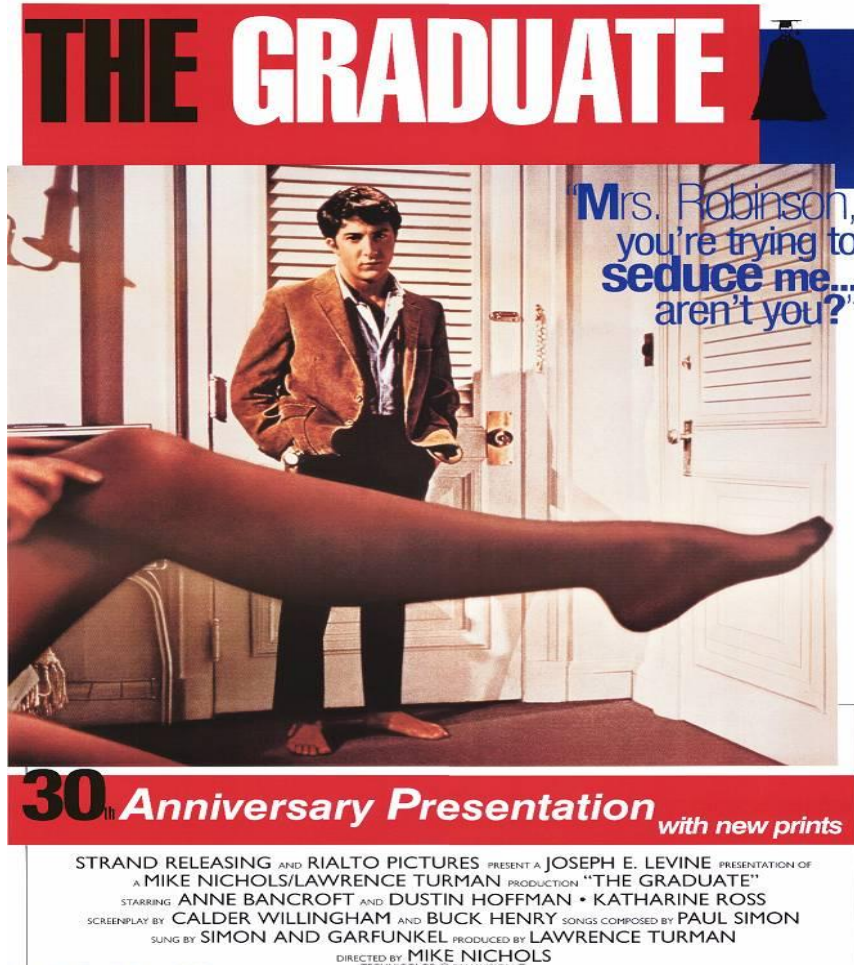
Class Objectives

- Investigation of popular films as primary and secondary historical sources through which to examine the formation of American values and ideology in the period since the Second World War
- Understanding of film techniques and vocabulary—visual or media literacy

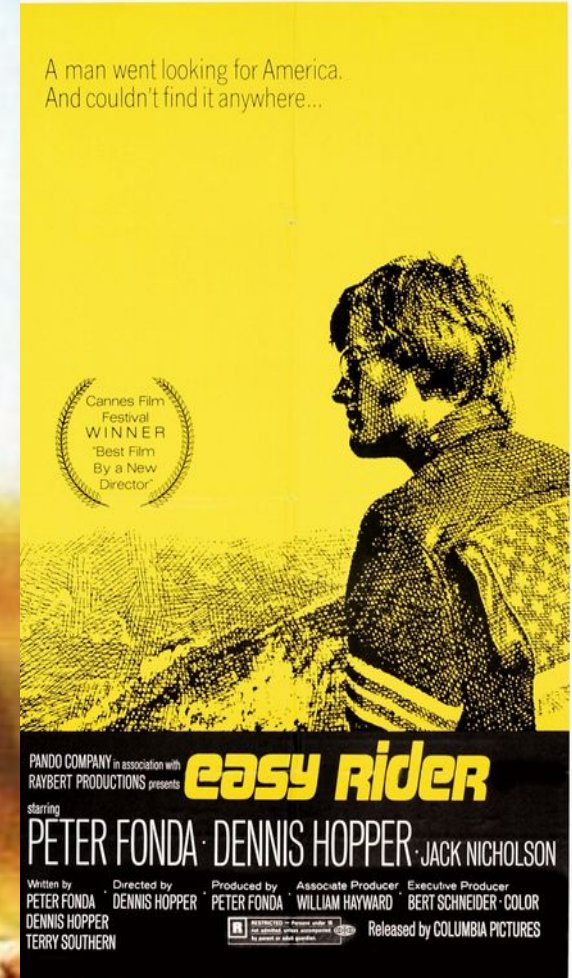
Written “texts”



Movie “texts”



Movie “texts”



Outline of Unit

1. Introduction to the Unit

2. Overview of the Unit's Content

3. Key Concepts and Themes

4. Major Works and Authors

5. Critical Analysis and Interpretation

6. Conclusion and Reflection

Written Assignments

Chapter Response Essays

Vietnam War Essay

Anti-Establishment Cinema of the 1960s Essay

Written Assignments

Vietnam War Essays

Select one of the following questions and develop your response in a well-organized essay of approximately 4 to 5 pages, using textual evidence from the films and readings from *The Unfinished Journey*. In answering the questions pay careful attention to how these films reflect the time periods in which they were released.

