



*Northern Essex Community College*

**Using Film in the Liberal Arts Classroom as a  
Way of Motivating Students and  
Generating Discussion**

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The medium, or process, of our time – electric technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life.... Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.... The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media. [McLuhan (1967), p. 8.]

I. Introduction.

Writing over 40 years ago, communications theorist Marshall McLuhan forecast many of the changes wrought by new forms of technology on our daily life. At a time when the Internet and personal computers had yet to emerge, he declared, “A new form of ‘politics’ is emerging, and in ways we haven’t yet noticed. The living room has become a voting booth” (1967, p. 22). The recent Presidential election is testimony enough to the way in which virtual reality can become political reality. And at a time when motion pictures could be shown only by the traditional means of a film projector, McLuhan remarked that someday films could be carried around in one’s pocket. The advent of videotapes and DVDs has turned that prediction as well into a reality, and the consequences for education are enormous.

Given the easy access to compact storage of motion pictures, this report will focus on ways in which teachers in the humanities and social sciences can use film in their classrooms to motivate students and generate discussion.<sup>1</sup> Just as the alphabet and the printed word produced a new emphasis on literacy, so the electronic media have given rise to the phenomenon of *visual literacy*. Our students are more apt to watch television and see movies than they are to read. As a recent report by the National Endowment for the Arts concluded, “Literature now competes with an enormous array of electronic media. While no single activity is responsible for the decline of reading, the cumulative presence and availability of these alternatives have increasingly drawn Americans away from reading” (NEA, 2004, p. 7).<sup>2</sup> While the NEA is understandably concerned with the fact that “a cultural legacy is disappearing, especially among younger people,” new forms of technology may provide an opportunity to preserve at least some aspects of that legacy. After all, those of us in the humanities and social sciences are concerned with *ideas*, and ideas can be expressed through films as well as books. Indeed, it may be that film offers a particular avenue to reach students in ways that the print media do not.<sup>3</sup> Before considering pedagogical approaches to using film in the classroom, therefore, we will briefly discuss *how* film operates and *why* it should be part of the liberal arts teacher’s repertoire.

## II. Film as a Powerfully Expressive Medium.

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<sup>1</sup> A survey of the way in which NECC teachers use film was to have been included in this report, but insufficient response made this impractical. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of teachers at this community college use film clips to supplement their teaching in philosophy, history, and political science.

<sup>2</sup> While the NEA report concerns only works of literature (fiction), it very likely applies to non-fiction as well, and therefore its conclusions are relevant to classes in the social sciences as well as the humanities.

<sup>3</sup> Gore Vidal, in fact, believes that “books ... have had their day – or rather, millennium.... Vidal suggests that we concede the inevitable, scrap the existing educational system, and introduce the young to the past through film.” (Cited in Carnes, 1996, p. 9.) As a supporter of film, I think this is going too far.

Many writers make the point that film operates on a different level from the print media. Writing about what he calls “symbolic competence,” Larry Gross argues that “visual images and symbols are capable of communicating and expressing meaningful information that cannot be formulated in the lexical or, indeed, any other mode” (in Olson, 1974, p. 68). With specific reference to film, he sees it as “considerably more complex than ‘simple’ visual communication in that it is organized in temporally sequential images which ... require the viewer to exercise skill in order to comprehend and appreciate the intended meaning” (pp. 68-69). Visual theorist Rudolf Arnheim, on the other hand, emphasizes what he calls the “passive use” of the visual media: “Pictures carry images of the world into the classroom. They offer the raw material for factual information. However, the pictures or models have been made by experts somewhere else. They arrive ready-made. Student and teacher act as consumers. Their acts are responses” (in Olson, 1974, p. 181).

It is true, of course, that films “carry images of the world into the classroom.” But are students and teachers merely consumers of these images? The celebrated educational theorist Paulo Freire argues that we have a responsibility to “decode” the visual images we see around us as part of a strategy of “conscientization” (Freire, 1971). The “ready-made” images we see need to be analyzed and understood in their social, political, and historical context. We will take up this point again in Part III, as it is the key to the pedagogical strategies that can be used to motivate students and generate classroom discussion. For now, however, let us return to the distinctive way in which film operates.

Just as Sabu is magically transported on a flying carpet in *Thief of Baghdad* (1940), so film may be seen as a kind of flying carpet that transports the viewer into an alternate universe. Long before the advent of virtual reality, film had the ability to position the spectator in an

intimate relation to what was presented on the screen. “It’s only a movie,” of course, but it somehow seems more than that. Hollywood was described as a *dream factory* as early as the 1930s, and this may have something to do with the relation of its images to what Freud refers to as the unconscious. Gabbard and Gabbard remind us of the psychodynamic dimensions of film:

Movies have become the great storehouse for the images that populate the unconscious, the chosen territory of psychoanalytic psychiatry.... Early surrealist filmmakers even saw the production of dream images in the human unconscious as fundamentally analogous to the “cutting” process by which movies are made ... More recently, psychoanalytically inclined students of film have made persuasive connections between the language of the cinema and Freud’s account of the dream-work ... [1987, p. xv].

Other commentators also mention the *oneiric* dimension of film, that is, the way in which it simulates the dream-state. Eberwein argues that “our experience of film permits us to return to the state of perceptual unity that we first participated in as infants and that we can know as dreamers.... As a result, we are able to watch and feel a sense of involvement in the images on the screen ...” (1984, p. 4). Watkins’ idea of *imaginal dialogues* – “dramatic dialogues of thought” between different aspects of ourselves, or between ourselves and imagined others (1990, p. 2) – supplements the unconscious power of images with the use of these images on a conscious level to stimulate the creative imagination. Thus film works on different levels simultaneously to reach the viewer in a way that the printed word may not be able to. Philosopher Susanne Langer (in Carroll and Choi, 2006, p. 80) makes a similar observation via the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Point 1: “Cinema is ‘like’ dream in the mode of its presentation: it creates a virtual present, an order of direct apparition.” Point 2: “Yet Eisenstein believed that the beholder of a film was somewhat specially called on to use his imagination, to create his own experience of the story.” So film is like a dream in *two* ways: first, by virtue of the mode of its presentation; and second, because it requires interpretation, much as Freud

believed that free association could be used to help therapist and patient together reconstruct the deeper meaning of the dream. As we shall see, using film in the classroom absolutely requires interpretation, but that interpretation must not be imposed by the teacher on the students any more than the psychoanalyst can impose *his* interpretation on the patient.

