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History in the Air

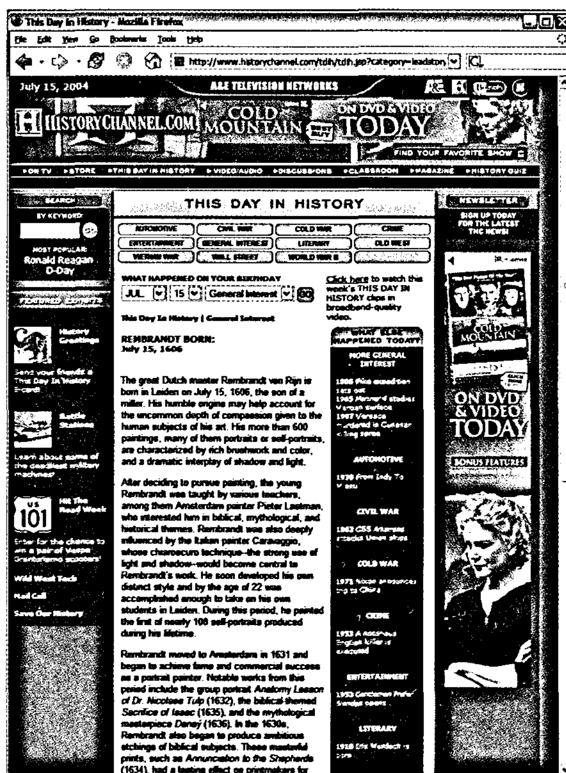
Edward L. Ayers

History is everywhere these days. Our students have grown up with a television channel that streams the past into their homes nonstop. They take for granted thousands of web sites devoted to historical subjects. They have visited historical battlefields, monuments, and shrines throughout their school years. They have lined up to buy tickets to movies set in history's most dramatic moments. They have played board and video games built around the plots and trappings of history. History has never appeared in such abundance.

Yet the profusion of history in the commercial and public realm has not translated into a new generation of young Americans at home in the past. Instead, they seem to live among a swirl of disconnected images, faces, and feelings. The history in the air never seems to settle to the ground. Polls and tests reveal that plenty of young people do not know about their nation's history—not to mention the history of other nations. Some connection is not being made.

It is not that the history in the air is without worth, of course. Films convey the look and feel of past worlds. Television documentaries pique interest. Visits to living museums can pull even resistant visitors into moments of empathy. Web sites open new areas of exploration. The purveyors of such history claim to bring history to life in a way that mere reading and talking cannot. The implicit—and often explicit—contrast is with the history classes all Americans have taken throughout their lives.

Indeed, faced with such boasts, classrooms can seem uninviting. Rows of desks, fluorescent lights, and state-issued textbooks hold little allure compared to the darkened theater or the familiar bedroom. The temptation for teachers is to let the world of lavishly produced history take the place of our own unamplified efforts. Poorly trained and hard-pressed history teachers might be inclined to show *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and claim they have taught the essence of World War II, or take their class to a historical site and believe they have covered colonial America, slavery, or the westward movement.



The History Channel's website features a "This Day in History" section. <http://www.historychannel.com/tdih/>

The newest competitor for the authority of the teacher and the classroom is the World Wide Web. The web may be particularly threatening because it claims a kind of authority that movies, television, and games do not. As every teacher knows, students believe that when they do "research" on the web they find trustworthy facts and interpretations. In the same way that students suspend disbelief in front of a movie screen they also suspend skepticism when a web page presents what appears to be truth.

What, then, should teachers of history do? When we face well-funded competition for whatever time and energy young people might be willing to invest in the past, what chance do we have? The history in the air is both our ally and our competitor.

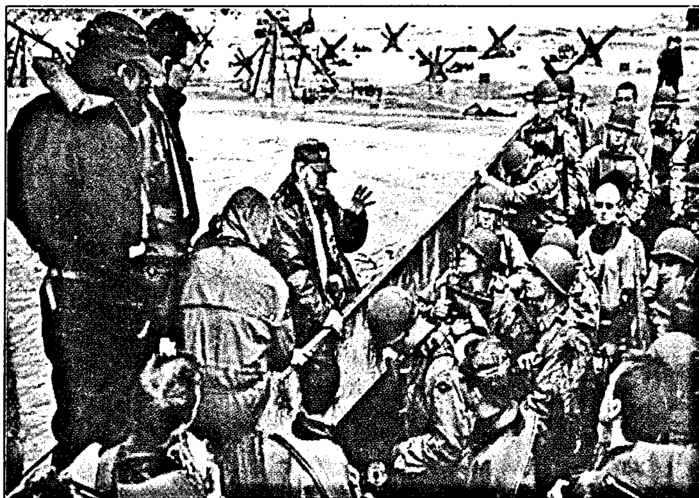
It is not that we are without advantages of our own. While there is never enough time to cover everything, we have far more time than even a blockbuster movie can occupy. We have claims on our students' attention that no other medium can exert.

