

# Chapter 20

## Teaching through Film

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### ABSTRACT

*Film can be used for multiple educational purposes in the support of students' learning. It can be used at the beginning of a unit to generate avenues for discussion or exploration, at the end of a unit to illustrate ideas that have already been studied through other formats, or to integrate multiple themes that have been considered across the curriculum. Some of its functions are to encourage the exploration of multiple perspectives, to teach specific histories, to provide guides for action, and to illustrate complex concepts. This chapter explores the ways these different functions can advance learning by focusing on one particular scene in particular. The scene is "The Decision" in Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*, a dramatization of the Republican forces' struggle against General Franco's coup in the Spanish Civil War.*

### INTRODUCTION

As I began writing this chapter, it was Oscar week in 2012. In the USA, around 40 million viewers watched the Oscar ceremonies on TV, with countless more viewers around the world. Despite the rise of Cable TV and the explosion of social media, films still retain the power to influence national debate and to focus the attention of adults across the social spectrum on a particular issue. When *Crash* won the Oscar for best picture in 2005 several of my colleagues used it to jump start class discussions of racial dynamics and identity. Not just the characters and storyline of *Crash*, but also the identity of its producer, co-writer and director, Paul Haggis (a White Canadian), provided multiple entry points for exchange and analysis. In my own courses I found *Crash* a wonderful

example of a distinctly White viewpoint on race, with its underlying premise that Whites (like the policemen played by Matt Dillon and Ryan Phillippe) could turn racism on and off like a light switch, depending on the situation.

*Crash* implied that with good hearts and raised awareness on the part of Whites, racism could be eliminated. It sidestepped any real analysis of how racism is structurally embedded in wider economic inequalities, or how the ideology of White supremacy is learned and deeply embedded in Whites' consciousness. It assumed that depending on the situation Whites can choose whether or not to be racist and that those with good hearts will choose not to be. In this perspective success in anti-racist work is largely a matter of individual fortitude; of how assiduously you gear yourself up to detect and fight the enemy of external racism. This approach holds that whether or not a White person chooses to be racist is down to the moral strength or militant Christianity he or she

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displays in fighting the system's efforts to make them think and behave as a racist. It views racism as individual not systemic, a matter of personal choice rather than an ideology learned in, and underscored by, social structures.

When I made this critique of the film many of my White students were surprised I would not be wholly supportive of a film that, in their view, courageously took on the issue of racism. I think that having an Oscar-winning film to focus on allowed us to get far more deeply into a real discussion of racism than if I had asked people to begin by talking about their own direct experience of discrimination. Unless people are ready and willing to disclose quite searing personal stories, you often need the bridge of art (fiction, film, TV, comedy) to prime them to make the leap to direct experience. I would argue that one comedy skit in *Chappelle's Show* or *Key and Peele*, or one Chris Rock or Def-Jam stand-up routine, is often more productive in opening up avenues for discussion than assigning people to read an article on critical race theory, or the autobiographies of Nelson Mandela or Malcolm X.

In the digital age, teachers are more and more aware of the need to use multiple media formats and technologies, particularly those that incorporate a strong visual element. As a medium, film has been around for over a century, but the explosion of the World Wide Web has meant that viewership is now possible on an exponentially greater level than ever before. No longer do people need to wait for a film to show up at their local cinema, or to be run on TV. Both legally and illegally, the opportunity to watch films is now available to anyone with access to a computer.

In this chapter, I want to review the different ways that film can be used for educational purposes. My purpose is to explore a number of functions that film can serve in advancing learning, and I will do this by focusing on one particular scene in one particular film. This film is Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* and interested readers can watch it freely on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WH9J48jUE0>.

## BACKGROUND

Adult educators are well aware of the teaching potential of popular cultural forms such as film. Stuckey and King (2007), respectively a teacher of, and student in, a course on using film and TV "as a way of revealing how social relations are based on power" (p. 25) write about the problems of moving past pleasure (it's easy to persuade students to watch films) into developing a third eye focused on "bringing the invisible out into the open or unveiling our unconscious assumptions" (p. 30). Redmond Wright and Sandlin's (2009) comprehensive analysis of how adult educators have used pop culture cites many studies examining the relevance of using TV shows such as *The Simpsons*, *The Avengers*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *The X-Files*, *Home Improvement*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *What Not to Wear*, *Changing Rooms*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The Sopranos*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Big Brother*. They also point out the use of science fiction, hip-hop, romance novels, cartoons such as *Dilbert*, lifestyle magazines, and video games such as *Black and White*, *Rise of Nations*, *Second Life*, and *Tony Hawk Underground*.

One can argue that film is a far more appropriate teaching approach for adult education than for any other part of educational provision. After all, the greater part of filmmaking is concerned with telling stories and portraying experiences. Given that an adult class will often contain more experiences and stories than a class of high school pupils or traditional aged college students, and the relevance of film as a teaching tool is clear. Of course, there are plenty of PG-13 films made that focus on childhood and adolescence, but these are usually made by adults who are re-imagining their own childhood or coming of age experiences. Equally, there are more experimental films that eschew any conventional narrative or storyline. But the films that lodge in popular consciousness typically address adult situations and adult choices.

In this chapter I focus only on film. In fact, I focus on only one scene within that film. This is

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