With respect to Freudian psychology, the French director Chris Marker has given an example of a film whose fantasy elements help to explain its mysterious power. Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is generally understood as a film about obsession, which it is, but it goes much deeper than that. As Marker says, "The vertigo the film deals with ... is [really] a ... metaphor for ... the vertigo of time.... Scottie transmutes [the fantasy of Madeleine/Judy] ... into its most utopian form: he overcomes the most irreparable damage caused by time and resurrects a love that is dead" (Marker, in Boorman and Donohue, 1995, p. 123). This unusual union of Eros (the life instinct, connected to sexuality) and Thanatos (the death instinct) may well account for the way in which *Vertigo* pulls the viewer in. Indeed, the Orphic idea of overcoming death makes the film itself seem like a dream, since only in a dream would that be possible.<sup>4</sup>

Sparshott (in Carroll and Choi, 2006, p. 86) reinforces Marker's observation about time by making it applicable to film in general: "Film time has a quality analogous to that dreamlike floating between participation and observation, between definite and indeterminate relationships, that give film space its pervasive character." On this analysis, *Vertigo* would be only an extreme case of a more general phenomenon, in that our normal sense of space and time changes when we watch a film. While occasionally films are shot in "real time," it is more common to

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Marker himself explores the idea of a *collective dream* in his celebrated film *Sans Soleil* (1983): "More and more my dreams find their settings in the department stores of Tokyo, the subterranean tunnels that extend them and run parallel to the city.... I begin to wonder if these dreams ... are part of a ... gigantic collective dream of which the entire city may be the projection."

telescope thoughts and actions in such a way that the events of a lifetime can occur in an hour or two.<sup>5</sup>

Another way in which film works is by making events and characters come alive. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of historical films. As the editor of a recent anthology observes, “We acknowledge from the outset movies’ unique capacity for stimulating dialogue about the past” (Carnes, 1996, p. 10). Eric Foner notes that “many more people learn their history from watching the film *Malcolm X* than from reading some academic tome about Malcolm X” (Carnes, 1996, p. 20). Filmmaker John Sayles puts it this way: “The struggle you often see in the making of a historical film is the struggle between how much of [an] ... emotionally stirring story you want and how much you want people to think about what’s going on” (Carnes, 1996, p. 28). I tend to see these two goals as complementary: films like *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Reds* (1981), *The Last Emperor* (1987), and Sayles’ own *Matewan* (1987) are both “emotionally stirring” and thought-provoking, though they may occasionally sacrifice historical accuracy in the interest of the story.<sup>6</sup> Currie (in Carroll and Choi, 2006, p. 151) sees this type of film, which we call “docudrama,” as inherently problematic: “At times we are intended to assume that what the film depicts really did occur, but only in general outline. Each morsel of assertion is thickly coated with fictional detail.” This “thick description,” to borrow Clifford Geertz’s famous phrase, should be regarded not so much as an actual account as an imaginative one, recalling Watkins’ “imaginal dialogues” mentioned earlier. The confusion between

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<sup>5</sup> An unusual example of this phenomenon may be found in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1962), in which several days’ events are seen to be an illusion, taking place in seconds or minutes, brought about by the imminent threat of hanging.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the viewer can be entertained *and* learn a good deal about the power of the press from watching Orson Welles’ gloss on William Randolph Hearst, despite the fact that the entire “Rosebud” plot element was a fiction of the screenwriter.

documentary and docudrama,<sup>7</sup> however, can be productive. Recall the celebrated CBS program *You Are There*, in which TV interviewers ostensibly interviewed people at the time of such historical events as the Salem witch trials. Peter Watkins' 1996 film *Commune (Paris, 1871)* uses the same device in interviewing participants in the Paris Commune on "television." A reviewer comments, and I agree, that this is "a brilliantly simple conceit that creates an instantaneous beehive of colliding concepts. As McLuhan himself might quip, it strikes while the media's hot" (Henderson, 2006).

In terms of historical accuracy, it should always be kept in mind that the filmmaker is reconstructing history from his or her point of view. Even so great an achievement as *Malcolm X* (1992) may be said to reflect the times *in* which it was made as much as the times *about* which it was made. Clayborne Carson (in Carnes, p. 283) argues that "the film's Malcolm becomes, like the filmmaker himself, a social critic rather than a political insurgent. Malcolm helped to create his own myth during a period when fundamental political change seemed feasible. Spike Lee has revised Malcolm's myth for a time when political cynicism prevails." As extraordinary as Denzel Washington's portrayal was,<sup>8</sup> the film as a whole minimized the dramatic shift in Malcolm's views that made him considerably more dangerous to the powers-that-be than he had been as a black nationalist. This underscores the importance of discussing historical films after the emotional impact on the viewer has registered so that their perspective can be analyzed. Since this stricture applies to films in general, it provides an opportunity to advance to the next

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<sup>7</sup> According to a teacher I interviewed for my doctoral thesis, some of her students thought that Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) was an actual documentary (as opposed to a docudrama), even though the technology necessary to make a contemporaneous film did not exist at the time of the incidents recounted in the movie.

<sup>8</sup> In a March 21, 2008 talk at Northeastern University, Spike Lee reported that at one point "Malcolm" gave a speech that sounded authentic but was nowhere to be found in the script. When asked to explain, Washington said that he was "channeling" Malcolm, thus indicating the extent of his identification with the character.



section of this paper, on helpful pedagogical strategies for using film in the liberal arts classroom.

### III. Pedagogical Tips for Effectively Using Film in the Liberal Arts Classroom.

A. *Pick a film with an appropriate theme for your course.* A list of films broken down by theme and director is attached to this paper (Appendix A). In some cases, films with similar themes can be used to get students to *compare and contrast* the different perspectives of the directors involved. A course in sociology or social problems, for example, might screen *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) in order to show how adolescent rebellion expresses itself in different time periods and among different racial groups. The advantage of these particular films is that each sees the larger society as a major contributor to what is called “deviance,” which is usually analyzed in terms of individual pathology. A political science or philosophy course might screen *The Sacrifice* (1986) and *Terminator 2* (1991) in order to show very different approaches to the issue of nuclear war. Where *The Sacrifice* is replete with dense religious and philosophical themes, *Terminator 2* is more of an action film with an emphasis on the power of technology gone mad. And a history course might screen *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) and *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933) for two very different views on the Depression and what should be done about it. Interestingly, both films are outside the mainstream in giving a serious portrayal of poverty and despair, but the solution each proposes is very different.

