The Borders of Historical Empathy: Students Encounter the Holocaust through Film

Scott Alan Metzger
Pennsylvania State University

This case study explores potential educational tensions in historical empathy for learning about emotionally difficult topics through lessons that use dramatic feature films (movies). It investigates one case of historical empathy in the classroom by analyzing what a high-school teacher and her students do and talk about in class. The observed lesson was part of the teacher’s unit on World War II and the Holocaust in a World History course using the 2002 Academy Award-winning film The Pianist. The conclusion interprets this case as an example of how the visual and emotional power of movies may lead some students to “over-empathize” and feel that they can “really” know what a historical perspective must have been like. The “caring” aspect of historical empathy has the potential to overrun historical context and override other educational goals like learning and applying content knowledge.

Introduction

The Holocaust is one of the most emotionally charged topics in the modern World History curriculum. It is widely taught in U.S. schools, mandated for study by some state governments, and given curricular support by numerous Holocaust museums and projects like Facing History and Ourselves (Fallace, 2008). The Holocaust is also the subject of many dramatic film treatments over the past several decades—including the 1978 television miniseries Holocaust, the 1993 Academy Award-winning Schindler’s List, and the 2008 films Defiance and The Boy in the Striped Pajamas. The emotional difficulty of the Holocaust may seem to many teachers a perfect match for the visual and visceral power of film. Teachers may be drawn to dramatic film to visualize a past that students cannot directly encounter, to make historical study seem more immediate and relevant, and to empathize with different, often distant, historical perspectives and experiences. Evoking historical empathy may be essential to how teachers identify and reinforce intellectual conclusions and ethical meanings about “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998), including sensitive topics like genocide and the Holocaust.
This exploratory study investigates historical empathy in a film-based lesson on the Holocaust by describing what the teacher and her students do and talk about in the classroom. It analyzes the phenomenon through the teacher and students’ evinced and articulated thinking about history movies and learning history and explores how teaching for historical empathy through dramatic film may raise complications for other learning goals. The observed lesson was part of the teacher’s unit on World War II and the Holocaust in a World History course using *The Pianist*, the 2002 Academy Award-winning international production directed by Roman Polanski. The screenplay is an adaptation of Polish classical pianist Władysław Szpilman’s published account of his experience in Warsaw during WWII.

**Framework**

A survey of 218 secondary-level English and Social Studies teachers by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum found that 69% reported using movies to teach about the Holocaust, a rate tied with firsthand accounts of the Holocaust and even higher than historical documentaries (Donnelly, 2006). Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* is perhaps the most widely used Holocaust movie in schools: One study, described in a published review of research on Holocaust education (Schweber, 2006), found that most teachers in Illinois high schools reported using *Schindler’s List* in class and did not seek out additional materials for their lessons. Such findings may give grounds for concern. Some history and film scholars have critiqued *Schindler’s List* (Loshitzky, 1997), particularly for how it depicts the Holocaust, its victims, and the centrality of Aryan figures like Oskar Schindler (Bartov, 1997). Shortly after the film was released, Holocaust educator Phyllis Goldstein (1995) questioned how it should be used in the classroom.

Concern over Holocaust movies in the classroom relates to a growing scholarly interest in how teachers use movies and for what educational purposes (Marcus, 2007). A body of scholarship has developed on how teachers employ movies in the history classroom (Marcus, Paxton, & Meyerson, 2006; Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010; Metzger & Suh, 2008; Russell, 2004, 2012a, 2012b) and on how history films can be used to facilitate particular student learning outcomes (Marcus, 2005; Metzger, 2007, 2010; Russell, 2009, 2012c; Scheiner-Fisher & Russell, 2012). Other scholars have focused on how students respond to history presented in movies, particularly issues of racial representation (Paxton & Meyerson, 2002; Seixas, 1993, 1994; Stoddard & Marcus, 2006; Wills, 1994). Sam Wineburg and his colleagues have explored in depth how the popular 1994 film *Forrest Gump* has shaped the ways students think about the recent past and its relation to American society (Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2000; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007). Wineburg et al. (2000) in reviewing research on history media
in schools conclude that “school often became the purveyor of the history curriculum offered by popular culture, the place where young people first sat and sampled its wares: Hollywood movies, made-for-TV documentaries, and the like” (p. 57).

Historical empathy is often named a potential historical-literacy outcome of instructional use of film (Marcus, 2005; Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010; Metzger, 2007). There may not be consensus on entirely what “historical empathy” means or looks like in practice (Brooks, 2009). Social studies researchers have tended to emphasize the role of taking on historical perspectives toward developing historical understanding (Davis Jr., Yeager, & Foster, 2001). Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004) have usefully conceptualized it as consisting of two dimensions – perspective recognition and caring. They argue that recognizing perspectives “is indispensable for public deliberation in a pluralist democracy. History, with its infinitely complex source material, should provide students practice moving beyond their own perspectives and taking seriously those of others, no matter how foreign they seem” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 224). Barton and Levstik (2004) further contend that “emotional connection, in the form of care, [is] a critical tool for making sense of the past” (p. 241). They see this in practice as “caring” about and for the past and its consequences. Barton and Levstik (2004) address concern that historical empathy could conflict with dispassionate analysis by contending that studying history should not be limited “in such a way that either perspective recognition or care is abandoned, but rather to maintain a productive tension between the two” (p. 242). This study employs Barton and Levstik’s (2004) definition of historical empathy in examining this case of a film-based Holocaust lesson in order to critique the productive tension they posit between historical-context elements like perspective and affective elements like empathy and caring.

