

Repeating History: Reinterpreting National Affairs Through Hollywood from 1950 to 2000

Neil Liss

INTRODUCTION

Introducing the great History Myth! Watch as I teach United States History ... synchronically! Gape as I turn chronology into a fiction! Be amazed, as I prove how history not only repeats, but that history's only function **is** to repeat! Prepare yourself for the force of my legerdemain, ripping open the time-space continuum as I show the redundancy of the last fifty years of this century! Fall to your knees in awe as I construct a memoir of our country that centers on one single event!

You have doubts. I understand. But what if I could demonstrate that one single motif ties the last fifty years of United States History together, in a way that students will find enjoyable, contemplative, provocative and accessible?

No go, huh? OK. Let me explain.

Of the various ways to teach post-war America, most focus on the organic link between the dropping of the Atomic bomb, the cold war, Vietnam, cultural politicizations of the sixties, recovery of the seventies, retrenched Reaganism in the eighties, and contemporary multiculturalism. This is not a bad way to go, focusing the students' mind on the exponential existences that factor into history. Getting them to see links like these helps them to see their own futures as exigent. And maybe they then take some caution in their paths. But what if, and here's a radical idea, we could get them to see links between cause and effect, between past and present (and thus future) *sans* beholden to the march of time, without the need to move forward through history as the only way to study history?

But students respond best when they both see a relevance to the work and make implicit connections in it themselves. Breaking up the processes, allowing them to move at a different pace than simply from chapter to chapter (nothing wrong with using the text, unless that is all you **are** using) provides a less stable but more open emphasis; they (the students) must bring themselves into the discussion because we (the class as a whole) move in different directions all at once. Failure to keep abreast, and to work at contextualizing the material to their own understandings, leads to failure. But participation in our class has the added reward of making history a continual event, a constant, requiring active reexamination, even and especially up the present moments in our lives. History for them thus becomes what they make of it. It can live if they choose it to, since they are becoming the keepers (and hopefully the makers) of the myths, or it can die because they deem it to.

Giving them that power requires showing them how history always has and always will be under a microscope. Not that facts change (and I will not sidestep here into a post-structural, Freireian rant), but our appreciation of those facts, those past events we have tweaked with scholarship, has. And what better way to do this than by using perhaps that powerful 20th century medium: film. Students respond to film as a teaching tool, even if only because of its

rarity (i.e. non-privileged academically) and its difference, its presence **and** its absence (a Derridian imbalance, I guess). Film somehow has the magic power of naturalizing events for students in a way that books or lectures can not; if it is on film, it WAS. So part of presenting history in film concerns how to look at film as a metaphor, as a distortion and as a resource. Scaffolding the students in the raw facts, leading them through a discussion of the events and instructing them on the art of criticism all pave the way for a lesson in film that does not simply become "sleep time" or a "free day." And not only film. Film as the crux of the learning, but not all the learning. Just as any educator has more than one method to revive the students' minds, so to film in conjunction with articles, essays, research, role-playing and writing exercises plays with the students' conception of learning (and keeps them from deadly stasis). The key is finding the balance while still making the film the centerpiece of the lesson.

Back to the subject of United States History. My practicum links the fifties, the fear of Communism and its rampant McCarthyism, the seventies, the "Me Generation," its fear of conformity and the rolling greed it inspired and the nineties, with nothing left to fear except fear of those things we expect to fear (although this is a bit off topic, but does not our current facility with seeped-in irony demonstrate a remarkable interest with the past and clue us into facing future crises with lessened anxiety because they do will past and soon become fodder for future irony?). While many films cover these areas smartly and concisely, to bring in several films, and allow students to uncover history through them piecemeal, would seem to affirm the idea of history as events that can be separated (no matter how successful those organic links are made and no matter how committed one may be to teaching history as a collection of disbursements). But what if we had one film that brought all three of these eras together? A grand-eloquent masterpiece maybe, but too wielded, too comprehensive, way too reductive. Yet one film, or rather, a series of the same film achieves my objective. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* came out in 1958, was remade in 1978 and then redone again, as *The Body Snatchers*, in 1993. Each remake retains the central plot and underlined fear of the "pod people," but establishes its own distinct subtext, dovetailing nicely into my reconstitution of its historical era. Because these films duplicate fears but imbue them with differing historical significance, the students get both a historical imperative and an art history lesson. Feed them the opportunity to find the difference themselves, let them dissect the films with their own eyes and maybe the knowledge becomes more than stale facts. Maybe they can connect changes in our nations culture by analyzing a recurring theme.