Many historians believe that the Vietnam War was much too complex of a historical conflict to be accurately explained by the Hollywood film. Based upon your screening of *The Green Berets* (1968) and *Platoon* (1986), do you agree with this assessment?

Film critic Steven Scheuer described John Wayne's *The Green Berets* as "more than two hours of relentlessly simple-minded, chauvinistic claptrap about a complex and profoundly important question—the American role and presence in the Vietnam War." On the other hand, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* is often praised by critics as a realistic portrayal of the American experience in Indochina. Based upon your screening of the films and readings on American involvement in Vietnam, do you agree with these critical assessments or find them to be simplistic?

Anti-Establishment Cinema of the 1960s Essay

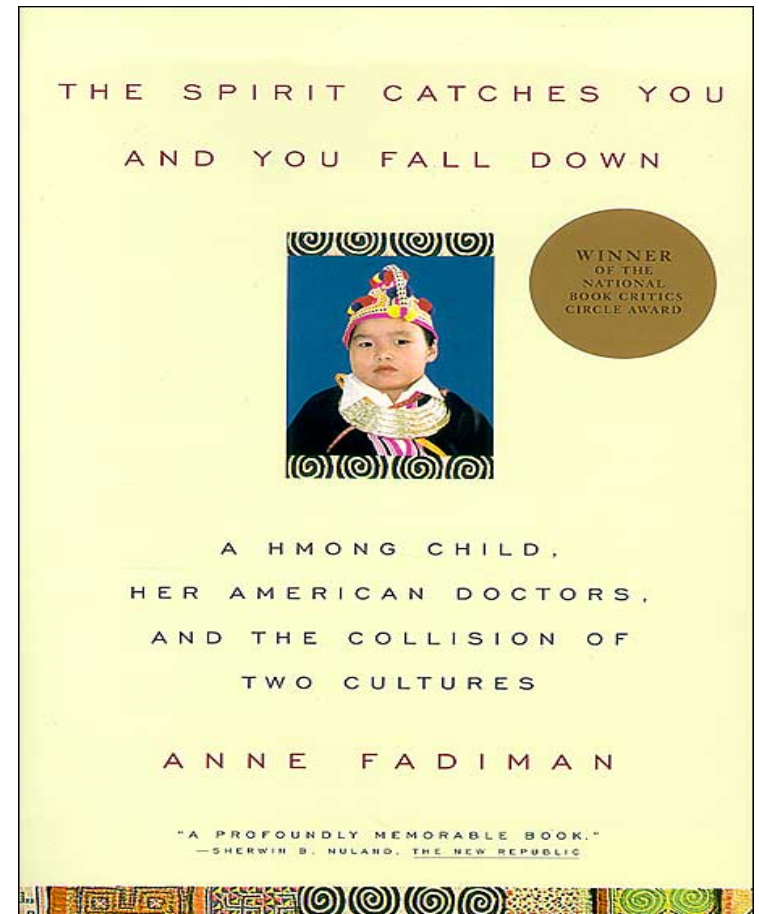
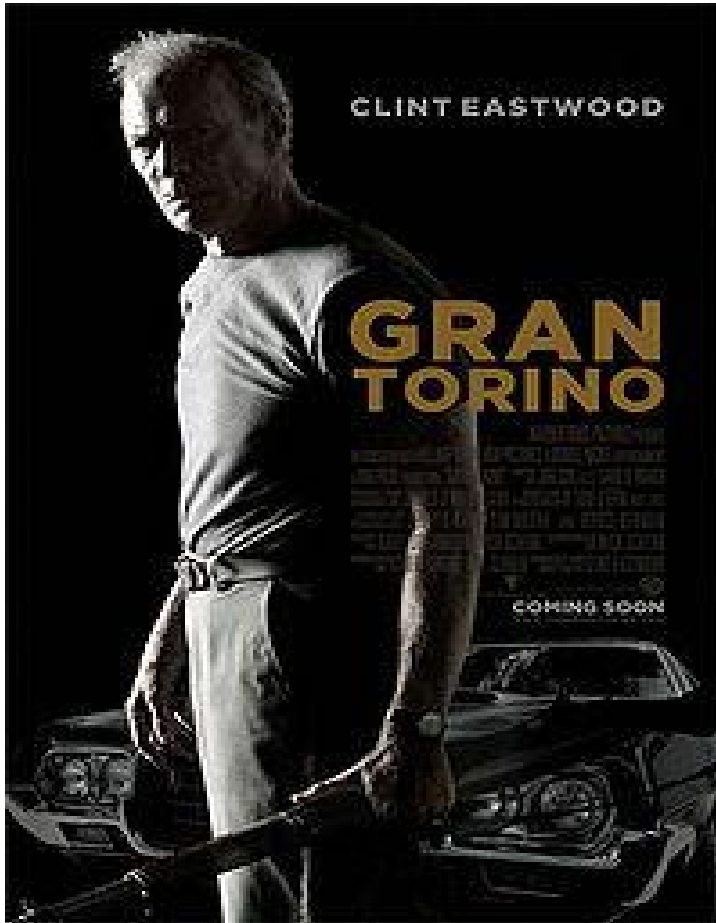
In a well-organized essay of approximately five pages, using specific examples from the film texts as well as course readings, analyze how the anti-establishment films of the late 1960s, such as *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Easy Rider*, reflect the countercultural values of the time period. In conclusion, assess, using both films and readings, the strengths and weaknesses of the counterculture movement.