Prior research suggests that achieving such carefully calibrated and intellectually powerful outcomes is a substantial challenge. Jeremy Stoddard (2007) observed a classroom lesson on totalitarianism that taught about the Holocaust using a feature film, television movie, and documentary film and found that this approach was generally effective in engaging students in recognizing characters’ historical points of view and challenging limited understandings students had of the Holocaust: “This development of empathy did not impede, and in fact fostered, the development of knowledge of the causes and effects of the Holocaust, and the…roots of totalitarianism and hatred involved in genocide” (p. 211). Yet, the teacher and students did not critique the films’ perspectives as historical interpretations, leading Stoddard (2007) to point out a “tension between using films as a powerful tool for shaping the attitudes and beliefs of students, and shaping students to understand the ways that films are powerful in shaping attitudes and beliefs” (p. 212).
Another published case looks at a teacher who used the 2008 Clint Eastwood film *Gran Torino* to develop empathy among high school students for the Hmong people (Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010). The researchers concluded that this film-based unit thoughtfully engaged students in caring about historical narratives of the Hmong and reinforcing tolerance, but they also worried about the potential for naïve stereotyping of a historically victimized people given unavoidable limits to fully empathizing with others: “Films tend to invoke an affective response…[but] can others truly ‘understand’ the plight of the Hmong?” (p. 47). Both cases suggest that there are limits to empathy that may not be acknowledged in – or can even be obfuscated by – the visual-emotional power and sense of realism of film.

**Method**

This is a phenomenological and qualitative case study of film-based history instruction that explores individual experiences within a found, organic context (the classroom and lesson). It addresses a descriptive and interpretive research question: What can historical empathy look like when enacted as a learning goal in an actual classroom, and what potential complications or tensions might teaching for historical empathy using a dramatic film raise for learning and applying content knowledge about historical context of an emotionally difficult topic? Originally part of a larger research project at multiple sites, this study focuses on one teacher, one class, and a small sample of her students. The teacher-participant was drawn from a sample of convenience (based on geographic proximity), though selection was also purposive (colleagues recommended teachers with a reputation for teaching with film). Data were collected through multi-day field observations of the teacher’s entire film-based lesson, pre- and post-lesson interviews with the teacher, and a post-lesson interview with a small sample of students. Participants’ non-verbal reactions are important to this study, but it must be acknowledged as a limitation that these data are inherently inferential on the researcher’s part. Participation was completely voluntary, and the teacher had full control over whether and how students could be interviewed. Informed consent forms were distributed by the teacher to all students in the participating class, and an additional informed consent form was signed by individual students (and their parents) who volunteered to be interviewed.

Kellie (all names in this study are pseudonyms), a beginning teacher around age 30 during observations, had been teaching for several years at an affluent, suburban mid-Michigan school district. The observed class was a World History course required for graduation and meant for 10th-graders (most students were aged 15-16). In this observed class, 23 of the 26 students enrolled were White/Caucasian (European descent). Kellie arranged interviews with a sample of her students by explaining to her class who I was and the research I
was conducting; three students volunteered. Julie is of German background, though her family has lived in the U.S. her whole life and she speaks native English. Though I was not permitted to track individual students during my in-class observations of Kellie’s lesson, Julie’s desk was very near to where I sat and I recall her intently watching the movie and actively participating in class. Amy struck me as eager to do well in school, and I recalled her from observations as a student who quietly and politely participated. Brad was one of the few students in the class not of European ancestry. He identified himself as Arab American and said that his family came to the U.S. from a sub-Saharan African country. I interviewed these students the week after the film-based lesson.

These students were interviewed together as a small group in Kellie’s classroom office to reduce the awkwardness of talking alone with an outside adult and collect some authentic student voices. The interview was semi-structured, using some pre-established questions but flexibly allowing students to contribute thoughts on their own. The first group of questions focused on their reactions to the lesson and the film used in class, to get the students to talk about how they perceived the lesson, the work, their teacher’s motivations, and the educational goals. The second group of questions focused on their thoughts about history media in general, to explore what the students thought about historically themed movies and television programming, how much of them they watched, and how media influenced what they knew about the past. While it is not possible to generalize beyond these individual experiences, a close look at what Kellie and her students say and think can illustrate possibilities for how similar classes of students and teachers may respond, intellectually and emotionally, to instructional uses of film.

“A Real Person, a Real Event”: A Holocaust Lesson Using The Pianist

When I asked Kellie why she chose The Pianist for her lesson, she admitted that her school’s social studies teachers had talked over other possibilities, including the 1998 Italian film Life is Beautiful:

I think what it came down to is that I see more value in showing a film based on a real person, a real event, and I liked the idea that it was a story of resistance, which is something the students don’t hear about a lot, the Jewish resistance…. Whereas Life Is Beautiful is a great movie, it’s more uplifting, more happy, but it’s not based on a real person. And so I think it just really came down to a story versus historical fact.

