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Monochrome Films in the Classroom

- An Investigation of Black-and-white Films in Swedish Junior High Schools

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Abstract

The focus of this essay is to investigate if old monochrome films can be beneficial to use in the classroom. The aim is to research how (if at all) old monochrome films can affect students' possibilities of learning from film. To investigate this matter, three fields will be of interest: First, how students respond to films according to ideas of identity; secondly, how films teach students about history; third and finally, qualities of monochrome films and how students might understand and relate to them. The findings in this essay suggest that old monochrome films are viable to use in the classroom, as they can teach students about history and previous cultures by being created in history themselves. The essay also suggests that old black-and-white films and newer films are quite similar, suggesting that monochrome films are just as adequate material to use in the classroom as newer films.

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Introduction

In the Swedish school system of today, film is an important and acknowledged method for teaching in the classroom. Due to new technical opportunities that are available, film has managed to make its way into the classroom more frequently and has therefore, as a consequence, grown as a respected tool for education and learning. Bruce Clemens and Curt Hamakawa observe this too in their article “Classroom as Cinema” as they state that “video and digital playback equipment has further enhanced the capability of educators to introduce film into the curriculum” (561). Butler et al. also confirm this in their article “Using Popular Films to Enhance Classroom Learning”, where they state that film at first was acknowledged as undiligent teaching, but now is used as instructional assistance in the classroom (1161). Furthermore, Bo Lundahl writes in his book *Engelsk Språkdidaktik* that “[m]ost adolescents get more stories from television, film and computer games than from newspapers and books. Film is therefore a given tool for the teaching of English” (my translation, 471).

Films’ presence and importance in the classroom have grown, and these are two important reasons as to why this essay has been written. The main focus of the essay is limited to a certain aspect of film in the classroom, namely the use of old monochrome films¹ in that setting. The purpose of this essay is to investigate if there could be any benefits of using black-and-white films in the classroom of the English subject for students in grades seven to nine in Swedish Junior High Schools. Moreover, the essay will strive to yield didactic tools and suggestions for using monochrome films in the classroom. To investigate the essay’s purpose, theories on how students respond differently to film, so-called reception theory, how film teaches students about history, and how students might perceive films in black-and-white differently from films in color will be used. The essay has been especially motivated due to the fact that there is no previous research on this matter and because

¹ Henceforth in the essay the word “old” will be removed, except where it is absolutely needed, and instead the terms “black-and-white films” or “monochrome films” will be used. It is still old black-and-white films which are being addressed, though. The word “old” covers any monochrome film made up until 1960.

monochrome films are rarely used in the classroom, which will be further elaborated in the next section. Additionally, three research questions have been formulated in relation to the essay's purpose:

- What can black-and-white films contribute in the classroom which films in color cannot?
- Can ideas on teaching history with film motivate usage of black-and-white films in the classroom?
- Do theories of reception hinder black-and-white films' usage in the classroom?

To investigate the essay's main focus and to answer the research questions, two films will be analyzed and compared to each other: Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and Robert Zemecki's *Forrest Gump* (1994). These two films were chosen because they both account for history in some way, and because one of them, *Forrest Gump*, is often used in schools, whereas the other, *It's a Wonderful life*, is not. It should be noted that since this essay is focused on investigating the usage of black-and-white films in the classroom, *It's a Wonderful Life* is the film which will primarily be focused, since monochrome films are the focus of the essay, whereas the analysis of *Forrest Gump* will serve as a method for trying to measure to which extent *It's a Wonderful Life* is viable to use in the classroom by comparing their analyses. The various qualities mentioned above, whether they are old or new, black-and-white or in color, often used in schools or not, as well as how students might respond to the two films according to reception studies and how they teach students about history, will all be important aspects later when the films are analyzed.

In addition to the two films, various theoretical ideas regarding film, reception, history and didactics will be applied to help understand and investigate the research field of the essay.

The first section will elaborate on films' role in the classroom, as well as account for previous research on the matter. The following section will describe ideas behind *reception theory*, ideas which will be of interest when investigating how we interpret films and if there is any difference between films in color and monochrome films. Reception theory, in short, deals with how the spectator is the central producer when interpreting a film, not the director or the work behind creating the film. The theory will be used to see if black-and-white films can evoke certain responses from its spectators which films in color cannot. It should be noted that reception theory does not only concern film, but literature as well. However, since film is the focus of this essay, that is the aspect of reception theory that will be of interest.

The next section will investigate how film can be used to teach history. This section will describe how film can teach students about culture and history, and how films' cultural contexts affect their message. However, it will also be noted that the usage of film to teach history does not come without problems. Such problems could be, for example, the fact that films which are based on portraying historical events, or which are assumed to be historically correct, sometimes might not be portraying history correctly.

Furthermore, in the final part of the theoretical section, ideas on black-and-white films will be accounted for. In this section, qualities which the monochrome film has will be explained, as well as possible reasons as to why some people dislike black-and-white films whereas others appreciate them.

These are the theoretical parts of the essay. After they have been accounted for there will be an analysis. In this section, *Forrest Gump* and *It's a Wonderful Life* will be analyzed and compared to each other by using the theories and ideas established in the theoretical section. By doing so it will be possible to investigate if black-and-white films could be useful in the classroom. The final section of the essay is the conclusion. This section will contain a

summary of the results which were found in the analysis as well as suggestions for further research based on the study.

Film in the classroom and previous research

As can be seen in the first paragraph, the usage of film in the classroom is well-recognized. This is also noted in Nola Kortner Aïex's article "Mass Media Use in the Classroom", where one can read that teachers frequently use film because films "help explore cultural context, may be integrated easily to the curriculum, are entertaining, and allow flexibility of materials and teaching techniques" (2). Furthermore, Skolverket² and the Swedish Film Institute have released a publication called "Film for Joy and Learning" (my own translation). In this publication one can read why film is such an important part of education. For example, Skolverket and the Swedish Film Institute state that "Film can make the past come to life, mirror the time we live in and create identification between people from different countries, cultures and circumstances of life" (my own translation, 13). Arguably, these are great topics for students in grades seven to nine to discuss and think about.

