



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

Mosaic America on Film: Fact Versus Fiction

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Mosaic America on Film: Fact Versus Fiction is designed to allow the students and teacher to examine how minorities, ethnic groups and history are portrayed in film. The potential difficulties of intercultural and historical communications can be reduced if students recognize what they view in films as either fact or fiction.

Using this curriculum unit, seventh grade students will become more aware of the values and struggles of minorities and ethnic groups in the United States. American films and written works, fictional and non-fictional will be used as tools to open the eyes of students and allow them to gain greater understanding and awareness of these cultures in the United States. Through films that portray different ethnic groups and historical events, student will explore the customs and beliefs of their own culture as well as those of others and examine significant events that have contributed to the history of the United States.

In 1994, 22,500 students from the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades participated in a battery of history tests given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (which was established by Congress in the 1980s). Most students failed to put into historical context the Civil Rights Movement or the government's historical role in trying to subjugate Native Americans. If students are foggy about the broad strands in American history, like what motivated the Puritans to come to America or exactly who did what to whom, then the finer points of who we are as a nation of diverse people are sure to be misunderstood. Without teaching history from a multicultural perspective, a pattern of confusion about people and events will continue to be apparent and many students will be participating in our society with misrepresentations (stereotypes), tenseness, and resentment. Students need the skills to form critical judgments of what they see in films depicting different groups of people or events.

This curriculum unit is not about entertainers, studio politics, innovative film techniques, or even the art of film. Rather, this is a unit about the social substance and meaning of American film, particularly a comparison between Hollywood's versions of history with that of historical events.

As students view select films, they will be asked to develop a portfolio that demonstrates skills in writing, creative thinking and the ability to differentiate between fact and fiction. The students will examine the origins, development and significance of ethnic representations in American film. They will explore the various ways films helped to shape people's perceptions of themselves and the world about them.

Since films serve many functions—a form of art, entertainment, an instrument of propaganda, a medium of

social change, and a transmitter of cultural values and events—the students will research facts shown in certain films (*Glory*, *Pocahontas* , and *Mississippi Burning*) through written materials (print and electronic print) and the INTERNET. Hopefully, students will develop a systematic way to view films and distinguish what is fact and what is fiction.

Films are products of collective efforts, representations that are partially borrowed from history and literature. The images portrayed are combinations of fact, fiction, commerce and art. Given the need to attract and engage mass audiences, popular attitudes are represented on film more than in novels and paintings. Filmmakers often choose to ignore reality in depicting ethnic groups or history. By portraying only parts of life , they often misrepresent the complexity of history and ethnic groups. Popular film stereotypes of Native Americans, African Americans, Asians, Jews, and European immigrants infer negative beliefs and prejudices about these people as groups not as individuals.

American films play an influential part in fixing images of ethnic groups and history in the minds of viewers. Despite years of research, it is impossible to find out the actual effect that films have on audiences. The adoption of dress styles, language, and mannerisms of films by the public has consequences. Not all negative. On the other hand, Hollywood has made victims of some ethnic groups. In 1915, D.W. *Griffith's Birth of a Nation* depicted African Americans as lewd and brutal. When large numbers of European Americans rejoiced as the Ku Klux Klan rescued a white girl from the hands of an African American in a scene near the end of the film, many African Americans knew that their people would suffer in real life as a consequence of the negative representation (stereotype). Even though African American groups, notably the NAACP, protested the showing of *Birth of a Nation* their success was limited. Although they raised the awareness of stereotyping in film, their protests also increased public interest in Griffith's film.

Films often serve as handbooks of social behavior. They introduce many audiences to people, places and events that they would otherwise never know. Therefore, films often establish basic identity of those people, places or events. The negative representation of African American males as oversexed beings like Melvin van Peebles' role in *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* sometimes reinforces false assumptions about other African American males. As the social places of ethnic groups change in American life, the representations of ethnic images should also change to adjust to new conditions. Filmmakers at times do alter negative representations (stereotypes) to maintain truisms with social data or they lose their credibility with viewers, thus profit. Ethnic groups themselves often choose misrepresentations as a strategy to draw attention to achievements or goals. Recent films that include John Shaft giving the finger to an irate driver in the title sequence of *Shaft* (1971); and *Original Gangsters* (1996) pushing for African Americans to take back their communities.

