

Abstract: This article argues for the use of international film in the World History classroom. In addition to an analysis of the literature on film and diversity, I offer my own critique and suggestions for the use of five films (*Mongol*, *Lemon Tree*, *A Separation*, *Black Girl*, and *Sankofa*) as examples.

Keywords: Film, multiculturalism, cinema, diversity, pedagogy

Short Title: Visualizing the World

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### Visualizing the World: Cinema's Use in the World History Survey

As world history instructors, we face two related challenges: engagement and student identification with cultures far remote from their own. The former is the burden of all instructors, particularly those working with underprepared students; the latter is a problem that can lead to student resistance to the material, or the substitution of simplistic stereotypes for actual consideration of the material. To respond to these challenges, I argue here for the use of international film in teaching World History. In addition to an analysis of the literature on film and diversity, I offer my own critique and suggestions for the use of five films (*Mongol*, *Lemon Tree*, *A Separation*, *Black Girl*, and *Sankofa*) as examples.

Seizing the opportunity presented by these films is important. Film is a powerful vehicle to stimulate the viewer's identification with the subject matter.<sup>1</sup> Film, particularly those outside of a "Hollywood" perspective, offers world history instructors a gateway through which to lead students to identify with distant cultures. In addition to serving as a bridge to discussing groups

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<sup>1</sup> See Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

distinct from one's own, film is particularly helpful for building skills of critical analysis. Finally, in an educational reality in which students suffer from skill deficiencies including reading speed and comprehension, film allows instructor outreach to both underprepared and prepared students.

Film has long been a part of education. The role of film as an educational tool can be traced back as early as 1932 newspaper reports of new visual media in colleges, where it was seen as an exciting new step in education.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the first major question in scholarship about history and film was not how to use film to teach but the extent to which film deserved scholarship in its own right. While John O'Connor's championship of film is to be applauded, I find here particularly useful the work of Robert Rosenstone, who has consistently demanded that film be taken seriously as a historical document. While O'Connor and many scholars have focused heavily on American media, Rosenstone's viewpoint additionally includes the value of global cinema as well.<sup>3</sup> His interest in film is sweeping because he argues that film is a kind of historical document we have not appreciated as such. Rosenstone argues that the act of historical interpretation means that there is no "one truth" and therefore objections to film as history based on inaccuracy alone cannot stand. "My own viewpoint...is that we always violate the past, even as we attempt to preserve its memory in whatever medium we use.... Yet this violation is inevitable, part of the price of our attempts at understanding the vanished world of our

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<sup>2</sup> An early discussion of film in the classroom, for example, comes to us from 1932: "200 Educators See Classroom Films: Two Scientific Talking Pictures, Prepared by the University of Chicago, Are Shown Here," *New York Times*, 15 November 1932, 12. Exposure to these kinds of films, the article implies, would lead to a dissemination of expert knowledge that would enhance education at all levels.

<sup>3</sup> As an example of this American media focus, see for example the excellent Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

forebears.”<sup>4</sup> Although his argument that film may be truthful if not accurate may be in sync with American comedian Stephen Colbert’s concept of “truthiness,” Rosenstone does not judge all ways of doing history as equal. “Film neither replaces written history nor supplements it. Film stands adjacent to written history, as it does to other forms of dealing with the past such as memory and the oral tradition.”<sup>5</sup>

A model-based discussion of film’s value within the classroom has been slower to emerge. As noted by the authors of the 2010 *Teaching History with Film*, this is spite of the fact that films are the most well-used educational tool next to textbooks.<sup>6</sup> This may be due to the perception that film has frequently been used in the classroom as a time-filler and a means to let the instructor relax. Renee Hobs’ critique of these habits, based on a six-year classroom study, led to scholarship outlining bad film pedagogical habits.<sup>7</sup> Hobs argues that simply flipping on a DVD is not enough for useful instruction. Instructors must supply context, require engaging written work, and create an environment of regular discussion of the film in order to break students from passive viewing habits.

Hobs is certainly not wrong in stating that film can be handled too simplistically in classes. As Joseph Gugler has noted in his work on African film, film can be especially convincing in the eyes of a student with little background on a given topic, and students lacking an appreciation of a different culture’s artistic styles or even budget needs could easily miss a

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<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/film on History* (Harlow, U.K.; New York: Pearson, 2012), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Rosenstone, “The Historical Film as Real History,” *Film Historia* vol. 5, no. 1(1995): 5-23.

<sup>6</sup> Alan S. Marcus, Scott Allan Metzger, Richard J. Paxton, Jeremy D. Stoddard, *Teaching History with Film: Strategies for Secondary Social Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2010). For a study demonstrating the importance of film in the classroom, see A.S. Marcus and J.D. Stoddard, “Tinsel Town As Teacher: Hollywood Film In the High School History Classroom,” *The History Teacher*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2007): 303-330.