B. *Consider devoting one or two sessions to explaining how films work.* Here I refer not so much to the discussion in Part II as to the visual qualities of film: cinematography, composition, camera placement, and montage (editing).<sup>9</sup> An interesting discussion of these elements of film is

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<sup>9</sup> When asked to name which arts most resemble film, French director Jean-Luc Godard replied “music and painting,” as opposed to the common association of theater. Most films do contain dialogue, but the fluidity and

offered in *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (1995), a four-hour historical survey of famous and not-so-famous examples of noteworthy American films. By illustrating his points with relevant passages from selected motion pictures, Scorsese manages to make a sophisticated theoretical discussion accessible to those with only a minimal knowledge of film. Another possibility would be to go through the “extras” on a DVD of a film that could be shown in class. Often the commentary to the film contains insights that could be incorporated by the teacher in a classroom discussion, even if the commentary itself isn’t shown to the class.

C. *Begin with a film students are familiar with and then work up to more challenging films.*

In my political science courses, for example, I often start with *The Matrix* (1999), one of the few films I can expect many of the students to have seen. One of my colleagues uses *The Matrix* as a way of getting into Plato’s *Republic*, since Plato emphasizes the importance of distinguishing illusion from reality (as in the famous metaphor of the Cave). I use it as a way of getting students to discuss what a “matrix” might be in contemporary American society. The media? The government? Or simply the idea of culture itself, which operates as a lens through which we see the world?<sup>10</sup> Two other action films which should be accessible to students are *12 Monkeys* (1995) and *Blade Runner* (1982), both of which project unfavorable trends into the future and examine the dystopic societies that result.<sup>11</sup> Each raises complex philosophical issues: the former having to do with time travel, the latter with the right of “replicants” (androids) to be

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visual dynamics of film lend support to Godard’s position. Films like Antonioni’s *Red Desert* (1964) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970), for example, would be inconceivable as stage plays because of their spectacular cinematography.

<sup>10</sup> If only the film version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) had remained more faithful to the book, it would be a perfect illustration of this point. In the book – but, sadly, not in the film – Dorothy is given green spectacles with which to look at the Emerald City, which obligingly appears green to her. In the film the Emerald City is presented in all its greenness. Arguably culture functions in a way similar to the *spectacles* (note the interesting choice of words in this context) in the book.

<sup>11</sup> A dystopia, of course, is a negative utopia. Other famous examples of dystopias are *1984* (1948, 1984), *Brave New World* (1998), and *The Trial* (1962).

treated as human. Each presents a grim scenario with distinctive apocalyptic features, raising the question of how such a scenario might be avoided.

D. *Use such techniques as freewriting and reflective writing to involve students in understanding their reactions to a particular film.* One idea is to have the students write a paragraph on what most affected them about the film. In my sociology class, for example, I show *The Emerald Forest* (1985) to illustrate the marked contrast between traditional and modern cultures. After showing the film, I ask the students to turn in their paragraph as a way for me to check on their level of understanding. If a student writes, for example, that the Invisible People (the traditional culture) wore few clothes and hunted with bows and arrows, that student is at a very different place from one who describes the authority relations between the chief and the villagers. (The chief at one point declares, “If I tell a man to do what he does not want to do, I am no longer chief.”) By having the students tell me what they saw in the film, I can better assess where to begin the discussion in the next class.

A more challenging example is presented by Spike Lee’s controversial film *Bamboozled* (2000). This film is replete with over-the-top stereotypes about African-Americans as a way of illustrating Lee’s point about media portrayals of minority groups. After watching the film, students may well be confused or, at the least, unsure of their own responses. One strategy for dealing with this is outlined in Slaner and Clyne (2008, pp. 8-9) and involves both freewriting and reflective writing:

Our strategy is to begin the classroom exercise by showing the archival footage at the film’s conclusion, an excerpt of about three and a half minutes.... The students are asked initially not to discuss [their] responses, but to write about them for a brief ten to fifteen minute period. This strategy ... would allow the students to develop and express their emotional and conceptual responses to the onslaught of raw, crass racial stereotyping. Having loosened up the flow of ideas through *freewriting*, the students are now ready to engage in a classroom discussion of the film clip.... The classroom discussion is followed by another,

more reflective bout of writing, affording the students an opportunity to consolidate their ideas.

The idea here is that the power of the images needs to be counteracted by the students' assuming for themselves the mantle of interpreter of the film, even if they are not at the point where they fully understand it. The hot bath of immersion in powerful images, so to speak, can be tempered by a warm shower of immediate reaction and a cold shower of intellectual processing of the experience. During the class discussion students will be more able to "vent" their feelings about the film if they have written them down beforehand, and the reflective writing that follows the discussion should be more temperate and fruitful.

E. *Use a reflection journal, but see Section F below on its possible limitations.* Stephen Brookfield and Donald A. Schön are two well-known practitioners dedicated to promoting critical awareness on the part of teachers. Both stress the importance of understanding students and the student perspective on teaching – "seeing ourselves through our students' eyes," as Brookfield puts it (2005, p. 92), or understanding that "each student makes up a universe of one whose potentials, problems, and pace of work must be appreciated as the teacher reflects-in-action on the design of her work," in Schön's words (1983, p. 333). Brookfield, in particular, asks his students to keep learning journals, "regularly compiled summaries of [their] experiences of learning that are written in their own terms" (2005, p. 97). Interestingly, however, neither writer explicitly advocates that the *teacher* keep such a journal, though such a recommendation may be implicit in their analysis. Brookfield does use a "critical incident questionnaire," which would certainly provide helpful information as to how students are responding to classroom dynamics. But it is also useful for the teacher to keep a record of her own responses to what went on in the classroom. How does this relate to film?

Insofar as the effect of a particular film on a particular class is hard to predict, writing down the student reaction (or lack of reaction) to the film may provide useful data for the teacher engaged in teacher research. In addition, the teacher should note her own reactions to the film and how she thinks she handled the classroom dynamics: what worked, what didn't work, and some possible reasons why. For example, when I showed the film *Red Desert* (1964) in a Politics and Film class, all the students but one were negatively impressed by the lack of action in the film. Brought up on a diet of action films, they may have expected something decisive to happen, but the filmmaker deliberately withholds such satisfaction from the audience. The film viewer has to actively engage with the film, and only one student was able to do that. A philosophy major, he understood that the virtue of the film lay in its definitive portrayal of a woman made psychologically unstable by the anomie and technological fixation of modern society, as well as the way in which the color coding in the film reinforces this philosophical message. In any event, I concluded from the reaction of most of the class that careful preparation is advisable when showing so contemplative a film to students without a strong philosophy or film studies background. Such a realization would certainly be part of a reflection journal. This would also enable future showings to be contrasted with the initial showing, and interesting comparisons might emerge.

