



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2003 Volume I: Geography through Film and Literature

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## Introduction

Geography is one of the most venerable subjects in the curriculum, hundreds of years old. Film studies is among the newest, introduced widely in universities only in the 1970s and still offered only in certain high schools and junior highs. Not long ago, geography was thought to have seen better days, replaced by "social studies" or by one of the more specific disciplines that thrived after World War II: psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology. Film studies has been suspect for quite the opposite reason: too young, too unproven, of uncertain consequence, it has been deemed a hobby.

Largely because of the effect on education of "globalization," these two subject areas have begun to intersect and, in the process, they have secured a mutual future which our seminar walked boldly into. Geography relates the historical human dimensions of sociology and anthropology to the more timeless conditions studied in geology, meteorology, and economics. The catchword "glocal" (global-local) has recently returned educators at all levels to geography's constant concern not only with the distinctive character of places (local) but to its concern with the (global) relation among places brought about by various types of movement: movement of people, goods, capital, ideas, images. Students from kindergarten through graduate school need to understand facts about other places in the world; but before learning such specific things, they need to understand two primary principles: first, the relation of people to place, and second the interdependence among places. In a way, the return of geography came about in tandem with the tremendous popular interest in ecology, a scientific word that would not have been understood by lay people until 1970 or so. Ecology taught us that all "individuals" (entire species too) depend on each other systematically and that the system, operating in a constantly self-regulating flux, can be altered, skewed, and upset when "individuals" get out of position, when they migrate to new areas or somehow turn up in new places.

The participants in our seminar routinely deal with students (from second grade through twelfth) who need to see themselves in a larger world and who need to understand that their health as "individuals" or as members of a group they identify with depends on the health of the system. Geography today is as much a study of migration, adjustment, and interdependence as it is of distinctive difference. From my perspective, films can be an instrument to bring the "geographical" to life, while the cinema in toto constitutes a model of what geography is all about.

Let me explain this latter claim. The availability of films from around the world has allowed the past two generations to thoroughly scan the world, catching glimpses of other places and noting processes of movement between places. Thus cinema has actively contributed to the renewed interest in geographical issues (more than TV, which is usually national in its institutional structure and socio-cultural concerns). While the movies were international before being national (the Lumière brothers who invented cinema in the late

19th century immediately commissioned camera crews to capture images in one location and project them in another), the exploitation of cinema's worldliness changed dramatically after 1975. In that year Hollywood successfully experimented with new strategies of global marketing (Jaws, then Star Wars). World distribution was theirs for the taking, the European art cinema having lost its influence after 1968. As an antidote to this Hollywood hegemony, international festivals began to feature films from places previously cinematically invisible. Cannes widened its tiny aperture first to include "le quinzaine des realisateurs (1969) " and then "un certain regard (1978)" in search of visions and voices beyond the "selection officiel." Specialized festivals sprouted as well, opening screen space to vigorous and spawning yet scarcely known film traditions. FESPACO--devoted solely to African work--was inaugurated in 1969 in Ouagadougou and has increased in size ever since. Montreal's "Festival des films du Monde" began in 1977. It annually screens over 400 films from 75 countries, including Kyrgistan, Myanmar, Kurdistan, and Iceland, while less than 10% of films shown there originate in the USA. Of course festivals like these reach a minuscule audience; and the films shown in these special venues could scarcely inflect box office figures, or the discourse of critics and teachers until the videotape revolution of the 1980s made them potentially available on a wider basis. And so it wasn't until the 1990s that "world cinema" could genuinely become a subject of study - when outlying films could make their way into a new market that included the AV holdings on college campuses and in certain school districts.

And so, while several dynamic cinemas date from the late 70s and early 80s (e.g., Ireland, West Africa, China), *world cinema* as a pedagogical idea and as a research agenda distinct from "foreign films," is really but a decade old. It appeals to teachers fascinated by what lies beyond the usual visual surround of their students, and to those who may have become suspicious of the reach and the narcissism of American popular culture. World cinema is the art cinema of our day; it banks on festivals and criticism, is handled by specialty distributors and has a particular section reserved for it at the video store. Studying films from odd corners of the world quickly shows how they are at once distinct from each other and interdependent on a mobile economy of images. Questions of indigenous source and style, on the one hand, and of "image migration," on the other, arise in ways comparable to geographical questions about populations.