<sup>7</sup> Renee Hobs, “Non-Optimal Uses of Film in the Classroom,” *Learning, Media and Technology* vol. 31 (2006): 35-50.

point.<sup>8</sup> As Peter Rollins pointed out, if we are not careful to include context, films may lead us easily to stereotypes like Orientalism.<sup>9</sup> Despite arguing for the value of film as a means of historical discussion, Robert Brent Toplin has conceded that film tends to lack a “big picture” analysis (if one may use those words regarding film) and may rely too heavily on the old trope of great person history.<sup>10</sup>

But despite its challenges, film should be embraced, not avoided, in the World History classroom. While film scholars have pointed out the weight of the numbers involved—even a “flop” Hollywood film, for example, will be seen by more than most major books are read—John O’Connor’s point is even more compelling:

However unfortunate, it appears likely that even well-educated Americans are learning most of their history from film or television. It is reasonable, therefore, that at least some of the classroom attention we normally devote to the critical reading of textbooks and journal articles should be extended to teaching people to be informed, critical viewers of historical film and television.<sup>11</sup>

O’Connor was speaking of American media consumed at home, the movie theater, and in the classroom. Similarly, almost ten years later, Peter Rollins has argued that Americans receive the majority of their information about the world and its history through motion pictures and modern

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<sup>8</sup> Josef Gugler, “African Films in the Classroom,” *African Studies Review* vol. 53, no. 3 (2010): 1-17.

<sup>9</sup> “Introduction,” by Peter C. Rollins, in Richard V Francaviglia, Jerome L Rodnitzky, and R. Rosenstone, *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film* (College Station: Published for the University of Texas at Arlington by Texas A & M University Press, 2007), p. 1-11.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, “In Defense of the Filmmakers,” in *Lights, Camera, History*, 113-135.

<sup>11</sup> John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflecting on the Importance of Film and Television for an Understanding of the Past,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 93, no. 5 (1988): 1200-1209. O’Connor discusses the mathematics of film viewership (using the example of *The Alamo* (2004), in “Murrow Confronts Mccarthy: Two Stages Of Historical Analysis For Film And Television,” in A.S. Marcus, ed.: *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History With Film* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007), p. 17-39.

digital media.<sup>12</sup> The reality to which both of these scholars speak is this: In today's world, our students are more immersed in media than ever before. They badly need the critical thinking skills to navigate that digital multimedia world. To thoughtfully use film is therefore to assist our students in the reality of today's information world.

This is not the only benefit of international cinema in the classroom. Film, particularly global cinema, empowers students to reach out empathetically to cultures distinct from their own, a step which Rosenstone describes as “giving a voice to the voiceless in non-Hollywood settings—a filmic equivalent of the New Social History.”<sup>13</sup> In the 2007 surveys of history teachers done by Marcus and Stoddard, instructors indicated developing empathy was their motive for showing the film at least 35% of the time. This figure was equal to their stated desire to provide engaging content.<sup>14</sup> In a World History setting, the power of film to rapidly unite the reader with another culture is especially important. Josef Gugler, for example, sees the use of African film in the classroom as a tool for overcoming negative stereotypes. First, he argues that film makes supposedly foreign material quickly accessible—an abrupt, but compelling, immersion in the material:

Films illuminate with images what text can barely convey, and they bring foreign settings alive in images, sound, characters, and story. They integrate in individual characters multiple aspects of politics, society, and culture that tend to be compartmentalized in academic writing, and they endow abstract concepts with readily accessible meaning.<sup>15</sup>

Second, Gugler notes that the perspective of the film-maker can potentially overcome preconceived stereotypes. In his courses, he notes that students are aware of the negative imagery

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<sup>12</sup> Rollins, in Rosenstone, *Lights, Camera, History*.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus and Stoddard.

<sup>15</sup> Gugler, 2.

surrounding Africa and the Middle East in American/European cinema; he therefore uses the works of African filmmakers as an antidote to these standing beliefs.