F. *Be aware of the limitations of a reflection journal.* Francis (1995) makes a strong case for using a reflection journal as a mechanism for increasing teachers' personal and professional empowerment. The dimensions of reflection (p. 232) are *describing* ("what do I do?"), *informing* ("what does this mean?"), *confronting* ("how did I come to be this way?"), *reconstructing* ("how might I view/do things differently?"), and *challenging* ("reflection should lead to action which is better informed"). A *professional diary* was part of the reflection process,

and “incidents from teaching practice” were supplemented with reflections from daily life outside the classroom (p. 237). The author found that “initial resistance has altered to a valuing of journal writing as stimulating growth, increasing self-awareness and confidence” (p. 241). So far so good.

Now comes the red flag. In an important article, “Through the Looking Glass: Reflective Teaching Through a Lacanian Lens,” Mick Markham (1999) makes the argument that the reflective mirror may itself be distorted. Using a Lacanian framework,<sup>12</sup> Markham argues that “the social construction of identities, interpretations of reality, and psychoanalytic processes of subjectivity involved in educational processes” (p. 58) problematize the very idea of reflection. The assumption of individuality and clarity may be misplaced in view of the interpersonal nature of teaching and the possible distortions of the reflective mirror. “The more unpredictably or randomly a mirror distorts what it reflects,” says Markham, “the less we can rely on the information gleaned from that mirror” (p. 59). Specifically, the outer world affects our perceptions in fundamental ways: “Our most basic, most foundational self-understanding ... lies on the border of our inner and outer worlds. Lacan often uses the topography of a Moebius strip to illustrate this concept” (p. 64).

These caveats do *not* mean that a reflection journal is unnecessary or unwise. But like any powerful medicine, it should be used with caution. Most obviously, in the first place, our understanding of what went on in the classroom may not reflect the students’ perception of what went on.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, our understanding of our own reactions may well be limited, since the

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst who expanded Freudian ideas to include linguistic analysis and philosophical ideas of intersubjectivity. For example, he explained the psychodynamic basis for learning to read by saying, in an untranslatable pun, that “le ‘non’ du père” is replaced by “le nom du père,” i.e., instinctual energy is sublimated away from the Oedipus complex to understanding written language.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once declared that “film is not the reflection of reality but the reality of that reflection.” The same could be said for a journal.

complex processes of intersubjectivity affect us in ways we are not fully conscious of. And thirdly, it might be a good idea to highlight particular entries that seem strange or unusual, since they may indicate (in the immortal words of Bob Dylan) that “something is happening but you don’t know what it is.” As Markham expresses it, “the unconscious always lies beyond the control of the individual.... Language often seems to control us as much as we control language” (p. 71).

G. *Practice team teaching or teaching in a Learning Community wherever possible.* Having taught in a Learning Community for the first time this spring, I can testify that it greatly expands the possibilities of using film in class. When I screened a clip from a particular film – *Antigone* (1992) by the radical filmmakers Straub and Huillet – it was as if there were two different films being shown. I saw a controlled but passionate reading of a text by Sophocles and Brecht; the students and my colleague saw an unexciting, unemotional reading of that same text. Having different opinions about the same film is a good way of generating class discussion. Similarly, when I was involved in team teaching a film course at another institution, I engaged in disagreements with my colleague, but also benefited from the fact that his expertise was different from mine. As a filmmaker himself, he was more familiar with the process of film production than I was, and the complementary perspectives enriched the dynamics of the class.

### III. Conclusion.

The movies were such rare things to have, to see, to have captured. But what were they? Were those slippery light patterns “things” at all? They eluded you, always; they moved and kept moving.... The moving image ... could only be attended to, waited for. Learning how to surrender to it was like learning to swim: coming to terms with the laws of a heavier and mysteriously pleasurable element. It was a river of images. [O’Brien, 1993, p. 41.]

The “river of images” described above does seem to obey its own laws. Like a dream, a film gives us access to a special realm that is related to but differs from everyday experience. But while we do have to surrender to it while we’re watching, a film can be analyzed and interpreted after the event, just as painting and music can. Having descended into the depths of an experience that some have seen as quasi-religious,<sup>14</sup> the viewer can awake in the real world and discuss her feelings and ideas with others. The film *Before Sunrise* (1995) exemplifies this phenomenon in a discussion between the two central characters, Celine and Jesse. “We’re back in real time,” Jesse tells Celine, after a particularly intense encounter with each other and the city of Vienna they are exploring for the first time. For a moment they had succeeded in doing what Chris Marker (in Boorman and Donohue, 1995) refers to as stepping outside of time, which seems to occur in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). But only for a moment: inevitably they must return to the real world. Just so, students in a class watching a film are being transported to a different plane of existence, but with the aid of a skillful teacher they can come back to reality and process their experience. As we have seen, in the case of particularly intense or controversial films, it might be helpful to use such techniques as freewriting and reflective writing to facilitate class discussion. But whatever techniques are involved, film can be used to reach a level of understanding of course material that adds immeasurably to the printed word. For better or worse, this new technology has changed the way we experience the world, and we as teachers can benefit from reaching our students where *they* are. Needless to say, we should encourage them to read at every opportunity, but film can be a valuable pedagogical resource in the educator’s bag of tools. Through film, in this case *La Jetée* (1962) or *12 Monkeys* (1995), students can vicariously experience what it might be like to live underground and travel through

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<sup>14</sup> Director Martin Scorsese (1995), who reports that he originally wanted to be a priest, sees certain similarities between watching a film and going to church: both activities involve people coming together in a large dimly lit area to partake of a common experience with spiritual overtones.



time to attempt to reverse (or at least cope with) the near-extinction of human life. Through film, students can appreciate the uniqueness of their contribution to the world by seeing how that world is altered by their non-existence, as it is for George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947). And through film, students can suspend disbelief and enter into a reality in which the normal laws of time and space are suspended as if in a dream – as the film *Waking Life* (2001) illustrates by means of digitally enhanced technology.