Moreover, Skolverket has established so-called steering documents. These documents describe the aims of the Swedish school system and how these aims can and should be achieved. A vital part of the steering documents are the syllabuses, which are documents which control what the various subjects should consist of and what the students are supposed to learn from them. By reading the syllabuses one gets a further insight to the possible advantages of using film in the classroom. Looking at the syllabus for English grades seven to nine, which are the grades this essay has been limited to, one can, for example, read that the students should be able to "understand and interpret the contents of spoken English and in different kinds of texts" (Skolverket 32). This example shows one possible important use of film in the classroom, since film is considered a text and because the teacher can choose a film in which they speak English. In the syllabus for English grades 7-9 one can furthermore read that the students should come in contact with "spoken English with some regional and

² The Swedish state authority which oversees the Swedish school system.

social variants” (Skolverket 34). This aspect could easily be covered by showing a film where a distinct type of English is spoken. These are two examples which highlight the possibilities of using film in the classroom, while taking the steering documents into consideration.

By now we have established the importance of film in the classroom and that teachers are willing to incorporate film in their teaching. What has not been established, though, is *how* teachers use film in the classroom. As one might understand, the complexity of film as a phenomenon in the classroom has increased due to the high amounts of exposure it has received in that setting. Not so much for film critics or others integrated within the field of film perhaps, but for teachers. In an article called “Non-Optimal Uses of Video in the Classroom”, Renee Hobbs claims that teachers often use film as a method for other purposes than for learning. For example, she states how teachers use film as a break from the regular teaching, to remunerate students and to make them quiet (35). Unfortunately, in my own experience of working as a teacher, which will have to do since there is no previous research on how Swedish teachers use film, the problem of teachers using film for other purposes than for learning is common at Swedish schools too. Students often approach the usage of film in the classroom as a moment for them to not having to do anything, or simply to enjoy a good film. Jeremy Harmer supports this when he, in the book *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, writes that “students are used to watching film at home – and may therefore associate it with relaxation” (308). As a teacher it might be difficult to change students’ perspectives on this, so instead of doing so you succumb to the students. The same could be accounted for when the teacher chooses which film to use. If the teacher uses a film with the purpose of filling the time or to reward the students, then one could argue that the choice of film is not of significance. Other times teachers simply let the students decide which film to use, or turn to the other teachers at the school to hear which films they use and then use the same. By choosing film in accordance with this formula, one will always end up with films

that the students have already seen or are familiar with; you will never choose an old film or a film in black-and-white. This problem of choosing which film to use is further verified by taking into consideration what Alan Marcus and Jeremy Stoddard state in their article “The Burden of Historical Representation”: “[T]o appeal to students, educators most commonly select big-budget studio productions featuring well-known actors and actresses” (qtd in Butler et al. 1161). Actors that were well-known in the 1950’s, like Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, are not well known to students in grades seven to nine of today. Thus, when taking into consideration what Marcus and Stoddard say, teachers will not show films starring these actors, and by doing so they eliminate the chance of ever showing an old film.

As can be seen above, it seems that while teachers are aware of the importance of film in the classroom and thus implement it in their teaching, there seem to be a lack of understanding of *why* it is important, as teachers tend to use film for the wrong reasons. Also, one could question the process of choosing which film to use, as Marcus and Stoddard claim that teachers tend to choose films based on how attractive they are to the students, rather than focusing on, for example, their educational and didactical strengths.

Previous research on the black-and-white film’s position, possibilities and advantages in the classroom is scarce. Research on film in the classroom has instead primarily focused on three different areas: First, research has focused on the mere fact that teachers turn to film as a method to engage students. Clemens and Hawakawa establish this by stating that film is an effective tool in the classroom, as students tend to embrace it, particularly if the students find the film to be beneficial (561). Second, research has investigated the film’s role in the classroom as a tool for learning: what the film can contribute with in an educational setting. On this note, Chappell and Thompson, in their article “A Raisin in the Sun: Fostering Cultural Connections with a Classic Movie” also mention the film’s positive impact on students’ engagement, but they also state that the utilization of classic films in the classroom can be

used to foster cultural connections (222). The third area which research on film in the classroom has focused on is how film is used as a method for teaching students about historical events. Alan Marcus, in his article “It is as it was: Feature Film in the History Classroom”, states that a film portraying history is fiction and is influenced by the filmmaker’s perspective, which consequently might make historical aspects in the film being portrayed differently from what is correct (61).

It should be noted that the previous research and the studies mentioned in this essay has not been specifically focused on Swedish schools; instead they have focused on no schools in particular or in some cases schools in the U.S. This is the case since there is a great lack of relevant research on monochrome films and films in general in Swedish schools. However, it is my belief that research on schools from specific countries is of interest when investigating other schools; otherwise we would eradicate the possibilities of learning from other schools, and international measurements such as PISA³ would serve no other purpose than giving certain countries the right to brag. Additionally, this is also the reasoning why the studies in the analysis segment of the essay are studies performed in other countries.

The lack of black-and-white films in the classroom is confirmed by my own experiences when working as a teacher, by what Marcus and Stoddard mention above - that teachers only show films that are contemporary block busters - and what the study in their article “Tinsel Town as Teacher: Hollywood Film in the High School Classroom” shows; that only two out of the twenty most popular films to use in the classroom are in monochrome, one of them being *Schindler’s List* (1993) and the other *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

So far we have established that film is a tool which teachers frequently turn to in their teaching. Research shows that teachers do this as they recognize film as a way to engage students. However, research also shows that teachers often use film incorrectly; to

³ *Programme for International Student Assessment*. A worldwide study which measures fifteen-year-old students results on mathematics, science and reading.

compensate students or to make them quiet, for example. We have also established that black-and-white films are rarely used in schools and that research in this field is almost entirely lacking.

Theories on film

In this section different theoretical concepts and ideas which are relevant for the essay will be described and explained. First, *reception theory* will be of interest. Since this essay focuses on film, Janet Staiger, who has studied the relations between reception and film, will be the critic which this essay will derive its theories regarding reception from. Her ideas will be used to investigate how students might interpret films differently and how that might problematize which film to use in the classroom. Staiger's notions will furthermore be used to investigate if black-and-white films' history, context and atmosphere make students in grades seven to nine interpret films in a different manner than films in color.

