

TEACHING CANADIAN HISTORY ON FILM

“Movies are the lingua franca of the twentieth century”, writes Gore Vidal in *Screening History* (1992), his short, elegant memoir of more than 50 years at the movies. “Today, where literature was movies are.” He continues, “Art is now sight and sound; and the books are shut.” Vidal was not the first cultural critic to make such an observation, but I find his discussion interesting for two reasons.

One is that he does not feel it is worth our while to spend much time lamenting this change in the technologies of communication; for better or for worse as the case may be, over the last 100 years the movies have become one of the principal languages of communication in this world. Beginning in public places called movie houses, they have gone on to invade the home by means of the tube. And there the availability of motion pictures has been enhanced by video players and cable channels. The theaters, of course, have countered with bigger special effects and better viewing environments. As a result the audio-visual culture that we know as the movies has become one of the major sources of information and entertainment in the modern world.

And secondly, I find Vidal’s observations interesting because he points out that so much of the information and entertainment conveyed in the movies is about history. In some respects, it is as simple as the film-makers search for good storylines and exotic settings - and of these the warehouse of history has a never-ending supply. In other respects the matter is more complex. Despite complaints about an ongoing epidemic of social amnesia, the authority of history still has a good deal of cultural clout these days. And the resources of visual history have been regularly used, with or without deliberation, to construct a culture that popularizes and promotes specific attitudes and ideas, sometimes in the interests of social criticism or public policy and often in the service of commercial capitalism. As a result, Vidal concludes, those who screen the history also make the history.

For the last several years I have taught a course under the title Canadian History on Film. This is an introductory course, thought it draws students from all years and several faculties. It stands at the intersection of film and history, which makes it most of all a course in cultural history. The underlying idea is to encourage students to look at history in visual ways and to look at movies in historical ways.

One exercise that I undertook, at the very beginning of the course, was to ask students to identify the last film, video or television movie that they had seen. The answers produced the usual suspects: this year it was *Armageddon*, *Patch Adams*, *Stepmom*, *The Waterboy* and *You’ve Got Mail*. There were also, interestingly, a number of classics, such as *Clockwork Orange*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *The Godfather*. Were any of the films historical films? Strictly speaking, the only ones were *Amistad* and *Hope and Glory*, though some of us might also

count *Forrest Gump* as a film with some form of historical content.

Were any of these films Canadian films, by any one of the available definitions? Only one of the students identified a Canadian film as the most recent film he had seen. In a second question, however, I did ask them to identify the last Canadian film, television movie or video they had seen.

Of the 58 students who completed the questionnaire, 25 (43.1 percent) failed to answer this question. Some responded with apologetic comments such as “I don’t know any Canadian films,” “I am not aware of any Canadian movies that I have watched recently,” “I honestly couldn’t tell you” and “I don’t know.” For those who wish to see a recognizable Canadian film industry, this is the kind of result that presents a challenge for Canadian cultural policy.

But a majority, the remaining 33 students (56.9 percent), did identify a Canadian film they had seen recently. Or at least films they believed were Canadian films; I found it necessary to delete five selections from the list on the grounds that I could locate no plausible reason for considering these to be Canadian under any of the available definitions (*Dazed and Confused*, *The Last Call*, *Oz*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Wrong Girl*); we subsequently went on to discuss various definitions of what “Canadian” meant for them, and what was the best definition for the purposes of our course. Thus we had five respondents (8.6 percent) who believed they had seen a Canadian film but probably had not. With this adjustment, the overall results were less optimistic than I had originally thought: 30 of the 58 students (51.7 percent) were not able to identify a Canadian film that they had seen.

Among the 28 students (48.3 percent) who did name a Canadian film, the most popular choices (two or more identifications) were *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Arrow*, *The Hanging Garden* and *Hard Core Logo*. Other titles included *Black Robe*, *Canadian Bacon*, *Crash*, *Margaret’s Museum*, *The Sue Rodriguez Story*, *Strange Brew* and *The Sweet Hereafter*. Three students gave what they knew must be a very safe answer - *The Heritage Minutes*. And I was pleased that three students named *Big Bear*, which of course was shown on television earlier in the month.

