



Teaching Ethnicity and Race Through Films

Curriculum Unit 98.01.08
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I. INTRODUCTION

Moral arguments against technological change are seldom convincing. Die-hard traditionalists opposed the printing press in the 15th century. Their 20th century intellectual descendants now despise the computer. But earlier this century movies and television drew the traditionalists' wrath. All these technological advances were criticized for creating personal isolation and destroying community life.

One can at least partially agree with these insights while simultaneously noting technological change is usually irreversible and ultimately beneficial.

Some educators today are ambivalent about not only television and movies but also the VCR, a device which has greatly increased the ease and reduced the cost of using audiovisual material in the classroom. In my school the comic teacher caricature "Ditto" has been replaced by "Cecil B. DeMille", who turns on a VCR tape for a half-interested group of students and relaxes for the entire period.

This curriculum unit begins with two basic premises:

1. Films can be powerful educationally, but they must be chosen carefully and selectively.
 2. The objectives behind the use of films should be integrated into a unit's overall objectives.
- While films can be used to reinforce the objectives of a teacher's lectures, discussions, or print materials, it may be more effective to use films to complement other objectives.

The topic of this unit is ethnicity and race. I will discuss film selection and the integration of film into a two semester course based on Thomas Sowell's controversial 1981 classic *Ethnic America*. Movie reviews for each film will be provided, along with a set of discussion questions. My target audience is college-bound high school students.

II. FILM SELECTION

There are several criteria to consider when selecting films for classroom use:

1. The films should have educational value. Educational value is not the same as entertainment value. A film which is entertaining but has minimal educational value is not appropriate for classroom use.
2. The film's educational value fits in with the overall objectives of your curriculum unit. Many of the films in my ethnicity and race unit deal with cultural and familial themes. "Far and Away" (Irish-Americans), "Avalon" (Jewish-Americans), "A Bronx Tale" (Italian-Americans), "The Long Walk Home" (African-Americans), and "Mi Familia" (Mexican-Americans) are examples of this approach to ethnicity. They complement Ethnic America, which is basically a social, political, and economic history of ethnicity. Yet all five films are set in an historical context, which means they also reinforce the themes of Dr. Sowell's book.
3. Students will become involved and engaged with your films. The five films previously mentioned all meet this criteria. Students do not put their heads on their desks when these films are shown. In other words, these films have entertainment value as well as educational value.
4. The great majority of your students have not seen the films before. I prefer "small films" instead of Hollywood blockbusters for this reason. I also lean toward films which were released several years prior to their use in my classroom. That way even students who have seen the films before will remain interested. Interesting plots and thought-provoking themes - as opposed to expensive special effects - are another criteria you may wish to use when selecting your films.

The film is age-appropriate and acceptable in your school community. I would never use an R rated film with middle school students, but I have used R rated films such as "Schindler's List" with high school students. There are three main reasons for R ratings: nudity, violence, and profanity. My belief is that parents, administrators, and other teachers are much more likely to become upset about nudity. Films with even brief nude scenes should be chosen very carefully. Violence and profanity are less problematic as far as negative reactions are concerned, but I would advise avoiding films where violence or profanity do not help develop the film's theme.

III. ETHNIC AMERICA

Thomas Sowell's *Ethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) remains the most profound and provocative conservative response to the liberal view of ethnicity and race. In his introduction, Sowell provides a chart which ranks ethnic groups in terms of average family incomes (p.5) Average is 100, but several ethnic groups exceed the average:

Jewish 172
Japanese 132
Polish 115
Chinese 112
Italian 112
German 107
Anglo-Saxon 107
Irish 103

Other groups do not fare as well:

Filipino 99
West Indian 94
Mexican 76
Puerto Rican 63
Black 62
Native American 60

Liberals, Sowell explicitly and implicitly asserts throughout the book, believe these differences are due solely to discrimination. But, Sowell wonders, how can this be if several ethnic groups which have experienced discrimination rank above and even far above the U.S. median income?

The reason, Sowell claims, is something which in his other books he calls cultural capital. Cultural capital includes a strong work ethic, a stable family structure, and a propensity to save and invest rather than to consume. But cultural capital also involves an understanding of the four paths to the upper middle class and above.

The first of these paths is politics, especially urban politics. This involves electing members of your ethnic group to offices, such as mayor, that can provide access to government jobs in police and fire departments, schools, and municipal services. Irish-Americans have historically excelled in this area, while African-Americans have been using this path since the 1960's. Political jobs offer security and good benefits, but they are seldom very remunerative.