After Staiger's ideas have been explained there will be a description of how films impact students' understanding of history and cultures. Research shows that film is a tool which teachers frequently turn to when teaching students about history and cultures. However, research also shows that this might be a problem since films do not always portray history correctly.

In the final part of the theoretical section, research on black-and-white films will be highlighted. As mentioned in the introduction, research on monochrome films and their role in the classroom is nonexistent. With this in mind, it is not especially surprising that research on black-and-white films in general is quite scarce. However, there are two books which account for some interesting ideas on monochrome films and which are of interest for this essay. The first one is called *Film as Art*, written by Rudolf Arnheim. Even though it was first published as early as 1957, the ideas presented in the book are still interesting and relevant. The book deals with certain qualities of black-and-white films as well as describes Arnheim's thoughts on how people want films to be like. When reading this, one gets a possible answer to why some people enjoy watching monochrome films and why some do not, which is of interest when trying to understand why black-and-white films are scarcely used in the classroom. The

second book of interest is *Monochrome Memories*, written by Paul Grainge. The central interest of this book is to investigate why and to what effect black-and-white images were acknowledged and used in different media during the 1990s and how this relates to cultural nostalgia. As one can see, the central interest of *Monochrome Memories* itself is not particularly interesting for the main focus of this essay, which is why there will not be a further explanation of it. Instead, Grainge's comments on black-and-white images and on monochrome films in general are what will be highlighted and discussed. He mentions, for example, that monochrome images are effective to use for documentaries. This will be further elaborated on later.

Since this essay focuses on old monochrome films there will not be a detailed description of the phenomenon of new films which are entirely filmed in monochrome. Still, it is relevant to mention it briefly, as there seem to be a resurgence in recent years for the usage of black-and-white images in films. Most noteworthy would have to be the film *The Artist*, 2011, which is a silent film entirely filmed in monochrome. The film received spectacular reviews and was highly praised not only by film critics, but by the general audience as well. *The Artist* was nominated for ten Academy Awards at the Oscars and managed to win five of them, including the most prestigious one: Best picture. It is fascinating to see that a film which goes back to using film techniques established in the early 1900s manages to achieve such success so many years later, and it shows that monochrome films are relevant even to this day.

Reception theory

Reception theory became prominent in the late 1960's as a form of literary analysis which focuses on how a text's meaning is not predetermined or fixed, but rather interpreted by its reader depending on his or her background and culture. One critic who has taken particular

interest in the field of reception and studied the relation between reception and film is Janet Staiger. Staiger is a professor of communication in the department of radio-television-film at the University of Texas. In her book *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Staiger stresses the historical aspect which reception studies should research: “[R]eception studies has as its object researching the history of the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films” (8). It is from this research, the history of reception, Staiger has taken her stance, and from this stance she has continued to form her own theories and ideas on the relation of reception and film. One such continuation can be seen in her book *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, where Staiger makes a case for the impact that spectators different identities have when watching films. She argues that all individuals have what she calls *multiple identities*. Therefore, according to Staiger, you cannot argue for a “master narrative”: That one single aspect of a spectator can stand as reason for his or hers different responses to film (1). Staiger claims that the individual’s multiple identities, “as well as specific historical situations, intersect to produce groups of responses that may be linked to broader dynamics of class, race and ethnicity, generation, gender and sexuality identities” (2).

In a classroom there are often many versatile identities present, especially in grades seven to nine, as this is a time when students often are confused about who they are and as a consequence they often make desperate attempts to fit into prevailing values at school or in class. In the analysis these variations in identities, which also cover gender and ethnicity, will be analyzed to see if students might experience *Forrest Gump* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* in specific ways due to them.

Furthermore, in more detail, Staiger’s notions will serve as a means to investigate if a film in black-and-white could be perceived differently from a film in colour by 7-9 graders due to its history, context and atmosphere being unknown to and unexplored by them. This

particular investigation is inspired also from what Robert Chennault writes in his book *Hollywood Films About Schools: Where Race, Politics, and Education Intersect*. Chennault states that a film is not created in a cultural vacuum; instead it is dependent on the context in which it is produced, and therefore one has to consider the period of time in which the film was created in order to fully understand its meaning (Chennault 2006).

Film to teach history

As mentioned earlier, much of the previous research on film has focused on both how film *is* used and on how it *can* be used to teach history, and how the culture of the film and the culture in which it was made affects the viewer of the film. In the book *History on Film/Film on History*, Robert Rosenstone asks the question whether “any film [may] count as ‘historical thinking’ or contribute to something we might call ‘historical understanding’?” (12). There has been a lot of research trying to answer this question. In an article investigating how the usage of film in the classroom makes students understand history, Marcus states that films which have history as their fundament are always a compound of “historical record, fiction and a filmmaker’s perspective” (61). With this statement as a background, he asks the very adequate question: “If films are not perfect representations of the past, then how can and should we interpret their images and messages?” (61). In other words, Marcus problematizes the fact that films which portray history have historical inaccuracies but are still used as tools for teaching students about history. Marcus then asks the question how teachers are supposed to relate to this issue. If we look at what Gore Vidal says then it is an issue indeed, as he suggests that “in contemporary culture, people’s perception of history are shaped most profoundly by the images presented on film” (qtd in Seixas 279). Marcus and Stoddard further problematize the phenomenon of teaching history with film. They write as follows:

Portraying history through film, and especially Hollywood feature films, is difficult because of the tendency to fit historical stories into traditional generic film narratives, often leading to compacted and simplified historical narrative. Hollywood films also tend to be made for a broad general audience, so the history of the majority of this audience, traditionally white and middle class, is emphasized, and dramatic liberty is taken with the story to make it more engaging and understandable for that audience. (“The Burden of Historical Representation” 28)

This too highlights the fact that films which portray historical events or are represented as historically accurate are altered in order to adapt them to the general spectators liking. Stoddard, in a study where he analyzed the various and adaptable functions film has in the instruction of history, concludes that his research elucidates “the lack of understanding of the epistemological construction of films as a source of knowledge and the need to teach students twenty-first century critical literacy skills” (286). Stoddard claims that these skills are vital to master in order to filter and perceive the great amount of information which one is confronted with every day in the era of digitality.

