

APUS History

List of suggested movies for summer viewing

It is not a bad idea to prepare yourself for United States history by watching movies over the summer that will prepare you for APUS by familiarizing you with some of the events. This is a long chronological list of movies, and some are more relevant to the history of the time period in which they are set than others, but all of them either tell a good historical story or do a great job of setting the scene of the time period in which they are set. Some of these are films I would love to show during the year but I will not have time for them. My list stops in the 1970s. Another idea is to borrow The History of US, a PBS series, from the library if they have it.

Early American History

Black Robe – Actually set in Canada, this movie is about the earliest settlers and their attempts to Christianize the Indians. It involves a little violence and sex, but is mostly an introspective movie set in early colonial times

The Crucible – This concerns the Salem Witch Trials and is not completely accurate but close.

The Last of the Mohicans – An excellent movie and decent adaptation of the book, it is set during the French and Indian Wars. Notice the relationship between the colonists and the British and the expectations the British had of Colonial obedience. Remember, of course, that this is based on a book that was written in the 1800s, after the Revolutionary War.

1776 – A musical version of the 2nd Continental Congress and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It has some minor inaccuracies, but it is basically truthful and informative. It is also a fairly entertaining musical if you like musical films.

The Patriot – Set in the Revolutionary War, not completely factually accurate but based on factual events. Basically it is a “hollywoodized” epic account.

Jefferson in Paris – I am not sure this is the name of it, but it is a decent movie concerning the 1780s and early 1790s.

Nineteenth Century

This list is relatively short, and I am sure I have left something out. I think there may be a film about Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, and there may be one about Andrew Jackson; I just can't think of any at this time.

Amistad – A Spielberg directed film set in 1839-40 about a group of escaped slaves on trial for mutiny.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn – It would be better to read the book, but this story does tell you a little about life along the Mississippi River in the mid 19th Century, from the existence of slavery, to the scandalous behavior of traveling “snake oil” salesmen, etc.

Lincoln – The recent movie is out in DVD form and available from rental outfits, etc. This Spielberg directed film is based largely on a small section of a history book called *Team of Rivals* by a renowned historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin.

Gettysburg – A film based on Jeff Sharra's book The Killer Angels. Outstanding book and a moving film set in and around the Battle of Gettysburg.

Glory – A really good movie about the 54th of Massachusetts during the Civil War, it features Denzell Washington, Morgan Freeman, and Matthew Broderick.

Twelve Years a Slave – A recent movie that is based on real events and has received a lot of critical acclaim. I highly recommend it.

Gone With the Wind – This classic love story is set in Georgia before, during and after the Civil War; it is basically a great love story, but it does portray the opulence of the aristocratic South as well as the devastation of the war. Make note of the somewhat racist stereotyping of the blacks in the movie, noting that the film was made in the 1930s. Compare this to Glory or A House Divided.

A House Divided – A good story but poorly made film about a family in Hancock county Georgia before and after the Civil War. It involves racial issues as well as property rights etc. Warning: it has a short, but not particularly violent or sexual, rape scene in it that could be disturbing to some people.

Dances with Wolves – This is a great movie about an American soldier who is greatly influenced by the Indians during his time stationed on the frontier. It stars Kevin Costner, and I think it won him an academy award for acting. This was one of the best movies of the late 1980s.

The Molly McGuires – Some of you may have seen this movie in the concluding week of the Industrial America course. It highlights working class concerns towards the end of the century. Made in 1972, it is somewhat dated, but the depiction of conditions in the coal mines is quite accurate, according to the reviews I read.

Early 20th Century

Titanic – Although it is primarily a love story, this film faithfully recreates the pride of the British and Americans in the technology of the time, as well as the attitudes of people towards the different social classes. The band playing “Nearer My God to Thee” as the ship sank and the locking of the lower classes below decks until the upper classes were in the lifeboats actually happened, as did the reluctance and refusal of people to begin evacuation of the ship they believed to be unsinkable.

Iron Jawed Angels – A powerful movie, starring Hillary Swank, about the efforts of Alice Paul to get the vote for women.

Eight Men Out – This is an outstanding movie about the Chicago White Sox scandal involving the World Series in 1919. It involves issues of ownership power and of the unions. It is directed by John Sayles. It is a must if you are a baseball fan.

Matewan – This is another John Sayles movie set in the early 1900s. It is about wildcat miner strikers and has some great actors in it, including James Earl Jones.

