



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

Introduction

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These curricular units were created within a course that had two goals. First it sought to familiarize seminar members with the history of racial representation in American cinema, from roughly *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to the present day. While the emphasis was on both the representation of African-Americans in Hollywood film (*Green Pastures*, 1936; *Imitation of Life*, 1959) and films by black Americans (Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, 1919; Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, 1989), we also looked at the depiction of Asians (*The Cheat*, 1915) and films by Asian Americans (Chris Choy's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, 1989; Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, 1991). Unfortunately, in an effort to trace these historical trajectories, we inevitably paid less attention to Mexican Americans, Native Americans and other groups that have been marginalized by American society. Second, the course was designed to provide participants with some conceptual tools to think about the ways representations of race function in our culture. For our purposes, this often focused on the issues of stereotypes, the problematics of positive and negative images, questions of point of view, and authorship.

The individuals who participated in this seminar teach in the New Haven public school system, with classes ranging from first grade through senior year in high school. They came to the course sharing certain underlying assumptions. All of us recognize that moving images are a pervasive presence in the lives of our students. The issue is not whether this is a good or bad thing. This omnipresence is a fact, a launching point for our work. Each seminar member was therefore searching for ways in which students could become more sophisticated viewers as they look at moving images not only in the classroom but outside it: in theaters but more often on television or in the VCR. The shared goal is to make students more aware of the ways images structure our experience of the world and to enable them to think both critically and creatively about what they see and what they are implicitly being told. Seminar members were intent on finding ways for their students to ask questions about the images they encounter all around them. The urgency of this task is reflected in the curricular units that follow.

Our group also shares a deep concern about the ways race and racism remain a pervasive reality of American life. The vast majority of students in the New Haven public school system are black or Hispanic. Many of the local schools are effectively segregated, a situation recently declared unacceptable by the state courts. In one school, over 90% of the students are African American while only 1% of the students are non-Hispanic whites. Our own seminar was thankfully much more diverse, roughly half the participants being African American and the other half being European American. Moreover, many of us are involved in inter-racial relationships in our personal lives. Some of us have children who are growing up in bi-cultural environments. Perhaps for these reasons but also because the seminar members are committed classroom teachers, who experience the

deepening crisis of urban life first-hand and on a daily basis, we could talk about these issues without race itself dividing us. That does not mean that there were not disagreements: in one discussion around Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925), one member was disturbed by the cornucopia of negative stereotypes, which made Micheaux seem a perpetuator of racism and white-generated stereotypes. Another felt that the film was an impressive artistic achievement which addressed crucial issues from within the black community. In fact, such a disagreement revived a debate about the film that occurred within the black press at the time of its release.

Ours was not a utopian classroom, but we did seem to share a commitment to some kind of multi-cultural, inter-racial future. Little of our time was spent dwelling on the current predicament of New Haven's neighborhood communities which are struggling with limited job opportunities, educational cutbacks, the fraying and now abandoned "safety net," AIDS, and so forth. These issues remained subtext as most of our energies focused on the creative potential of young people from these communities and how they might cope with an equally problematic cultural legacy but one that has also had many moments of achievement and hope. In a straight-forward fashion, for instance, Deborah Hare assembled a unit that shows high school students films about college life including Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988) and John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1995). These were part of a larger sequence of classes designed to excite students about the possibilities of going to college, to make them think about the different kinds of colleges they might consider, and finally prepare them for the difficulties ahead.

While the seminar focused on ways that we and our students could become more effective readers and creators of images, seminar members remained deeply concerned about finding ways for their students to master the basic skills of reading and writing and to integrate such skills into their daily lives. In many units, these teachers bridge the worlds of film and literature, having students read stories, plays or film scripts in relation to the films they were seeing. Carol Penney and Gerene Freeman developed units for high school students to learn more about the history of black actors and black cinema. Students are not only to learn how to see films critically but how to write their own reviews and their own scripts, and how to engage sometimes problematic material as performers. Synia Carroll-McQuillan and Felicia McKinnon present film as one way to tell stories, making their students aware of the uses both positive and negative of storytelling. Students are not only made to think about storytelling, but to elicit stories from family members or to tell their own.

These teachers consistently use film and video as a catalyst for engaging other portions of their curriculum. For Christine House and Geraldine Martin, the Disney film *Pocahontas* becomes a starting point for students to learn more about the life and history of American Indians and also to learn other, more complete and truthful accounts of one of the founding myths of American culture. Ida Hickerson does the same for films focusing on important moments in American history (*Glory*, *Mississippi Burning*). Steven Gray, Martha Savage, and Karen Carazo encourage their students to think about stereotypes in films and television shows. Jean Sutherland uses video tape as a way to better understand and talk about the problems of AIDS, while Val-Jean Belton employs documentaries to familiarize her students with women artists of color, who would otherwise have been marginalized in the curriculum.

I am very grateful to all the seminar members for their contributions to this group undertaking. Because this was the first time I taught at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute and also the first time I offered a course on this general subject, the class required various adjustments as we proceeded. I remain particularly appreciative of their patience and good humor. On many different levels, I found the course to be a vital, wonderful and challenging experience. It was an honor to work with them and a pleasure get to know each one of them individually. I also thank Jim Vivian and the Institute staff for providing this rich and rewarding

opportunity.

Charles Musser

Associate Professor of Film Studies and of American Studies

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