It should be noted that the ideas on how films which take history their point of departure alter and manipulate historical events in order to conform to the preferences of general public are mainly applicable to films which portray historical events which have already happened, i.e. films which recollect events from the past; films *about* history. The ideas are not quite as applicable to films which concern history simply by having being made in the past, i.e. films which portray history just by being produced at the time which it also portrays; films *from* history. This does not mean that all monochrome films should be considered films *from* history, which one otherwise might think, as there are examples of black-and-white films which portray historical events of previous times, like *Cleopatra*

(1934) and *Paths of Glory* (1957). It should also be noted that films *from* history can be historically problematic too, which will be further elaborated in the analysis and the conclusion. Still, the distinction between films *about* history and films *from* history is important to note and we will come back to it later in the essay.

A vital part in the process of investigating what films can teach students about history is to understand how the culture of films affects its spectators, since culture is a big part of history. Chappell and Thompson “have identified three categories that describe the extent to which cultural associations are integrated into a movie’s message” (222). The first category is films which are *culturally contextual*, which Chappell and Thompson mean are films in which the cultural context is so decisive that if it was removed the film’s message would change (222). The second category covers films which are *culturally amenable*, which refers to films where the message is entirely unaffected by the culture (222). The third and final category is *culturally influenced* films, where the culture of the film is not vital to the film’s message, but has an effect on it and on the viewers’ response to it (222-23). It should be noted that Chappell and Thompson are with these categories referring to films’ cultural context, the culture in which films were made, and not the culture within films. These categories will be of interest in the analysis when comparing *Forrest Gump* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* in order to discuss which of these categories fit in best on the films and whether the prescribed category for each film makes for any differences when incorporating them in the classroom

The research and ideas above will all be relevant to this essay and will be used as background to understand the role of films in the classroom. When comparing *Forrest Gump* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* it will be taken into consideration what the films can teach students about history, even though they were not made primarily to portray history. With that being said, one could argue that it might be even more interesting to investigate what films with no outspoken intentions of portraying history unintentionally can teach students about history.

Black-and-white films

Rudolf Arnheim, in the book *Film as Art*, explains that the absence of color in films was not noted until films in color came to be (22). This might sound self-explanatory; we do not find phenomena peculiar until such peculiarities are actually being shown to us. However, it is still interesting that we accept our ever so colorful world, when watching a monochrome film, as a world consisting of only black-and-white images. Then again, all of us do not accept that portrait of our world, which arguably might be one of the reasons as to why black-and-white films are not established in the classroom. Still, as Arnheim puts it, most of us experience “no shock at finding a world in which the sky is the same colour as a human face” (22). Later in the book, however, Arnheim contradicts his own statement that we accept the world on the black-and-white screen as a world without colors when he mentions that people who are not artists, he mentions engineers as an example, want films to exactly imitate real life (61). He states that:

The general, artistically untrained public feels much the same [as the engineers]. An audience demands the greatest possible likeness to reality in the movies and it therefore prefers three-dimensional film to flat, coloured to black-and-white, talkie to silent. Every step that brings film closer to real life creates a sensation. (61)

These two contradictory statements, that we accept our world as black-and-white on the screen and that the general, artistically untrained public want films to imitate real life, will be used in order to attempt to understand and to problematize students’ and teachers’ relations to and prejudices towards black-and-white films.

Paul Grainge also accounts for some interesting ideas on monochrome films. In *Monochrome Memories*, he writes that monochrome is a great style for the aesthetic of documentary. As Grainge claims, this is because black-and-white images have become

especially associated with authenticity and time (103). One could only agree with this, as we have all probably experienced the effect of monochrome images in documentaries where the past and historical events are being portrayed; it feels authentic. Grainge writes that “[t]hrough conventions of use and its more general place in the early history of the camera image, black and white became, and remains, a quintessential aesthetic of the authentic” (104). Grainge’s idea of monochrome images being especially associated with authenticity and time will be interesting to have in mind for the analysis. It should be noted, however, that just because black-and-white images are especially associated with authenticity and time, it does not mean that those are the only qualities which monochrome images manifest. Grainge makes sure to state that “[t]he meanings of monochrome are multiple; black and white “feeling” is not a stable or fixed quality” (102).

Summary

As can be seen, there are primarily three different areas which will be of interest when investigating if black-and-white films can contribute with something beneficial in the classroom which films in color cannot. The first area includes reception theory and Staiger’s ideas that we all have multiple identities which form how we respond to films. Here it will be interesting to investigate whether students multiple identities might respond differently to a monochrome film in comparison to a film in color. The second area covers the phenomenon of using film as a method for teaching history and possible issues one might encounter in doing so. Is film an adequate method for teaching history? Is the usage of film to teach history affected by whether the film is in black-and-white or in color? The third and final area deals with qualities which monochrome films possess, the relation between black-and-white images and authenticity and time, and possible benefits of black-and-white films in the classroom.

Analysis of *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Forrest Gump*

In this section the two films *Forrest Gump* and *It's a Wonderful Life* will be analyzed. The analysis will derive from the theoretical aspects which have been described previously in the essay: Students' reception of film, film to teach history, and film with black-and-white images. It should be noted that the films will not be analyzed in their entirety, only specific parts which are relevant to the purpose of the essay will be analyzed; a so-called case-control analysis. Furthermore, since there is no previous research in the field of black-and-white film in the classroom, this essay will serve as an introduction to the matter. Thus, the analysis will not strive to give definite answers, but rather work as an inspiration to motivate further research on monochrome films in the classroom.

Analysis of *It's a Wonderful Life*

We will begin the analysis by looking at the oldest of the two films, namely *It's a Wonderful Life*. The film came out in 1946 and is about George Bailey and his struggles during Christmas time. He is just about to commit suicide when he is saved by an angel and gets to see how the lives of the people around him would be like if he was never born. George then realises that he wants to live and the film ends in a state of euphoria. The film is considered an American classic and is especially aired during Christmas.