U.S. History Since WWII: The Movies

- Casablanca
- Bataan
- Mildred Pierce
- Woman of the Year
- On the Waterfront
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers
- High Noon
- Rebel Without a Cause
- American Graffiti
- Dr. Strangelove
- JFK
- Mississippi Burning
- Do the Right Thing
- Malcolm X
- The Green Berets
- Platoon
- The Killing Fields
- Bonnie and Clyde
- The Graduate
- Cool Hand Luke/Easy Rider
- All the President's Men
- Chinatown
- Red Dawn/Testament
- Missing
- Norma Rae
- Wall Street
- Forrest Gump
- Mi Familia
- Smoke Signals

Case #2 – Film to Develop Empathy Caring

Gran Torino and the Hmong Experience

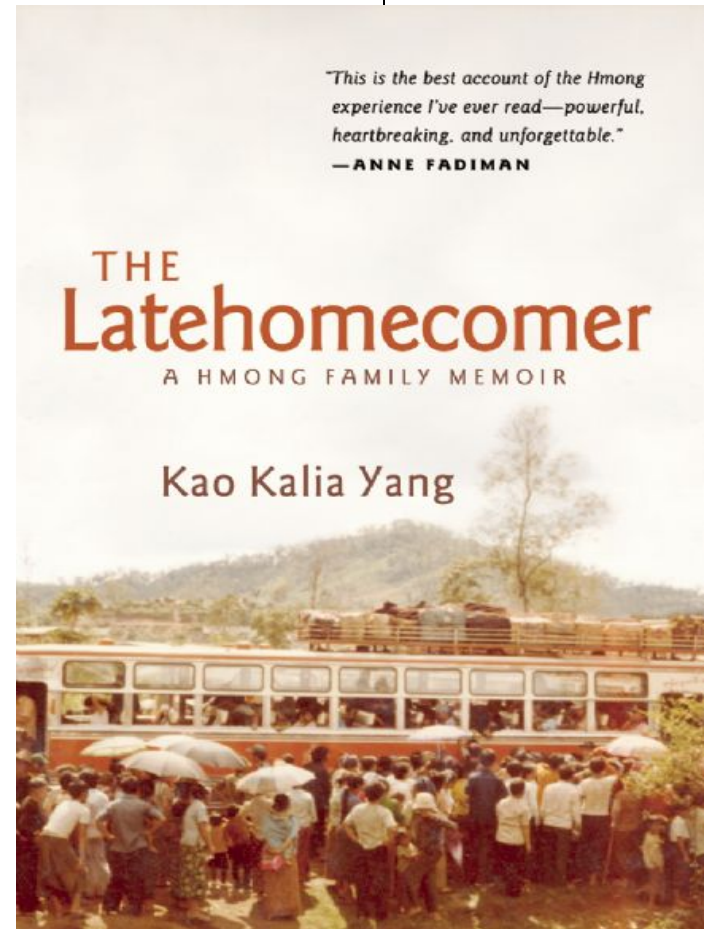
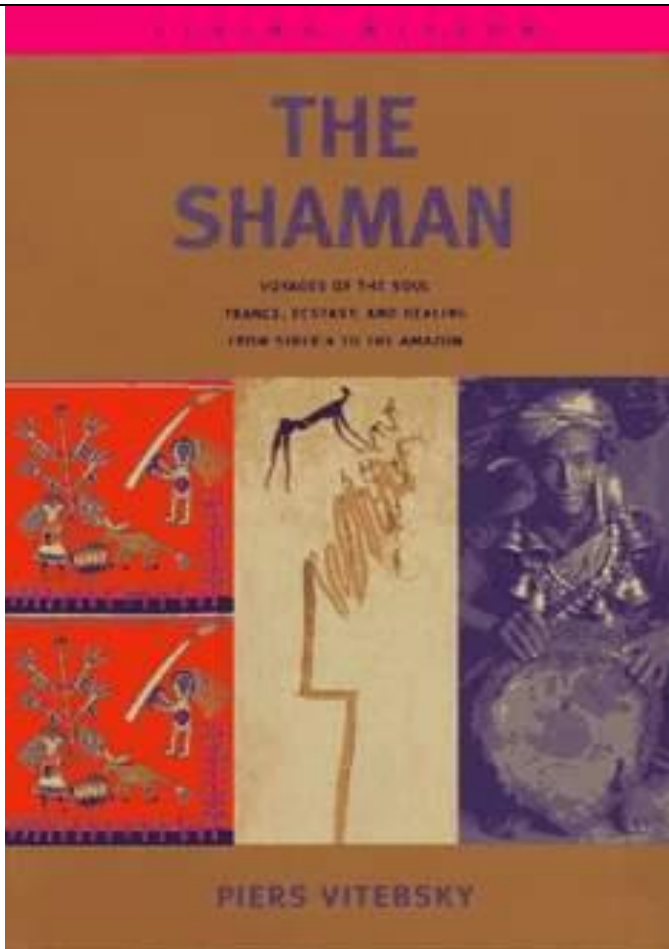