Kellie’s historical fact/fictional story dichotomy was important to her thinking about teaching and learning history. Fictional stories are entertainment. They may be inspiring and even enlightening, but in Kellie’s view they still cannot
cover historical content as effectively as films closely modeled on factual events.

In explaining why *The Pianist* was appropriate for her lesson, Kellie emphasized close connection to course content as well as moral development:

*[The Pianist]* definitely covered resistance, which again is something that’s not really taught, about Jewish resistance. Just getting a feel for anti-Semitism in Poland, among the Nazis, of course, and just how brutal the Nazis were when they didn’t necessarily need to be.

Closely bound up with Kellie’s conceptions of content coverage was a particular worldview, a psychological schema and ideological lens for perceiving and making sense of the world. For Kellie, teaching about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism was linked to the broader issue of brutality and the corruption of power. The Nazis heaped insult on injury—not only did they commit mass murder but engaged in petty cruelties to boot. *The Pianist* fit with her worldview and helped her convey this message in her classroom.

However, Kellie was hesitant to explicitly discuss worldviews with students. Avoiding revealing her own ideological stances was important to her, so she would not alienate students with contrary political beliefs. She told me, “I think it’s sort of your duty as a teacher” to present a neutral approach to issues. I asked her if she would ever admit her personal beliefs to students. She replied,

No, I would never. My students ask me, “Well, what do you think?” And I never tell them. I’m like, “It doesn’t matter, I want to know what you think”…. I hear about teachers who do that sometimes, and I just think it is a bad idea to do that.

This may help explain why Kellie was daunted when I asked her what she hoped her students would learn about the world from her film lesson:

I think it will hopefully teach them that we have to remember these tragic events that happened in the past…. What can we do to ensure that something like this never happens again, and have we really progressed as a society, as people, that something like this wouldn’t happen. That’s a perfect point to bring in, like Bosnia, the Serbs, [Rwanda]. Have we really progressed that far and what can we do to make sure we have.
For Kellie, there are lessons concerning human beings’ inhumanity to other human beings to be learned from the Holocaust that generalize to other times and places.

Observing Kellie’s Film-Based Lesson

Kellie’s lesson, which included viewing The Pianist in its entirety, took place over five class periods (each 46 or 58 minutes long, depending on the day of the week). The field trip to the Holocaust museum (which I was not able to attend) took place on Friday at the end of the week, before the final day of the lesson. On the first day of her lesson, Kellie collected parental permission slips (for a field trip to the Holocaust museum and to watch The Pianist). No students in the observed class left any of the activities due to lack of parental permission.

The Start of the Lesson

After collecting permission slips at the start of the first period of the lesson, Kellie talked for a few minutes about the film’s production background, actor Adrian Brody, and the director Roman Polanski. She distributed a small handout with five questions which the students were assigned as homework (Figure 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to answer on The Pianist – Due Tuesday, 5 points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Who directed the film? Why was he so passionate about doing the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Why did Szpilman’s book go unnoticed for so long?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Who was the German captain who discovered Szpilman?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What ends up happening to this captain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How did Adrian Brody (who plays Szpilman) prepare for the role?</td>
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Figure 1: Kellie’s First Student Handout.

Kellie’s tacit expectation was that the students would use the internet to find answers. The first four questions all position the film as a true story. In looking them up online, students would discover that the film very closely followed Szpilman’s memoir and that the director was passionate about recreating events that really happened in Poland. The fifth question reflects Kellie’s hope that students will enjoy The Pianist as a movie by focusing on the film’s Hollywood star.

Over the following 10 minutes, Kellie directed student attention to the front whiteboard and provided some background information about the Holocaust, particularly the Warsaw Ghetto. Kellie’s first question (“Where is Warsaw
located?)” was simple enough, and many students answered, “Poland.” One young woman asked if the whole city were a Jewish ghetto or just part. Another female student asked where the idea of ghettos came from. When Kellie described how the Jews in the ghetto were intentionally underfed, a young woman asked, “Why were they fed at all?” Kellie responded briefly and in general to each question. The remaining class time that day was used to start viewing the film. Kellie began it by explaining she was showing *The Pianist* because it does a “good job showing what the situation was really like.”

*Viewing the Film*

At the start of the second day, Kellie spent five minutes with the class on the questions handed out the day before (Figure 1) and then presented some additional notes on the Warsaw Ghetto. Some of the information looked to be in response to students’ questions from the first day. There were details of the population of the Warsaw Ghetto, about deportations to the camps, and about the 1943 uprising in the Warsaw Jewish ghetto. These notes sparked some new questions. One young woman asked if the Germans wanted to kill every Jew, even those who survived the camps, or did they want some as slaves. Kellie responded that Germany wanted to destroy all Jews, not to keep slaves for economic reasons. Another young woman then asked if Germany wanted to destroy all non-Aryans, specifically the Gypsies. Kellie replied that the Germans targeted certain groups, but to her knowledge they did not want to destroy peoples like British or French.

Most of the class time on the third and fourth days was spent viewing the film. There was a noticeable shift in the students’ demeanor as the film progressed. In the part of the movie showing Szpilman’s life before the war as a classical pianist on Polish radio, there was a general restlessness. Some students chatted under their breath or played with materials on their desks. However, by the time the film shifted to the war, the students were quiet and watching the screen intently. They remained almost uniformly attentive for the rest of the film.