Film can therefore offer a way around standing stereotypes, a portal into a discussion of a different culture. This can both invigorate class discussion for the whole and, in cases where the film topic connects with the backgrounds of students in the class, can provide valuable affirmation of their backgrounds. Geneva Gay, a professor of education at the University of Washington-Seattle, has written extensively on the need for “culturally relevant curriculum content.” Her work argues just these points:

In some instances, this means validating their personal experiences and cultural heritages; in others, it means teaching content entirely new to ethnically and culturally diverse students but in ways that make it easy for them to comprehend.<sup>16</sup>

Gay argues, based on studies like that of L.K.Y. Chun-Hoon’s analysis of Asian-American student responses to popular textbooks, that mainstream textbooks have marginalized and stereotyped the experience of American students whose backgrounds are “ethnic...and immigrant groups of color.”<sup>17</sup> The push to standardization has further narrowed the window for considering diversity of experience, according to Gay. This is problematic for education, because research indicates multicultural programming strongly supports student achievement and attitude toward education. During one four-year study of a multicultural curriculum in Michigan classrooms, kindergarten through eighth grade, students reported more interest in reading, more positive attitudes about reading and writing, improvement in confidence, and greater appreciation of others’ cultures.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, 173. See also B.J. Diamond and M.A. Moore, *Multicultural Literacy: Mirroring the Reality of the Classroom* (New York: Longman, 1995).

For a World History classroom, film therefore makes sense; it supports our mission of understanding global diversity. As an educator, however, there are other benefits of using film. As noted in the Michigan study, research suggests that film helps to support student literacy. This is especially significant given student problems with reading comprehension, a problem that looms over the US at both the high school and university levels.<sup>19</sup> Given the fundamental importance of literacy to basic education, it is therefore not a surprise to see film's potential for developing literacy first explored in middle and high school classrooms.<sup>20</sup> Michael Lipliner, an educator at Bayside High School in New York, has actively appealed to the academic community to utilize what he calls "newer paradigms of literacy," as we make meaning today with more than just words. In his own microstudy of tenth grade students labeled "at risk" by the New York Department of Education, Lipliner showed how using film helped students to access the meaning in texts they did not understand. In one example, Lipliner discussed his use of writing assignments based on a television production, *Escape from Sobibor*, in combination with a class reading of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Students were initially unable to grasp the significance of the division of the sexes at the start of *Night*, until a fellow classmate identified a similar scene in *Escape*. Working with both media, Lipliner found the students showed a much stronger ability to infer and predict, skills required as part of their curriculum, than they did when working with

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<sup>19</sup> In 2013, only 64% of all students taking the ACT met the English benchmark score of 18. Just 26% met the standard across all four categories of the test. See ACT, "The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2013," accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr13/readiness1.html>. See also, Tamar Lewin, "Many Going to College Are Not Ready, Report Says," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2005, sec. Education, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/17/education/17scores.html>.

<sup>20</sup> As previously discussed, studies of film at the university level, particularly in the area of History, have revolved chiefly around theory and discipline than pedagogical impact.

*Night* alone.<sup>21</sup> What was most exciting in Lipliner's study was the impact the dual media of film and text had on students likely to struggle in their reading ability. Rather than shutting down and isolating themselves in the course, they were more confident in reading and more participatory in the classroom.<sup>22</sup> Adam Woelders finds film ideal for helping students who are still developing the skills to fully understand historical documents on their own.<sup>23</sup> Paul Sommer has come to a similar conclusion about film in the English high school classroom. He incorporated the film, *The Matrix*, in his class, as an effort to teach student skills of analysis. As he compared student writing on different media (novels, poetry, non-fiction, the film, and so on), he noted that students were much more enthusiastic in their analysis of the film and much more confident in it. Student work on film was of a better quality, "noticeably more complex," Sommer claims, than their work on print media; he suggests this was due to their better grasp of the material and their stronger sense of confidence in approaching it.<sup>24</sup>

Sommer's conclusion is therefore of significance for those teaching students who struggle with written material: Film analysis can be used as a model to improve analysis of written work. Film can be, as Lipliner shows, useful in enriching understanding of a related text as well. As we have seen, film use as a whole can invigorate a classroom, increase levels of engagement, and develop a positive attitude toward diversity, education, and reading/writing as a

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Lipliner, "Lights, Camera, Lesson: Teaching Literacy through Film," *E-Learning and Digital Media* vol. 8, no. 4 (2011): 375-396.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>23</sup> Adam Woelders, "'It Makes You Think More When You Watch Things': Scaffolding for Historical Inquiry Using Film in the Middle School Classroom," *The Social Studies* vol. 98, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 145-152. Woelders recommends the use of a scaffolding technique, known as a Know/Wonder/Learn chart, to make the film a thoughtful in-class exercise.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Sommer, "Using Film in the English Classroom: Why and How," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* vol. 44, no. 5 (2001): 485-487.

whole. While film is not necessarily a vehicle focused on accuracy, it can evoke an emotional response that words alone cannot access, and its impact should not be ignored.<sup>25</sup>