Historians often argue against how films distort the past. Using non-fictional written documents and comparing them to films with historical events or people represented, historians and even the average viewer can prove misrepresentations. In the *Double Life of Pocahontas* (Jean Fritz, page 67), *Pocahontas* marries John Rolfe, not John Smith as represented in the Walt Disney production of *Pocahontas* (1995).

The entire population—Native American and non-Native American—is affected by the misrepresentation of Native Americans in film. Berry Brewton (The Education of the American Indian: A Survey of Literature, 1968) states that Native American children need positive images true images of themselves, and that non-Native Americans need more appreciation and awareness of the Native American so that their image of the group might improve. It is very necessary that damaging ethnic or historical myths be exposed and eliminated concludes Jack Forbes (Education of the Culturally Different: A Multi-Cultural Approach, 1969). When

confronted with their own ignorance, whites (film producers) either deny responsibility, accept guilt, or adopt a romantic view of the Native American. These responses have been transformed into film (*Crazy Horse* , 1995).

What is the story of the Native American? Is it the Indian princess *Pocahontas* with roots in Jamestown, the drunken Indian, the store cigar vendor, or the chief with secrets? The film industry avails itself to portray these representations of the Native American. Films have distorted, represented, misrepresented almost every ethnic and religious group. The Native American seems to be suspended in time. Native Americans on the film reside between the Pilgrims's landing and the late 1800s when Native Americans were trying to keep control of their land. In order to justify what is called progress and be accepted by mainstream America, white producers portrayed Native Americans as illiterate savages. Only a few, Squanto, *Pocahontas* , and Chingachgook have been immortalized as "good" Indians similar to Tonto who knew his role in American society.

The images of early writers and historians are still perpetuated in the twentieth century. Tonto, noble sidekick of the *Lone Ranger* (radio and television series) and the Indians unable to handle alcohol of *F-Troop* (comedy television show) continue to misrepresent the Native American. It is difficult to know how much distorted images on film have influenced viewers. As a part of a study on Indian Education, a Senate Special Subcommittee interviewed Americans from all sectors of the United States in 1994. The results indicate that we still have a long way to go toward understanding Native Americans (*Report 501 of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S.Senate, 91st Congress, 1st Session*):

To thousands of Americans, the American Indian is and always will be dirty, lazy, and drunk. That's the way they picture him; that's the way they treat him.

. . . The basis for these stereotypes goes back into history—a history created by the white man to justify his exploitation of the Indian, a history the Indian is constantly reminded of at school, on television, in books, and at the movies.

If the past is a predictor, Native Americans will be represented in a new image that is sympathetic and contains minimal elements of historical truth (as does Walt Disney's production, *Pocahontas*) similar to how African Americans have been represented in *Glory* (Civil war dramatization) and *Mississippi Burning* (Civil Rights Movement dramatization). In both of these films, the past is shaped and limited by the conventions of the story, the notion of progress, the emphasis on individuals, the script writer's interpretation, and the drive to make a huge profit. These conventions mean that the history of people, places and events on film will be somewhat different from the history in print format. To obtain the full benefits of the film, that is to use film's power to the fullest, changes in the way we think of the past occur in the dramatic story, character, emotional intensity and settings of the people, places and events being depicted by filmmakers. It must be remembered that history on film is not an area which historians are allowed to censor. History on film may be criticized and misrepresentations pointed out, but not controlled.

The misrepresentations of history on film and our lack of control over these representations makes it necessary that many audiences including students learn how to research and judge films. Among the issues to address in judging people, places and events from the past on film is the liberty of invention used by filmmakers. If we can find a way to accept and judge the inventions (alterations, omissions and conflation) that filmmakers use in the production of dramas relating to history, controversies such as the one initiated by Walt Disney's film, *Pocahontas* , will be reduced.

History as drama on film is saturated with fiction and invention from small details such as a style of dress to large discrepancy such as whom *Pocahontas* loved. Take the furnishings in a room where a historical person, Robert Gould Shaw, sits in *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989). Or examine the battle scenes in the same film. The room and scenes are approximate rather than true representations. That which we see in *Glory* is necessitated by the camera's need to complete the specifics of a historical event. Despite limited records to draw upon, the flow of the drama is kept intact.

The same is true of character: all films will include fictional people or invented elements of character (*Pocahontas* ' singing ability). Also, events will be altered to keep the story moving, to encourage intense feelings, and to reduce the complexity of events to correlate with time limitations.