To be sure, film is not a panacea for what ails education. Students, especially community college students, will still be burdened by the cares and complexities of everyday existence. Some students will still need special attention to make the adjustment to college. In an age of budgetary cutbacks, large class sizes will still make it difficult to reach every student. But film can make a difference. I've seen how showing the film *Bulworth* (1998) in an American government class can reveal the limitations of normal political discourse in a way that a standard textbook cannot. I've seen how showing *The Sacrifice* (1986) can be the occasion for combining deep spiritual reflection with drastic political reframing. I've seen how showing *Bamboozled* (2000) can generate an emotional minefield whose explosiveness can be defused by careful handling and respect for diverse points of view. And I've seen how student involvement can be facilitated by using the power of film to explore controversial issues in a way that seems larger than life. If one of our goals in "achieving the dream" is to make students feel more connected to the world both in and out of the classroom, film can help make that possible. If one of our goals is to make students appreciate the ramifications of citizenship in a culture that stresses private opportunity to the neglect of public possibility, film can facilitate that objective as well. And if one of our goals is to foster critical thinking and the ability to decode the myriad of messages that we see every day in the media, film can certainly be a valuable tool in realizing

that aspiration. Just as we emphasize writing across the curriculum, so training students in visual literacy is applicable to a wide variety of disciplines. Teachers in the humanities and social sciences can use film to help achieve all these goals. The resources are as close as your nearest library or mailbox. What have you got to lose?

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FILMS CITED

Amistad (1997)  
Antigone (1992)  
Bamboozled (2000)  
Before Sunrise (1995)  
Blade Runner (1982)  
Boyz n the Hood (1991)  
Bulworth (1998)  
Brave New World (1998)  
Citizen Kane (1941)  
Commune (Paris, 1871)  
Emerald Forest, The (1985)  
Gabriel Over the White House (1933)  
It's a Wonderful Life (1947)  
Jetée, La (1962)  
Last Emperor, The (1987)  
Matewan (1987)  
Matrix, The (1999)  
Malcolm X (1992)  
1984 (1948)  
1984 (1984)  
Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, An (1962)  
Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies, A (1995)  
Rebel Without a Cause (1955)  
Red Desert (1964)  
Sacrifice, The (1986)  
Sans Soleil (1983)  
Sullivan's Travels (1941)  
Terminator 2 (1991)  
Thief of Bagdad (1940)  
Trial, The (1962)  
12 Monkeys (1995)  
Vertigo (1958)  
Waking Life (2001)  
Wizard of Oz, The (1939)  
Zabriskie Point (1970)

Appendix A

This is a preliminary list of 50 films that could be used in history, literature, philosophy, political science, religion, or sociology courses. Four themes are listed for each film together with the discipline(s) to which they apply, and the themes themselves are cross-indexed by discipline. In the case of *Rebel Without a Cause*, for example, the themes are adolescent rebellion, family relations, deviance, and justice. Looking at the list of themes reveals that three of these are found in *Boyz n the Hood* (which also deals with racism). Besides looking up the films themselves, it is possible to take a given theme and see in which films it shows up (and which films might therefore be compared). Looking at the particular disciplines, under sociology and psychology we have adolescent rebellion and family relations; under sociology we have deviance; and under philosophy and political science we have justice. Finally, for selected films I have presented a short synopsis and four possible questions that could be used to generate discussion in class or topics for a paper. Anyone interested in particular films that are not represented here should feel free to contact the author at [sslaner@necc.mass.edu](mailto:sslaner@necc.mass.edu).

The columns are arranged as follows (films are listed alphabetically):

FILM (YEAR)

DIRECTOR

THEMES (DISCIPLINE)

Bamboozled (2000)	Spike Lee	race/racism (soc/pol) stereotyping (psy/soc) the media (soc/pol) slavery legacy (hist)
Battle in Seattle (2007)	Stuart Townsend	fair trade / free trade (pol) resistance (pol/phil) ecology (pol/phil/soc) police brutality (pol)
Bed Sitting-Room (1969)	Richard Lester	nuclear war (pol/phil) civilization collapse (hist) norms, values (soc) authority (pol)
Before Sunrise (1985)	Richard Linklater	life cycle (psy) counterculture (soc) intimacy (psy) identity (psy)
Black Narcissus (1947)	Michael Powell	religion/spirituality (rel) sexual repression (psy) colonialism (hist/pol) multiculturalism (soc)
Blade Runner (1982)	Ridley Scott	replicants/cyborgs (phil) ecology (pol/phil/soc) technology (pol/phil) memory (phil/psy)
Boyz n the Hood (1991)	John Singleton	adolescent rebellion (psy/soc) deviance (soc) racism (soc/psy) family relations (soc/psy)
Bulworth (1998)	Warren Beatty	race/racism (pol/soc) ideology/protest (pol/phil) political campaigns (pol) pop culture (soc/phil)
Burn! (1969)	Pontecorvo	colonialism (hist/pol) imperialism (hist/pol) race/racism (soc/hist) class struggle (pol/phil)
Citizen Kane (1941)	Orson Welles	media/press (soc/pol) family relations (soc/psy) power (pol) wealth (pol/hist)

Crying Game, The (1992)	Neil Jordan	ideology/protest (pol) gender (soc/psy) colonialism (hist/pol) race/ethnicity (soc)
Dr. Strangelove (1964)	Stanley Kubrick	nuclear war (pol/phil) psychotic leaders (psych/pol) military-industrial (pol) Orwellian language (pol/lit)
Emerald Forest, The (1985)	John Boorman	idea of “primitivism” (soc) cultural norms/values (soc) ecology (pol/phil/soc) imperialism (hist/pol)
Europa '51 (1951)	Roberto Rossellini	capitalism/socialism (pol) grief/loss (psy) spirituality (rel/phil) St. Francis (rel)
Four Nights of a Dreamer (1971)	Robert Bresson	alienation (phil/soc) sexuality/love (soc/psy) spirituality (rel) artistic creativity (phil/psy)
Gabriel Over the White House	Gregory LaCava	ideology (pol/phil) Great Depression (hist) political leadership (pol) spirituality (rel)
Grand Canyon (1991)	Lawrence Kasdan	race relations (soc/pol) role of film (lit/phil) family relations (soc/psy) class dynamics (soc/pol)
Imitation of Life (1959)	Douglas Sirk	race/racism (soc/pol) family relations (soc/psy) art and society (phil/pol) generational change (soc/psy)
In My Country (2004)	John Boorman	race/racism (soc/pol) revolution (hist/pol) accountability (pol) South Africa (pol)
Invasion of Body Snatchers (1956)	Don Siegel	anticommunism (pol) conformity (soc/pol) free will (phil) personality (psy)