For these reasons, I consider film an essential tool in my World History classroom, which is set in a two-year open access institution. To strengthen my ability, as a historian trained as a Europeanist, to offer truly global cinema to my students, I have engaged on a personal development project, which I have affectionately labeled, “The History Movie of the Week.” Over the last two years, I have constructed a personal database of over one hundred and fifty films; this is the result of a weekly labor of viewing at least one film per week and constructing an assignment based on that piece.<sup>26</sup> Of the films I have discovered in my “History Movie of the Week” project, I have selected five to discuss their use in my World History courses: *Mongol* (Russia), *Lemon Tree* (Israel), *A Separation* (Iran), *Black Girl* (Senegal), and *Sankofa* (Burkina/Ghana/US). I selected these five to give a snapshot of how pushing one’s boundaries can result in real gems for classroom use.

The first of these films is set in Asia. Among other honors, *Mongol* was a 2008 Academy Award nominee for Best Foreign Language film. Director Sergei Bodrov’s film may be considered a Russian and Mongolian joint production. It is a biopic of the youth and ascendance to power of Temudjin, later Genghis Khan. From the opening scenes, the film develops the idea

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<sup>25</sup> Toplin tells a moving story of a guard at a Swiss bank who reported pre-WWII accounts of Jews were set to be destroyed. The guard stated that he felt compelled to act on this information after watching the film *Schindler’s List*, 118.

<sup>26</sup> Those who consider film and history will no doubt have heard of the outstanding website, FilmStory.org, by Mnemonic Productions. FilmStory sorts films by location and eras—an incredibly useful tool for an instructor of World History. When I began my own research in films for the classroom, I found FilmStory’s database relied too heavily on American and pop-culture films for my needs. For that reason, I avoided relying on the site. FilmStory has developed significantly since its founding, however, with the addition of hundreds of foreign-language films, source links, and brief critical essays. I would now strongly suggest instructors utilize it for film options.

that Temudjin rose from a society whose potential strength was ruined by infighting. We see, for example, Temudjin from childhood witnessing brutal feuds on the steppe. These feuds lead to the destruction of Temudjin's home and the loss of his father. We see as well the future Khan's early insistence on loyalty; this is demonstrated repeatedly by his quest to marry and return to his fiancée from childhood. (Even when it is clear that Temudjin's wife has been raped and given birth to another man's child, Temudjin is insistent that she is his wife and the child is his.) We witness as well the evolution of Temudjin's spirituality, moving from fearing nature to embracing it. All of these aspects of his character come together in a series of battle sequences leading to Temudjin's ultimate ascendance as Genghis Khan.

For two years now, this film has proven a favorite of my students. While they were possibly drawn in by the heavy action-packed sequences—this film deserves its R rating for violence—the students did not miss the major points of the film, the evolution of Genghis Khan. They recognized that the steppe political system became infinitely stronger when the clans united. They saw as well the repeated insistence on loyalty and accountability in Temudjin's vision of Mongol society. (As an example of this, students frequently cited the imposition of a death sentence on men who turned against their khan to support Temudjin. Students found this an eye-opening testimonial to Temjudin's commitment to the idea of law.) Students also, interestingly, picked up on the conflict between settled societies and the nomads, as demonstrated by Temudjin's enslavement and imprisonment in the Tangut state. The only issue students had with the film with its end point: Several expressed frustration that the film stopped at Temudjin's ascendancy to power on the steppe, and did not carry on with the story of his full conquests.

But that script choice is directly why *Mongol* is so useful for class purposes. In *Mongol*, the emphasis is on what had been before, and the ways in which Temudjin would approach

making changes to Mongolian society to build unity. Extensive time is given to the audience to see the life of the Mongols, their tribal relationships, their values.<sup>27</sup> Given most students have little visual references of nomadic society, these elements are highly useful when discussing nomadic life later in the term.<sup>28</sup>

The essay question I give my students is therefore based on this idea of explaining the origins of Genghis Khan's vision: According to the film, in what ways did Genghis Khan change the Mongols, to allow for their ultimate domination of Eurasia? Students can also utilize what we know of the Yassa to frame this question and ask what, according to the film, young Temudjin found problematic in Mongol society. For textual grounding, they may consult primary sources on this era, including selections from *The Secret History of the Mongols* (an anonymous work that provides a Mongolian perspective on the period) and the works of critics at court, including Persian historian Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini and a Daoist wise man, Changchun. While the film showcases an extremely hard but heroic Genghis Khan, these commentators' views may be used to temper the positivity of Bodrov's depiction.

While envisioning the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, *Mongol* is decidedly modern. Modern voices as well dominate two stories from the Middle East, *Lemon Tree* (Israel) and *A Separation* (Iran).