Business ownership may be more risky, but the potential benefits greatly outweigh the costs. High percentages of Jews, Japanese, and Chinese have excelled here, although Sowell is well aware that members of all ethnic groups have succeeded in business.

Higher education, the third area, is perhaps the most dependable path to success. Again it is the Jews and the Asian-Americans who have excelled the most here. Both Sowell's supporters and his critics call these groups the "model minorities," a term which Sowell himself does not use in print!

There is a fourth area - sports, music, and entertainment. Here the results can be spectacular, but the odds for success are not good. Often this is the area first available to ethnic Americans. Sowell knows this, but he issues a caveat anyway. Put your eggs in this basket, he is saying, and most likely they will break. Sowell is clearly delivering a message to members of his own ethnic group - African-Americans.

By now Sowell's argument is clear: the liberals are wrong. All ethnic groups have faced discrimination - some more than others- Sowell acknowledges, but it is really cultural capital which accounts for the income differences among ethnic groups. Sowell clearly suggest entrepreneurship and higher education are the best paths to success. It is not surprising that he sees reliance on the federal government as the worst of the legal paths to success. While he in no way supports discrimination, he believes that pooling resources with members of your own family and ethnic group is a better way of starting a business than going to court and claiming you were denied a loan due to your ethnic or racial background. Even better, start your own bank within your own ethnic group. Eventually you can start your own country clubs if the WASP country clubs will not accept you.

Naturally liberals find Sowell's ideas anathema. While most liberal would not quibble with the importance of cultural capital, liberals believe European and Asian ethnic groups have faced far less discrimination than other ethnic Americans. Assertive affirmative action policies and strong federal government action, liberals believe, are necessary to assure ethnic equality.

IV. THE ROLE OF FILM IN TEACHING ETHNICITY AND RACE

My goal is to use films to complement the objectives of teaching Ethnic America. When we begin studying each ethnic group, we look for answers to these questions from the book:

1. When did most members of the group come to America?
2. How did they come?
3. Why did they come?
4. Where did they settle?
5. What are the divisions within the group?
6. What is the dominant religion?
7. What successes have members of the ethnic group attained in politics, business, higher education, and sports, music, and entertainment?

Ethnic America says little about what might be called cultural contributions, such as foods. Thus the study of each ethnic group begins with each student writing anonymously on a sheet of paper what comes to mind upon hearing the name of the ethnic group. All responses which reappear at least once are recorded on the board.

Now is where the films come in. Family and cultural dynamics are still missing from our study of ethnicity and without them we will have a rather sterile unit. These two critical aspects of ethnic experience are best taught through films. It is one thing to read about Protestant-Catholic tension among the Irish and about Irish-Italian tension in Boston in the mid 19th century. It is another thing to watch these themes develop in the movie "Far and Away".

It is one thing to read about Jewish Americans' remarkable business successes. It is another thing to watch this happen in Barry Levinson's "Avalon".

Telling students about stereotypes of Italian-Americans is easy to do, but seeing the character of Lorenzo the bus driver brilliantly juxtaposed against that of Sonny the local mob underboss in "A Bronx Tale" is far more powerful.

Lecturing on the African-American struggle for civil rights is important, but watching that struggle unfold in "The Long Walk Home" may have an even greater impact.

Finally the statement "Different members of the same family succeed in different ways" takes on real meaning through "Mi Familia".

Films do have pitfalls. The reviews which follow will point out both the weaknesses and the strengths of these and other films.

V. FILM GUIDELINES AND REVIEWS

Before presenting the film reviews, some guidelines for the use of films should be proposed. There are several actions that teachers can take to make sure that the films used in our classrooms will have optimal educational value. Here are my guidelines:

1. Preview the film yourself. This is absolutely essential. You know your students better than anyone else does. You will be able to determine not only if the film fits into your curriculum, but also whether it is appropriate for your students. Furthermore, you will be able to prepare a set of discussion questions in advance.

2. Prepare discussion questions which will enhance students' viewing of the film. I recommend a set of questions which are organized day by day, which in most cases means by forty-five minute segments, since most middle and high school schedules are based on forty-five minute periods. You may wish to have students write out the answers to the questions each day to assure that they are watching carefully and comprehending the film. But when discussing a film after its conclusion, I usually begin with these three questions:

a. How would you rate the film on a 1 to 10 scale?