Jonah Who Will Be 25 ... (1976)	Alain Tanner	education (phil/psy) '60s counterculture (soc) capitalism/socialism (pol) generational change (psy)
King in New York, A (1957)	Charlie Chaplin	anticommunism (pol) consumerism (soc) conformity (soc/pol) McCarthyism (pol)
Kiss Me Deadly (1955)	Robert Aldrich	nuclear war (pol) Cold War (pol) anticommunism (pol) anti-hero (lit)
Last Emperor, The	Bernardo Bertolucci	imperialism (hist/pol) revolution (hist/pol) life stages (psy) China (hist/pol)
Lord of the Flies (1963)	Peter Brook	state of nature (phil) idea of "primitivism" (soc) authority/hierarchy (soc) in-group/out-group (soc)
Make Way for Tomorrow (1937)	Leo McCarey	life stages/old age (psy) family relations (soc/psy) love/sexuality (psy) moral codes (phil)
Matrix, The (1999)	Wachowski Bros.	Plato's cave (phil) image/reality (phil) aliens/sci-fi (lit) liberation (phil)
Memory of Justice, The (1976)	Marcel Ophuls	Holocaust (hist/pol) Vietnam war (pol) justice (phil/pol) legitimacy (phil/pol)
My Son John (1952)	Leo McCarey	anticommunism (pol) McCarthyism (pol) family relations (soc/psy) anti-intellectualism (hist/pol)
Rebel Without a Cause (1955)	Nicholas Ray	adolescent rebellion (psy/soc) family relations (soc/psy) deviance (soc) justice/utopia (phil/pol)



Red Desert (1964)	Michel. Antonioni	alienation (phil/soc) role of technology (pol/phil) love/sexuality (psy) neurosis (psy)
Rhapsody in August (1991)	Akira Kurosawa	nuclear war (pol/phil) Japan (hist/pol) family relations (soc/psy) hibakusha (hist)
Sacrifice, The (1986)	Andrei Tarkovsky	dream/reality (phil/psy) nuclear war (pol/phil) spirituality (rel/phil) sanity/insanity (psy)
Sans Soleil (1983)	Chris Marker	cross-cultural (soc) image/reality (phil/art) memory (phil/psy) time travel (phil/lit)
Sansho the Bailiff (1954)	Kenji Mizoguchi	oppression/feudalism (hist) feminism/sacrifice (phil) Japan (hist) justice (phil/pol/hist)
Searchers, The (1956)	John Ford	journey/quest (psy) Indians/whites (hist) family relations (soc/psy) cultural adaptation (soc)
Sullivan's Travels (1941)	Preston Sturges	Great Depression (hist/pol) class struggle (pol/phil) role of film (lit/phil) black church (hist/pol/rel)
Talking Picture (2003)	Manoel de Oliveira	historic places (hist) communication (psy) education (phil/psy) terrorism (gov/phil)
Terminator 2 (1991)	James Cameron	nuclear war (pol/phil) technology (pol/phil) resistance (pol/phil) feminism (pol/phil)
Trouble in Paradise (1932)	Ernst Lubitsch	love and sexuality (psy) Great Depression (hist/pol) social roles (soc) wealth (pol/hist)

Twelve Monkeys (1995)	Terry Gilliam	ecology (pol/phil/soc) time travel (phil) romantic love (psy/lit) sanity/insanity (psy)
Twilight's Last Gleaming (1977)	Robert Aldrich	nuclear war (pol/phil) military-industrial (pol) Vietnam war (pol) Cold War (pol)
Ugetsu (1953)	Kenji Mizoguchi	oppression/feudalism (hist) love/sexuality (psy/soc) Japan (hist) ghosts/spirits (rel/phil)
Vertigo (1958)	Alfred Hitchcock	obsession (psy) romantic love (psy/lit) death, Orpheus (phil/lit) memory (psy/phil)
Waking Life (2001)	Richard Linklater	consciousness (phil/psy) mortality (phil/psy) existentialism (phil) postmodernism (lit)
Weekend (1967)	Jean-Luc Godard	collapse of society (soc/pol) anarchist rebellion (pol/phil) role of film (lit/phil) class relations (soc/phil)
Where the Heart Is (1990)	John Boorman	counterculture (soc/hist) art in society (phil/soc) class relations (soc/phil) family relations (soc/psy)
Wild Strawberries (1957)	Ingmar Bergman	life stages/old age (psy) family relations (soc/psy) mortality (phil/psy) personality (psy)
Women on the Verge ... (1988)	Pedro Almodóvar	feminism (soc/psy) love/sexuality (psy) postmodernism (lit) terrorism (pol)
Zabriskie Point (1969)	Michel. Antonioni	youth rebellion (soc) '60s counterculture (soc) Vietnam war (pol) consumerism (soc)

Subject AreaThemes

## History

anti-intellectualism (My Son John)  
 China (The Last Emperor)  
 civilization collapse (Bed Sitting-Room)  
 colonialism (Burn!, The Crying Game)  
 Great Depression (Gabriel ..., Sullivan's Travels)  
 hibakusha [A-Bomb survivors] (Rhapsody in August)  
 Holocaust (Memory of Justice)  
 imperialism (Burn!, Emerald Forest, Last Emperor)  
 Japan (Rhapsody in August, Sansho, Ugetsu)  
 race/racism (Burn!)  
 revolution (In My Country, Last Emperor)  
 slavery legacy (Bamboozled)  
 wealth (Citizen Kane)

## Literature

aliens/sci-fi (The Matrix)  
 Orwellian language (Dr. Strangelove)  
 postmodernism (Waking Life, Women ...)  
 role of film (Grand Canyon, Sullivan's Travels, Weekend)  
 romantic love (12 Monkeys, Vertigo)  
 time travel (Sans Soleil)  
 anti-hero (Kiss Me Deadly)

## Philosophy

anarchist rebellion (Weekend)  
 art and society (Imitation of Life)  
 art in society (Ugetsu, Where the Heart Is)  
 artistic creativity (4 Nights of a Dreamer)  
 class relations (Weekend, Where the Heart Is)  
 consciousness (Waking Life)  
 death, Orpheus (Vertigo)  
 dream/reality (The Sacrifice)  
 ecology (Blade Runner, 12 Monkeys, Emerald Forest, Battle in Seattle)  
 education (Talking Picture, Jonah Who Will Be 25)  
 existentialism (Waking Life)  
 feminism/sacrifice (Sansho, Terminator 2)  
 free will (Invasion of the Body Snatchers)  
 ghosts/spirits (Ugetsu)  
 ideology (Gabriel Over the White House, Bulworth)  
 image/reality (Sans Soleil, The Matrix)  
 justice (Memory of Justice, Rebel ..., Sansho)  
 liberation (The Matrix)  
 memory (Vertigo, Sans Soleil)  
 mortality (Waking Life, Wild Strawberries)  
 nuclear war (The Sacrifice, Bed Sitting-Room, Twilight's Last Gleaming, Rhapsody in August)