If we look back at what Marcus says, that films which alter and/or manipulate history are used to teach students about history, and relate it to Vidal's claim that people's understanding of history especially derives from what they see on film, a problem arises; students might form their understanding of history based on historically inaccurate films. Fortunately, this problem becomes less substantial when using *It's a Wonderful Life* in the classroom. This film was not created with the purpose of teaching history in the classroom, and since it portrays the same period of time in which it was produced (roughly) it can be

considered a film *from* history, a term which has been previously described. Still, even though the film was not made primarily to teach history, the film does concern political aspects of the time in which it takes place (early 1900-1946) and it makes a strong case for the American small town. It is quite problematic actually, as Thomas Halper and Douglas Muzzio state in their article “It’s a Wonderful Life: Representations of the Small Town in American Movies”, *It’s a Wonderful life* is in the end the story of *one* person’s life in an American small town. They write that “For much of the film, after all, George feels depressed, trapped, so angry that he lashes out at his saintly wife and adorable children, literally suicidal. And had there been no George – and many small towns presumably lack such a savior – Bedford Falls could hardly have offered a wonderful life” (2). In other words, the authors argue that while *It’s a Wonderful Life* tells the story of one man’s extraordinary life in an American small town, there are surely stories of other people’s lives in the same setting where the ending is not quite as blissful. Still, this is something which the teacher could acknowledge to the students beforehand, and it could even be an interesting field of work for the students: After the film they get an assignment where they are told to search for information on the American small town of 1946. By doing so, they will come to the understanding that not all people were as fortunate as George was. This would make for a great group project.

As previously noted, Marcus and Stoddard argue that films with the purpose of portraying history often reshape history in order to fit the generic film narrative. Since *It’s a Wonderful Life* was not made for the purpose of teaching history, one might take for granted that it is an accurate description of the time it portrays. However, one has to be careful when treading these grounds, as film is often filmmakers’ take on reality and on a specific period of time, and should therefore not be uncritically granted as historically accurate, even though the film was not made primarily to portray history. This is the case with *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Although it gives an understanding of the time in which it takes place, it is ultimately the

filmmakers' apprehension of that period of time. Still, the film has historical value suited for the classroom since it was made *in* history. Rather than showing a film which has made comprehensive efforts in order to portray history, *It's a Wonderful Life* offers a contemporary take on its period of time, even though it is the filmmakers' take. Fortunately, these are problems which the teacher could solve, as mentioned above. Furthermore, it shows that monochrome films can be considered proper material to use in the classroom.

On the note of teaching history and culture with film, it seems as if Rosenstone was onto something when he asked the previously outlined question whether "any film count as 'historical thinking' or contribute to something we might call 'historical understanding'?" (12). While it seems that *It's a Wonderful Life* can contribute to historical understanding, perhaps there is no film which can be considered entirely historically accurate, especially when considering Marcu's previous statement that films which have history as its fundament are always a compound of "historical record, fiction and a filmmaker's perspective" (61). Still, using *It's a Wonderful Life* to teach history and culture is further supported by Chappell and Thompson, who argue that using classical movies is a method for teaching cultural connections (222).

Continuing on the cultural note, Chappell and Thompson have identified three categories which determine to which extent films' cultural associations affect their message, as previously described in the theoretical section. *It's a Wonderful Life* falls under the category *culturally contextual*, which means that the cultural context in the film has such an impact that if it were to be removed the film's message would change. As it stands, the film wants to convey the importance of appreciating the people close to you and the small things in life, and no matter how grim it might seem it always works out. This is arguably a probable interpretation of the film's message. However, if it were not for the culture in which *It's a Wonderful Life* was made, one would probably have another interpretation of its message. The

poor community in which the film takes place, Bedford Falls, is a reflection of the American small town during that time, and although it might not be an entirely accurate reflection it is still the inspirational source, and it is what sets the tone of the film. The scenes where George have to help his poor father and keep the bank on its feet, which forces him to cancel his long-planned trips, are heart-stirring and frustrating at the same time; we want George to be able to go on his trips, but at the same time we understand the responsibility of taking care of your family.

With all this being said, the question of how the students will relate to the culture of the film remains. When watching older films, students might have a hard time understanding and relating to institutions and cultures which are being shown in such films, since they were made in a context which is unfamiliar to them. Thus, the students might not perceive the film's culture, and since the film is *culturally contextual*, their interpretation of the film's meaning will be different. Fortunately, this is not necessarily a problem, since according to reception theory a film does not have a predetermined meaning which one has to understand. Instead this gives the teacher interesting approaches to utilize when using the film in the classroom. For instance, the teacher could tell the students to pay extra attention to the cultural context in *It's a Wonderful Life's*, or even give an account of it before watching the film, and then afterwards see how they interpret the meaning of the film because of this. Another approach could be not to mention anything about the culture of the film at all beforehand, and then after the film see how this affects their interpretation of the film. It could even be a future study: Inform half of the students about *It's a Wonderful Life's* cultural context beforehand, and leave the other half unknowing of it. Then, after seeing the film, analyze and compare the two groups' interpretations of it and look for potential differences.

In one scene in the film, George is shown working in a store which is owned by Mr. Gower. Here George is still a child, whereas for the rest of the film he is an adult. In the scene

we get to see how George has a lot of responsibility in taking care of the store; he sells milkshakes and other beverages, as well as delivers medicine which Mr. Gower prescribes to people who need it. By watching this, the students get an insight into what it could be like being a child in the 1940's. Sometimes, especially if you lived in a poor community like Bedford Fall, you had to work even in your younger years to provide for your family. This teaches the students about the culture of poor communities at that time. And, since the film was made in the same time which it mainly portrays and since it is filmed in black-and-white images, it feels genuine and you believe what you see on the screen. This becomes even more substantial when considering the previously described statement by Paul Grainge that monochrome images are particularly associated with authenticity and time. Moreover, since George had quite the responsibility in running that store, students might contemplate on whether it is correct to give children such a responsibility at that early age. Also, they can relate it to themselves; what if they were to have this kind of responsibility right now? Could they imagine having that? How would they handle it? Also, students might react differently when watching this depending on their own background and situation. Perhaps some of the students are in the exact same situation as George. This actualizes Staiger's idea of multiple identities. According to Staiger, all individuals have multiple identities which control how we respond to films. Therefore you cannot argue for what Staiger calls a "master narrative": That one single aspect of a spectator can stand as reason for his or hers different responses to film (1). This is a fair assumption, as it would be quite restrained to argue that only certain aspects of our identity influence how we respond to films. For many, film is a decisive tool for perceiving reality, and it is often through film we relate ourselves to the world in which we live. Thus, it is reasonable to say that when watching films we relate what we see on the screen to all our identities and experiences. In the case of *It's a Wonderful Life*, it will be a challenge for the students to understand and interpret the film since it was made in a context