A notable number of the Canadian films dealt with history of one kind or another. To repeat the most obvious examples, there were *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Arrow*, *Big Bear*, *Black Robe* and *Margaret’s Museum*. The students also identified two documentaries without giving precise titles - one on the 1972 hockey series and another on Canadians in the Second World War. It seems clear that whether they dealt with specific historical events and themes or were simply placed in identifiable historical settings, films have been making a contribution to students knowledge of the past.

Interestingly, the presence of historical themes and settings was much more pronounced in the Canadian list than in the list of largely American films the students had seen. Should we conclude from this that Canadian film-makers have a special affinity for historical themes? Or that Canadian audiences find historical themes particularly acceptable? Whatever the case, this suggests that films about Canadian history are a good idea.

One of the modest exercises we undertook in the early weeks of the course was to review a short excerpt from a very fine 1988 Canadian film that happens to be in part set in their own home province. Based on a 1984 novel by Jacques Savoie, the film is called "Les Portes Tournantes" ["The Revolving Doors"]. Usually there is no one in the class who has seen this film or, needless to add perhaps, read the novel. The story involves a kind of dialogue between a young boy in the urban present in Quebec and the world of his grand-mother in the past. This scene takes place in Campbelton, New Brunswick in the 1920s. After showing them this short excerpt, I then asked the students to explain the historical significance of the episode shown here.

Let me quote here some of the answers:

As the girl walks to the theatre, we see what Campbelton might have looked like during this time.

People with talents would move to the cities and turn to make money.

The theatre is fancy and she probably feels really lucky to be working there.

It demonstrates the method of how sound was incorporated into the movies before the invention of movies with sound, by having someone try to play the piano along with the film.

The scene shows the role that musicians played during the showing of early silent films. They were extremely important because their musical interpretation of the film heightened the audience's anticipation as to what would happen next.

Here we see a young woman playing the piano trying to follow the mood of the film while her boss stands back and tells her what to do.

The film on screen has the characteristics of an early movie: fast-paced, no talking, romance, action, etc.

When the girl breaks down laughing it shows the appreciation with which the silent films were honoured.

The film also depicts another one of the roles of women where the actress on film tries to clean up. The piano player's response shows her disbelief at such a ludicrous

idea, depicting social stereotypes that were present then and now.

It also shows how men still acted as the dominant sex. And in the end when she starts to laugh, I guess you could say it was her way of standing up against authority to some extent.

You see the man by the projector getting hot and taking some clothing off while the girl plays the piano. At the end of this clip we see the film beginning to burn.

The film projector goes up in smoke which happened a lot in those days due to the cellulose nitrate, which ruined a lot of film.

As usual in any class there were also some comments of lesser merit. On the use of piano accompaniment for silent films: "I believe it was in Campbelton where this tradition started." And about the fire at the end: "you can't trust Canadian equipment to last forever." But on the whole the observations constituted an apt commentary on the episode, indicating the significance of a variety of themes particular to this era.

Apart from any of the specific observations or conclusions, they confirm that when it comes to looking at films, students of this generation have a good deal of visual literacy. And, as any teacher will recognize, there are lots of points of departure here for discussion - "privileged moments" in a film can produce "teachable moments" in a classroom.

With that in mind, I have certainly found more than enough material at the intersection between film and history in Canada. Others are doing the same, for I notice that the *Canadian Historical Review* has even published a five-page list of recent films on Canadian history in its December 1998 issue.

This country has of course long been known as one of the homes of the documentary film, and this genre continues to produce excellent results. The strength of the documentary is in the authority of its appeal, whatever the style of presentation. In the case of films about the past, the authority effect is reinforced by the authority of history. As Arlene Moscovitch writes in *Constructing Reality: Exploring Media Issues in Documentary* (1993), the documentary shows us "actual people in actual situations"; at the same time, like all historical presentations, "documentaries are constructions - highly compressed and shaped versions of 'real space' and 'real time.'" Often the documentary film is intervening in a field where there is a well-developed body of research, and even historical debate over the proper interpretation of the evidence; historians sometimes serve as advisors to such projects, and this does make it possible for the film-maker to benefit somewhat efficiently we hope from an existing body of knowledge.