Plato's cave (The Matrix)  
 pop culture (Bulworth)  
 replicants/androids (Blade Runner)  
 resistance (Terminator 2, Battle in Seattle)  
 role of film (Weekend, Sullivan's Travels)  
 spirituality (The Sacrifice, Europa '51)  
 technology (Blade Runner, Terminator 2)  
 time travel (Sans Soleil, 12 Monkeys)

## Political Science

accountability (In My Country)  
 anarchist rebellion (Weekend)  
 anticommunism (A King in New York, My Son John, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Kiss Me Deadly)  
 anti-intellectualism (My Son John)  
 art and society (Imitation of Life)  
 black church (Sullivan's Travels)  
 capitalism/socialism (Europa '51)  
 China (The Last Emperor)  
 class struggle (Burn!, Sullivan's Travels)  
 Cold War (Twilight's Last Gleaming, Kiss Me Deadly)  
 collapse of society (Weekend)  
 colonialism (Black Narcissus, Burn!, Crying Game)  
 ecology (Blade Runner, 12 Monkeys, Emerald Forest, Battle in Seattle)  
 fair trade / free trade (Battle in Seattle)  
 feminism (Terminator 2)  
 ideology (Bulworth, Crying Game)  
 imperialism (Burn!, Emerald Forest, Last Emperor)  
 intimacy (Before Sunrise)  
 Japan (Rhapsody in August)  
 justice (Rebel Without a Cause, Memory of Justice, Sansho the Bailiff)  
 McCarthyism (My Son John, King in New York)  
 the media (Bamboozled, Citizen Kane)  
 military-industrial complex (Dr. Strangelove, Twilight's Last Gleaming)  
 nuclear war (Bed Sitting-Room, Dr. Strangelove, Twilight's Last Gleaming, Terminator 2, Rhapsody in August, Kiss Me Deadly)  
 police brutality (Battle in Seattle)  
 political campaigns (Bulworth)  
 political leadership (Gabriel Over the White House)  
 power (Citizen Kane)  
 psychotic leaders (Dr. Strangelove)  
 race relations (Grand Canyon)  
 race/racism (Bamboozled, Bulworth, Imitation Life)  
 revolution (In My Country, The Last Emperor)

resistance (Terminator 2, Battle in Seattle)  
 South Africa (In My Country)  
 technology (Blade Runner, Terminator 2,  
 Red Desert)  
 terrorism (Women on the Verge ...)  
 Vietnam war (Memory of Justice, Twilight's Last  
 Gleaming, Zabriskie Point)  
 wealth (Citizen Kane)

## Psychology

adolescent rebellion (Rebel ..., Boyz n the Hood)  
 artistic creativity (Four Nights of a Dreamer)  
 communication (Talking Picture)  
 consciousness (Waking Life)  
 dream/reality (The Sacrifice)  
 education (Talking Picture, Jonah Who Will Be 25)  
 family relations (Boyz, Rebel, Grand Canyon,  
 Citizen Kane, Where the Heart Is, The Searchers,  
 Make Way for Tomorrow, My Son John,  
 Rhapsody in August, Wild Strawberries)  
 feminism (Women on the Verge ... )  
 gender (The Crying Game)  
 generational change (Jonah Who Will Be 25)  
 grief/loss (Europa '51)  
 identity (Before Sunrise)  
 intimacy (Before Sunrise)  
 life stages (Make Way for Tomorrow, Before  
 Sunrise, Last Emperor, Wild Strawberries)  
 love/sexuality (Red Desert, Ugetsu, Women ...)  
 memory (Vertigo, Sans Soleil, Blade Runner)  
 mortality (Waking Life, Wild Strawberries)  
 neurosis (Red Desert)  
 obsession (Vertigo)  
 Orwellian language (Citizen Kane)  
 personality (Invasion of the Body Snatchers,  
 Wild Strawberries)  
 power (Citizen Kane)  
 psychotic leaders (Dr. Strangelove)  
 romantic love (Vertigo, 12 Monkeys)  
 sexuality/love (4 Nights of a Dreamer)  
 sexual repression (Black Narcissus)  
 sanity/insanity (The Sacrifice, 12 Monkeys)  
 stereotyping (Bamboozled)

## Religion

black church (Sullivan's Travels)  
 ghosts/spirits (Ugetsu)  
 religion/spirituality (Black Narcissus)  
 spirituality (Four Nights of a Dreamer,  
 The Sacrifice, Europa '51)  
 St. Francis (Europa '51)

## Sociology

adolescent rebellion (Rebel ..., Boyz n the Hood)  
 alienation (Four Nights of a Dreamer, Red Desert)  
 art in society (Ugetsu, Where the Heart Is)  
 cross-cultural comparisons (Sans Soleil)  
 deviance (Boyz n the Hood, Rebel ... )  
 conformity (A King in New York, Invasion of the  
 Body Snatchers)  
 consumerism (A King in New York, Zabriskie Pt)  
 counterculture (Jonah ..., Where the Heart Is,  
 Zabriskie Point, Before Sunrise)  
 ecology (Blade Runner, 12 Monkeys,  
 Emerald Forest, Battle in Seattle)  
 family relations (Boyz, Rebel, Grand Canyon,  
 Citizen Kane, Where the Heart Is, The Searchers,  
 Make Way for Tomorrow, My Son John,  
 Rhapsody in August, Wild Strawberries)  
 idea of "primitivism" (Emerald Forest, Lord of  
 the Flies)  
 love/sexuality (Ugetsu, Women on the Verge ...)  
 gender (The Crying Game)  
 media/press (Citizen Kane, Bamboozled)  
 multiculturalism (Black Narcissus)  
 norms/values (Bed Sitting-Room)  
 pop culture (Bulworth)  
 race/ethnicity (Crying Game)  
 race/racism (Bamboozled, Bulworth, Boyz, Burn!,  
 Imitation of Life)  
 sexuality/love (4 Nights of a Dreamer)  
 social roles (Trouble in Paradise)  
 stereotyping (Bamboozled)

## UGETSU

*Ugetsu*, by the great filmmaker Kenji Mizoguchi, shows feudal Japan in the grip of warring clans. The lead character is Genjuro, a potter, who's convinced he can take advantage of the war by selling more pots, just as a friend of his from the same village is determined to become a great samurai warrior despite his lack of noble lineage. Both discover that war isn't all it's cracked up to be, and Genjuro is separated from his wife and gets involved with a strange lady in what is described in the film as a "forbidden love." Reunion with his wife, which is shown at the end of the movie, takes on a particularly spiritual quality.