Context

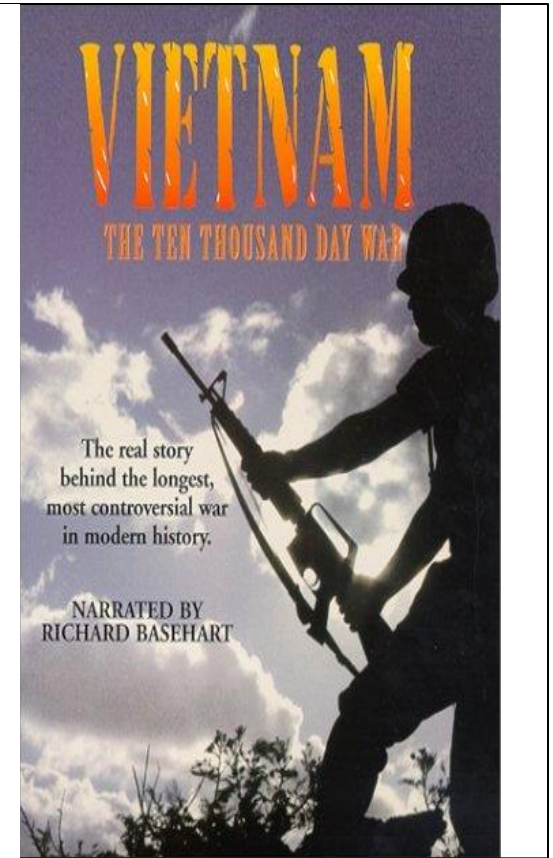
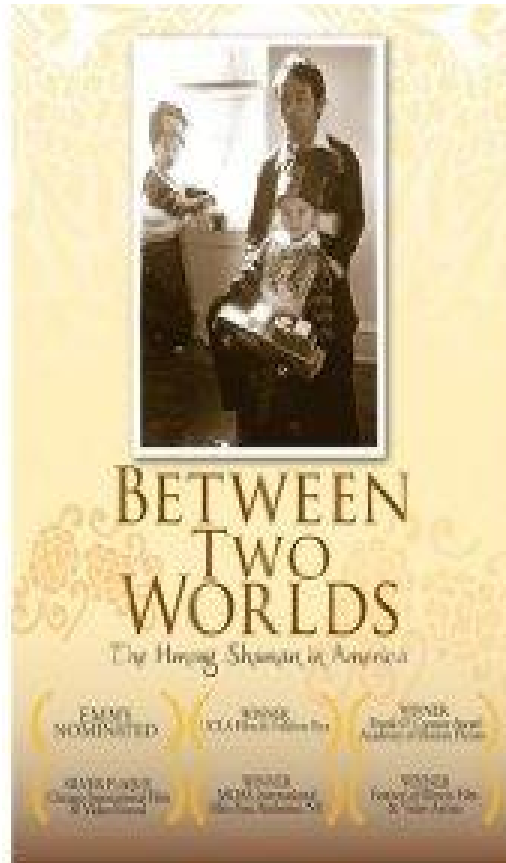
- School: Large Downtown Public High School, Portland, Oregon
- Students: Heterogeneous group of student in terms of race, gender, performance
- Teacher: Mike Sweeney
- Course: Anthropology
- Major theme of course: Introduction to Anthropology through the study of a select set of cultures

“It started a long time ago because I love film and I had professors in college who used film, both in anthropology classes and in other classes as well,” said Sweeney. “So I was early on introduced to the idea that what we are looking at here is a different narrative structure and it can be complementary to reading. But you have to invite your students to read film like you ideally invite your students to read text. You have to make it as attractive as possible. Of course as a teacher you know that these kids love film. They watch and watch and watch, but they watch pretty indiscriminately.”

