Film: A Pedagogy for Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-six years ago, my mother, who was pregnant at the time, took a trip from Juarez, Mexico to McCamey, TX. My aunt was working in McCamey, and from what I know of the story, my mother needed work in order to send money back to my grandma. This necessity proved to be a turning point in my life, or that is, for my soon-to-be-life. Thanks to this trip, I was born in the U.S. My mother only had a work permit at the time, so I would not be a U.S. citizen today if it were not for this mere coincidence. Soon after I was born though, work became scarce and my mother had no choice but to return to Juarez.

In Juarez, my mother turned into the not-so-token breadwinner, yet breadwinner nonetheless, and my grandmother took full responsibility for my upbringing. We were extremely poor; therefore, entertainment required a lot of creativity on my part. I used to use a pen and clothespins to recreate robot characters I saw on our black and white 15-inch monitor television. That television turned out to be one of the most useful tools in my life. Through it, I taught myself enough English to follow along conversations, and more importantly, film dialogue.

When I was about four years old, my grandmother took me to my first movie. To be honest, I can't really remember much about it except that it was serious in tone, and that overall it was somewhat lost to me. My grandmother doesn't really know English to this day, so I'm sure she was even more lost than I was. The important part, however, was the experience.

The theatre was called "El Teatro Victoria," and we had to take three different "rutas" to get to it. These were vans in which the seats had been ripped out, and in their place benches had been installed around the perimeter to provide room for more passengers. They worked like buses, but they were more common in the parts of town we traveled. In any case, going to the movies was such an event that I remember getting ready would even take longer. My grandma would give me a shower (this was done in an outhouse), put way too much moisturizer on me, and would make sure my clothes were clean, ironed, and hole-free. By the time we actually made it to the theatre, I was completely clueless to the fact that I did not belong to the social class that was in the audience. This lets me know that even though I did not realize it at the time, my grandma knew exactly what she was doing.

The first movie I remember actually understanding was *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). I was immediately enthralled by the images and they still remain within my recall to this day. I can still remember the giant beetle appetizers, eyeball soup, and chilled monkey brains feasts that were so vividly captured in this movie. Every month at the movies brought a plethora of new visual displays that just stuck with me after every experience. Now I realize that this is exactly what "movies" are supposed to do; they pretty much lay it all out there visually, without much room for interpretation.   Great "films," on the other hand, tend to have a more purposeful existence that provides their viewers with social, political, and philosophical questions.

James Monaco distinguishes among these terms in the following way: According to Monaco, who follows French film theorists, film concerns the relationship of film artworks with the world around them; cinema on the other hand, refers to the aesthetic and internal structure of their art and artistry. In this schema, movies are seen as more commercial enterprises and represent their economic aspect. (DiYanni 111)

Using these associations with the terms 'movie,' 'film,' and 'cinema,' allows us to examine a general social problem that is especially overrepresented among younger viewers: the confusion between value and entertainment value. That is, our students do not think about films in terms of Academy Award-winning performances, satirical implications, or their relevance to life in general. They are still (and actually increasingly so) consumed by violence, action, and the blockbuster mindset of getting "more bang for your buck."

It has gotten to the point that students consider the movie experience to be completely separate from an educational experience. They put these two on opposite sides of a spectrum, as if saying that we shouldn't "have" to learn while being entertained or vice versa. Moreover, the entire school system seems to reflect this "counter position" belief, with many teachers and administrators priding themselves in **never** showing movies in their classrooms. You don't have to go farther than the teacher's lounge to hear that so and so "has already shown their students three movies this year!" The scornful tone of voice used with these "accusations" pretty much lets one know that films are becoming a taboo in our schools. Often times, movies are seen as a way of keeping the kids quiet without working hard.

This sort of accusation only deserves merit if what is being shown really is "just a movie." However, for those of us that believe in the power of film, this becomes an inaccurate assumption. In fact, film can become an invaluable tool in teaching about many different disciplines.

Many times, difficult to understand subject matter and overwhelming concepts like political ideologies, economic systems, and philosophical debates tend to cause problems for students. The students may not relate to the black and white images in the textbooks, and furthermore, may feel removed from the time periods in which they occurred. This is where a film becomes a wonderful resource.

A small film that may appear "senseless" to some educators can actually be a brilliant way to present a major topic. Recently, I discovered that *Robots* (2005), an animated Pixar film, is an outstanding way to present the ideologies behind capitalism, consumerism, communism, and the Americanization of beauty. In this movie, we have the lower class robots struggling to "upgrade" themselves in order to survive. This presents several conflicts which can help explain the following themes:

Consumerism: the money-hungry production companies are refusing to make simple spare parts in order to force the lower classes to get further into debt. This would be comparable to auto companies ONLY making new cars and not producing spare parts that are necessary for wear and tear.