Birth of a Nation – I have not seen this one, but it is a world famous racist silent movie about the founding of the KKK. In the film the founder of the KKK is made out to be a hero and the savior of American culture.

Rosewood – Set in the segregated South in the 1920s, this movie is about a white family living in a black town and about the racism of the white town nearby; it features Jon Voight.

Inherit the Wind - Make sure you get the older version with Frederick March and Spencer Tracy. It is a classic movie depicting the Scopes Monkey Trial. But it is really more about the McCarthy Era of the 1950s.

The Great Gatsby – (The old one) This is a fairly good adaptation of the classic novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Like most film adaptations of classic novels, it disappointed many purists, but it was a pretty good movie. It was painstaking in its recreation of the time period, and it had good performances from Robert Redford, Bruce Dern, and especially a young Sam Waterston as Nick Caraway.

The Sting and The Road to Perdition are two very good movies set in crime circles during the 20s and 30s, especially during prohibition.

Cinderella Man & Seabiscuit Great sports movies set in the 1930s and based on true stories. They are both wonderful movies that give you the tone of the thirties.

The Great Debaters - It is a factual story about a debate team from a small black college that accepted an invitation to debate at Harvard. It concerns segregation, the Thirties, debating, regionalism, and power. It is an outstanding movie.

The Grapes of Wrath – Set in the Depression, this movie is a classic which portrays the Oklahoma dust bowl, the growth of paternalism in government, and the greed of the wealthy California land owners, etc.

I have left out World War II movies, but many are good

Late 20th Century Movies

The Bridge over the River Kwai - A supposedly great WWII movie. Compare this with

The Bridges at Toko Ri – (I may have misspelled that one) A Korean War movie that takes a somewhat critical view of war, quite a change from the WWII era movies. This is important because it is an early anti-war movie.

To Kill a Mockingbird – Based on the great book by Harper Lee, this basically true story is presented well in the 1960s era movie starring Gregory Peck. It captures racial attitudes in the Jim Crow South.

Far From Heaven – This is a very recent movie with Julianne Moore and Dennis Quaid that is an indictment of the conservatism of the 1950s. The story involves a wealthy suburban couple that ends up divorcing, but not until they deal with some major issues.

Quiz Show – Another relatively recent film directed by Robert Redford about a scandal involving a quiz show in the 1950s. The set, the costumes, the cars etc. are all excellently portrayed.

Good Night and Good Luck – 2005 movie about the life of newscaster, Edward R. Murrow during McCarthy era.

Rebel Without a Cause - Starring James Dean. This captures the iconoclastic attitude of some of the people in the fifties who, despite all the affluence, felt they did not fit in and that something must be wrong.

October Sky - About a teenager and his science project during Sputnik Era.

The Front – An early Woody Allen movie that deals with the dark side of the Red Scare, the blacklist, it features a few actors who were blacklisted. More recently The Majestic with Jim Carey dealt with some of the same issues.

JFK – Oliver Stone movie, presents an explanation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, worth thinking about.

Thirteen Days - Account of the inside workings of the Kennedy White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis..

Mississippi Burning – A great movie about the disappearance of three civil rights workers in Mississippi.

Malcolm X – A good movie about the life and times of Malcolm X, it features Denzell Washington as Malcolm.

Forrest Gump – This is a great film set in the fifties, sixties and seventies, not historical but set in history.

The Deer Hunter, Coming Home, or Born on the Fourth of July, all feature disillusionment of soldiers or ex-soldiers after their experience in Vietnam. They are all a bit depressing and dark.

Platoon – Excellent war movie set in Vietnam. Also set in Vietnam are Hamburger Hill & Full Metal Jacket. I think Platoon is the best of them; it features some great acting and has a more meaningful message.

Nixon – This is a good movie about one of America's greatest villains; it features some great actors. I have not seen it, but I imagine it does not portray Nixon in a light he would like. Frost Nixon too concerns the Nixon. Era.

All the President's Men – This is an adaptation of the book by Woodward and Bernstein; it features Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford as the two newsmen who uncovered the Watergate scandal.

Milk – A great movie about Harvey Milk's efforts to advance the cause of gay rights in the 70s.

The Insider - An indictment of the tobacco industry starring Russell Crowe as a former employee testifying against them.

Miracle – A powerful sports movie about eh 1980 Olympic hockey team. Historical significance is in the first five mins.

Food Inc. – a great documentary about the power of big business in the food industry.