Additional Written Texts



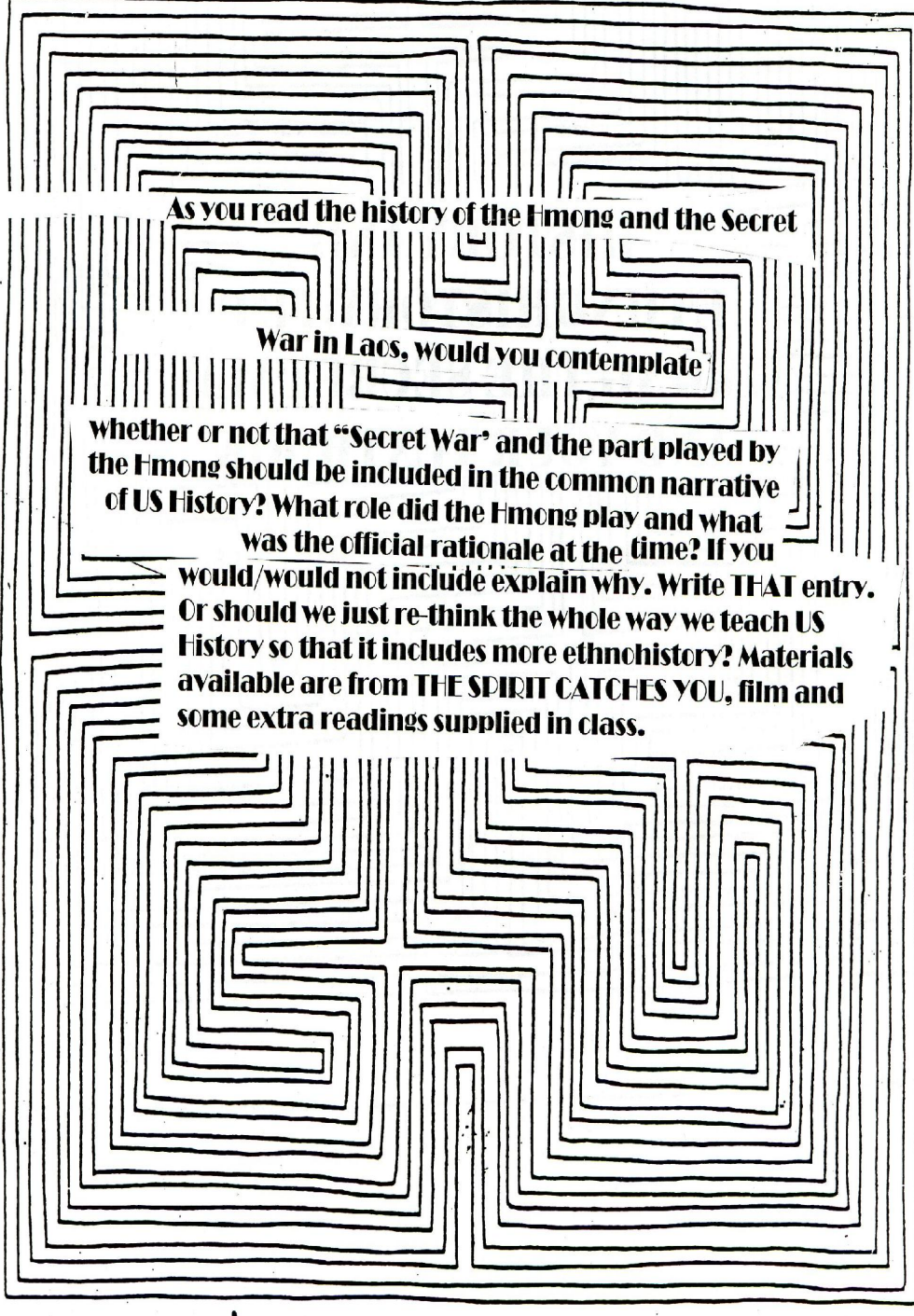
Additional Movie Texts



	<u>Unit Outline</u>	
Days	Activities	Goals
1-3	View and Discuss Gran Torino	Focus in particular on the Hmong characters.
4	Students write freewrite essay on, “what they know about the Vietnam War.” Discuss Vietnam War Assign Book: The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down (1997)	Review Vietnam War
5-7	View The Killing Fields	Understanding the complexity and violence of Southeast Asian Wars, and the reason for flight.
8-9	Finish and Discuss The Killing Fields Discuss Chapter 1- 8 of Spirit Catches You	Contextualize Hmong history within SE Asia, from ancient to modern.
10	Watch and Discuss: Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America (1984) Fish Souping Assignment	Focus on Hmong traditions and culture, in particular the role of shamanism and the Hmong perspective on healing.
11-12	Further discuss Between Two Worlds Cont'd Discussion of The Spirit Catches You Assign: Foua, The Legally Abusive Parent	Continue focus on Hmong culture, bridging to the experience of flight from SE Asia and the exodus to America.
13	Assign Book: Shamanism (1995) Shaman Picture Assignment	Continue focus on shamanism and the Hmong experience in America.
14-15	View Clips from Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War (1980) Continue discussion of The Spirit Catches You, Shamanism.	Focus on Vietnam War, guerilla tactics, the Secret War in Laos, U.S. agreement with Hmong (or “the promise), flight from Laos.
16-17	View: The Split Horn (2001) Assign: Viewers Guide to The Split Horn	View and discuss film.
18-19	Discuss The Split Horn, Cumulative Discussion, Guest Speakers, Additional Cultural and Artistic examples.	Sum up unit, explore student questions, flex time depending on schedule.
20-21	Cumulative Discussion and Assignment: Assignment: The next Clint Eastwood movie.	Move discussion from past to the present.

Specific Assignments

- Freewrites
- Written Essays (Many to choose from)
- Creation of Original Works of Art along with Artist's Interpretive Essays



As you read the history of the Hmong and the Secret

War in Laos, would you contemplate

whether or not that "Secret War" and the part played by the Hmong should be included in the common narrative of US History? What role did the Hmong play and what was the official rationale at the time? If you

would/would not include explain why. Write THAT entry. Or should we just re-think the whole way we teach US History so that it includes more ethnohistory? Materials available are from THE SPIRIT CATCHES YOU, film and some extra readings supplied in class.

Assignments

FISH SOUPING AND CONQUERGOODING THE HMONG AND THEIR ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CULTURES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

The title of this update and opportunity sheet makes sense? We will discuss the “Conquergood approach” today and you should have a fuller comprehension.

To review, so far you have been asked to read through chapter 8 and to respond to the following,

1. What do you know about “The Vietnam War”?
2. “Birth,” for the Hmong and Lia and for you, and what does it mean when we “” a word?
3. “Fish souping,” explain and interpret.
4. Bullet point, or otherwise display the basic narrative themes of Hmong “history.”
5. Did I suggest that you review “The Killing Fields”?

The above were the assigned responses as of last Friday. In addition, period 6 also viewed “Gran Torino” and I suggested that you jot down some thoughts for future use. We also discussed thoroughly the first 4 chapters? So, here is what you will desire to accomplish in the coming weeks.