Communism vs. Capitalism: Students can make a comparison between two economic systems. From the film, they may draw many different examples illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of both communism and capitalism. If the lower class robots would have their way, then everyone would live in a society where the division between the classes is erased. All robots would have a role in the advancement of the society, but no roles would be valued more than others.

Though this is the ideal situation behind a communist system, students begin to see certain problems. For example, if all of the robot's roles are given the same value, then they would not make extra efforts to get ahead in life. If everyone is getting the same pay with no attention being paid to merit, then why would certain robots work harder? Also, the competive edge would be taken out of the robot society. With only one company supplying one product, there would be no need to make quality products. People would have to be satisfied with what was offered to them without having many different choices.

In a capitalistic robot society, however, robots have quite the opposite problems. Robots would be overwhelmed with the hundreds of products that all perform the same function. Advertising would be relentless as companies struggle to win the robot/consumer's business. Though robots would benefit by the choices in great products, they would also enslave themselves to a life of always trying to catch up to those that have it all. Through this, students begin to understand the paradox that our own society lives in.

The Americanization of Beauty: Immediately after viewing robots, my students were asked how we can relate this "upgrading" of robots to our own society. One very astute student said, "nose jobs!" Following this statement, many other students blurted out "face lifts," "implants," "liposuction." They all understood that our own society has its own version of upgrades that mimics the one seen on *Robots* (2005). In reality of course, it is the other way around. The creators of the animated film were extremely clever in their efforts to include adult topics in a PG film. There's a part in the film were a head honcho type business CEO says something to the effect of, "How are we supposed to sell these upgrades if robots feel good about themselves?" When students understand the problem as it relates to the robots, they begin to draw conclusions that relate to our society. By making people feel like their appearance is not up to par, we push upon them this **need** to improve their image. Cosmetic surgeons, beauty care lines, and big name gyms become some of the first to capitalize on this phenomenon.

Obviously, films have to be carefully selected to avoid being "just a movie." If teachers are merely popping in a movie to entertain the students while they take care of grades or whatever, then we have a problem. To avoid this, it is important that a teacher carefully selects a film and knows what he/she wants the class to draw from it.

This year I have the privilege of teaching Spanish for Native Speakers; therefore, my position requires that my students learn more than simply *how* to speak Spanish, for they already have that capability. Instead, they need to learn about the different cultures associated with the language, their geography, the different dialects, and the history that unites them all. They must also build a new vocabulary with technical writing skills and practical applications. This is why it becomes such a natural step for me to turn to film. Especially since countries like Spain, Mexico, and Argentina are really pushing the envelope with groundbreaking films that help create analytical minds. Perhaps it would be easier to understand my idea if we broke it down into different areas of learning: cinematography, geography, historical content, and psychological/socio-economic/political/philosophical elements.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

Though learning about how films are made is not an integral part of Spanish *per se*, having technical writing and vocabulary-building activities is. That is why it becomes almost a no-brainer for my unit to include a section where we learn the physical elements that are present behind the scenes in movie making.

The movie industry changes its technology regularly thanks to "the increasing expectations of the movie-going audience." (Johnson 3) Therefore, the lessons that we use for this part of our

unit will continue to evolve over the years, each time adding new depths to our technical understanding.

This becomes especially important for my classes due to the fact that I am one of two Spanish teachers in the engineering academy, an academy an that prides itself in staying on top of technological advances. The students in my classroom are expected to learn terminology that may be applicable in a technologically advanced environment. Truthfully though, it does not matter where one teaches, because with our rapidly progressing technological society, it is still crucial that our students develop technical writing skills that may help them in a future career choice.

The initial focus will be on camera techniques (differentiating between shots), special effects, costumes, and finally, on distinguishing between different film genres. Here, we will be able to be more specific on certain features depending on the films themselves. For example, period pieces might have more elaborate costumes, while more contemporary films may generate more detailed discussions of newer camera techniques. While writing about film, we will be able to become film critics. As our repertoire builds, we can write short film reviews which can then become lengthier works as we are able to draw comparisons from the great film makers and directors; perhaps, maybe even comparing different works from one particular director (DiYanni 115).