*The Pianist* contains many disturbing scenes that provoked noticeable reactions among students. Julie seemed to have consistently strong reactions. Kellie confided to me that she was always worried this film would be hard for this student because she apparently had expressed some guilty feelings about the Holocaust. In a scene when German troops raid an apartment and push an old man in a wheelchair to his death out a window, one young woman closed her eyes and looked away. In another scene, a starving man wrestles a can of beans from an old woman; they spill on the road and he devours them on the pavement. Another student turned away. In a later scene, German soldiers raid a warehouse and a Jewish girl who asks what they want is shot point-blank in
the forehead. Several students visibly jumped at the gunshot, and one young woman covered her mouth with her hand, staring wide-eyed.

During disturbing, complex, or confusing scenes, students frequently whispered questions and sometimes Kellie responded, but often the questions could not be heard by the whole class. For example, in one scene Szpilman worries that he may have jaundice. A female student turned around to the young man behind her and asked, “What’s jaundice?” The young man shrugged. The chaotic battle scenes depicting the Warsaw uprisings seemed to provoke the most confusion. Kellie tried to briefly explain what was happening without pausing the film. The teacher herself could not provide detailed clarification and may have been confused, too. Toward the end of the movie, Captain Hosenfeld, a German officer who befriends Szpilman, is in a prisoner-of-war camp. One young woman asked Kellie if the guards watching the prisoners are Polish. Kellie answered, “I think some of them are.” The guards in the scene wear Soviet uniforms.

The Pianist depicts complex, intricate historical elements in intriguing, often subtle ways. Occasionally students picked up on the intricate content and asked questions, but often the most nuanced content went uncommented. For example, the scene in which Szpilman’s family is deported to death camps depicts three different groups with power: German troops, Polish auxiliaries, and Jewish police; a Polish guard beats an old Jewish man to death with his rifle butt when he makes a commotion. Shortly later there is a scene in which German troops pull out a group of Jewish workers at random and shoot them in the head. During these scenes, Kellie’s students were totally silent, staring at the screen. They clearly experienced the visceral reaction of watching dramatization of such displays of power and brutality, though there was no examination of the specifics of the historical context.

Another scene plays on the film’s historical deployment of spoken languages. During a New Year’s celebration, drunken German troops order Jewish workers to sing something cheerful; the Jews sing the Polish national anthem, which the Germans guards do not understand (since in the film English is used in place of Polish but German remains in German). A few of Kellie’s students giggled quietly at what seemed to them a strange scene. They did not appear to pick up on the subtleties in language by themselves. The film ends with text blocks reporting what happened after the war: All that is known of Captain Hosenfeld is that he died in a Soviet prisoner camp in 1952, seven years after Germany’s defeat. Neither the students on their own nor the teacher in the class discussions articulated connections between how the film ended and the emerging Cold War.
I returned for the final day of the lesson the following week. After the remaining eight minutes of the film, Kellie passed out a worksheet with five new questions (see Figure 2). The students were given 10 minutes to write individual responses.

The Pianist

Please answer all questions on this sheet of paper.

1. If you were given the choice to join the Jewish police as Szpilman and his brother were, what would you do and why? What would be the consequences of your decision?

2. What did you like about the film and why? What did you dislike?

3. What were the most important things you learned from the film?

4. Did this film help you understand the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, WWII, and/or the Warsaw uprising? Explain.

5. What questions does this film leave you with?

Figure 2: Kellie’s Second Student Handout

Over the next half hour, Kellie discussed the questions with the whole class. First she asked if there were things in the film that students did not understand. Most student questions revolved around the film’s plot or characters. Only one student question was about historical content (How were the Jews able to fight the Germans in Warsaw?).

Kellie’s worksheet sparked a sustained discussion about students’ moral responses to the film. Referring to Question #1 a young woman asked, “Why would any Jews join the ghetto police?” One student pointed out that the Germans were killing all Jews regardless, but another student said that Jews did not know that at first. The young woman subsequently pressed for more details about the police, and Kellie framed the dilemma as a tension between getting better treatment versus betraying your people. Intermixed were student responses about what they would do in that situation. Most said they would not join the police because it would be like helping the Germans. One young woman pointed out that none of the students had ever been in a desperate situation like the Warsaw Jews, and though she hoped she would not join, she
was not certain what she would actually do. The next young woman said she was persuaded by the previous student’s point—who knows what you would do in a desperate situation?

Afterward, Kellie pointed out some of the film’s historically accurate details. Most student comments and questions revolved around human personalities. Was the romance plot real? Why did Captain Hosenfeld ask Szpilman to play the piano for him? Julie tried to focus on broader history by arguing that by the end of the war most Germans were questioning the Nazi government. Kellie steered away from this new direction by replying that the class would talk about that issue later.

Almost one-third of the discussion time was spent talking about how the students liked the movie. Kellie asked for a show of hands of who liked the film, and almost all students raised their hands. She asked how many found it hard to watch, and about a third kept their hands up. This same group of students did most of the talking. Several students said that they wished the film had depicted more about Szpilman personally. Kellie suggested in response that Polanski did not do this because he wanted Szpilman to appear numbed by the horrible experience. Two young women agreed—one said that she had read how people in the concentration camps often reported feeling numb, and another in the back of the room had previously read an account by a Holocaust survivor who reported all people in the camps expected to die.