As with past requests, these questions are intended to encourage you all to DO the reading, not just read, “read.” So, after each chapter we would ideally discuss salient topics and you would have the desire to think critically and interpretively about the cultural meanings of what you have just “read.” So, we can now dispense with the “”. In order to fulfill your desire to express cultural meanings, you are asked to write responses. As you should know by now, this material lends itself to rich and diverse representations. The bottom line responses are answering the questions that the material suggests, like “birth.” In addition, if you are feeling called in some other interpretive or expressive direction, go there. I will attempt to clarify some of these directions as we proceed through our **reading** of



FOUA, THE LEGALLY ABUSIVE, BABYSITTING PARENT, AND LIA

Thank you all for finishing the opportunities for chapters 1 thru 6, even if some of you are not quite "finished." This week we have tried to move through the next four chapters as Lia is moved to foster care and back home (ch. 7); then we come to know how Anne Fadiman found Foua and Nao Kao and thereby find Lia's parents becoming real and very human (ch 8); Hmong healing concepts are revealed (ch 9); and finally we come to the heart of the reason they are here in ch. 10, "War."

I suggest that you take a little quality time this weekend and consider the following,

1. As we pass through the story of Lia's continued traumas we meet a new set of "healers." Who are these people from three different sectors of American healing culture? How does their care of and for Lia flesh out the picture of American culture's

attempts to deal with Lia's problem? (Korda, Hilt, Waller) Do any of them respond to something in the Hmong that allows a more humanizing portrait to begin to emerge?

2. Who **are** Lia's parents? When do they become more human characters with a real voice in this narrative? Who **are** the Hmong? When and how does the story of Hmong culture and history begin to kick in? Should the author have used a different narrative strategy introducing the Hmong more completely earlier? What aspects of Hmong culture emerge early as vital to the creation and preservation of Hmong identity? Of "Hmongness?"
3. We watched "Between Two Worlds: A Hmong Shaman in America," a film by Taggart Siegal, narrated by Dwight Conquergood. What did the film add to your sense of the Hmong? What seemed authentic in the film? How are you understanding what shamanism is and what it does now?
4. Next week I will ask you to narrate as best you can the events of war and flight. Please **READ!** Read chapters 10, 11 and 12. Really! Read them deeply, lovingly and with imaginative empathy until you become immersed there with the Hmong traveling through their past like a shaman into those zones where life and death commingle. And, if you are successful, you can return to this world, our world, now their world, having rescued their culture's dislocated soul from oblivion and the awful death of anonymity.

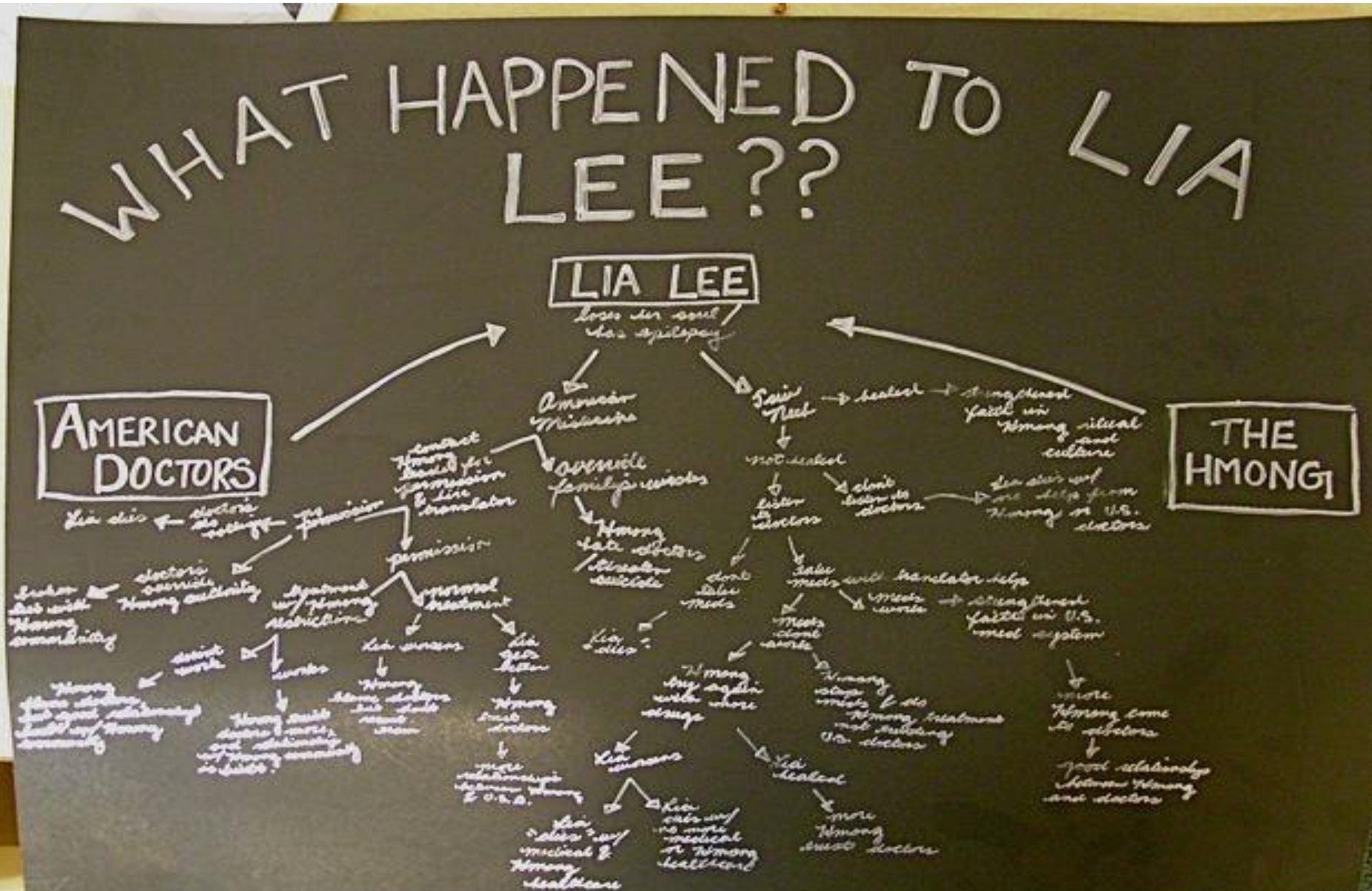
*The Split Horn: A Viewer's Guide to Accompany the Reading of **The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down***