The students would need some prepping, some scaffolding to understand exactly what they are looking for in the films. For the fifties, several sources provide a comprehensive and engaging read. Start with the assigned text. While my school's state-mandated book is rather bereft of the full extent of the scare of Communism in its various forms, it does cover it enough to give the students adequate background. For better detail, use Eric Goldman's *The Crucial Decade and After: 1945-1960*. His book weaves this era together a bit too seamlessly, but his writing on McCarthy can be separated from the rest of the book without losing its context. Also, there is David Halberstam's opus, *The 50s*. The History Channel has converted the entire book to video. Its (or Halberstam's?) focus on McCarthy may be more superficial in the video, but that level might be on a "reading level" appropriate to high school students. Asking them to compare these sources (in an essay? through oral Q & A? having them come up with questions for the rest of the class to answer?) primes them for analysis, the very thing they will need when watching the film. The seventies are more diffuse to cover,

perhaps because we are still so close to them. Although if the recent rage in retro clothes means anything, our facility for deconstructing the decade is growing sharper (first the clothes, then the culture, then the politics). But with Richard Nixon being lionized, the time might not be ripe to see this decade with the same lens as we did the fifties. So take on cultural politics instead of governmental intrusion. Treat this version of the film as a critique of the creeping conformity (also a mainstay of McCarthyism) that the Me-decade thrust at us, and its ambient lure of self-help, self-interest, self-improvement. Start with Michael Lewis' personal account of the madness of world of Wall Street, *Liar's Poker*. Using a first person style, he chronicles the obliviousness of the decade from inside the culture that spawned a multi-billion dollar breakdown in our financial institutions (the Savings and Loan scandal on top of Reagan's monstrous deficit spending). The book shows the folly of the overindulgent praise of conspicuous consumption, the rampant greed that bubbled to the top of the cultural binary solely by its own force. Use *Cadillac Desert* by Marc Reisner. It shows Carter's attempts to reclaim the country's mindset on continuing the sixties neo-liberalism. Focus the students on the end of the Vietnam War, the end of the Civil Rights decade, the beginning of the Conservative movement and the start of globalization. The text always comes in handy for background knowledge. Add to it Tom Wolfe's *In Our Time*, a witty, weighty attack on seventies "culturalism." Loaded for bare, the book comes overstuffed for most high school students, but you should choose the essays that best fulfill your needs, then help your class wade through it. Show the 1978 version of the movie after the readings. Ask the students to both pick out the trends and fears they have just read about, but also to contrast the film with the first. Here are some questions to have them consider:

- How is the central character depicted?
- How different is his reaction to the "pod people?"
- What do the "pod people" represent in each film?
- How is the film evocative of the era?

Preparing for the last film, prompt the students to make lists of the important historical events that have occurred during their lifetimes. Take them to the library to research important dates (their specificities) and events that link important stages in their histories. Cultural and social events might make the transition to this era more palpable if only because the students have a greater sense of trends than they do politics. But try to focus their minds on the major issues that arisen in this decade, environmentalism, multiculturalism, the soaring economy, educational debates, practically any issue that could conceivably touch them. Readings from *The Nation*, the *New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Wired* or *Mondo*, or even *Time* and *Newsweek* on contemporary society would make great scaffolding for placing recent events in a quasi-historical context. This lets the students see even their era as integral in the shaping of history and the world's ideological make-up. Once students are cognizant as to their generation's place in history, show the most recent film version. Again, allow them to write about the film in empirical terms, and then in comparison to the others. Assign them a formal essay asking them which film most persuasively allegorizes its era and why. Have them prepare a film treatment where they create a new version of the film, complete with a subtext they think best exemplifies the tensions and fears of their contemporary society. Share these ideas with the class at large. (Perhaps offer a prize for the treatment students find most metaphorical.)