GEOGRAPHY

One of the biggest shots to my heart comes when you ask a student where Chile is located, and they respond by saying, "t's either in Mexico or Spain, right?" Growing up in El Paso, TX, I once thought this problem was specific to border towns, but it seems that the problem is more severe than just that. The fact that I have to explain that there are more countries --continents, even-- that speak Spanish other than just Mexico or Spain lets me know that our students are not very aware of the world around them.

Recently, I showed my class the movie *Diarios de Motocicleta (The Motorcycle Diaries,* 2004). The movie focuses on the travels of a young Ernesto Guevara (the future Che Guevara) and his best friend Alberto Granado. They travel down from Buenos Aires to Chile, then all the way back up to Peru, finally ending up in Venezuela. The makers of this movie kept true to the authenticity of the actual travels by shooting the film in the exact places designated by Ernesto Guevara's diary and Alberto Granado's book and testimony. We get to see beautiful panoramic shots of these gorgeous countries and the industries that have changed their landscapes.

At one point, a student asked, "Would that be like traveling across Texas on a motorcycle?" To which I responded, "No, it would be like traveling across the U.S. one way and then making it half way back." This gave the students a new admiration not only for the travels, but also for the land area that they once didn't even acknowledge as existing. Another important feature comes in the form of dialect. Students pick up quickly on the different accents that distinguish the people of other countries. This helps them link a way of speaking to a particular location, making that location a little less foreign than before.

HISTORICAL CONTENT

In the film *Diarios de Motocicleta* (2004), we are introduced to a young Che Guevara, a man that played a huge role in the history of the Latin American world. Che Guevara images are now resurfacing as symbols of a revolutionary mindset, but how many students honestly understand what this mindset was? More importantly, do they understand about the factors that contributed to the construction of such mindset?

In our textbooks, historical figures are usually documented in, at most, two to three pages, which generally simply list their most noted accomplishments. Students are, most of the time, expected to read these short biographies and perhaps complete a short activity to show they have understood what they read. The problem with this is that in small reading sections, the characters do not come to life for our students. Students cannot relate with this type of distant learning. This is where the big screen becomes a teacher's aid in the classroom.

> But even if all imagined pasts are imperfect, their imperfections are distinctive. Professional historians, for example, pluck from the muck of the historical record the most solid bits of evidence, mold them into meanings, and usually serve them up as books that, though encrusted with footnotes and redolent of musty archives, can be held and cherished, pondered and disputed. Hollywood History is different. It fills irritating gaps in the historical record and polishes dulling ambiguities and complexities. The final product gleams, and it sears the imagination. (Carnes 9)

In short, through film students are able to draw associations with the characters, and what once seemed so boring and old to them, becomes relative and new. For example, when my students watched *Evita* (1997)**,** they found out that Eva Perón had been a radio host, an actress, a political leader, and the wife of Argentina's President by the time she was 26 years old. This gave them a completely new admiration for her as a person, and even helped some of them question their idea of "maturity."

Though I am not a big fan of taking the original language out of a historically based movie, I make a small exception for *Evita* (1997)**.** That is, until a better, more powerful Spanish version is made. The importance of this film, despite its flaws, is that it captures an actual character and follows her history. It shows us how Eva Perón was not just a simple first lady, but rather a force that helped her husband win his position in politics. Her travels through her "rainbow tour" helped generate great sympathy throughout the world for the people of Argentina. Yet, in the U.S., had Madonna not played her role, many people would not even recognize her name. This seems a great disservice to our students. This is especially the case for Spanish-speaking students that are replacing their identity with an American conformity.

One disclaimer I must add here is that I do not intend for film to replace lectures and textbooks. Instead, I propose that we use film to supplement the written and spoken word. Film should be seen as an upper level manipulative that can have a lasting effect on our audio and visual learning students.

PSYCHOLOGICAL/SOCIO-ECONOMIC/POLITICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL ELEMENTS

Our students' disinterest in their own roots is a phenomenon that I truly feel can be slowed down or maybe even reversed through the use of good film in the classroom. As I mentioned before, the images of Che Guevara are resurfacing on a regular basis on T-shirts, lunchboxes, purses, etc. Yet when I asked my class who Che was, the only student who claimed to know said he was an "anarchist." After further questioning, I realized that my students were immediately equating the term "anarchy" with the term "revolutionary." This allowed me to use their misunderstandings as a platform from which to dive into the life of a man who went from adventurer to communist and, finally, to socialist.

Watching *Diarios de Motocicleta* (2004) allowed the students to view the process through which a human begins to shape his own mind. In fact, the first question on my student's minds was, "Why are they riding a motorcycle across South America?" It was as if they could not possibly fathom the idea of doing something for the sake of intellectual and spiritual growth.