But how exactly should World Cinema be studied? Who is prepared to take it on, and what does it encompass? Encompass, indeed! We need a compass and a map to negotiate the worlds of World Cinema. Film festivals long ago came up with the most basic map as they sought top products to be put in competition each year as in a Miss Universe contest. For a long while the cognoscenti did little more than push colored pins onto a map to locate the national origin of masterpieces. This appreciation of cut flowers adorned film study in its first years but required a more systematic account (call it ecological) of the vitality of privileged examples. What political atmosphere and cultural soil nourished these films and their makers? Today's impulse--more ambitious because more dynamic and comparative--would track a process of cross-pollination that by-passes national directives and affects the way that films are made and seen everywhere. Might not a dynamic mapping strategy describe the changes in films as they have evolved differentially around the globe? An historical atlas of world film would seem a sensible first step before approaching a territory as confusing as this "field" of study.

These were the considerations behind our seminar. Yet we did not set out to build a gazetteer or an encyclopedia, futilely trying to do justice to cinematic life everywhere. Instead of comprehensive information about any particular place and its films, we were interested in becoming acquainted with a set of *approaches* to world cinema and with the different perspectives one can take. Take an atlas of maps as an analogy. An atlas opens up a continent to successive views figured by very different types of maps: political, topographical, meteorological, relief, marine, demographic, historical. In the seminar we recognized how each approach--each type of map--might tell us something different about films from abroad. Let's sample a couple

of these.

**A political map.** From grade school on students pour over successive shapes of world power: the Greeks, the Roman empire, various barbarian kingdoms, Islam's arms reaching through Africa and girdling Europe. What would a map of cinematic power show? To indicate filmmaking hotspots, imagine a gray-scale of production density that would be keyed to Hollywood figured as a dark constant of about 300-400 strong movies each year. Competitors would be variably less dark: since 1930 France has put out well over 100 features a year except during the German occupation. Japan, more like 300. And India, at least since the 1950s has increased from 300 to its current 890, by far the most productive industry going. The surprise would be Egypt, Turkey and Greece, all making hundreds of films each year until television undercut them. Were one to graph world output at ten year intervals, significant pulsations would appear: Brazilian production, for instance, phases in and out with shifts in government, Hong Kong emerges in the 50s, then dominates East Asia from the 70s; and today there is the powerhouse of Iran. Like Burkina Faso in West Africa, Iran in the 1980s surges ahead of surrounding nations.

Iran and Burkina Faso remind us, however, that national power and prestige in cinema comes more by way of critical assessment and festival performance than by sheer quantity of titles. It was genius filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami and Idrissa Ouedraogo who put these nations on the map at Cannes. Similarly Edward Yang and Hao Hsiou Hsien raised Taiwan to a par with Hong Kong (they receive equal space in World Cinema encyclopedias) despite Taiwan's modest overall output. Nor can we forget Denmark, which this past decade has become a European colossus compared to Germany despite being outproduced 60 to 16. The political map may be for specialized film teachers like myself, but we learned that it is always useful to try to determine the "scale" of a film culture when assessing the impact of an individual film. Knowing that Myra Nair's *Salaam Bombay* was just one of 875 films made in India in 1989 makes a difference. So too does knowing that it was immediately recognized there as something daring and dangerous: a film about the genuine (and genuinely terrifying) conditions of hundreds of thousands of children in South Asia.

**A demographic map.** Apportioning the world's 3000 feature films per year by place of origin makes the globe appear to spin more smoothly than it really does. For Hollywood's lopsided economic mass (bags of box office receipts returning to it from nearly everywhere but India) pulls it out of true. Such domination of distribution includes both theatrical exhibition and video dissemination (except for the black market economy rampant particularly in Africa and Asia). To represent not the production, but the availability of images region by region, the grayscale no longer suffices. It is too simple. These displays must be chromatic; imagine a map of Spain or Poland or Cambodia with red daubs for Hollywood films playing in theaters and taking up space on video shelves, blue for indigenous images. Speckles of yellow and green would suggest diversity - yellow for images imported from neighboring countries, green for those coming from afar. Take Ireland, the European country with the highest per capita attendance. Lately Hollywood has colonized some 86% of its screen space and time; local productions (up to 30 films a year) garner 3-4%. The remaining 10% come mainly from other common market countries, Britain above all. Now in France, this year Hollywood dipped below 50% for the first time in two decades. The French have a taste for Italian and Asian films, but mainly their own products prevail, set up by intensive promotions and economic incentives. Since the real film wars have been waged less over production than competition for audiences, demographic studies look like military maps, suitable for strategy sessions in the boardrooms of CEOs and cultural ministers. Nation-states have frequently protected their workforce and the minds of their citizens from foreign invasion. Unlike literary production where native product is secure behind the Great Wall of the native language, films from the outset invaded foreign screens.