The more the students write, the more they learn. And writing about films helps them to see everything they experience in the world as potential for critique. Once they make the connection to their views on something (even something as arbitrary as a movie, a book, a school assignment), they learn to apply their views on the world itself, perhaps taking a more critical, less knee-jerk cynical approach to life. Films allow them to see art as more than a commercial exercise. They will be consumers all their lives; maybe with a little push, they will be circumspect consumers. And more tuned in citizens.

SEQUENCE:

- For *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* , 1958:

Start with excerpts from Eric Goldman's *The Crucial Decade*. Telling the post-war history of America in narrative style, the book personalizes the actors and their actions. Select the sections of the book you feel most scaffolds your students for understanding the era. Because the book links almost all of the events from 1945 (V-J Day) to 1960 in a mythic timeline, you will have to fill gaps in student understanding if you want them to make complete sense. The book takes particular care to depict McCarthy as an atavistic opportunist, and the era itself as a moral struggle for the New Deal idealists and the free enterprise conservatives (weighing in slightly on the left). Since you know your students best - their prior knowledge, their rate and capability of comprehension, their retention and effort - you can glean the sections most appropriate for your teaching. Reading the book for yourself is the best advice I could give. The book is a quick and smooth read, despite its length (346 pages), so do not worry about that burden. In order to get the students to access this information post-reading, ask them to answer some higher level questions about the events. My favorites are the "Why?" and "What would you do?" types that require students to get inside the psychology of the character or the event. These force the students to actually be historians by doing something with their learning besides just memorizing it. Discussing the readings, either in conjunction with these questioning or in lieu of it, can as well force the students to use the knowledge by defending their theories about it. Because the panic inspired by Communism derives from such a broad picture, use these question sessions to gauge how versed your students are in facts. If you can tell they need more, pull out more sections for them to read.

Use the Halberstam/History Channel rendition of *The 50s* judiciously to focus on McCarthy. Although it too includes much of the periphery to the Red Scare, its episode on "Tail Gunner Joe" is specifically tailored to show how brutal was his effect. Interviews with some of the analysts in the State Department whose careers he ruined (and the effect on our foreign policies) or with several reporters who watched the sudden rise of the demagogue give the era a distinctly personal touch. Again, ask the students to put themselves in each participants head, including McCarthy.

- "Why do you think he did what he did?"
- "Was he right to?"
- "Was he a hero or a villain? Why?"

And have them compare these two sources.

- "Which do you find more explicit?"
- "More believable?"
- "More persuasive?"
- "Why?"

This starts the students on the task of analyzing what is present but unsaid. It asks them to find for themselves the answers instead of repeating what you have told them. Perhaps even get them to grade each other's analyses. Whatever forces them to think for themselves and to respect their own critical facilities.

Now you are ready to show them the movie. How you want them to demonstrate their ability to pick out the subtext should be central to your lesson. Exposing them to reviews beforehand might (will) encourage them to simply co-opt these ideas without assembling them themselves. (But be sure to give the students these reviews once they have completed your assignment if only so they can compare what they thought with other, more "professional" reviewers.) My strategy would be to ask them to prepare a critical analysis of the film **as a document of the history of the decade.**

- "What, from what we have recently studied, do you see in the film? Give examples."
- "What is the message of the film?"
- "How does this message relate to the history we have studied?"
- "How effective is the film at sending this message?"
- "What group of society does the protagonist represent? Explain."
- "Who/what do the 'pod people' represent? Explain?"
- "Who/what do the 'pods' represent? Explain"
- "Who/what does Miles represent? Explain."