Kellie concluded by asking if there were other things students wanted to know. One young woman said, “How can people be so cruel to each other?” Kellie then asked whether any students wanted to know if the Nazis were punished. A few students mumbled yes, and Kellie said they would address that topic later in the week. There were a few overlapping student questions and comments about what happened to Hitler himself, but they were indistinct and not taken up.

Kellie’s Reactions to the Lesson

A major goal for Kellie was to motivate student interest in the Holocaust and to provoke an emotional response, to get them to care, to get them to see what the Holocaust was like. When I asked her, Kellie said she believed the lesson went well: “Students who typically don’t write a lot were writing a ton of things, because I got the feeling that they really cared about it and were really interested in it and were kind of shocked and inspired by the story.

The students’ written responses and the in-class discussion gave her the evidence she needed:

[The students] all seemed to have a lot to say about it when we had the discussion questions, follow-up discussion. Just reading through the responses, they said they learned a lot. A lot of them said it was hard to
watch, but they said this is not an easy time period to study, so they were glad it was a brutally honest film. I just feel that using something that really happened, looking at the ghetto, the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, and Szpilman’s story, just having a real story was really helpful, they really understood part of what the uprising was all about.

Kellie’s perception of what the students gained from the lesson mirrors the overlapping motivations she brought to it. The film lesson was a rewarding break that most students liked; it motivated student interest in the topic and helped them visualize the Holocaust; it provoked an emotional response that fit with the humanitarian themes Kellie hoped to stress; it covered “real” content.

Ultimately, it was this sense of authenticity that Kellie stressed in validating her film choice. Not that she felt the lesson was perfect. When I asked how she might teach the lesson differently, she pondered, “I think that would have been interesting to research more. I think I should read Szpilman’s memoirs…. I would have [students] read…an excerpt.” For Kellie, the best way to improve the lesson would be to make it even more authentic, to get even closer to Szpilman’s real experiences by reading his own words.

“It’s Kind of Like You’re There”: Students’ Reactions

Amy, Brad, and Julie all expressed positive reactions to watching The Pianist in class. One of Kellie’s motivations for her film-based lesson was to raise student interest by making an emotional connection. When I asked the three students what they thought about the movie, Julie responded,

I thought it was really emotional, because you watched how cruel people can be and I never really thought that someone could actually allow themselves to murder and hurt so many innocent people. Even though I knew that it happened, it was still hard to watch and stuff.

Amy expressed a distinction between detached knowledge intellectually known and visceral knowledge emotionally learned: “You can look at numbers and stuff and you can say what happened, but I think seeing it on the screen is really different, like actually seeing it happen. It’s kind of like you’re there.” Brad agreed with the value of this way of knowing: “You get a real life emotion, like one person’s life to see, you know, all the horrors they got to see throughout their lives and everything. And how they were affected themselves, and what they had to go through to survive.”

A chief goal for Kellie’s instructional use of film was to motivate student interest in a historical topic. For these three students, this was accomplished through emotional stimulation. Amy and Brad especially emphasized how watching the movie helped them imagine the past. The dramatic feature film
recreated the past as a plausible virtual reality. Kellie wanted to use a movie to bring the past to life, helping students visualize what it could have been like. Perhaps nothing else produces this simulated historical realism as powerfully as feature films.

**Emotional Impact**

The common theme in what these students thought about the movie was its visceral power to spark an emotional reaction. Students may intellectually know that something happened but they may not comprehend the full magnitude until they confront it emotionally. Amy described this as a dichotomy between “numbers and stuff” and “actually seeing it happen.” All three students noted the translational power of a movie to make the viewer feel “there” in the event. It may be this sense of authenticity (Brad’s “real life emotion”) that appeals most to students.

Kellie worried that the emotional impact of the film title could be too strong for some students. “I felt really disturbed watching it,” Julie told me. “Sometimes I don’t feel proud to be German…. I can’t say I’m disappointed with who I am, but it’s hard for me to think that we did that.” Even though she is an American too, Julie identifies with German collective guilt for the Holocaust (“we did that”). Her family visited Germany the previous summer, and while in Europe she said she was taken to see one of the death camps. “Sometimes I had nightmares, like I had to sleep with the doors open,” she admitted. “It was really hard for me.”

Julie’s father is German, and she referenced what she knew of her family’s experiences in WWII. Her grandfather was too young to fight in the war, but one of his older brothers was conscripted and died in Russia while another uncle married a strongly pro-Nazi woman, fought in the war, and lost a limb. Her great-grandfather was captured by the Soviets when they took eastern Germany, but he was not deported to Siberia because he was too old to work. I asked Julie, “What did you think of the end of the film, when you saw a Russian prisoner camp and all the German former soldiers?” She replied,

I guess I think that what goes around comes around. But, I also think that Hitler was a man who controlled Germany at a time when it was really depressed…. German people were at a low point in their lives, and these soldiers weren’t thinking clearly. And I cannot stick up for them because what they did was so wrong…so maybe they deserved what happened to them.