It is important for American students to understand the power of American images opening up markets in

other places. They should also be able to understand the rise of local resentment and self-defense strategies that may appear anti-Americanism. Some of those strategies aggressively try to fight back with images that look very different from the Hollywood norm, images responding to traditional stories, traditional graphic arts, and a distinctive rhythm and style of looking at the world and understanding it. This is what one tastes in looking at good films from abroad.

But this celebration of "distinction" can go too far. When university scholars first began to study foreign films after WWII, they mainly did so inside language departments, assuming that great films were individual creations or else came out of an isolated and self-generating national tradition. To use Franco Moretti's analogy (1), national cinema studies have by and large been genealogical trees, one tree per country. Their elaborate root and branch structures seldom interfere with one another. A world systems approach, on the other hand, demands a different analogy, that of "waves," which roll through adjacent cultures whose proximity to one another promotes propagation that not even triangulation can adequately measure. Moretti's term attracts one of world cinema's best examples: for the "New Wave" that buoyed French film in 1959 rolled around the world, affecting in different ways and under dissimilar circumstances the cinema lives of Britain, Japan, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Hungary. Its original undulation in Paris owed much to the Hollywood films that came ashore behind the Normandy invasion of 1944, literally re-juvenating a tired French culture. The New Wave passed first through youth fads in fashion, design and the novel before cresting at Cannes in 1959 where its effects were patently international. In short, you can't study a single film, nor even a national cinema, without understanding the interdependence of images, entertainment, and people all of which move with increasing regularity around the world. The movies are a model for "the glocal."

**A cognitive map.** Fredric Jameson has adapted the phrase "cognitive mapping" to characterize the ways people in different places make sense of a world so complex that they can't readily visualize the power structures that impinge on them (2). Movies are privileged cognitive maps, since they are made to challenge and assist people in their effort to put the world together, which is precisely what one must do to process a film. "Cognitive mapping" derives from social science; in Jameson's hands it has an explicitly pedagogical, indeed outright political aim: to orient human beings who are literally aimless in the increasingly spatial and cultural alienation of our times. Our seminar deployed this concept to measure the internal experience of any fictional universe: how does a film from another part of the world orient its viewers to the conditions that surround them? How do they literally put the pieces of their world together? One must notice particularities of scope, dimension, pace, focus and detail within the aesthetic center of films. How do different films or different national cinemas orient their spectators to the world? And how do these spectators orient themselves to the "global" films made in Hollywood that are putatively designed with everyone's pleasure in mind? Can American students, even in early grades, imagine what the world looks like through the eyes of an Iranian child? It's worth making the attempt, and the plethora of movies from Iran that feature children as main characters makes this an enjoyable challenge.

Our weekly seminar discussions focused on the films we saw together from a given region (West Africa, Ireland, China, Iran, Australia); we spread out from the film's cues to learn about the social and geographical features of a chosen part of the world; information about the national cinema-the image life-of the populace was disseminated. But mainly we sought to elaborate the kind of concerns, features, values, and resources the films brought up, comparing these to parallel aspects of American life and Hollywood films. The literary heritage of some of the regions made the distinctiveness of the films easier to comprehend (Yeats' poems celebrating the landscape and the sprites of the west of Ireland form a terrific background to films like *Into the West* and *The Secret of Roan Inish* ).