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- Most of you have finished reading *The Spirit Catches You...* Even more have viewed *The Split Horn*. Write a Viewer's Guide, anthropologically speaking, to accompany the film, as well as the other texts we have used. That is, incorporate also relevant, pertinent, informative parts of Vitebsky's ***Shamanism***. Your Viewer's Guide can make reference to the PBS work done a few years ago: [//www.pbs.org/splithorn/story.htm](http://www.pbs.org/splithorn/story.htm). However, you will find that site anthropologically and shamanistically deficient. Your task, your calling, is to remedy that soul stealing deficiency. The unwary viewer may be seduced into something resembling an "understanding" of Hmong/Mong culture and a fatuous sense that they "understand" shamanism. You know that nothing could be further from the truth regarding understand shamanism. In fact, such unwary viewers are in terrible danger: they will have unwittingly had their souls of sensibility stolen. You will, shaman-like, travel into the zone of misunderstanding and following the threads of more accurate representation of shamanism call back the senses of understanding. You will need to travel into several

Final Screenplay Assignment

Clint Eastwood, following his dual aesthetic with *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, decides to follow *Gran Torino* with an inside perspective on the Hmong Exodus. Using *The Late Homecomer* as inspiration, he enlists Ms. Yang as the screenplay writer and Ms. Fadiman as producer. This chapter is the opening scene in their film. Describe in general how the rest of the movie might proceed and in particular how it might contrast to *Gran Torino*.

ETHNOHISTORY AND COMPLEXITY



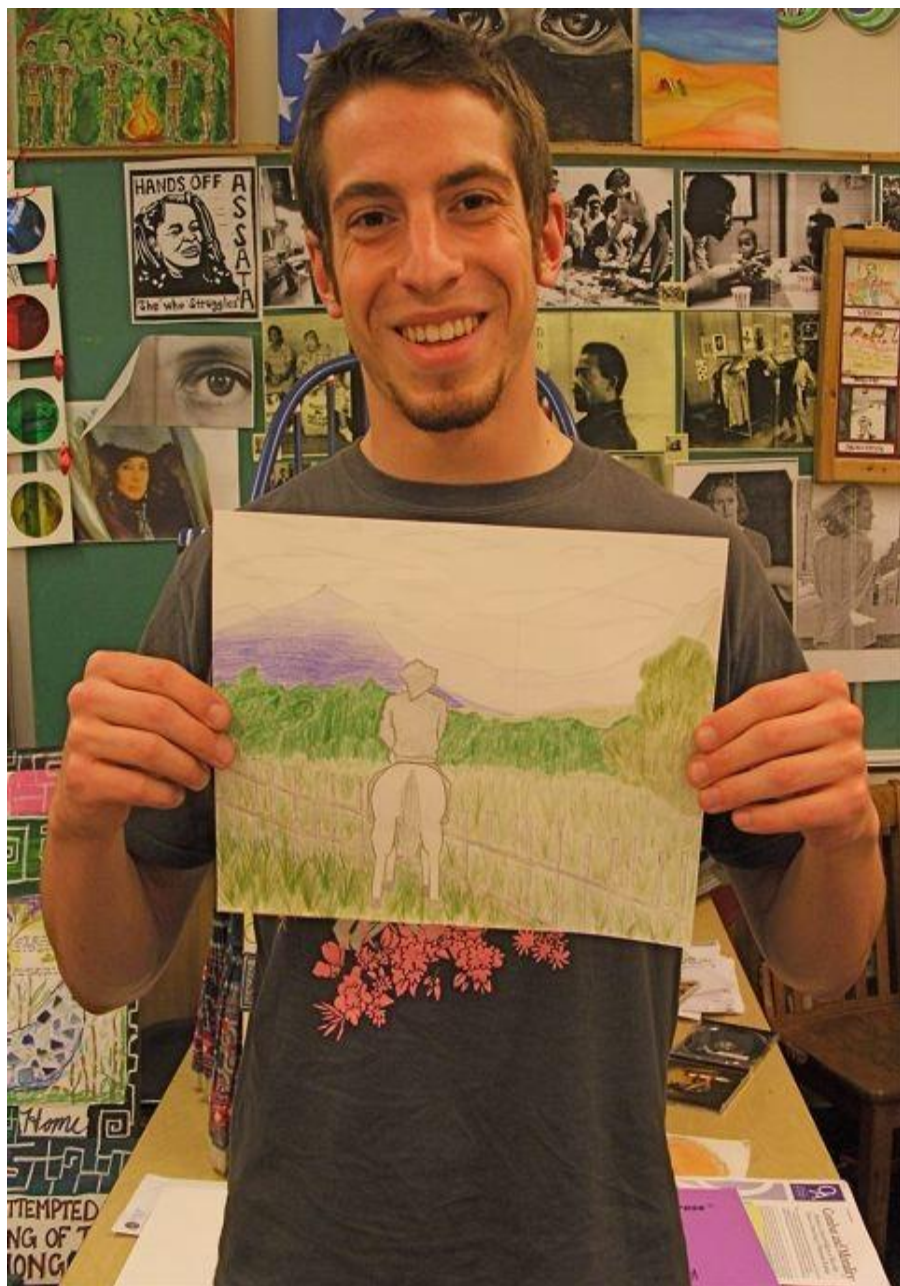
On the other side you cannot say to your
wife, I love you more than my life.