The difference between history and history on film is that they both tell stories, but the former tells a true story. History in film can never be an exact duplication of a person, place or event. It can only be a portrayal. History can not be repeated. What is on film is only an approximation of who, what, and where as interpreted by actors, costume and set designers, script writers, producers, and the drive to make money. Viewers must recognize that films will always include representation that are invented in some degree that can be argued as not true.

Mississippi Burning (Alan Parker, 1988) is as inventive as *Glory* . The Freedom Summer of 1964 is portrayed in *Mississippi Burning* using the killing of three civil rights workers, two whites and one black. Two FBI agents are depicted as heroes while blacks as victims of racism who had little to do with the voting rights drive. The message visualized by the film is that the government protected African Americans and the government also played a major role in the voter registration drive. This drama does not include what actually occurred. The federal government was reluctant to protect those involved in the registration drive and was also slow in solving the murder of the civil rights workers. The fact that African Americans worked together as a community in 1964 is omitted, thus false representation is reinforced.

It is not hard to get students interested in certain kinds of public issues. They are especially responsive when discussing matters close to them—for example, students will talk for hours about the ban on students in malls at certain times, city-wide mandated curfews, First Amendment rights, or a lack of recreational opportunities. Students are also willing to debate with little encouragement emotional issues such as the death penalty, violence on television, gun control, or racial prejudice. This curriculum unit has lessons designed to motivate students to explore and reexamine what they view on film and identify areas in which filmmakers represented ethnic groups or events askew from what is or actually was.

The lessons will help to enhance writing, reading comprehension, listening and visual observation, critical thinking, research, cooperative learning, creativity, and appreciation for the diversity of the United States as well as more awareness of the contributions credited to different groups. Working collaboratively with a media specialist, students will utilize electronic and printed resources. Each lesson allows flexibility to use any or all of its components separately or in concert. However, these elements are used, the results will foster a new awareness for the way people and history are represented on film and open discussion of the Mosaic America.

This unit will be more successful if the classroom environment has established respect for all its members. Therefore, the unit should be used after the first marking period .

Lesson Plan One

Objectives

To define race, ethnic group, and culture

To freewrite in individual portfolio

To enhance collaborative learning

Materials

Newsprint

Markers and rulers

Dictionaries

World Almanac

Student individual portfolios

Access to computer with printer

Time

One Week

Procedures

Divide class into groups of three to five students. Each group should brainstorm and record all words or phrases defining race (5-10 minutes).

Each group should select one person to orally report to class the results. Teacher records words on chalkboard.

Individually, students should write a definition of race selecting words and phrases from chalkboard (3-5 minutes).

Within each group, members should share definitions. Using a history or social studies textbook and a dictionary, each group should compare reference definition to definitions from the group.

By consensus, each group should write on newsprint a definition of race and display on wall (5-10 minutes).

Using the steps above, ethnic group, culture, and image should be defined and displayed. It is highly suggested that one or two words be defined each day.

After all words have been defined and displayed, allow each group opportunities to use electronic or printed World Almanacs to collect data on the population of the United States. Each group should be charged to use data and construct a graph that depicts the diverse population providing symbols related to the United States. Allow one class period for this task and display group efforts.

Give each group an opportunity to read all definitions and examine graphs. Each student should then be given time to write a response to the question, "Who is an American?" Students are to include this as part of their cumulative individual portfolios. Give students an opportunity to read each others essays. If students agree, publish for all to read selected essays.

Debrief in an macro class (all students in class) discussion the activities that occurred before students agreed to allow essays to be published. Use the following questions to promote discussion: How difficult was it to agree on definitions? Why?

What are the similarities in the essays. What are the differences?

Were the activities beneficial? Why?

Lesson Plan Two

Objectives

To identify the ways in which words are used in political cartoons

To examine the way visual elements in a cartoon determine the meaning of words and enhance their impact

To explain the concept of stereotyping

To identify stereotypes

Materials

Political cartoons converted in transparencies

Typing paper

Overhead projector

Time

Two class periods

Procedures

Use the ideas listed to conduct a class discussion about the role of symbols and words in political cartoons.