But in many cases it is also true that documentary films are breaking new ground in historical research, especially when they

uncover new evidence, especially visual evidence about the past, or when they employ the techniques of oral history. I think here especially of films such as *Echoes in the Rink: The Willie O'Ree Story*, produced by the New Brunswick Film-makers Coop, the story of the first black player in the National Hockey League. There is no published biography of this man; there are no scholarly articles in the sports history journals; there is no mention of him in the textbooks in Canadian history; and there is barely any recognition of him in the popular hockey books. There should be, and now that this film is made there can be no excuse. Maybe there will even be a Heritage Minute.

It is also clear that we now have a substantial legacy of dramatic films that focus on the Canadian past, though they are often much more difficult to identify and locate than the documentary films. Historians have approached the dramatic film with more skepticism than the documentary, and as early as 1941 the *Canadian Historical Review* published a discussion by the artist C.W. Jefferys, himself a populariser of Canadian history, of several recent Hollywood movies that addressed the Canadian past with mixed results as to "their accuracy of detail and the general truthfulness of their conception and presentation."

Historians have a role to play here too, and not just as critics after the fact. But they do need to recognize some of the special characteristics of the historical feature. Robert Rosenstone, in his very fine book *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (1995), describes these characteristics as follows. A dramatic film usually will emphasize a strong story line with a clear beginning, middle and end. It will usually focus on individuals who can be understood to represent in their persons specific historical ideas or forces and can be placed in situations that demonstrate the conflict of emotions. A film will also strive to present the look and feel of its time and place in ways that the viewers will accept as authentic. Such a film can also be very successful in doing what written history often does so badly, which is to show history as an integrated process in which a variety of factors operate simultaneously as part of the complexity of character and circumstance.

With these considerations in mind, I would argue that the approach of the historian is useful both in watching and in making films. Film is a collaborative art that involves a division of labour among a large number of specialists, and it is reasonable to expect that sympathetic historians will be among the members of the team when a film focuses on the subject matter they know.

But if a successful popular history should be encouraged to welcome relevant knowledge and skills in the field, historians need to adjust their expectations and learn to appreciate the special features of film as a language of history. After all, film is a form of visual history, not a journal article or monograph. All historical narratives are a form of cultural construction, and visual history, documentary or dramatic, is best recognized as a special case of the general problem of the presentation and popularization of history.

My own students, as I have suggested earlier, already have a great deal of personal experience when it comes to looking at films, and I have a favourable impression of their command of visual literacy skills. I hope they will come out of the course more informed, more attentive - in some cases even more critical - viewers of films and that their understanding of history will be enhanced by the experience.

In those meditations on film and history that I mentioned earlier, Gore Vidal has argued that history should be restored as the backbone of the public school curriculum in the United States. He further argues that the history curriculum can be reinvigorated through the use of film, because it is a language that is more widely understood among young people than many of the available texts. He even makes the radical proposal that film should be the principal text for the history program in the schools.

I am not sure what such a program would look like, and I doubt that many education programs in Canada are prepared to go so far. But in the absence of formal or extensive requirements for Canadian history in most Canadian schools, it may be the case that this is already happening by default, that students are already gaining most of their knowledge of Canadian history from films, video and television. In a recent address entitled "Seeing History," Simon Schama put it plainly: the word "history" occurs more often in the television guide than in the school curriculum. If this is going to be the case, it is all the more important that we find ways to encourage standards of both historical and visual literacy in Canada.

I originally presented these remarks in a talk at the conference *Giving the Past a Future: A Conference on Innovation in Teaching and Learning History*, organized by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, 29-31 January 1999.

I came away from the January conference with mixed views about the prospects for the participation of historians in the making of historical films. While some high-profile projects are well-funded, most are not. One senior producer stated that an historical training was excellent preparation for a career in film-making, and others indicated their willingness to consult with academic historians. However, the fragmentation of the market also appears to be driving down the budgets available for the archival research and oral history approaches that would be most likely to employ the skills of trained historians. One film-maker indicated that she could no longer afford to make the kinds of award-winning documentary films that had established her reputation.

Finally, I was astonished when one senior television executive at the January conference stated that there exist only five or six feature films about Canada history.

David Frank, UNB. This article originally appeared in the Atlantic Association of Historians Newsletter, Winter 1999/2000.