Participants launched their own examination of various aspects of film as it relates to geography and history, building the impressive set of teaching units collected here. Some of these examined features of social life in a given region. Kristin Carolla used the movies mentioned just above, and several additional titles, to help students understand Irish culture. A large percentage of Connecticut's population claim Irish ancestry. And since English is spoken in Ireland, one might expect this small island (not much more than twice the size and population of Connecticut) to feel familiar. Yet Carolla finds that a very different relation of people to tradition obtains there. She shows how attentive Irish films are to the features of landscape, suggesting that tradition can be embedded in the land. The abundant stories and legends the Irish are famous for link history and myth to the land and to the sea. Her unit attunes students to exactly this living aspect of geography, challenging them to find stories in their own culture that bring the land to life. David DeNaples broke the continent of Africa, often taken as a single block, into a group of regions with quite distinct climates, economies, and social organizations. Yet all places in Africa underwent the terribly difficult experience of colonization and liberation. DeNaples' unit examines how this dramatic and painful scenario played out in different ways region by region. Many of the troubles currently associated with Africa can be understood as an interplay of history and geography. Films from each region immediately immerse students in the social, historical, and geographical issues that should be known by all Americans, since our own country is comprised of a large percentage of people whose heritage goes back to Africa. Sean Griffin has developed a genuinely exploratory adventure for his students: a study of the places along the Trans-Siberian railway. This legendary railway connects places crucial to Asian civilization; it is also the link between Asia and Europe, starting as it does in St. Petersburg and forking off to places like Vladivostok and Beijing. Griffin has made ample use of the spate of wonderful films from China and the republics of the former USSR. His "stops" along the way allow students to acquaint themselves with the history, literary classics and famous architecture of key cities. Students learn how to prepare for a journey and how to learn from touring - even touring by means of the movies. Crecia Cipriano sampled countries linked not contiguously by a railroad, but linked by a common language: French. Her unit emphasizes the breadth of francophone cultures from West Africa, to Madagascar, to the Caribbean to Quebec. She alludes to Southeast Asia as well, but because it is difficult to find Francophone films from Cambodia, for instance, this part of the "franco" world is not represented. On the other hand, excellent films from her other sites will give her students a sampling of the way French sounds in different places. More important, these films open up the differences and commonalities of life in these amazingly rich cultures. Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins, working with early-grades, has emphasized the narrative traditions in several distinct places: West Africa, France, East Europe. Her students will be exposed to vivid stories from these places, since excellent short films have been made of these. Branching out from the films of the stories, she has prepared materials and planned activities to immerse students in the world and world view of far-away children who are at once very like them and yet whose daily lives are different. This builds the qualities of curiosity and respect; it also provides a wealth of knowledge about the world to students who might otherwise not look far beyond their neighborhoods.

All of the units produced by the Fellows took advantage of the opportunities afforded by the subject matter of world films and geography to introduce sophisticated notions of diversity and commonality in the human experience. This was a constant concern for teachers working in the richly diverse school district of New Haven. A couple of the units, besides that of Kirkland-Mullins made diversity the focus of their units. Sandra Friday, looking for ways to introduce a broader world to her students, a world more diverse than they had imagined, came upon one of the seminar's crucial theoretical distinctions: that between space and place. Her students will be asked to move concentrically out from their homes and neighborhoods, to the city of New Haven, to the New York City orbit, and then to the wide world (represented by films shot in South America and Australia). She has located films that clearly trace the transformation of a character's understanding of the



surrounding world from that of mere place to that of personal space. Her own students will find themselves more comfortable in a larger world if they carefully watch the films she has chosen. In each film, chief characters are confronted with people and places disturbingly different from what they have known.