1-terrible

2-poor

3-well below average

4-below average

5-average

6-above average

7-good

8-very good

9-excellent

10-superior

b. Describe each of the film's main characters.

c. What are the film's main themes?

The first of these questions seems very popular with my students. We go around the room and each student gives their rating and their ratings and their reasons. I give mine last in order not to bias the students.

3. Make sure the film and your tv/vcr are in proper working order.
4. Time your films so you won't have a class period end with a few minutes of film left. "FAR AND AWAY" Irish-Americans,1992, 140minutes,PG-13

"Far and Away" is not a great film, but it will hold your students' interests and with a skillfully-led discussion will result in most students learning more about the Irish-American experience than they would learn from the more scholarly yet somewhat tedious PBS special on Irish-Americans. Film critics Mick Martin and Marsha Porter give four stars to "director Ron Howard's sweeping tale of Irish immigrants who come to America in the late 1800's." This "entertaining saga" features Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman as a "bickering couple from different social classes who find themselves adrift in the New World." Video Movie Guide 1996 (New York: Random House, 1995), p.527.

The film's ending is ending, however, is pure Hollywood, which is one reason why critic Roger Ebert, usually generous with both stars and upward pointing thumbs, gives "Far and Away" only two stars of a possible four. 1998 Pocket Video Guide (Kansas City: Andrew McMeel Publishing, 1997), p. 16. My students give this film an average rating of 7 - right between Martin-Porter and Ebert. They realize that the film features a number of improbable coincidences, but still has a lot to say about the Irish-American experience.

Day 1 questions

1. What did Joseph learn from his father?
2. What happened at the Christie home?
3. Describe Joseph and Shannon.
4. What happened when Joseph and Shannon arrived in Boston?
5. How does the film show religious and social class differences among the Irish?

Day 2 questions

1. Who probably destroyed the Christie home?
2. Who found it harder to adjust to America- Joseph or Shannon? Why?
3. How successful was Joseph' boxing career?
4. How did Joseph and Shannon's feelings for each other change during the movie?
5. What discrimination did Irish-Americans face?
6. Describe Irish-American relations with Italian-Americans.

Day 3 questions

1. How does the race for land in Oklahoma symbolize America?
2. Was the ending realistic or “Hollywood”? Why?
3. What were the main themes of the film?
4. Evaluate the film in detail, giving reasons for your comments.

“AVALON” Jewish-Americans, 1990, 126 minutes, PG

“Avalon” comes close to being a great movie. Armin Mueller-Stahl is memorable as a first generation Jewish grandfather whose first image of America is a Fourth of July celebration. Mueller-Stahl, a German actor, makes his character seem totally Jewish. The same can not be said of Aidan Quinn, who plays Sam’s assimilated son Jules Kay. I believe Richard Dreyfuss, who worked with director Barry Levinson in “Tin Men”, would have been a better choice for this part.

Roger Ebert sees this film as a tale of how a strong extended family degenerates over time into an isolated nuclear one. 1998 Roger Ebert’s Video Companion (Kansas City:Andrew McNeels Publishing, 1997), p. 44. I like to emphasize the risk-taking and creative thinking necessary for success in business.

The story is slow-moving, which is why my students rate the movie higher for educational value than for entertainment value.

Day 1 questions

1. Describe Sam Krichinsky.
2. What do we learn about the Krichinsky family from their Thanksgiving dinner.
3. How did Jules Kay and his cousin Izzy Kirk do in the television business?
4. What problems did moving to the suburbs bring for the Kay/Krichinsky family?

Day 2 questions

1. How did Sam Krichinsky feel about his son changing his last name to Kay?
2. Give at least one example of Jewish humor in the film.
3. How did Thanksgiving dinner help create a split between Sam and his brother Gabriel?
4. Why were Sam and Eva Krichinsky upset about their son playing golf?
5. Why did Sam resign from the Family Circle?

Day 3 questions

1. The burning of the store was presented with much symbolism. Discuss this symbolism.
2. What made Eva's death so painful to her husband?
3. What were the movie's main themes?
4. Rate the movie on a 1 to 10 scale for both educational and entertainment value, giving your reasons.