which is unfamiliar to them. However, according to ideas of reception, no interpretation is more correct than another; each individual make their own interpretation based on his or her experiences, background, and, according to Staiger, multiple identities. Students in grades seven to nine are often still struggling to find their identity; consequently it is likely that there will be many different interpretations of and responses to *It's a Wonderful Life*. Fortunately, as a teacher this is exactly the scenario you are hoping for, as variations in the students' interpretations make for great discussions and the students can exchange their opinions on the film and argue for their own interpretation. Also, since the students might relate differently to George's situation as a child, there are many possible approaches for teachers to take after seeing the film. For example, one viable option would be to let the students sit in groups and discuss their view on different parts of the film. The teacher will hand out suggestions on different topics to discuss on a piece of paper, making it easier for the students to get started. When the students feel ready, all groups account for their discussions for the rest of the class, and there will be room for further discussions in all class as well.

As previously mentioned, Arnheim claims that the general public want films to imitate real life and thus prefers films which are in color and where the actors talk, for example. Although this might be true, black-and-white images can enhance certain details in films, even for people who are unfamiliar with or dislike black-and-white films, which students most often are. On this note, in one scene in the film, George and Mr. Potter, the renowned bad guy of Bedford Falls who does whatever it takes to get his hands on money, are having a meeting. George is in desperate need of help, which is the only reason he is in a meeting with Potter, a man who he utterly despises and normally never would want to have a meeting with. In this scene, if one is paying attention, one might realize that Potter is symbolizing "the evil", whereas George is representing "the good". Thus, this meeting is a confrontation between good and evil. This scenario is further enhanced by the black-and-white images of the film.

Black is often used in relation with evil, while white often symbolizes the good. By using black-and-white images the battle of evil versus good becomes more prominent and powerful in this scene. This is something which arguably everybody experience when watching this scene, even though we might not be aware of it. Moreover, as already stated, the past is often seen as black-and-white. Therefore, watching a monochrome film, like *It's a Wonderful Life*, will arguably strengthen the fact that it is taking place in the past. However, this is not entirely on the positive side, as it further cements the common view of seeing the past in images of black-and-white. As film is expanding as a reliable tool in the classroom, it should be in teachers' field of work to try and widen students' perspectives on and understanding of film. If we again look at what Arnheim says, that the general, artistically untrained public wants films to exactly imitate real life and therefore prefer colour films to black-and-white (61), one could argue that teachers should strive to widen students' perspectives on black-and-white films. One way to do this would be to show monochrome films to students. It is important, though, that the teacher works with the film in a manner so that it contributes to widening the students' perspectives on film, and not only serves as a means to further establish the idea of the past as being seen in images of black-and-white. One way of doing this would be to implement some of the suggestions of how to use *It's a Wonderful Life* in the classroom mentioned above.

Earlier in the essay we looked at Marcus and Stoddards' statement that teachers, when choosing which films to use in the classroom, choose contemporary blockbusters featuring well-known actors to appeal to students, and thus we got one possible explanation as to why monochrome films are rarely used as material in the classroom. This is unfortunate, since it seems as if *It's a Wonderful Life* could be beneficial to use in the classroom. In the analysis we can see that even though it is a complex field, *It's a Wonderful Life* seems to be an adequate tool to teach students about what it was like living in a poor community in the

1940's. However, as noted, the teacher must make sure to inform the students that *It's a Wonderful Life* is *one* possible scenario of what it could be like. Furthermore, there are parts of the film which students in grades seven to nine can relate to and identify with, which makes the film grateful to work with as there are many interesting aspects to discuss and analyze. Having this said, it might be difficult for students to understand the film's message since it was made in a cultural context which is unknown to the students and since the film is *culturally contextual*. Also, it seems as if the black-and-white images of *It's a Wonderful Life* do enhance certain scenes and that it can be used to widen students' perspectives on film. However, one has to be careful when using *It's a Wonderful Life* in the classroom; it is great that its monochrome images make students understand that the film is portraying the past, but it is also a problem since it cements the common view of seeing the past in images of black-and-white, which contradicts the idea of widening students' perspectives on film.

Analysis of *Forrest Gump*

The second film to be analyzed is *Forrest Gump*. It came out in 1994 and in the film we get to see Forrest Gump and the amazing journey he goes through in life. The film is considered a classic and is often used in schools.

Unlike *It's a Wonderful Life*, history and historical events are essential components in *Forrest Gump*. By pure coincidence Forrest Gump, the protagonist of the film, ends up witnessing, and sometimes even affecting, significant American events which took place from 1950 and onwards. Having said this, the film is not an on-screen historical recollection of American history. Rather, the incorporation of historical aspects are used as a means to further enhance the central foundation of the film; the extraordinary life of Forrest Gump. The tale of Forrest Gump becomes even more impressive when American history itself is affected by and contingent upon the film. In other words, in *Forrest Gump*, history is used to further

impact its viewers, since the creators of the film probably are of the understanding that relating a film's protagonist directly to history will make the film seem important. This is not meant as criticism, but rather as an attempt to understand possible uses of historical events in films. Also, since *Forrest Gump* portrays historical times and events from much earlier than the time in which the film was made, it should be considered a film *about* history.

As previously stated by Marcus and Stoddard, we know that when it comes to using history in film, filmmakers are liberal in the way they make use of it in order to make it engaging and more understandable for the audience. This means that they sometimes manipulate history in order to make films more attractive. This fact becomes clearer than ever if we look at *Forrest Gump*, where they have used visual effects to incorporate Forrest in archived footage with, for example, John F. Kennedy. Needless to say, this is a case where it is obvious that history has been changed. However, when it comes to students in grades seven to nine, you cannot take for granted that they are familiar with John F. Kennedy, and thus it can be quite confusing for them to suddenly see him in the same context as Forrest Gump. Kennedy is not described much further in the film either, instead Forrest quickly moves on while stating that someone later shot this nice young man.