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<sup>27</sup> The late film critic Roger Ebert criticized the film as not sufficiently showcasing Mongol heritage, arguing that the nine-hour documentary *Taiga* (1995, directed by Ulrike Ottinger) is superior. Ebert misses the mark, however, by equating two stories of Mongolian life without respect for difference in time, or even difference in goal. *Mongol* is a drama about the rise to power of Genghis Khan; *Taiga* is not. See Ebert's review online, at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mongol-2008>.

<sup>28</sup> The film may be useful beyond its time period as well. The main actor in *Mongol* is a Japanese man. Because of his casting and concerns about depiction of the Mongols, Mongolia declined to allow filming in its territory. Discussing this allows students to consider different perspectives in Asia on Genghis Khan's legacy.

Of the two, *Lemon Tree* has received lesser attention. I am currently preparing for its use in my classes. *Lemon Tree*, a 2008 nominee for the European Film Award for Best Actress and Best Screenwriter, is a 106-minute story directed and co-written by Eran Riklis.

To the great satisfaction of students, one can indeed say this is based on a real-life story. Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz had a home on the edge of the occupied territories. Claiming security reasons, he had the olive trees surrounding the house cut down. The neighboring Palestinian family then took Mofaz to court for the loss of their orchard.<sup>29</sup> While a very personal encounter, the destruction in the name of security echoed policies of demolition of border homes supported by Mofaz.<sup>30</sup> The film runs with this connection, spinning a story of a widow's encounters with the Israeli security forces. The persistence of the widow, Salma Zidane, in an unsympathetic justice system reveals her to be a sympathetic figure, while all around her stand those who would use the lemon tree battle for propaganda. The film reveals the political grandstanding surrounding even the smallest, simplest gestures of humanity. Interestingly, it also emphasizes that the Palestine/Israel problem is not a simple binary. Riklis' film shows the Defense Minister's wife, Mira Navon, increasingly supportive of Salma's lemon tree orchard. Indeed, by the point that by the end of the film it is suggested that she is leaving her husband over this issue. The movie clearly suggests part of the blame for the troubles in this region lies in entrenched interests and bureaucratic machinery that have damaged basic human relationships.

*Lemon Tree* is certainly a fictionalized story. But as one can see, we can still use it to provide student engagement and encourage critical thinking. In my notes on *Lemon Tree*, I

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<sup>29</sup> "Widow's Trees Threaten Security," *Al-Jazeera English*, February 16, 2005, accessed June 25, 2013, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/02/20084914345338584.html>

<sup>30</sup> See for example the Human Rights Watch report, "Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip," October 18 2004, accessed June 25 2013, at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/10/17/razing-rafah-0>.

prompt students to first analyze the film as the creative expression of Eran Riklis. What is this Israeli director's opinion of the relationship between the Israeli government and the Palestinians? Who are the "bad guys" or "the good guys," in his vision? What are their motives? These questions ask the students to take on the story of the lemon tree orchard from multiple perspectives and to realize that Riklis has given all of the officials in the film—representing both sides—distinct character failures. In addition, from a feminist perspective, I ask the students what the use of female characters in the film suggests, as the central figure, Salma, and the Defense Minister's wife, Mira Navon, are clearly the faces of the film. (This is so clear that they are the only performers shown in the promotional art for the film.) To take all of this further, students can read newspaper articles on the real olive tree orchard battle and even the border housing demolitions that inspired the film, and ask the same questions. While students will likely not walk away from the project with a clean-cut answer of good/evil, inviting complexity by way of a seemingly simple film is exactly the goal of the project.

In watching *Lemon Tree*, students will be struck by how common-place the lives depicted seem to be. Similarly, *A Separation* also erodes stereotypes. I played this film for three sections (approximately seventy-five students) and the response was extremely encouraging. If one approaches film use as a way of creating empathy, this film certainly acts in this fashion; more than one student, a child of divorce like one of the leads in the film, told me the film felt painfully true to them.

This painfully true experience, *A Separation*, is a 2011 feature film from Iran, written and directed by Asghar Farhadi. It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. The plot revolves around a couple, Nader and Simin. Simin, the mother, would like to leave Iran with their young daughter Terme; when asked why, she strongly implies her objection to the limitations

impressed on women there. Nader, Simin's husband, refuses to go, because his father is in the grip of Alzheimer's and needs assistance. Nader refuses permission for Simin to leave Iran with their daughter, and this sets the stage for the film. As Simin moves in with her parents, Nader hires the young and very devout Razieh to care for his father. The physical decline of Nader's father, Razieh's fragile health, and her highly temperamental and aggressive husband, combine to create a tragedy in which no character is a clear-cut villain or hero. By the end of the film, a judge asks Termeh which parent she wishes as her guardian—to leave the country with her mother, or stay with her father—and in many ways, it is the director himself asking which vision of Iran is right.