Julie’s conflicted reaction to *The Pianist* raises a potential complication for the empathic use of movies. She already felt troubled by the historical implications of the Holocaust for German people, and the movie’s emotional power forced
her to confront these feelings in school. Her reaction surely went beyond Kellie’s motivation to spark student interest, and the lesson was not designed to help Julie navigate the complicated personal and moral issue. Left on her own, it is not surprising that Julie interpreted the end of the movie as “what goes around comes around” for confused soldiers who had done terrible things under Hitler’s hypnotic influence—rather than as a manifestation of the emerging Cold War that would soon shape the lives of millions of Germans, including her family.

Student Reactions to the Lesson
Covering content was at least as important a stated motivation for Kellie as motivating student interest and empathy. The students, however, did not mention this. Only Julie hinted at this consideration in observing that the movie was like a documentary rather than just fictional entertainment. For these three students, learning information from the movie took a back seat to the film’s authenticity and vicarious power.

The only lesson work specifically linked to the movie was the pair of question sheets, to which all three at first offered negative reactions. Julie responded, “I don’t think that it really helped me understand the past.” Amy agreed with her: “I really don’t think it had much to do with history at all.” Brad added that “history-wise, it wasn’t very helpful.” As the conversation proceeded, they offered deeper personal reflections. The homework question about Captain Hosenfeld (the German officer who helped Szpilman) was important to Julie:

When we learned about the captain, it kind of showed people that not all Germans are bad. And I was kind of glad they touched on that because I’ve been called a Nazi before, and it’s kind of hard for me to hear that but I just don’t think it’s right for Germans to have that bad name.

For Julie, the work highlighted an element essential to how she thought about the lesson by touching on a perspective that otherwise could have gone unnoticed.

Bringing up the captain also got Amy to reconsider the usefulness of at least some of the work:

[Reading about Captain Hosenfeld online] did help me with the history more, because it didn’t really go into his life much in the film. But, I read a lot of stuff about him online because personally I thought it was really interesting. So I think that kind of helped a lot just with
watching the movie and understanding it, and also about like understanding the history.

The work triggered Amy’s personal curiosity about this lesser figure in the film narrative. For both Julie and Amy, at least a portion of the work had value when it emphasized important details from the movie that supported a deeper understanding of the film’s historical content.

**Students’ Ethical Conclusions**

The transcendent universality of the Holocaust, its humanitarian and broad ethical lessons, that Kellie emphasized in her lesson were palpable in the reactions of these three students. The movie was a powerful emotional and psychological (in terms of bringing the past to life) experience. It was augmented by the class trip to the Holocaust museum.

When I asked what the movie lesson taught them about the past and also what it taught them about our world today, all three students conflated the two questions. The knowledge they gained from the film was inseparable from its ethical or moral lessons. Julie linked her ethical conclusions from the film lesson to the museum field trip:

> I think that it really makes me feel that our generation never, ever let anything happen like this again…. We went to the Holocaust museum, and the lady said that we’re probably going to be the last generation to hear Holocaust speakers, and I think it’s important that we show our children and our grandchildren these movies to know that when they become the future leaders of countries that they don’t ever let discrimination and prejudice come to this level.

Coming into the lesson with a personal background that predisposed her to these issues, Julie learned a humanitarian obligation for her generation, the last to get to hear live Holocaust survivors speak. She learned that movies like *The Pianist* can be mobilized to teach future generations to resist racial prejudice.

Amy, too, emphasized ethical lessons in what she learned from the film lesson. She connected her bewilderment at how genocide could have happened in the past to why genocides are still happening in the world today:

> It kind of made me feel like, “How could people do this?” I know we talked about the Treaty of Versailles and how like everything kind of lead up to it, but it’s like these [German perpetrators] aren’t human beings. Like, I don’t know, just how people could do that is really hard to think about…. Could it happen again today? Like there have been
The empathic notions of universal justice and collective obligation that Amy learned from the movie and Holocaust lesson were applied to her contemporary understanding of the world and its problems. Amy espoused the ethical obligation of military intervention but said nothing of the military, political, and diplomatic complications that actually constrain national decision-makers, both historically and today. A largely ethical, emotional educational input yielded a largely ethical, emotional moral response.

Brad drew ethical conclusions from Kellie’s lesson that he too applied to his family background and personal experiences:

I was really looking at racism, because I’m an Arab American myself and ever since 9/11 I’ve gotten so many racist remarks. Like it’s not even funny. It just reminded me like how serious racism can get in one spot and how it can spread so easily…. And it kind of reminded me the Jews had it ten times worse during the Holocaust.
Like Julie and Amy, Brad also saw a transcendent universality to the lessons of the Holocaust. Whereas the girls applied the lessons of the Holocaust across time in light of more recent genocides, Brad went a step further and reconceived the Holocaust as representative of the problem of racism broadly:

[The Holocaust] wasn’t the only anti-Semitism, like there was some around the world, like in Saudi Arabia and places like that there was a lot of anti-Semitism going on against Muslims and all that. And it reminds you it’s not just the Jews, it’s like everybody…. It’s not just one race, it’s like so many.

Even the term “anti-Semitism” was redefined in Brad’s mind as synonymous with racism. It is not directed just against Jews; everybody can potentially be a victim. Brad was not alone in this cognitive step. Julie described how she did a research paper for an English class and learned that Hitler’s racial policies were influenced by segregation in the U.S. against African Americans. “I thought that was really interesting that he actually derived that from African American anti-Semitism in the United States,” she added.