She
Saw!

You cannot say that anymore













Artist's Statement

•Artist's Statement

My two-part penciled portrait is of the beginning of a Hmong Shaman's journey from two perspectives; the observer's and the shaman's. The front side of the paper shows the observer's point of view, where we see a frontal view of the Shaman on top of a bench. The Shaman is dressed in traditional Hmong shaman "garb", and has in his hand a ring with several rings, a tool used to call and communicate with spirits. The background is very empty, with empty shelves and an empty desk. The emptiness not only symbolizes the literal lack of possessions that the Hmong have here in America, but also symbolizes that the Hmong have moved "here", but have not "moved in". This was inspired by how the Hmong refuse to assimilate to whatever culture is around them, and always struggle to remain true to their Hmong identity, in addition to the fact that they have not been here in America very long, so they have not established themselves.

The lack of color in the portrait expresses dreariness, and an overall feeling of emptiness and near-miserable sentiments, for America is not their home. The Hmong have always lived in the hills around Asia, most recently in Laos area. But after the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, they sought refuge and moved here, expecting to be thanked for the part they played in aiding the U.S. during the war.

the Hmong for their services. They continue to live off welfare, cannot live their lives the way they want to, and have hardly any presence in American society. There is also the juxtaposition of the Shaman's clothes with the American-style background to illustrate how the Hmong feel out of place here. This country is not their home; their spirits and souls lie back in the hills of Laos.

This is shown on the other (back) side of the portrait, where the Hmong shaman is shown riding a horse, looking out over the hills of Laos, before his ascent through the sky into the spirit world. This image was inspired by the film "The Split Horn," the specific instance being when the shaman has moved to America and wants to make sure that he can still contact the spirits *back home*. The background is full of color, illustrating the reality of the hills (as the homeland for the Hmong), and gives the scene a very lively feel, whereas the Hmong are clustered and restricted in America, which is again emphasized by the grayness. However, the Shaman is still in gray and white, as is his horse, because he is not really there; only his spirit is. It is merely a short visit home, and the lack of color of the Shaman emphasizes that he no longer belongs even there. While the land is vibrant and thriving, the Hmong culture has been put under countless stresses as a result of the wars and their migration.

This piece was inspired by several explanations and stories in the book "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down," and by the book "Shamanism" by Piers Vitebsky.

Using Film to Teach a Controversial Issue in History



Kingdom of Heaven (2005)

Film & Controversial Issues

- Openly exchanging diverse views and discussing controversial issues in the classroom is important for democratic education (Epstein & Shiller, 2005; Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003)
- Social/political status/power/identities at stake
- Interpretations depend on values and identities
- Films can “frame” controversial issues by envisioning background content, dramatizing perspectives, and conveying social meanings
 - Risk = avoiding/skirting complexities; presentism
- Contemporary Issues: Teach present thru past
- Historical Issues: Teach past thru present



Mr. Jackson's Unit on the Crusades

- Goals for using *Kingdom of Heaven*
 - The “focus is on understanding the Crusades from multiple perspectives” (*Crusaders, Muslims, past, contemporary*)
 - This film “really bring it alive for the students” because it does “a lot with looking at the Muslim side.... There’s not a clear good guy and bad guy.”
 - Balancing multicultural themes and historical accuracy: “History vs. Hollywood” and “21st-century cheers for peace”



Mr. Jackson's Unit on the Crusades

- Film Activities

- Days 1-5: Background content instruction (*What caused the Crusades, motivations, life in Muslim lands, how crusaders and Muslims viewed and fought each other*)
- Days 6/7: Document readings + film clips (*comparing Richard I and Salah al-Din, character “shadowing” assignment*)
- Days 8-10: Film + daily writing prompts
- Days 11-12: Film's historical accuracy; discussing the legacy of the Crusades



Mr. Jackson's Unit: Analysis & Findings

- How this film-based unit was effective:
 - Teacher content preparation (research)
 - Structured student activities (character shadow)
 - Important role for student discussion (elicited involvement from some reluctant to in the past)
- Tensions in this film-based unit:
 - Student over-attention to inaccurate details
 - Risk of oversimplification (Raynald vs. Saladin)
 - Disconnect of film themes (not really used in the discussion on the legacy of the Crusades)

Conclusion

- By examining specific cases of skillful teachers thoughtfully and responsibly using movies for instruction, we get a stronger sense for how movies can contribute to students' historical literacy.

Thanks for attending!

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Teaching History with Film:
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Social Studies (2010)

Available from Routledge