To that end, I ask students confronted with this film to write a paragraph based on the three lead adults in the film, to state their motives and their vision of what life in Iran should be like. I then ask the students to step back further and predict, based on the writer/director's depiction of those options, Termeh's final choice. From there, I ask students to extrapolate just a bit more—what does Farhadi's film tell us about this one Iranian writer/director's assessment of modern Iran?

My students were originally stymied by that set of directions. With prompting, though, students began to delve further. For example, almost every paper I received remarked that the film included a criticism of women's position in Iran, as expressed by Simin. Students picked up quickly on the divergence of beliefs in women's roles. Many of them noted that while Termeh and her mother typically covered their hair, they wore Western fashions. Students noted that Simin drove, had a job, and clearly felt enabled to go before the courts for her divorce. Students also spotted that Nader and Simin were both highly encouraging of Termeh's education.

In contrast, students pointed out Razieh's anxiety over gender roles, fearing desperately to tell her husband that she had been alone with, let alone had washed, an elderly man. (She even had to call her imam to ask if it was a sin to wash a man who had soiled himself.) Her worries are so obvious that her pre-school daughter even assures Razieh that she "won't tell" her father about that act of kindness.

*A Separation* raises issues of religion and gender. It also touches on issues surrounding social class as well. The best students were able to see that the religious divide between the families of Simin and Razieh masked a fundamental class divide. They pointed out that Simin and Nader had cars and a comfortable apartment, with signs of modest wealth. In comparison, Razieh and her husband Hojjat are clearly lower-income. Razieh's only transportation is on the bus, even though it is a lengthy ride to Nader's. Despite working, despite suffering health problems, Razieh apparently cannot afford daycare for her little daughter, who is always in Razieh's company. Meanwhile, her husband Hojjat has been laid off his work and the family must struggle on whatever income they can.

*A Separation* prepares students for a more nuanced discussion of Iran and the Middle Eastern countries as a whole, showing them a diversity of lifestyle and belief in a way that does not encourage contemporary stereotypes. While it does not address a distinctly historical topic, like *Mongol*, and it does not have a clear application to modern politics, like *Lemon Tree*, *A Separation* is a powerful tool for opening the door to a more realistic, more diverse discussion of Middle Eastern life. It also spurs increased class engagement, as students, questioning me

eagerly about how the film could have been filmed in Iran, demonstrated significantly more interest in the realities of modern Iran than one would otherwise have expected.<sup>31</sup>

For the Middle East, the films discussed, *Lemon Tree* and *A Separation*, are very much about the modern day. For Africa, the two films I have selected, *Black Girl* and *Sankofa*, take us into the past. *Black Girl* (1966) is a feature from Senegal, written and directed by the outstanding novelist/film-maker Ousmane Sembène. The film's French title is more literally "The Black Girl of—", implying that the film poses a question of location and identity. This is true, for the entire hour-long drama revolves around where the central character, Diouana, fits. In this sense, the film echoes the major themes of its scriptwriter/director, for Sembène is considered the founder of postcolonial African cinema.<sup>32</sup>

Diouana is from Dakar, Senegal, working as a nanny for a French couple. Upon Senegal's independence (1960), her employers retreat to France, on the Riviera, and take Diouana with them. The first full-length film from Senegal is therefore a discussion of post-colonialism and racism. Its importance in the history of film, and African film as a subset, is enormous. As Rachel Langford has summed up, *Black Girl*, arriving as the first sub-Saharan African film, may be "seen to be a most significant film in the development of post-colonial cinema in Africa, for it marks a point of decisive change in the relationship of images between

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<sup>31</sup> To expand upon the film, I would recommend use of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. Many World History students are familiar with the original *Persepolis*, but Satrapi's second book specifically speaks to issues similar to *A Separation*: religious cultures, cosmopolitanism, and social class. Students may also find instructive reading the lyrics of Salome MC, an Iranian female rap artist, or interviews with director Farhadi on how he made this film in Iran.

<sup>32</sup> Martha P. Nochimson, *World on Film: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011). See chapter 10, "Senegal: Ousmane Sembène, Postcolonial Pioneer," 354-377.