"A BRONX TALE" Italian-Americans, 1993, 122 minutes, R for violence and profanity

Year after year my students rate "A Bronx Tale" higher than any other film we see. It is easy to see why. Mick Martin and Marsha Porter call the movie an "atmospheric, exquisitely detailed character study of a youngster torn between his hard-working bus-driver dad (played by director Robert DeNiro) and the flashy mobster (played superbly by screenwriter Chazz Palminteri) who rules their Bronx neighborhood. (p.482)

Roger Ebert gives the film four stars, praising its subplot of interracial romance, which seems just a bit out of sync to me, while claiming the film's importance is that "it's about values. About how some boys grow up into men who can look at themselves in the mirror in the morning, and others just go along with the crowd, forgetting after a while that they ever had a choice." (p. 115)

The educational value of this film may not match its entertainment value, but there are a number of good themes to discuss. The sound track and the cinematography are also exceptional.

Day 1 questions

1. Where and when does the story take place?
2. Describe the Anello family: Lorenzo, Rosina, and their son Calogero.
3. Describe Sonny and his friends.
4. After the shooting, what should Calogero have done? Why?
5. If you had been Lorenzo, would you have taken the \$150/week from Sonny? Why or why not?
6. How did Sonny influence Calogero?
7. How did Lorenzo react to Sonny's influence on "C"?

Day 2 questions

1. Describe C's friends.
2. List two pieces of advice Sonny gives C. How does this differ from Lorenzo's advice?
3. Describe C as a young man.
4. Describe Jane and her relationship with C.
5. How did C react when his friends attacked the young black men?
6. Describe Sonny's "door test."
7. What prevented Jane from having her first date with C?

Day 3 questions

1. What happened to C's friends? What happened to Sonny?
2. What were the movie's main themes? Rate the movie on a 1 to 10 scale.

"THE LONG WALK HOME" African-Americans, 1991, 97 minutes, PG

"The Long Walk Home" is a story of courage and salvation. Whoopi Goldberg plays Odessa Cotter, a maid who quietly supports the Montgomery bus boycott and inadvertently converts her employer Miriam Thompson, played by Sissy Spacek, to the cause. This film was not a huge box office success, but I get the feeling that many teachers around the country are showing it to their students. It is a moving story which shows ordinary people in an extraordinary time period. Roger Ebert suggests that by making Miriam's daughter Mary Catherine the narrator, director Richard Pearce is making it clear that this film is intended for white audiences. (p. 473) My experiences suggest otherwise. My students are almost all African-American. When Miriam's moderately racist husband punches his totally racist brother at the end of the film, whoops and hollers fill the room. Mr. Ebert may have missed the bus here, but he and virtually every other film critic love "The Long Walk Home" as much as my students and I do.

Discussion questions

1. When does the story take place? How can you tell?
2. Who are the main characters? Who is the narrator?
3. What does the first scene in the park symbolize?
4. How did the boycott affect the following?

- a. Odessa?
 - b. Miriam?
 - c. Odessa's family?
 - d. Miriam's family?
 - e. the city of Montgomery?
 - f. the rest of the U.S.?
5. Did any characters change during the movie? If so, how?
 6. What was the meaning of the incident with the three white boys on the bus?
 7. Discuss the importance of the scene where Odessa announces her intention to quit.
 8. Discuss the significance of the movie's final scene.
 9. What was your reaction to the movie? Rate the film on a 1 to 10 scale, giving reasons.

Short essay topics:

1. Write a character sketch of Odessa, Miriam, Herbert, Norman, or Tucker.
2. Describe the philosophy behind the Montgomery bus boycott.
3. Tell how both Odessa and Miriam became stronger individuals during "The Long Walk Home."
4. Compare "The Long Walk Home" with other films dealing with Black-White relations.

"MY FAMILY" ("MI FAMILIA") Mexican-Americans, 1995, 122 min., R for violence, profanity, drugs, and nudity

My students give this family saga mixed reviews - and so do the movie critics. Roger Ebert, describing the film's final scene, says, "Rarely have I felt at the movies such a sense of time and history, of stories and

lessons passing down the generations, of a family living in its memories.” (p. 554) Ebert’s four star rating, his maximum, contrasts sharply with that of Martin and Porter, who give “My Family” three of a possible five stars because the narrative is “spread too thin.” (p. 734)

Everyone seems to agree that the acting is superb. All this makes the decision to include the film as part of my curriculum an easy one. Many of us on the east coast know very little of Mexican-Americans and their culture. “My Family” thus has great educational as well as entertainment value. Ebert is on target in calling this “the great American story”.(p. 553) I would add that the great American story is more about commonalities than about differences, especially where ethnicity is concerned.