Ultimately, Brad concluded that the Holocaust serves as a warning about a broader danger:

Even though the Holocaust was as horrible as it was, if it never happened how would we know? How would we know not to do that again? Like in the past they never thought that would happen, then, boom, it happened. Hitler came out there and did oppression, and it all happened. Like if that never happened, who knows what would have happened today? It would have been another race. It could have been African Americans. It could have been anybody.

Brad concluded that the Holocaust could have happened to anybody. Prior to Hitler, nobody could have conceived of something as dreadful as the Holocaust. If the Holocaust had not happened, the world would not be on guard against it today and genocide could have happened to any other group. Brad’s observation may have been a sudden epiphany, but it was spoken unflinchingly with real passion. Brad’s comment is the strongest expression of the transcendent universality implicit in how Kellie used The Pianist in her lesson. What Brad learned about the Holocaust is so universal, however, that it is almost completely denuded of the Holocaust’s historical context.

**Discussion**

This study set out to examine what historical empathy can look like when enacted as a learning goal in an actual classroom, and what potential
complications or tensions might teaching for historical empathy using a dramatic film raise for learning and applying content knowledge about historical context of an emotionally difficult topic. Kellie’s lesson (however its implementation or outcome may be judged) was thoughtful and carefully planned. It intentionally (if implicitly) framed the Holocaust as a universal human experience. Her goal was to let her students see the horror of the Holocaust through a visually graphic, emotionally powerful, and highly authentic feature film and to generalize transcendent moral lessons. Her post-film discussion aimed at eliciting empathy in this regard by asking students to contemplate what they would do if they were in Szpilman’s position. That the Holocaust targeted Jews (overwhelmingly) was downplayed and its universality highlighted in getting students to think if something similar could ever happen to them and, if so, what they would do. The overarching moral response to the Holocaust advanced by the lesson was a human tragedy transcending historical context by attributing universality to the Nazis’ crimes.

Film, Empathy, and Vicarious Memory

The Holocaust is daunting to try to understand because its historical context emerged from a confluence of many historical factors: industrialization and mass production, the rise of racism as pseudoscience, Germany’s defeat in the First World War, and the revival of virulent anti-Semitism. This could not have happened anywhere at any time, yet a popular feeling exists that an event so monstrous should provide some kind of broader applicability or moral lesson for humanity. Historian Peter Novick (1999) contends that many scholars of American Jewish historiography have argued for the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a historical event, stressing its incomprehensibility. For educators, though, this limitation to generalizing from the Holocaust to broader humanity can be unsatisfying. This educational tension pushes into longstanding debates between Universalist and Particularist notions of the Holocaust and further complicates the instructional use of film for empathy in this case.

Tensions over whether the Holocaust is “unique” or “universal” can affect how educators engage even with revered public museums, as Levy (2010) explores. Though the educators in Levy’s study did not openly challenge the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s stance on the Holocaust’s historical uniqueness, she found that some privately reinterpreted this just as being “unprecedented” historically and thus consonant with belief in universal implications that could be taught in the classroom. Kellie’s lesson reflected this tension in a high-school setting: From her perspective, the educational value of the Holocaust is not in its uniqueness or incomprehensibility but in its transcendent applicability. Her film-based lesson implicitly framed the Holocaust as a universal narrative of hatred, excessive brutality, and human progress.
This required Kellie to establish an empathic connection between her students and the topic: A dramatic feature film like The Pianist was an appropriate instructional choice for this particular outcome. Sam Wineburg (2001), in his study on the movie Forrest Gump and how people think about the Vietnam era, notes a distinction between “lived memory” and “learned memory” (p. 234). Using feature films to teach historical empathy may reflect an effort by teachers to transform what could otherwise only be a learned collective memory for young people into vicarious, virtual lived memory. As seen in this study, Kelly capitalized on the vicarious reality of film by asking for student reactions in individual, personalized terms.

**Empathy and Context, Imagination and Authenticity**

Amy, Brad, and Julie’s reactions show that students do not watch movies in a vacuum. They bring with them prior understandings from other classes, their own personal and family experiences, and knowledge they have learned from other sources, including the teacher, books, family, and other movies. Kellie’s Holocaust lesson had universal implications that transcended its localized historical context. Pairing the movie with the field trip to the Holocaust museum gave it an especially powerful emotional impact. Her students picked up on the transcendent universality in the lesson but expanded it beyond how Kellie herself described the goal. For some students, “anti-Semitism” ceased to apply exclusively to Jews and the Holocaust was not a principally Jewish tragedy but a warning for all humanity. In applying the humanizing lessons, these students broadly generalized the Holocaust out of its specific historical context.

Loshitzky (1997), in critiquing Schindler’s List, notes that “the Holocaust…has been mobilized as an educational tool in the fight against contemporary racism” (p. 6). Kellie’s film-based lesson and her students’ responses to it are an example of what this can look like in the classroom. This study suggests how teachers really can powerfully influence students’ sense of empathy. Julie, Amy, and Brad picked up on the ethical intentions in Kellie’s film-based lesson and, shaped by their personal backgrounds and perspectives, translated them into broad lessons about the human condition in their own world.