Africa and the West.”<sup>33</sup>

That said, *Black Girl* is not necessarily an easy film to discuss in class. As Roberta Di Carmine has discussed, it lacks a traditional Western story-telling structure.<sup>34</sup> The majority of the heroine’s words in the film come in voice-over.<sup>35</sup> In addition, *Black Girl* is not about a specific incident we could discuss in class as “historical”; this is not like *Battle of Algiers*, although the film’s discussion of ongoing systems of oppression would make it a good companion for Gillo Pontecorvo’s epic. Nonetheless, even more so than *A Separation*, *Black Girl* uses an intimate drama to make larger political points.

These points about the endurance of the colonial system come through clearly in *Black Girl*. In flashback, we see Diouna’s excitement in going to France; she is dressed like a European woman and she is thinking about how she will be free to go wherever she wanted, to a place so rich that there are clothes for everyone. But in France, where Diouna had expected freedom and glamor, she receives a rude awakening. The terms of Diouna’s employment have changed, with the family now demanding she act as maid as well as nanny. Her physical freedom is restricted; she is forbidden to leave the house except for shopping for the household, she is granted no salary with which to escape, and even her belongings are denied her. Miserable, made to play out a stereotype, Diouna is tragically unable to reach out for help. Her employers read what they claim are her mother’s letters to her and dictate their own responses.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Rachel Langford, “Black and White in Black and White Identity and Cinematography in Ousmane Sembène’s *La Noire de.../Black Girl* (1966),” *Studies in French Cinema*, 1, vol. 1 (2001): 13-22. See also Marsha Landy, “Politics and Style in *Black Girl*,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 27, July 1982, pp. 23-25.

<sup>34</sup> Martha P. Nochimson, *World on Film: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Langford argues, quite persuasively, that the film in many ways inverts colonialist tropes: First, upending the traditional travelogue of the colonials, and then, using silence as a way of giving people a voice. See Langford, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Throughout the film, the trappings of colonialism are evident. Diouna ultimately describes herself as a “slave” of her French family, and her forced work, isolation, lack of ownership of her belongings or her body, all testify to the truth of her words. I therefore ask my students to evaluate the film as an expression of the director’s optimism about post-colonial relations. A question to trigger discussion is why Diouna’s French family changed so much when they moved home. Why did their expectations, especially their desire to control Diouna, shift so much when they were back in France? Why are they unable to speak with one another? What challenge does this suggest about making a positive relationship between former metropolises and their former colonies? One can pick up Diouna’s question, “Why am I here?” and apply it to the colonial relationship itself: What *was* the nature of post-colonial relationships?

*Black Girl* is a meditation on the post-colonial relationship between Senegal and France, hinting at underlying problems of economy, culture, gender, and power. It could be easily be paired with short segments of *Battle of Algiers*, as noted, or excerpts from Fanon’s *Black Skins: White Masks*, to discuss systems of oppression and resistance.<sup>37</sup> Another work that raises questions about the colonial past and Africa is *Sankofa*. *Sankofa*, probably even more than *Black Girl*, is familiar to those who study African cinema and African-American culture. *Sankofa* is a 1993 drama directed and written by Haile Gerima. The film, a nominee for Germany’s Golden Berlin Bear Award, runs just over two hours and it was the work of a US/Ghana production team. More than just a story of slavery, *Sankofa* speaks to the memory of slavery and a broader cultural reluctance to address this past.

The story of this film revolves around a standard plot device of stepping back in time. We start the film with the reveal of a drummer, Sankofa, at the site of the Cape Coast Castle in

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<sup>37</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

today's Ghana. His name is the film's title, a term used by a Ghana people to indicate a reclaiming of the past as one moves into the future.<sup>38</sup> The film then tells us that the drummer is "drumming home" the spirits of Africans lost to the slavery-wrought diaspora. Against this sober note, we see an African-American fashion model, Mona. Mona is unaware of the painful history of the former Portuguese slave station. The drummer's efforts to scold her for disrespect fail, and he is left to curse her to "go back to her source." Wandering around the castle, she finds herself stepping into the past, removed from all memories of her twentieth century life. Now called Shola, she experiences the violence of slavery first-hand, observing beatings, branding, her own rape, arson, and threats of murder. By the conclusion of the film, she is moved forward, shaken, into modernity, where she must bring together her knowledge of the slaves' suffering with her contemporary world.

*Sankofa* is about memory, and therefore the chief question I ask my students addresses that: If "sankofa" means to retrieve something from the past, what does the director/writer, an Ethiopian-American, mean for us to retrieve from the history of Atlantic African slavery? The film has been described by Michael Martin as a challenge to social malaise, and it certainly seeks to do so.<sup>39</sup> By putting this question to my students, I hope to ask them to consider their own areas of indifference. In addition, I ask about the relations depicted in the film, asking students to define family in the slave plantation, and why they arrived at that conclusion. The film offers us many examples of family, including Nunu, the symbolic mother of the slaves and the keeper of African traditions, and Joe, a mulatto slave who exists in a social limbo between the other slaves

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<sup>38</sup> This matches with Gerima's claim that his work was an attempt to rewrite history to incorporate the stories of those missing from it. Pamela Woolford, "Filming Slavery: A Conversation with Haile Gerima," *Transition* 64 (New Series 1994): 90-104.