We know that black-and-white images are often used with flashbacks in films. We symbolize black-and-white with the past, as argued by Grainge when he states that monochrome images are associated with time, and thus it is an effective method to film flashbacks in images of black-and-white. In *Forrest Gump*, the only times we get exposed to black-and-white images are in two of the archived footages, which are short and quite far apart. In correspondence with what has just been stated, these two scenes, which if one is familiar with them beforehand, really strengthen the fact that they have actually happened. However, since black-and-white images are frequently used with flashbacks in films in general, which most often are fiction and not historical reality, it further complicates the

matter for students in grades seven to nine. Since they might not know of these particular archived footages beforehand, they may interpret the scenes as fiction rather than historical reality, especially so when taking into consideration that Forrest is present in the scenes. This is an interesting contrast to the earlier established fact that new films often portray history inaccurately. In this case, some segments of *Forrest Gump*, a new film, actually portray real events of history, but students in grades seven to nine risk interpreting it as fiction if they are not familiar with the archived footages beforehand. Fortunately, this misunderstanding could easily be dealt with simply by informing the students before seeing the film, or by working with the historical events after seeing the film. On the same note, Ariel Duncan et al. write in their article “Forrest Gump and the Future of Teaching the Past” that:

By using footage of cultural and political turning points and inserting Forrest at the center (thanks to the wonders of digital legerdemain), Zemeckis and Roth create a historical mnemonic that aids viewers, especially those with no lived experience of such events to remember decisive moments from the second half of the 20th century. (174-75)

In the case of students in grades seven to nine, this is true, *if* you somehow inform them of this beforehand or afterwards, as mentioned above.

Since black-and-white images are only used in two of the archived footages, the students might miss out on the fact that the entire film takes place in the past; from Forrest’s birth 1944 to 1982. The students risk not noticing this since the past is connected with black-and-white. At the same time, when filming in black-and-white, filmmakers know that they will lose many viewers by doing so since they are aware of the general audiences’ resistance to black-and-white images. When making a blockbuster you have to stimulate the general audience, and thus be restrained in your usage of black-and-white images. It is quite a complex situation then: By not utilizing black-and-white images you risk students not

noticing that a film to a big extent is taking place in the past, but if you were to utilize it, you risk losing the students interest entirely, since they generally are not attracted by black-and-white images on film.

Trying to account for the impact *Forrest Gump*'s cultural context has on its message is not entirely easy. In contrast to *It's a Wonderful Life*, the cultural context in which *Forrest Gump* was made is not the same as the cultures which are being portrayed in the film, since the film came out in 1994 but takes place between 1944-1982. The message of *Forrest Gump* is that no matter your situation or what background you have, you are always able to achieve great things in life. Taking this into consideration, the film falls under the category *culturally amenable*, which Chappell and Thompson mean are films in which the cultural context has no effect on its message. The message of *Forrest Gump* is not affected by the culture in which it was made because it is easy to comprehend and understand, no matter whom you are and to which extent you are familiar with the culture in which it was made. Yet, the film does concern various historical and political aspects which took place in the later half of the 20th century, making people who have relations to these events experience the film differently from people who do not. Still, regardless of your relation to the film's political and historical aspects, the message of the film remains the same since it is not affected by history or politics. With this being said, people who are closely related to the historical or political events portrayed in the film might choose to let those aspects become their focal points of the film, which may alter how they perceive the film. Still, it is not the film's cultural context which alters their interpretation, and therefore it can be considered *culturally amenable*. This means that, unlike *It's a Wonderful Life*, the students will not have any problems understanding the film's message because of its cultural context. Although this is good in the sense that the students actually understand the film's message, which undeniably is important, it also makes

the film less culturally complex. Making a film less complex eradicates interesting topics to work with after seeing the film, and it might hinder more ambitious students.

When watching *Forrest Gump* you realize early on that Forrest is very fond of Jenny, a girl which he meets on the bus on his first day of school. The two of them become best friends and soon enough we understand that not only is Forrest fond of Jenny, he is in love with her. This is something which probably is close to the students' own situations. For many, being in grades seven to nine can be quite stressful and a lot of different emotions arise and pervade your body. While struggling with finding your identity, this is a time in our lives where many of us initiate our first intimate relation with another person, apart from our family that is. However, for others, it is a time of constant uncertainty and rejection, as we do not get quite the response we were hoping for. For the latter it can be quite emotional to see *Forrest Gump*, as it turns out he too gets rejected by Jenny. Seeing one part of yourself on screen like that can certainly evoke strong responses within oneself. Yet again, we understand that Staiger's idea of multiple identities, like sexuality and gender, form how we respond to films. This relates to the third of the research questions; how ideas of reception affect students when watching films. Much like *It's a Wonderful Life*, it seems as if *Forrest Gump* stimulates our multiple identities. There are differences though, which can be traced back to the films' divergences in their cultural contexts. Although the students can relate to George as a child in *It's a Wonderful Life*, they still have a hard time relating to other aspects of the film since they are unfamiliar with its cultural context. When it comes to *Forrest Gump*, though, not only can the students relate to Forrest's feelings for Jenny, but since the film takes place in cultural contexts which they are more familiar with, they can relate to it more extensively than *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The analysis of *Forrest Gump* tells us that making use of history in films is a great method for engaging audiences, much like Marcus and Stoddard have previously concluded.