1. Which character do you think is most important in the film, and why? (Think before you answer.)
2. Why is Genjuro's affair with Lady Watanabe characterized as a "forbidden love"? Compare it to his relationship with his wife.
3. How is war portrayed in the film? What might the director say about attempts to glamorize it?
4. What is the significance of the final scene in the film when Genjuro is reconciled with his wife?

## SANSHO THE BAILIFF

Here we see how feudal Japan dealt with people who wanted to change the system. In Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff*, Zushio and Anju, the offspring of a progressive government official, are sold into slavery. Anju remains true to her father's values, but her brother becomes corrupted. After she pleads with him, they plan their escape; only Zushio makes it, however, as Anju drowns herself to distract the forces of the feudal lord who runs their manor. Somehow Zushio becomes a government official and goes back to liberate Sansho's slaves, with mixed results. Significantly, as in so many of Mizoguchi's films, it is the woman who is the bearer of compassion and human decency. Through her self-sacrifice, Anju has called attention to the cruelty and oppression that were rampant in medieval Japan. In this sense, the film may be seen as feminist.

1. Is *Sansho the Bailiff* a feminist film? Why or why not? (Or why *and* why not?)
2. Why does Sansho's son join a monastery? Is this a way out of his dilemma?
3. At the end of the film Zushio is finally reunited with his mother. Is this a happy ending?
4. In what ways have we made progress since feudal times? In what ways have we not?

## REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

It has been said that the difference between a criminal and a rebel is that the criminal accepts the legitimacy of the goals of his or her society but believes in using illegitimate means to reach these goals, whereas a rebel is in fundamental disagreement with the goals themselves and may or may not choose legitimate means to reach new goals. In this sense, the idea of a "rebel without a cause" is paradoxical, since rebels tend to be involved in a cause, however negative it may be. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, the protagonist, Jim Stark, is presented sympathetically as someone who is trying to find values and principles in a world that seems devoid of either. Neither his family nor his friends are capable of providing him with the guidance and role models he seeks. Tragically, a gang leader, Buzz, is killed in a game of "chicken," and Jim is forced to flee with his girlfriend to a deserted mansion, where they and their friend Plato constitute themselves as an imaginary family. Plato's ultimate fate is a metaphor for the response of the society to violence and rebellion, and his name is itself an indicator that something is radically wrong with American society, just as the famous Greek philosopher believed that something was seriously amiss in the Athens of his day. Interestingly, this film was made in the 1950s, a time of conformity but also the source of much of the activism of the 1960s. To give a few examples: *Brown v. Board of Education*, which established that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was inherently unequal, was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1954 and helped trigger a series of events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and the later sit-ins against segregation. The peace movement began in earnest to oppose nuclear weapons, a strategy which was somewhat derailed by the need to struggle against the Vietnam war. And coffee shops in New York's Greenwich Village featured some of the writers and artists who would be part of the great movement of social protest in the 1960s. In fact, the director of *Rebel Without a Cause* was himself a rebel and made other films in the 1950s that illustrated the pressures toward conformity that were so powerful in that period, chief among them *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *Bigger than Life* (1956), and *The Savage Innocents* (1960). Incidentally, *The Savage Innocents*, which deconstructed the idea of "primitivism," was the source of a famous reference in a song by Bob Dylan: "Quinn the Eskimo" refers to the part played by the actor Anthony Quinn in the film.

1. Is Jim Stark a rebel? If so, what is he rebelling against?
2. What is the significance of the planetarium sequence in *Rebel Without a Cause*? How might it be taken as a metaphor for the social universe of these teenagers and their families? What omnipresent menace of the 1950s may it be said to represent?
3. Why do the adolescents play the exciting but extremely dangerous game of "chicken"? In what sense does it resemble the behavior of nation-states?
4. Jim Stark's young friend Plato is named after the famous Greek philosopher who was engaged in a search for justice. How might this be related to the main themes of the film?



## BURN!

The legacy of colonialism and imperialism is a long-lasting one. Pontecorvo's *Burn!* is a historical account of the way in which the colonial powers jockeyed for position in the fight to control the resources and people of what used to be called the Third World and is now referred to simply as the South (reflecting the North-South world divide). Two things are particularly noteworthy. First, the British themselves instigate an uprising against the Portuguese in the mythical island of Queimada led by a slave, José Dolores, ostensibly to free the people but in reality to institute their own form of oppression; and second, William Walker, the British agent, is presented most engagingly, even somewhat sympathetically, as portrayed by Marlon Brando. The film does not gloss over his racism and arrogance, but he also becomes attached to José Dolores to the point of trying to help him escape after he has been condemned to death. José Dolores' refusal to escape and the subsequent assassination of William Walker mark this film as having a genuinely anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist perspective. In rejecting the overtures of the British, José Dolores says, "It is better to know where you are going and not know how to get there than to know how to go but not know where." In other words, freedom cannot be handed to you; you must fight for it yourself. The fact that *Burn!* was made in 1970 calls attention to the analogy it may be implicitly drawing between the anti-imperialist struggle of the 18th and 19th centuries and the Vietnam war, in which the U.S. attempted to perpetuate imperialist domination of a poor country in the name of freedom. That the war was disastrous both for Vietnam and the U.S. underscores the point that European domination of indigenous territories has in general involved terrible destruction and loss of life – and, in an ultimate sense, as in Vietnam, represented an attempt to hold back the tide of history. Finally, just as William Walker helped foment the uprising shown in the film, so in many cases it was European ideals like democracy and self-determination that ironically inspired subject peoples the world over to revolt – saying, in effect, that they too wanted to take advantage of the principles which their European conquerors had assured them applied to everybody.

1. Why does William Walker help to instigate a slave revolt in Queimada? What are his real motives?
2. Why does José Dolores refuse Walker's offers to negotiate and then, later, to free him?
3. It can be argued that William Walker admires and respects José Dolores. On the other hand, he insults him to his face. What do you think his real feelings are, and why?
4. What is the ultimate lesson of the film? What parallels can you draw with the Vietnam War and with the world situation today?