<sup>39</sup> Michael T. Martin, "Podium for the Truth? Reading Slavery and the Neocolonial Project in the Historical Film: *Queimada! (Burn!)* and *Sankofa* in Counterpoint," *Third Text* vol. 23, issue 6 (November 2009): 717-731.

and the world of the whites. Religion may also be used as a means to define family here, for Father Raphael advocates for Joe to fully embrace white culture, which included a rejection of the very African faith his mother had upheld. These lines of belonging are drawn with absolutism, without a possibility of compromise: Joe, as head man, is required to mete out physical punishment to slaves, and Father Raphael tells Joe that African faith is “devil-worship.” The connection between these sides—the faith of the planters and the head man—is made apparent in a final whipping scene, in which Father Raphael, Joe, and the foreman Master James all take turns whipping Shola.

These are broad points that invite connection with primary sources on slave lives around the world. That said, another point one may raise in teaching this film is the varying systems of slavery in the Atlantic. As one critic has pointed out, *Sankofa* is deliberately vague about the location of its Lafayette plantation, depicting a place where the plants and crop, including sugarcane, suggest the Caribbean, while the emphasis on Creole culture hints at Louisiana, which was not rooted in the sugar economy.<sup>40</sup> That vagueness includes time: *Sankofa* slides between “the past” and “the present,” but does not give us a strong sense of how slavery changed over time. Finally, *Sankofa*, paired with slave testimony, may be used to emphasize the constant resistance of those enslaved. In the film we see slaves run away, pull weapons on their overlords, plot to rescue fellow slaves, plot rebellion, and even threaten to kill their master. We see as well Shola’s love Shango as he struggles in the stocks, swearing vengeance on the plantation system; the portrait of the plantation system, according to Gerima, is one that includes active resistance.

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<sup>40</sup> Sylvie Kande, “Look Homeward, Angel: Maroons And Mulattos In Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*,” *Research in African Literatures* 29, 2 (summer 1998): 128-146.

For all of these reasons, as well as to speak to the issue of memories of the slave past, readings from *Twelve Years a Slave* would also be an appropriate to be paired with *Sankofa*.<sup>41</sup>

*Sankofa* uses film to make an argument for returning to the past and considering viewpoints which we, like Mona, have ignored. The use of foreign-language or minority films in the World History classroom can help us to achieve that goal by asking us to identify with those who are not the majority American culture. Film allows our students a faster grip on broader issues, invites their further consideration of these problems, and encourages them to empathize with those they think different from them. This is particularly important in open-access introductory classrooms, where a diversity of students, starting from a range of educational backgrounds, must attempt to seek a common educational ground in the midst of a fast-paced survey. From my own personal development project, I propose to you five films, *Mongol*, *Lemon Tree*, *A Separation*, *Black Girl*, and *Sankofa*, that can enrich our classrooms. The thoughtful use of film in the World History classroom, as discussed, can unlock better critical thinking skills and a stronger appreciation of global diversity. To do this, as I have suggested with my own story, we must start with ourselves as instructors and with the expansion of our own boundaries.

### Filmography

*A Separation (Jodaeiye Nader az Simin)*. Directed by Asghar Farhadi. 2011. Culver City, California: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

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<sup>41</sup> One could also bring in the extensive commentaries surrounding 2014 Academy Award winning film *Twelve Years a Slave*. Screenwriter John Ridley and director Steve McQueen have both spoken openly of the film as a reclaiming of the violence of the slave past. See as an example “Steve McQueen: My Hidden Shame,” by Decca Aitkenhead, *The Guardian*, January 3, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/04/steve-mcqueen-my-painful-childhood-shame>.

*Black Girl. La Noir de [...]* Directed by Ousmane Sembène. 1966. New York, New York: New Yorker Films, 2005. DVD.

*Lemon Tree. Etz Limon.* Directed by Eran Riklis. 2008. Orland Park, Illinois: MPI Home Video, 2009. DVD.

*Mongol: The Rise of Genghis Khan.* Directed by Sergei Bodrov. 2007. Los Angeles, California: New Line Home Studio, 2008. DVD.

*Sankofa.* Directed by Haile Gerima. 1993. Washington, DC: Myphedud Films, Inc., 2006. DVD.

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