-Symbols are the building blocks of political cartoons. Just about anything can be a symbol. To be more precise: A symbol is any drawing, object, or design that stands or represents something else—for another object, a group of people, an attitude, or an abstract idea. Some symbols are famous. The Uncle Sam figure stands for the United States, while the elephant and donkey that represent the major political parties.

-Symbols are used as abbreviations. They make it possible to pack a lot of meaning into a cartoon.

-Words used in a political cartoon are dependent on visual elements for their meanings.

- Political cartoons distort images to make an impact.
- A stereotype in a cartoon is often a way of identifying a person or group. Stereotypes can be insulting and biased. Stereotypes are useful, but sometimes misleading.

For each point, select political cartoons from newspapers, books, or magazines to stress each point above. Convert them into transparencies to facilitate class focus on discussions.

Ask each student to choose an issue involving teenagers and illustrate the issue via a political cartoon. Ask students to explain their cartoons on a one-to-one basis. Teacher selects several and make transparencies out of them for class a lead in to class discussion on day two of lesson.

Show student illustrated cartoons. Allow class to point out different aspects of the cartoon before illustrator explains his/her cartoon.

Ask each student to write on notebook paper examples of stereotypes and where are they used. Debrief in all class discussion.

Explain to students that it is our natural tendency to fear those things we do not understand. When we are confronted with people who are different than we are, whether that difference is body shape, culture, ethnic, religion, skin tone, gender, dress, or language, we rely on our "learned" responses. We use our pre-assumptions to dictate our behavior. Our response often portrays mistrust. To eliminate this reaction, individuals must not stereotype or prejudge those or that which we do not know.

Place a numbered sheet of paper on each students forehead in such a way that they have no idea what number (1-10) is on the sheet. They are to hold the number on their forehead and mingle in the room. Tell the students not to look at their sheet. They are not to sit down. They are to greet each member of the class and treat them according to their sheet. Highest numbers are most important while lowest numbers are not. Each student is to determine from the way they are treated what his/her number is. After five minutes of mingling, ask students to line up according to what they think their number is from highest to lowest. No help is to be given to anyone.

Have everyone look at their numbers and see if they were correct. Use the following questions to debrief the activity:

- Ask the highest people how they felt. Act shocked that they are not treated as high numbers.
- Ask the lowest how they knew they were low. How did it feel?
- Is anyone here lower than any other as human beings?
- What makes us feel lower or superior?

As a concluding activity, ask each student to respond in their portfolio to the phrase “Stereotype—It Is”. Teacher critiques each for grammar and structure.

Lesson Plan Three

Objectives

To create a literature-based portfolio

To read for comprehension

To critically view film— *Pocahontas* by Walt Disney

To assist students in recognizing their individual and group accountability

To listen to audiotapes

To evaluate student progress

Materials

The Double Life of Pocahontas by Jean Fritz

Pocahontas: America's First Lady by Frances Mossiker

Pocahontas by Walt Disney

Student portfolio Thesaurus

Dictionaries

Time

Four Weeks

Procedures

Each student should read *The Double Life of Pocahontas* . Allow fifteen minutes each day for silent reading. At the end of each day, a chapter in the nonfiction book should be completed. Student should write in journal a summary of each chapter.

Each student should use a word processor and construct a story pyramid. This technique is used to look at the main character, story setting, and plot development. Students must be very precise in their word selection. Have students work in pairs. Have a thesaurus and a dictionary available, as well as copies of *The Double Life of Pocahontas* . Use the following formula to complete the story pyramid.

Line 1—One word—main character

Line 2—Two words—describe the main character

Line 3—Three words—setting

Line 4—Four words—state a problem

Line 5—Five words—state an event

Line 6—Six words—state an event

Line 7—Seven words—state an event

Line 8—Eight words—solution to problem

Each response should be centered. Use computer to construct a pyramid diagram around responses. Do this exercise for *Pocahontas* . John Smith, Chief Powhatan, and John Rolfe. Each student should put a copy in portfolio.

Play first audiotape from *Pocahontas: America's First Lady* . Ask each student to complete a story web with characteristics of *Pocahontas* .

Compare in a paragraph or more the similarities between *Pocahontas* in *The Double Life of Pocahontas* and the *Pocahontas* in the audiotape.