Since you know your students best, use the type of questioning you feel most comfortable with; the only caveat is to not let the students be too literal with the film. Do not let them use the overt narrative as the message. Get them to dig deeper in their interpretive skills to prove their points. After this assignment, discuss students' ideas with the entire class. Open up the dialogue to let others comment on and debate the merits of various interpretations. As long as you remind them that every theory is valid as long as it is accompanied by persuasive writing and reasoning, the students should feel efficacy in comparing their ideas with others.

- For *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* , 1978:

Liar's Poker jumps into the heart of the decade's acculturation of greed and reactionism. Spawned by the same type of reactionism that made the 1950s such a response to the New Deal of the 1930s, the 1970s spit out a generation so intent on denying their own causation, they sublimated the radicalization of the 1960s into a fixation on accumulation. Or they allowed the spirit of experimentation and freedom from the 1960s to run its now de-glamorized life, creating a wacky, marginalized New Ageism. Michael Lewis gives as good a

depiction of these times in his book as any I have uncovered. Its first person account of life as a Wall Street player shows the personalities evenhandedly; they are neither romanticized nor overly criticized - they just ... are. This style, like Goldman's, keeps the reading light, swift and enjoyable, especially for those students who have come to regard history as stale, dry, boring, lifeless, needless, and nauseous. Like the Goldman reading, use selections that you think would most capture your students' attentions. The section on the bond traders and the one on Lewis' own socialization into this world are particularly demonstrative of the lesson precisely because each refuses to make apologies for the era or its participants. Lewis simply shows *what it was like*. This is the kind of reading students need to experience to see how history as learning is life itself. For a more political view of the era, turn now to Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*. Much more specific than either of these other sources, this book goes after the folly of America's water policy. His chapter on Carter gives a great description on how liberalism got smashed, in the person of the Democratic president. This rather lengthy chapter chronicles the idealism Carter had at the outset of his tenure. Readers can then watch how the forces of retrenchant conservatism bled the pragmatic out of him. For a social view of the decade, Tom Wolfe makes a terrific source. (I recommend his collection of essays, *In Our Time*, but more inquisitive students could be led to Wolfe's journalism from *Rolling Stone*.) Use his words as a counterbalance to Lewis' financial mindset or Reisner's political criticisms, and to show how the creeping conformity caused people to go to extremes to fit their own personalities into this era. Choosing just those selections that allow you to show the students the best examples of seventies thinking (as you are the best arbiter of your own students' interests), get the students to compare the styles and messages of these three writers.

- "How do the events in one seem to represent the themes in the other?"
- "Which source is more opinion?"
- "Why?"
- "Does that make it any less valid?"
- "Why/why not?"

In order to focus them on understanding the people of this era try letting them, in groups if possible, create a short play about the era. Ask them to include financial, political and social issues in their story line. Now that they have been exposed to the idea of subtext, from your discussions of the 1958 version of the film, remind them to try, and stress try, to incorporate some message into the actions of their characters that show what they (the student writers) think about the era. This will not only give them a creative outlet, it will also show them that entertainment must have a comment on the subject it shows. And it will prepare them to pick out from the 1978 version of the film what its director/writer/producer was trying to say about the decade. Show them the film and ask them to answer the same types of questions you used for the first film. But now add a comparative selection. In preparation for this, ask your students to write a review from their two favorite movies. Have other students grade them, on persuasiveness, writing (grammar, spelling, etc.) and creativity (How enjoyable did you find this review?). Then, require them to bring in at least three different reviews of these same films, from newspapers, magazines, on-line, etc. Have them compare these professional reviews with their own.

- "What makes the reviews different?"
- "Which is most persuasive? Why?"
- "Which is the best (their definition)? Why?"
- "How would improve these reviews?"