This lets me know that our high school students are not being asked to spend any time analyzing themselves. We are losing them to the smoke and mirrors of sensationalism.

When I would ask my students for socio-economic factors that can lead people to do what they do, they used to respond by saying, "That's like college stuff, Mr. Corona, we're just in high school right now." So now, I ask them instead about a particular film, *Maria full of Grace* (2004)*,* about a young Colombian girl that allows herself to be used as a drug transporter as her only alternative to her horrible working conditions. I say, "What are the socio-economic factors that caused Maria to become a 'mula' and risk her life?" This time, I get answers that let me know that they understand the question, and furthermore, are able to apply these answers to real life situations. When I asked that exact question on a test, one student wrote (in Spanish):

> There are several factors that influenced Maria's decision. For one, she had gotten pregnant too young. Secondly, her only other way of making money was working in poor conditions at the flower factory. On top of that, there were family problems that are especially found in Colombian homes. She was expected to help pay for the rent of her home rather than being in school. Basically, Maria had so many things working against her that in the end they piled up and fell on top of her.

Now, when I get a student who tells me that my questions are too college-like, I read this same answer, or one like it back to them. To be honest, every time I test them on what I hoped they could find from a movie, they tend to impress themselves with the type of answers they are capable of coming up with.

For example, when we read about Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, we took our understanding to another level. Before the students watched the movie *Frida* (2002), the quiz question was, "What are some differences between the works of Diego and those of Frida?" The most general response was, "Diego made big paintings on walls, and Frida made small paintings on canvas." Though this captures the general idea, it does not get into the political implications of their work. And it is not that I expect them to be able to write a paper on the political histories of these two artists, but I want them to at least scratch the surface so as to pique their interest. Once again, after the movie, I ask the same question on a test. This time, when I post the best exams on my wall, I am able to feel a sense of pride in the detail that they are able to capture in their answers. One student, who happens to have special learning modifications, wrote in his response:

> Diego made murals. They were important because it let even the poor people see them. They were in public and they were about the people. He even put pictures of communist men and got in trouble for it. They destroyed his art, but he made it again later somewhere else. Frida made smaller pictures that were more about herself. People thought she drew the world of dreams [here he attempted to come up with the term surrealism that we had talked about, but was not able to use the exact word so he described it instead], but she was really drawing herself. She just had a life that looked like a nightmare. This made people know she had a bad life like them too.

Naturally, the eloquence in language will take some time, but I think the student's response shows that he has a very good understanding of the basic concepts that were found within Frida's and Diego's works. He is also able to put together a direct and indirect connection with how people identified with their art.

Another aspect of films that students can learn from deals with the responsibility of making film. Here, students can be dragged into a discussion of why certain films are made. Do they

serve a particular political or commercial function? An equally important question is: SHOULD they be made?

> Because so many people consume Hollywood entertainment product, should Hollywood have to exercise care as to the messages, intended or inadvertent, sent into the world embedded in that product? This sounds like more than many film and television creators signed up for when they chose to enter the field: "We are not teachers, we are artists." (Valenti 33)

Forming these types of questions draws students into philosophical discussions of morality. There's no better way to get students participating in class discussion like simply asking if something is right or wrong. Students themselves constantly engage in this type of criticism (usually of each other) in the hallways and in the lunch areas, so why not bring it into the classroom where it can serve a purpose?

LESSON PLAN 1: THE FILM REVIEW

The basic foundation of our technical film review will be vocabulary, vocabulary, vocabulary! Though it may generally seem monotonous, it will be imperative to develop (as a class) a comprehensive vocabulary list that provides students with the basics of film critique writing. Though this list will not have to be reinvented every time the students write a film review, it should be amended as the class film repertoire develops.

This is extremely useful when we want to focus on a particular element. For example, "costumes" is a general term used to describe what the characters are wearing. In depth, however, students may learn about the different people that are involved in costuming, such as costume designers, first hands, cutters, stitchers, drapers, and dressers to name a few (Campbell 2).

Example List: Antagonist   Protagonist
- Antagonist
  - Villain
  - Musical Score
  - Set
  - Setting
  - Director
  - Dialogue
  - Shots
    - close-ups
    - long shots
    - focus
    - foreground
    - middle ground
    - background
    - pan
    - zoom
  - Genre (The different genres may vary within classes)
    - drama
    - horror
    - foreign
    - action
    - documentary
    - science fiction
    - comedy
    - musical
- Protagonist
  - Supporting Actors
  - Costumes
  - Make-up
  - Plot
  - Producer
  - Screenwriting

<div align="center">-realistic fiction</div>
<div align="center">-surrealist</div>

Once an appropriate list is formed, that is, one that incorporates all of the aspects that the students will be expected to apply within their review, then it is time to watch the film. A film may be seen all at once, or it may be viewed in sections, paying attention to particular aspects at different times. Using small sections is useful in focusing on certain techniques; however, for a complete film review it is important that the film be viewed in its entirety.