The way *Forrest* has been cut into archived footages is a clever approach for incorporating history and politics in film, but it might also confuse students in grades seven to nine who most often are not familiar with the events which the archived footages are portraying. Seeing *Forrest* in these footages might make the students interpret it as fiction rather than descriptions of the past. Fortunately, this can be easily avoided if the teacher somehow acknowledges the students of it, either before or after seeing the film. Furthermore, we know that filmmakers want to attract the general audience when making blockbusters. This means, according to Arnheim, that the film should be in color rather than monochrome, since that is what stimulates the artistically untrained public. *Forrest Gump*, which is a blockbuster, is therefore filmed in color. By not being in monochrome, the fact that the entire film is taking place in the past (1944-1982) might be lost on the students, whereas if we look at *It's a Wonderful Life*, there is little to no doubt that students understand that the film is taking place in the past due to its black-and-white images. Additionally, since *Forrest Gump* does not take place in the cultural context of which it was made, the film's message is not contingent upon the culture in which it was made and is therefore considered *culturally amenable*, according to Chappell and Thompsons' categories. This means that the film's message is easily comprehended by anyone, but it also eradicates cultural complicity from the film. Moreover, the analysis indicates that *Forrest Gump* actualises Staiger's multiple identities, as students can relate their backgrounds and experiences to the film, especially in the case of Forrest's feelings towards Jenny. It also seems as if students will be able to relate to more aspects in *Forrest Gump* than in *It's a Wonderful Life*, since the film is closer to what they are familiar with.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay one can confirm that the field of monochrome films in the classroom is a vast and complex one. The results in this essay manage to provide an answer to the essay's first research question: What can films in black-and-white contribute in the classroom which films in color cannot? The analysis shows that black-and-white films can learn students much about history and culture of previous times, since they were made in history themselves and because students easily understand that the film is portraying the past because of its monochrome images. However, it is important to note that this is only the case for black-and-white films *from* history, like *It's a Wonderful Life*, as monochrome films *about* history suffer from the same issue as any other film *about* history; they risk being a demonstration of how the filmmakers want history to look like in order to appeal to the audience, rather than being an accurate description. Having said this, the results in this essay show that films *about* history can also be adequate material for teaching history in the classroom, despite their flaws. Furthermore, it should be noted that one has to be careful even when using monochrome films *from* history, as they often tell stories from *one* perspective, which might not give the entire picture. For example, *It's a Wonderful Life* tells the story of *one* man's life in small town America during 1940's, as Halper and Muzzio points out. Thus, it might not give the entire picture of life in small town America during that time. Also, by using monochrome films teachers risk further strengthening the narrow view many students have of always seeing the past in images of black-and-white. Still, *It's a Wonderful Life's* black-and-white images manage to achieve details which *Forrest Gump* do not. First, there is the scene with George and Mr. Potter, where the monochrome images manage to enhance the battle between good and evil, consequently making the scene more powerful. Secondly, as previously mentioned, *It's a Wonderful Life's* black-and-white images make students understand that the film is portraying the past. Even though *Forrest Gump* portrays the past too, students might not

acknowledge it as much as in *It's a Wonderful Life*, since it is not filmed in monochrome. Instead, only two scenes in *Forrest Gump* are in monochrome, which risk confusing students of what is reality and what is fiction, especially since Forrest is cut into these scenes which are archived footages of real events. Fortunately, there is a way to avoid this confusion, which is described briefly.

As for the essay's second research question, whether ideas on teaching history with film can motivate usage of black-and-white films' in the classroom, results are also interesting. The analyses of the two films show that both *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Forrest Gump* can teach students history. In the case of *Forrest Gump*, we know that there are historical events being portrayed in the film but that the students might interpret them as fiction. The solution lies with the teacher, then. By informing the students that the scenes which Forrest has been cut into are actually events of the past, you remove the risk of students interpreting the scenes as fiction. Fortunately, this is easy for teachers to do, and therefore *Forrest Gump* can be considered adequate material to use for teaching history. As for *It's a Wonderful Life*, it can also teach students about history, by offering something different from *Forrest Gump*. While *Forrest Gump* gives you a portrayal of various historical events, *It's a Wonderful Life* offers a more subtle method for teaching history. By taking place almost entirely in an American small town during 1940's, the film provides an intricate insight into such settings in that period of time, just by being filmed and shown. As previously mentioned, though, the film might be the filmmakers' take on that period of time, and should therefore not automatically be considered historically accurate. Still, it gives students an introduction to what it could be like in poor communities during that time, and could then be further expanded upon by the teacher after seeing the film. Additionally, the film teaches students a history of its own, namely the history of film.

Regarding the essay's third research question, whether theories of reception hinder black-and-white films usage in the classroom, the study suggests that there are no decisive differences in how students respond to black-and-white films and newer films according to the model of Staiger's multiple identities. Therefore, nothing points towards monochrome films being less beneficial to use in the classroom than films in color, having Staiger's notion in mind, which suggests that black-and-white films can be considered to use in the classroom in this regard. Still, there are differences in how students will identify with and relate to the two films because of the films' cultural contexts. Since *Forrest Gump* was made in a cultural context which students in grades seven to nine are quite familiar with, it will not be difficult for them to relate to aspects of the film. In *It's a Wonderful Life* though, the cultural context is unfamiliar to the students, which probably make it difficult for them to relate to many aspects of the film, although they can relate to George's situation as a child. These differences, however, are not significant enough to consider either of the films as inadequate material to use in the classroom.

It should be noted that the sample of this study is small since there is no previous research to proceed from, which is why the essay is meant to work as an introduction to the field of monochrome films in the classroom rather than yielding definite answers and solutions. Because of this the study in this essay has been difficult to conduct and perform, and since it is the first in its field it has been necessary for it to derive from the very basics of films and monochrome films in the classroom. With this being said, there are interesting fields presented in this essay to continue further research on. Based on the results in this essay, a well-founded approach to further research monochrome films in the classroom would be to visit classes of seven to nine graders and show them both a black-and-white film and a newer film, or only parts of them if time is lacking, and afterwards ask the students relevant questions for the study. If one chooses to investigate only one class, then a qualitative study,

like interviewing the students in smaller groups for example, might be an effective method. If one decides to investigate several classes, to get a wider sample, then one could conduct a qualitative study in form of a survey which the students would fill out afterwards. With a survey you risk getting somewhat lackluster answers, but you get a wider sample and volume to base your data on. By performing interviews you might be rewarded with extensive answers, but the sample which you base your data on will be lacking. To narrow the investigation, one could aim to research only *one* of the aspects which have been addressed in this essay, like teaching history with film, for example. In any case, this essay demonstrates that there are many reasons for further researching the field of monochrome films in the classroom. Now that this essay has been written there is hopefully a base to derive such research from.

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