Day 1 questions

1. Who is the narrator?
2. Describe the narrator’s father and mother, Jose and Maria Sanchez.
3. Describe the narrator’s brother Chucho and his sister Toni.
4. What significant events took place at the wedding?
5. Why was Chucho put out of the house?
6. What happened at the dance?

Day 2 questions

1. Why do you think the director showed Chucho’s death along with scenes of baseball and “I Love Lucy”?
2. How did Toni surprise the family?
3. Why did Jimmy get married? How did his marriage turn out?

Day 3 questions

1. What happened to Jimmy after Isabel died?
2. What happened to Memo (William)?
3. How would you describe the Gillespies’ visit to the Sanchez home?
4. Describe Jimmy’s relationship with his son Carlito.
5. Did the Sanchez family achieve the American dream? Why or why not?
6. What were the film’s main themes?

7. How would you rate this movie? Why?

VI. RACE AND FILM

Race seems to be America's albatross. Not surprisingly, race seems to be Hollywood's albatross too. While one might claim that Hollywood has come a long way from "The Birth of a Nation" (1915), the silent Civil War saga which glorified the Ku Klux Klan, the majority of the films which deal with race still seem to become controversial for one reason or another.

Sidney Poitier films in the 1950's were criticized for presenting "the perfect Negro," even though his roles were a direct response to the criticism that Blacks only appeared in Hollywood films as maids, railroad car porters, chauffeurs, and entertainers. The "Blaxploitation" films of the 1970's - featuring characters such as Shaft and Superfly- were blasted for depicting Blacks as violent pimps and drug dealers, but the films did make money. So did "The Color Purple" (1985), which also was attacked for promoting negative images of Black males.

Films which deal with racial issues present us with several themes. White racism clearly is one of those themes. Racism appears in almost every film dealing with race. But it is far from the only theme in films about race. The struggle against racism is another major theme. I think there is a possibility that White and Black directors tend to handle the interplay between these themes differently, with black directors emphasizing the struggle against racism at least as much as the racism itself. This may be because black and White directors have different audiences. White directors often use racial themes to convince other Whites that racism is wrong. Black directors, who gear their films more toward their fellow Blacks, assume their audience knows that racism both exists and is wrong, so the struggle against racism gets more attention.

Other themes include interracial relationships and what might be called community and family studies. This all adds up to a growing number of diverse films about race. So how is a classroom teacher to choose what to show? I believe the guidelines presented earlier about ethnicity are equally valid here. Let me present reviews of several films with racial themes. The films are listed in descending order of quality, from my perspective. This time readers will need to preview the films and provide their own questions.

"HOOP DREAMS" 1994, 171 minutes, PG-13

"Hoop Dreams", a lengthy documentary about high school basketball in Chicago, is my all-time favorite movie about race and race relations. Roger Ebert calls it one of the great moviegoing experiences of his lifetime (368). I concur completely. It would not be possible to write a story as inspirational as this six year odyssey of Arthur Agee and William Gates, two of the best 14 year old basketball players in Chicago when the film

begins. The struggles of Arthur, William, and their families will remain with the viewer forever.

“DO THE RIGHT THING” 1989, 120 minutes, R for nudity, profanity, and violence

Ebert also champions this community study by Spike Lee, and again I agree completely. This may be Mr. Lee’s best movie. A tragicomic study of a Brooklyn neighborhood, this film raises many issues about race and race relations - never providing pat answers but always raising more and more questions. The main characters- Sal, Mookie, Radio Raheem, Buggin’ Out, and Da Mayor- are as memorable as the film’s final violent and tragic scenes. This is a powerful film. Teachers should preview it carefully before showing it.

“JUNGLE FEVER” 1991, 135 minutes, R for nudity, profanity, and violence

Martin and Porter only give this film three stars out of five, largely because of its excessive length (561), but Roger Ebert is much more positive, noting that the crackhouse scene is amazingly powerful, as is the frank discussion of sexual attraction between the races.(418) Ebert criticizes the depiction of the interracial romance because the characters are not fully developed. I liked the way it was handled because I believe Mr. Lee was trying to portray merely a physical attraction, not a relationship.

The film fully deserves its R rating. The nudity is so pervasive that I have not shown this film in my classroom - although I wish I could.