Upon completion of a film viewing, students will be expected to work independently on creating their own review of the film. It is important to structure the review with two sections. The first is one that is teacher-guided. In this section, the teacher sets up certain questions that MUST be answered by the review.

Sample Questions:

- What type of film was _____?
- Who were the main characters? Supporting Characters?
- Who was the antagonist and who was the protagonist?
- What was the setting of the film?
- Who was the director?

Then, in a second section, the students should be able to provide a personal interpretation of the film's meaning and an evaluation of the actors' performances (DiYanni 117). The result will be a film review that resembles those seen in newspapers and magazines. In fact, as a supplemental activity, the teacher may choose to find an actual review of the same movie and make a comparison to the student's work. This will allow the students to see the progress they are making in becoming expert film critics.

LESSON PLAN 2: CHARACTERS IN HISTORY

This lesson plan should be implemented after several different movies have been incorporated in the classroom. For the sake of building a good lineup of historical leaders, the films *Evita* (1997), *Frida* (2002), and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) may be used. Naturally, the more films the students are introduced to, the more learning that will occur in the classroom. Luckily, new historically based films are constantly being produced.

The Characters

Eva Peron, Juan Peron, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Ernesto Guevara, and Fidel Castro (optional)

Group Project

The students will split up into groups. Each group will be assigned a particular historical figure [from the above list] to research. The research will be used to confirm or negate the accuracy of the film's portrayal of the character that they are assigned. In order to allow students equal access to the same resources, a trip to the library/computer lab should be scheduled for the entire class period. Additional research should be student- motivated and will reflect student performance. Thus, some of the more advanced students will show their work via PowerPoint or neatly prepared graphic organizers.

Upon completing the research, the students will work with the members of their group to put together a 10-minute presentation on their historical figure. If students choose to show segments of the movie they are representing, those segments will not be included in the 10 minutes required for the groups. During presentations, students will be encouraged to make links between their character and those of the other groups.

When all groups have presented their work, the class as a whole will put together a timeline, placing their characters and associated events in perspective. Also, the class will come up with guiding questions that will help build relationships among all of the characters. Obviously, some characters will be more closely related than others, but that will present itself as the class draws its conclusions. Finally, in order to tie in a geographical component, students should create a map designating the different characters' locations. This should include the different cities, countries, and continents in which the characters made an impact. For example, though Che Guevara was from Argentina, his work with Fidel Castro in Cuba was what really put him on the map. In addition, Guevara traveled to Bolivia in effort to spread his ideas. This will help students make connections between the many different Latin American societies in the world.

LESSON PLAN 3: SOCIAL INTERACTION VIA THE INTERNET

This lesson plan will be put in effect when the students have reached their highest level of understanding about the films. There are endless websites that provide interactive postings about films, actors, and the historical figures portrayed in such films. These sites tend to get rather in depth about their postings and in general require a lot of research to fully understand them.

One site for example, may include a person's negative reaction to the making of *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004). This is because there are many who believe that Che Guevara was a horrible man and that his story does not deserve to be told, or simply, that his character should not be praised. On the other hand, we have those that concentrate on the fact that the movie does not go into detail about Guevara's political ideas, but rather presents a young man that is noticing that the world needs change. The student, then, is expected to arrive at his/her own opinion of the movie's worth.

The first step in the students' assignment will be to print and read three postings from different sites and use them, along with their prior research, to form personal opinions about the given subject matter. These personal opinions will include social implications, political implications, and philosophical implications. The students should not only include the views of the characters in the films, but also, the view that the students feel the filmmakers themselves wanted to portray. What was included in the film, and what was purposefully left out? Who are current representatives with the same ideals? How do ideologies come into play?

After reading along with such postings, the final step will be for the student to become an active member by submitting his/her own postings and reading the replies that ensue. Each student will be required to make three separate postings. They may be postings that are replies to a dialogue they have initiated due to an original posting, or they may be three separate posts on three different sites. The students will be required to bring in the postings they have made, as well as the responses produced by their original posting.

This activity validates the students as proactive members of society. They are no longer sitting on their opinions, but rather putting them out there for the world to see. Also, they are getting feedback from people all over the world, which allows them to see how others think.

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