Now get them to rewrite their reviews, based on the comments of their classmates and their exposure to these reviews. Finally, you can ask them to compare the films, empirically or specifically.

- "Which version makes its message most clearly? How?"
- "Why did the second film change?"
- "What effect did the changes have on its message?"
- "How do these changes show the changes in society? Be specific."

- For *The Body Snatchers*, 1993:

Before you begin this section, hold a discussion among your students about how they get their information, how they express their opinions and how they would compare their era with the two they had just studied. (Even start a working list of sources for you to refer to in order to grasp their take on the world.)

- "What are the similarities?"
- "What are the differences?"
- "How would you show the differences?"
- "What would you focus on to show how things have changed?"
- "Have the changes been for the good or the bad? Give examples."
- "How would you show this?"

Michel Foucault stressed the inability of one age to survey its own time (what he called its "archive"). Call it the philosophical-uncertainty principle. While I agree, it is still necessary to help students to understand that they must be thinking, critical beings if they want to take control of their lives. They may be cynical, apathetic and unmotivated, but they do interact with the forces of culture and society. Use this section of the curricula to engage students in a discussion (even if metacognitive, actually **especially** if metacognitive) about what it means to be a part of the world around them. But instead of bringing readings about the nature of being (and needlessly depressing the more attuned), require them to create for you a cross section of their lives. As a short-term research project, started best before you enter even the onset of this extended lesson, require that they begin compiling readings about their culture, their era that they think best depicts who they are, what it means to be them. Give them wide latitude to interpret their times as broadly, specifically and personally as they need. Have them create a journal, book or portfolio with a collection of five to ten articles, images, readings, music/television/movie reviews, art or whatever they feel adequately shows in the public sphere what it means to live in this age. Once these are due, have a museum-like display, as if your students are the curators of their era. Invite other classes, parents, teachers, friends, enemies, pets, whoever, to come and view the students' projects. And invite the guests to respond to particular exhibits with notes, messages or letters.

Afterward, get the students to share the responses they received. Hold a townhall discussion among your students about each other's work. Generate a general synopsis for what their views are on this era (reminding them that everyone who came to see their work, every classmate, everybody *alive*, is also part of their archive and has as valid an interpretation of their world as the students do), creating an ongoing list of adjectives, images or notions. Instead of bringing in outside readings, ask the students to choose several isolated images/views from their classmates to write about.

- "Why are there so many different views?"
- "What are some similarities?"
- "Do you agree with some views of one student but disagree with others of their views? Why is that?"

Show them the 1993 version, *The Body Snatchers*. And of course, repeat the writing exercises from earlier. But include questions that get them to comment on the archives they have created. Focus them on comparing the film's version of their lives with their versions of their lives. Students might be sick of the images or they might be emboldened by the varying texts the film exposes (although I am sure they will hate the term "subtext"). For a finale, ask students to write a comprehensive paper, not on how films comment on their era, but on how accurately films comment on their era. Force the students to be skeptical and critical and cynical. Use their strengths in a constructive way. Present the purpose of the paper as an analysis of the way society depicts history and how this depiction is consumed. They might understand, when forced to play historians, that history is simply myth, reconstituted from the personal opinions of the author to be accepted as truths by the readers (or viewers in this lesson).

While some students will still be reluctant to do much of this, precisely because they do not see what facts are to be learned (and thus without value, reason or use), your job is not to worry about these too frequent aberrations. The purpose of this curriculum unit is to give students a chance to analyze history not as a dry, dusty allotment of facts and dates, but as an ongoing critique of the era we live in, or lived in. Students' appreciation for this fact may not arrive until later, perhaps much, much later. But this lesson gives them a chance to see that everything around them is in some way a reaction to, and a dialogue with, the world. They too have that responsibility. And meanwhile, they got to watch a film for school. (How cool is that!)

SOURCES:

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Goldman, Eric. *The Crucial Decade - And After*. New York: Random House, 1960

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