After one week, students in groups should use printed materials and computers to collect nonfiction information about the following topics:

1. Jamestown
2. Powhatans
3. John Smith
4. John Rolfe
5. Algonquians

One page essays with bibliography for each. Students should allow another student to read and make comments on back of each essay. Using the comments, students should make changes to essays and write a revised essay to be given to teacher for evaluation.

Teacher should give students information on filmmakers use of inventions and representations in production of film. Use *Glory* clips to demonstrate concepts. Discuss with students why this is done. Show video of *Pocahontas* by Walt Disney. Again in pairs, each student on a computer should construct a story pyramid using the same formula as used with *The Double Life of Pocahontas* . Students should be given class time to discuss both pyramids with other students. In all class discussion, teacher should lead students into discussing the video as compared to the book and essays.

Divide class into five groups. Assign each group one of the essay topics. Each group is write a script that depicts an important fact about each topic. Script should be videotaped. Groups should include setting,

customs, and poster advertisements as part of completed project. A written group evaluation should also be included that explains the process in the production. Contact several persons that the are of film production and ask them to view a film and summarize the positive and negative aspects of student-made video. Arrange meetings between each group and the reviewer.

Allow groups within each class to critique another group's video.

As a concluding activity, students should produce a newsletter that explains the process and problems associated with the production of a video based on historical facts. Group assignments should be same as video production groups.

Lesson Plan Four

Objectives

To compare the portrayal of events from the Civil Rights Movement in *Mississippi Burning* with documented facts
To create a time line that accurately portrays the events in Mississippi from the Civil War to the addition of the Voting Rights Act (Twenty-fourth Amendment) to the Constitution

To write a comparison essay

To evaluate essay utilizing CAPT rubric

Materials

Mississippi Challenge by Mildred Pitts Walter

Mississippi Burning by Frederick Zollo

Eyes on the Prize by Blackside, Incorporation

Student individual journals

Access to computer and printer

Access to electronic and printed encyclopedias

Time

Three weeks

Procedures

Students should be asked to read *Mississippi Challenge* using the following daily schedule and complete each accompanying activity.

Day 1 Read pages 1-28.

In journal, write a letter to a friend pretending that you participated in a 1960 sit-in.

Day 2 Read pages 29-56.

In journal, define Black Codes. Use electronic and printed references. Include a bibliography of references used.

Day 3 Read pages 57-105.

In journal, write a newspaper article that highlights the organization of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Day 4 Read pages 106-148.

In journal, write three brief biographical sketches of the three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi in July, 1964. Use electronic and printed references.

Day 5 Read pages 149-184.

In journal, list 25 events that summarize *Mississippi Challenge*.

Day 6 Students working in groups of three to five members, compare lists of events from *Mississippi Challenge*. Decide as a group which 25 events should be used to create a time line that depicts Mississippi from the end of the Civil War to the 1966 Congressional primaries.

Day 7 In groups, cooperatively create a computer generated time line of the events. Use computer graphics to enhance the time line.

Day 8 Complete time line and distribute to each class member a copy of group time line. Give teacher two copies. (Teacher will evaluate a copy and return to group. Class display will be made using other copy.)

Day 9 In groups, students will compare time lines. On index cards, a critique of each group's time lines should be written and returned to appropriate groups.

Day 10 Allow class to view Episode 5: *America's Civil Rights Years* from *Eyes on the Prize*. In journal, summarize the film.

Day 11 Begin class, with question: How does the film (Episode 5: *America's Civil Rights Years*) portray the murder of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi? Is it correlated with facts from *Mississippi Challenge*? Allow class to view 30 minutes of *Mississippi Burning*.

Day 12 In journals, students should compare *Mississippi Burning* with facts obtained from readings and research from *Mississippi Challenge*. Allow students to view 30 minutes of *Mississippi Burning*. As a homework assignment, students should add to journal an additional reflection on comparing the readings and research with film.

Day 13 Allow students to view the other half of *Mississippi Burning*. Students are to begin and complete a draft of an essay that compares the film with facts.

Day 14 Students should allow at least two other classmates to read their drafts. The readers should make three positive and three negative statements about the drafts. As a homework assignment, students are to rewrite and make final draft of comparison essay.

Day 15 Allow students to orally debrief film. Students should use final essay drafts to support their comments. Essays should be given to teacher to evaluate. Teacher should use rubric standards correlated with CAPT test.

Similar activities as used in Lesson Plan Four and Lesson Plan Five could be used with *Glory* and the Civil War.

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