That these students’ conclusions were so broad as to almost overlook historical context altogether suggests it may be difficult for teachers to appreciate or control the extent of the emotional, visceral influence of movies. The Pianist intentionally has a broad humanitarian appeal. The film emphasizes Szpilman and his family as assimilated Poles and ordinary people with little attention to Jewish aspects of their identity, and some of Kellie’s students picked up on this expansive human sympathy, divorced the Holocaust from historical context, and applied it directly to their lives. It made Julie grapple with what it
means to be German. It made Amy struggle with racial hatred and mass violence. It made Brad reflect on the ubiquity of racism. In contrast to Stoddard’s (2007) study, which found a teacher’s use of film did not impede and even fostered understanding the Holocaust, this study suggests that using a complex dramatic film can impede understanding difficult issues on a deeper level. Why do genocides happen? Why are they so hard to prevent or stop? The comments of Kellie’s students reflect generally uncomplicated conclusions to these very complicated questions.

Perhaps Kellie was hesitant to impose on her students too explicit a moral picture of the world today, but this was unavoidable given the visceral, emotional power of the film and its broad humanitarian themes. In describing how people try to control narrative texts, Wertsch (2002) observes that “in the very process of invoking an imaginary coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure, narrative also introduces a moral order into the picture” (p. 124). Without explicit guidance from their teacher, these three students intuited a moral picture that was passionate (all thought more needed to be done to stop hatred and violence) but generally divorced from content knowledge about the WWII era during which the Holocaust occurred.

Why did Kellie’s carefully planned lesson intentionally employing a complex film rich in historical detail not result in more observable student application of historical content knowledge in the development of historical empathy? There is a tension in history films that may have an analog in teaching with them. Bartov (1997) observes two requirements in public tastes for representations of the past on the screen:

First is the demand for a “human” story of will and determination, decency and courage, and final triumph over the forces of evil. Second is the quest for authenticity, for a story which “actually” happened, though retold according to the accepted conventions of representation. (p. 46)

Actual historical events, however, rarely conform to filmic conventions. Bartov points to a fundamental challenge in historical storytelling: balancing imagination and authenticity. The three students interviewed in this study responded to both elements – they liked the imagination that helped them visualize and get an emotional feel for the past, but they also expected a true story that did not misrepresent what really happened. Given this tension, students may gravitate toward an excessively generalized conceptualization of empathy that “feels” authentic because it is informed by the past without having to be specifically grounded in complicated, and often conflicting, historical evidence.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this study points to special challenges in using film to develop historical empathy, particularly when it comes to emotionally difficult topics such as genocide. A film like The Pianist provides a specific topical and period frame, conveys its story through the use of historical content knowledge, and offers a powerful way for students to visualize and get an emotional feel for the past. That it is based on a true story augments its appeal to authenticity. Yet, the more complex a film is in its treatment of imagination and authenticity, the more difficult it may be for students to infer complicated understandings of difficult historical and ethical problems. Students may draw uncomplicated, even naïve connections between emotionally powerful events depicted on the screen and our world today, with little appreciation for why longstanding historical problems like racial conflict are so difficult to confront or change.

Additionally, the visual and emotional power of a film may lead students to over-empathize and conclude that they can “really” know what a historical perspective must have felt like. This study reinforces Stoddard’s (2007) concern that film-based activities which invite students “to place themselves in the role of a historical figure such as a Jewish person in a ghetto or camp, something that a film invites...is impossible and problematic” in terms of history education: “Students may believe that they fully understand what it would have been like to experience the Holocaust and may develop naïve understandings as a result” (p. 189). As students make connections to their lives and imagine how they would have acted if put in that historical position, humanitarian purposes – the “caring” aspect of historical empathy – have the potential to override other instructional purposes, like connections to content knowledge of the event’s historical context. If the borders of historical empathy overrun historical context, the “productive tension” that Barton and Levstik (2004) advocate may prove elusive.

It is important to acknowledge the limited and exploratory nature of this study’s findings. It is possible that timing influenced student reactions. This study sought to capture both immediate student reactions (the class discussion after the movie) as well as after a short time had passed (the small-group interview one week later, which prompted the students to reflect back on the film specifically). Separating the effects of viewing the film from other instructional inputs is not possible or even valid. Indeed, some students mentioned the Holocaust museum trip during the class discussion. However, comments about the movie outweighed the museum trip, information in the textbook, or anything else. In the case of this classroom lesson, there was no certain connection between the goals of historical empathy and content knowledge. The students did not apply much historical content knowledge to informing or analyzing empathic responses to the Holocaust. Of course, learning historical facts is not the only or even always the most important goal in
a lesson. However, learning and applying content knowledge to significant historical questions certainly is a widely recognized goal in reformed history education (VanSledright, 2011). This study suggests that a potential challenge for historical empathy, at least when operationalized through dramatic film, can be a disconnect with other goals like learning and applying content knowledge—even in the hands of a smart, motivated teacher. Despite how readily dramatic film is often incorporated into history classrooms, even good teachers may not necessarily be prepared to perceive and address this tension.

References
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**About the Author**

Scott Alan Metzger is an associate professor of education in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at Penn State University. His research interests include history teaching and learning, educational uses of the past in popular-culture media, social studies teacher education, and the sociology, history, and politics of schooling.