Yet as the films prove, diversity is something to be approached with excitement, a learning and expanding experience, just as mere places can, through "investment," be transformed into familiar, or at least habitable spaces. Because of her teaching assignment (recently arrived children from non-Anglophone countries) Giovanna Cucciniello's unit is unusually well-tailored to the seminar topic. She goes directly after the goal that all the Fellows shared, that of making the students in her class comfortable with themselves, intrigued by their heritage, and prepared to treat other children with these same feelings of comfort, intrigue, and pride. The films she came to focus on were largely the ones chosen for group consideration, films from other lands seen through the eyes of children-protagonists. Her lesson-plans suggest, as do those of many other Fellows, how the enthusiasm shared by all of us in discussing these films and the peoples and places they concerned, could bubble into the minds of children who have had neither the time nor the opportunity to explore much more than their own experiences. Faced with the same mission, Evelyn Lawhorn will use films as one of several devices to shock her fifth-grade students into recognition of their place in the universe. Her catchword is "scale," the manipulation of which allows her to bring together science, mathematics, geology, anthropology, history, and of course geography. There may not be many films that deal with the origin of life on earth and with the development of homo sapiens, but she has found several; using these together with inventive lesson plans her students will face themselves in a very different mirror, one that reveals their place in a very large schema of time and space. From here she leaps forward eons to the discovery and colonization of the New World by Europeans. Many films are available to her for this portion of her unit. The trick, which she has mastered, is to keep in front of the students' minds the sheer size of the historical enterprise that has resulted in what may all too easily seem like a small comfortable world of New Haven in the year 2003. Lawhorn's unit should usefully unsettle her students, provoking them to discover a world that her films display as vast and full of possibilities.

Two other units situate cinema and geography within what is a more properly historical framework. Nehemia Levin grabs the undeniable impetus of the Academy Award-winning films *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist* to initiate an inquiry into the origins of anti-Semitism, beginning as far back as Russia in the late 18th century. Keeping a European focus, his unit will let students understand the way Jews in the last century were confined to certain areas of Europe, and were then confined in camps. The story of their persistence as a nation, one that was able to successfully make a claim on a traditional homeland, may serve as an inspiration to other persecuted groups who sense themselves literally pushed around or dispersed. The search for identity can take one into geographies that may be hostile or friendly, but that in any case contain history. The films mentioned, plus many others dealing with anti-Semitism in Europe, "contain" history in just this way. Students are encouraged to locate films relating to the identity of groups they belong to, films through which they can interrogate a personally felt history. James Brochin's unit deploys several notable films to make students palpably aware of the importance and fragility of their freedoms, specifically the freedom from aggressive interrogation that has terrorized peoples in the past. Glancing at the ordeal Joan of Arc was made to undergo, which can be seen as related to the mentality and practice of the Inquisitions of the late Middle Ages, he then turns to America's own history, specifically to the Salem witch trials and to the inquests of the House Un-American Activities Committee of the postwar years. Given the traumatic events of the past few years, students should easily relate such history to concerns for national security on the one hand and the abrogation of personal rights on the other. Geography, history, law, and philosophy come together around what in our country is known as the "Fifth Amendment," something that the arts (drama and cinema above all) make unforgettably present.

Let me close this preview with Angelo Pompano's inventive plan to have his students produce a filmed geography of their own environment, the school where he teaches and where they spend so much of their lives. After studying an important genre of artistic documentary films known as "City Symphonies" (the most notable examples of which date from the 1920s and early 30s), the students will plan and execute their own film. The goal here is the appreciation of film as an artform as it intersects a complex local geography. Just as the cities of Berlin, Paris, and Moscow were viewed through the cinematic prisms of the filmed "symphonies" made about them, why not encourage students to break down the complexity of their own environment in the same way? Let them identify the myriad interdependent aspects of their institution, aspects that go into action from early morning till into the evening. Their own place in the institution will come into focus only as part of the "system" that their film should both identify and model. This film, if properly brought off, will display the "ecology" of a public school environment through a "symphonic structure" that foregrounds a knowledge of the way a film works as a system, too.

Geography and Cinema are equally systems in which human characters play the most significant but not the only roles. Altogether, in our weekly seminar sessions and in the eleven units developed by the fellows, "Geography through Film and Literature" monitored the relation of the personal to what is beyond the personal. Just as films show that interdependence of the protagonist on other characters, on the setting, and on scarcely visible forces, so students in New Haven must be shown that their lives depend on understanding the network of cultures that surround the globe, understanding the history of those cultures and the way they interact with the features of the earth. A deep understanding of such systematic interdependence is possible in the cinema; it is possible as well in the school situation. If such understanding may ever be possible in global society, it must come through the minds of new generations sitting expectantly in front of screens or in classrooms, absorbing, thinking, then discussing *Life on Earth*, which, by no coincidence, was the first film we watched.

Dudley Andrew

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1. Franco Moretti, *An Atlas of the European Novel* (New York: Verso, 1999).
2. Fredric Jameson, *The Geo-Political Aesthetic* (London: BFI, 1992).

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