“A RAISIN IN THE SUN” 1961, 128 minutes, B&W, unrated

This screen adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s classic play is of great interest to my students, who usually have little use for black and white films. We watch the film before performing several of the scenes. Sidney Poitier is terrific as Walter Lee Younger, but it is Claudia McNeil’s performance as his mother Lena which really impressed me.

There is a 1988 version which features Danny Glover as Walter Lee and Esther Rolle as Lena. I liked this one too, but it is unnecessarily 43 minutes longer than the original.

“MALCOLM X” 1992, 193 minutes, PG-13

Spike Lee directs, Denzel Washington stars, and the result is a great screen biography. The film may have disappointed those who hoped Mr. Lee would provide a new interpretation of Malcolm X, but I believe Mr. Lee accomplished more by remaining faithful to the Autobiography. Once again, there are no easy answers, but race in America has never been an issue with easy answers.

“BOYZ N THE HOOD” 1991, 111 minutes, R for profanity, violence, and nudity

Martin and Porter wisely note that this is not the exploitation film about gang violence it appears to be.(133) It is probably the best of the central city dramas of the early 1990’s. A high percentage of my students had already seen it, which is why I have not shown it .

“AMISTAD” 1997, 160 minutes, R for violence and brief nudity

Steven Spielberg received a fair amount of criticism from historians for this powerful discussion of an 1839 incident which led to one of the first legal challenges to slavery. Yet if America is to confront its racial past, Amistad seems to be one of the best films available. Yes, the film is long, and yes, there are some tedious legal scenes, but the portrayal of the Middle Passage is as powerful as the death camp scenes in Schindler’s List.

“GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER” 1967, 108 minutes, unrated

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” may be somewhat outdated, but it remains a fine middle of the road film about interracial marriage. This classic stars Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn as liberal White parents who become conflicted when their daughter becomes engaged to a Black doctor played - surprise!- by Sidney Poitier. Martin and Porter correctly note that this once controversial picture seems “rather quaint today,” but that has not bothered my students.

“DRIVING MISS DAISY” 1989, 99 minutes, PG for profanity

Film critics loved “Driving Miss Daisy,” which stars Jessica Tandy as an elderly Jewish widow and Morgan Freeman as her Black chauffeur. Roger Ebert sees it as a film of “great love and patience”(234). Martin and Porter give it the maximum five stars (309). The only dissenter seems to be Spike Lee, who blasted the Best Picture of 1989 for portraying Blacks in stereotypical roles. Mr. Lee’s “Do the Right Thing,” also released in 1989, was unfairly denied a Best Picture nomination. But that is not the fault of “Driving Miss Daisy,” an especially fine film for students unfamiliar with the history and dynamics of American race relations.

“THE COLOR PURPLE” 1985, 130 minutes, PG-13 for profanity, violence, and suggested sex

Is it Steven Spielberg’s fault that Alice Walker’s novel was none too kind to Black males? Or did Spielberg deliberately exacerbate the novel’s sexism? However you feel, it is obvious that Spielberg’s problem may have been that he entered the landmine-filled gender wars within the Black community as an outsider. Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Danny Glover are all sensational, so this film receives my strong recommendation despite a few flaws, such as occasionally romanticizing life in the South under Jim Crow.

“A TIME TO KILL” 1996, 145 minutes R for violence, profanity and rape

Martin and Porter give this film only two and a half stars, but John Grisham’s tale of a Black man in Mississippi who kills the two racists who raped and assaulted his daughter has been very popular with young people of both races. The story is Hollywood at both its best and its worst, depending on your point of view. If you want to be entertained, this is a winner. If you want to be educated, try something else.

“ROSEWOOD” 1997, 140 minutes, R for violence, profanity, nudity, and torture

Rosewood purports to be an historical film about a racist attack on a prosperous Black community in Florida in 1923. The film is quite powerful. It seems a bit too long to me, but its real problem is that the last half hour is, as Martin and Porter suggest, more Indiana Jones than historical drama.(914) Even so, I have no problem recommending this film, although I too wonder about the authenticity of the main character, the “man with no name,” played quite well by the underrated actor Ving Rhames.

“A FAMILY THING “ 1996, 109 minutes, PG-13 for profanity and mild violence

No film with James Earl Jones and Robert Duvall can be a bad film, even though it is hard to imagine them as long-lost half brothers. I agree with Martin and Porter that Irma P. Hall as Jones’ aunt nearly steals the film (347), which may go to show that fine acting covers up a lot of loose edges in the script. An average film.