Most important, we have our talents and the classroom. In that classroom, we can create communities of trust that do not exist in the outside world. We can sustain conversations across weeks and months. We

can ask questions that cannot be answered in the span of an hour-long documentary. We can offer coherence and proportion. We can show the importance of sequence and context. We can embody the excitement that engagement with the past can bring. And we can insist that some questions cannot be answered at all and certainly not by plots built around love stories.

Using these advantages, we can provide our students with the tools to understand the history they confront outside the classroom. We have no choice but to engage the history pouring in on them. Over the years, teaching the introductory survey course as well as advanced classes on slavery, war, and segregation, I have turned to several strategies to get students to think about the forms in which they experience history.

Because I have worked with the Internet since its inception, I have made sure my students understand the particular benefits and dangers of that medium. We sometimes do a search on any topic in American history and work through the list of returned sites. How would we know that we might trust one site more than another? What are the telltale signs of distortion and political agendas? How can we tell responsible research from bogus research? Why would people or organizations want to make a certain argument about the Second Amendment, say, or the nature of slavery or the causes of the Civil War? Students can easily discern cheap web design but they cannot know the difference between well-grounded research and distortion unless teachers show them.



In his Oscar-winning role, director Steven Spielberg meets with the actors and production crew before shooting the D-Day landing scene in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

Sometimes I watch a documentary with my class, the remote in hand. Instead of just letting it play, I stop it periodically, asking if it matters that certain images are actually of the people being described or what particular kinds of music play in the background. We sometimes compare documentaries on the same subject and examine the reasons for their overlap and divergence.

When I assign movies, we analyze the film *as* a film, as a particular kind of storytelling that imposes its own needs and desires on historical material. History in the movies is always simplified, always translated into personal conflict, but students asked to isolate scenes that seemed especially effective or especially suspect may be suspicious of scenes that are not historically problematic after all. For example, at a recent discussion of *Glory* (1989), the story of black troops in the Civil War, one student wondered whether African Americans would really be as openly critical of the United States as Denzel Washington's character is. I assured them that if they read David Walker's 1829 *Walker's Appeal* they would find equally blistering language.

After visiting a historical site, I have found it enlightening to study the brochures the sponsoring agency hands out, the promotional web site, the things the interpreter said, and even the items available in the gift shop. What sort of messages are they promoting and why? What stories are they not telling and how might those untold stories be told? Well-interpreted sites are gifts to all of us, but they are interpretations nonetheless.

In a less orthodox maneuver, it could be useful to ask a student to bring in a video game set in World War II or Vietnam, since especially popular and well-crafted games focus on these times and places, and analyze the scenes acted out on the screen. Look carefully at the ways enemies are represented and ask what it means to represent warfare as a "first-person shooter," as the most widespread genre of these games is known. How can historical understanding be gained in this potent new medium, which now brings in more money than sales of movie tickets?

High school teachers might even bring in a truly exotic representation of the past—a historical monograph—and show students how academic historians make claims about the lives of people long dead. On what grounds do the authors of such books declare themselves the ultimate adjudicators of historical truth, sitting in judgment of all the other portrayals of the past?

It is often revelatory to analyze the textbook itself as an artifact, to read the preface and examine the claims laid out there. What are the "special features" of your class's textbook and what do they tell us about the goals of the authors? If the book is boring, figure out why, since there is no reason that the record of the American people should be dull.

Even in these days of enforced standards it is important to spend some time analyzing with our students how it is that we touch the past. The point is not merely to debunk television, film, games, historical sites, or history books. The point is to let our students in on something they already know at some level: history is represented in certain ways for specific reasons. There are reasons why some topics dominate the History Channel. There are reasons why movies routinely turn the past into melodrama. And there are reasons why living history museums now feature women and enslaved people.

Our students live surrounded by history and representations of history. We can serve those students not only by teaching them "the material," but also by alerting them to the way that the very forms in which they receive history shape their sense of themselves. Our students will continue to learn history long after they leave our classrooms, whether they want to or not. Perhaps the most important thing we can teach them is how to interpret what others would teach them. ❑

Edward L. Ayers is Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History and Dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. He was named National Professor of the Year for Research Universities by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education in 2003 and his most recent book, In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863 *(2003) won the 2004 Bancroft Prize.*