“ZEBRAHEAD” 1992, 102 minutes, R for profanity, violence, and sexual situations

This low-budget film is about a Jewish boy and a Black girl in inner-city Detroit who find themselves in a state of lust. Zebrahead is intriguing. It is filled with profanity, modern music, and symbolism. The story will hold your students’ interest, but the ending of the film may be seen as confusing rather than ambiguous. At least one character - a middle-class Black militant- is not only hopelessly stereotypical, he isn’t even given a name.

“MISSISSIPPI BURNING” 1988, 125 minutes, R for language and brutal violence

I am more forgiving than most when it comes to historical inaccuracies in historical films. Some academics' criticisms seem pedantic to me. But the criticisms of “Mississippi Burning” seem on target. This film was very popular with both film critics and moviegoers. But Robert Rosenstone, an historian of film, notes that the movie marginalizes Blacks and makes heroes out of an FBI which acted very slowly when three civil rights workers were murdered in 1963. *Visions of the Past* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 72-73.

VII. CONCLUSION

Obviously I am convinced that films are very useful in teaching about ethnicity and race. But what about historical and sociological inaccuracies? Doesn't Hollywood present a false reality that may actually miseducate rather than enlighten?

Sometimes this charge is completely valid. Sometimes this charge is not valid at all. Most of the time this charge is partially valid.

How do we, first as viewers and then as teachers, determine validity? First we see the film, next we read the critiques, and finally we may do research of our own. Then we decide if the film is appropriate for our students. If so, we may still come up with a few disclaimers - or we may require our students to do research to discover their own disclaimers.

Minor disclaimers usually involve minor errors of fact. For example, Professor David Brion Davis, Pulitzer Prize winning historian at Yale University, lectured to our film seminar on the Amistad affair on May 26, 1998. When asked about the movie “Amistad”, his minor disclaimers were that “Men didn't wear beards” and “People didn't ride bicycles.” If these were “Amistad's” only inaccuracies, the film would be home free as far as I'm concerned. While historical errors should not be excused completely, it is unrealistic to expect Hollywood directors and screenwriters to meet professional standards of scholarly accuracy.

Professor Davis made another, more far-reaching criticism. He said that “Amistad” grossly underrepresented the racism found in the Northern United States in 1839. This is a major disclaimer, an important topic for critical discussion.

Note that the major disclaimer is not merely a question of an error of fact. It involves an error of omission, a question of emphasis. These types of errors are much more important than the inevitable minor historical and sociological errors which crop up in all films.

Documentary filmmakers must be especially aware of questions of emphasis. Ken Burns, our leading documentary filmmaker today, was criticized for focusing too much on the battlefield in *The Civil War*. A rather obscure general received fifteen minutes screen time for successfully defending a hill during the Battle of Gettysburg. Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist leader, received four minutes of screen time. I am one of those who sees this as nearly a sacrilege.

Mr. Burns took some of the criticism rather hard. But he listened to his critics. His epic “Baseball” place greater emphasis on matters of wide societal, rather than baseball, significance. The Negro Leagues, Jackie Robinson, and the other Black baseball pioneers received three hours of screen time, which I believe reflects

the tremendous importance of baseball segregation and eventual integration.

Of course baseball purists attacked Burns. An irate caller to WFAN in New York ranted and raved about the disproportionate amount of time given Robinson, implying that this came at the expense of Stan Musial, who was merely a blip in the fourteen hour documentary. The caller kept reading from baseball's record book, which he claimed proved Musial was a better player than Robinson.

The caller may have been right about Robinson and Musial's playing abilities (actually it is a close call), but it was Ken Burns, not the caller, who made the right call. Jackie Robinson is the most significant historical figure in baseball history. Musial has virtually no wide historical significance, although he may be the best left fielder of all time.

I am not going to draw the line between minor and major errors, because this is an extremely subjective undertaking. I do like the line drawn by Robert A. Rosenstone in *Visions of the Past*. He acknowledges that there will be a certain amount of invention in all historical films. He goes on to distinguish between true and false invention, asking only that historical films not violate the overall data and meanings of what we already know of the past.(79) This may be a relaxed standard, but it is a sensible one when we evaluate films to determine if they are suitable for our students. We can't expect filmmakers to be academic researchers, although we can expect them to use academics as consultants when it is necessary. But we certainly have a right to expect filmmakers not to alter or embellish the past to gain viewers.

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