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Uniting Children of the World through Film: Planning an International Film Festival for Middle School Students

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Introduction and Rationale

Uniting the children of the world? What kind of clichéd and simplistic dream is that for an urban public school teacher to sustain for 30 years? Merely saying the words recreates for me the idealism that nudged me toward a career in public education so long ago. It's the same innocence that caught me holding hands with humanity in 1985, the year of Stevie Wonder and Harry Belafonte's "We Are the World" benefit concert to aid victims of the Ethiopian famine. I was attempting that day to make my own children part of a global community. Children of the world united — is this possible?

Of course it is not. But frankly, the need for promoting global understanding is greater now than it was in 1976 or in 1985. In the year 2006, with the world turned flat as Thomas Friedman ¹ has pointed out, if American children do not begin to sense the oneness of all humanity and embrace a world view, then our nation will continue down the path of isolation and separateness that it is currently on. As teachers and parents we must at least attempt to influence our children in this regard. A desire to make U.S. children members of a world community and respectful of differences among the people of the world is the strongest goal for this unit, but other objectives are met along the way. In fact, this unit is a huge pot into which many goals, some instructionally concrete and some less tangible, have been thrown. If nothing else is accomplished, a door will at least have been opened, students will view films they otherwise might never see, and the idea of foreign film may not be so foreign to them in the future.

The seeds for this unit were planted when I viewed films as a part of a seminar titled "Stories Around the World in Film," offered at the Yale National Initiative Intensive Session. Dr. Dudley Andrew, the seminar leader, carefully chose films about children for this seminar for public school teachers. I found the stories of the children in each film to be endearing and magical and immediately wanted to share them with the children that I teach. Each film provided a sense of common humanity and at the same time supplied clarifying and important images of local landscape, cityscape, family interactions, religion, and a whole host of cultural information. The films presented profiles of children with fortitude, courage, and strength of spirit. These visual glimpses into the lives of children in Ireland, Iran, China, Africa, and Australia suddenly seemed of utmost importance.

Although I have rarely used film in my classroom, relying more on literature as a valuable vehicle for

expanding the global awareness of my students, I am well aware of the love my students have for movies. I began to realize the obvious; that my students' interest in film can easily be connected to my personal passion, the perpetual struggle to make my very parochial Pittsburgh students more globally aware. While watching these films, I realized the power of the visual image and the instantaneous opportunities for increasing empathy and understanding that they provide.

The more films I watched and the more connections I began to make to other curricular areas, the possibilities for a film festival expanded rapidly. I limited these expansive ideas to a small unit that could be taught in a variety of ways, depending on the number of films used, and the emphasis that the teacher chooses to place on various aspects of study offered. The five films are *Children of Heaven* from Iran, *Not One Less*, from mainland China, *Into the West* from Ireland, *Rabbit Proof Fence* from Australia, and *The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun* from Senegal, Africa. Each film will be examined in five ways. The first mode of response will be to reinforce literary terminology that middle school children must know for our state exam, the PSSA. Terms like theme, plot, tone, mood, point of view, and characterization are viable for analysis of film as well as literature. The second mode of viewing will encourage children to observe, articulate and discuss cultural traits present in each film. Closely connected to this cultural observation, students will be asked to think about childhood and what is universal about being a child. A fourth mode of looking at each film will be an actual analysis of some technical aspect of filmmaking such as cinematography, editing, and sound. Finally, some attention will be paid to observing and discussing variations of storytelling methods or literary styles from each country and an effort will be made to see if these literary modes translate to the films of that country.

This unit will add to the wealth of practical advice already available to teachers regarding the use of film in schools. Although the unit is planned for students in a middle school for the creative and performing arts, parts of it are suitable for a film studies class, world cultures class, or any curriculum studying one of the five countries covered in this unit. Parts of the curriculum might be valuable to Language Arts teachers interested in reinforcing literary concepts and terminology.

What is Foreign Film Today?

The term foreign film was in vogue in the 1960s. To sophisticated American viewers the word conjured images of the exotic, the experimental, the "art" film, as pointed out by A.O. Scott in an essay called "What is a Foreign Movie Now?"² In a contemporary discussion of foreign film the terminology has changed and, in fact, the change in language points to an altered meaning of that 60s concept. Terms like globalization, cross-pollination, world film, cross-cultural fertilization, and transnational formations are used to articulate what is going on today world wide in film.

Dudley Andrew makes a point of adding a fifth period to the traditional four periods of cinema history. To the categories of Early, Classic, Modern, and World, he names Global. For Andrew, this period begins in 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolizing the end of the Cold War and the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing.³

Though the films in this unit are presented for the very reason that they do depict cultural differences in contemporary societies as well as visual strategies and storytelling linked to specific cultures, the fact that our world gets smaller every day cannot be ignored. Thus the term cross-pollination is significant.

Filmmakers everywhere are cognizant of Hollywood and its far reaching influence. Although filmmakers all over the world are struggling to create their own national schools of film, many of them grew up watching Hollywood films. Djibril Diop Mambety, the director of *The Little Girl Who Stole the Sun*, spent much time as a

schoolboy attending local movie theatres in Dakar that showed American films. Today in Ireland, 80% of the screens are playing American films.

Another aspect of cross-pollination and the globalization of film is that directors, writers, and cinematographers from more than one country often work on a film. The director of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is Australian, but he had spent twelve years working as a director in Hollywood. The director of the Irish film, *Into the West*, Mike Newell, is British.

Often those involved in the production of film have actually trained in another country. This is especially true in Africa. Many of the most prominent names in the African film industry spent time studying film in the Soviet Union. Ousmane Sembene, the most highly respected African filmmaker, spent a year in Moscow early in his career. Sembene's peer, Souleymane Cisse, studied there from 1963 to 1969.

So although this unit places emphasis on naming differences, it does so with the realization that when studying films from other countries, and especially nonwestern countries, the curious viewer must wonder what is representative of the region's culture and what is a result of cross pollination.

Objectives

Using film in the classroom can meet objectives from a huge array of disciplines. I have organized my objectives into the categories listed above and in this section will elaborate on them.

The use of standards and testing to monitor student achievement of the standards is the mode of operation in almost every public school system in this country. I would never attempt to introduce film into the classroom without considering carefully how the film festival will aid students in mastery of skills tested on our state exams. But it is a simple task to do so. This unit addresses Pennsylvania standards in three areas: Arts and Humanities; Geography; and Reading, Writing and Speaking. In the last of these areas, many skills of film viewing and responding are similar to those needed for reading and responding to text. In this unit students will identify basic facts and ideas using specific strategies; demonstrate understanding and interpretation; draw inferences; compare and contrast themes and techniques in several films; and identify and analyze elements including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style that pertain to both literary texts and film.

Students will also be asked to write in this unit, thereby working towards meeting standards for writing. Ideas will be presented for writing activities both in the fiction and nonfiction genres. Nonfiction writing tasks will direct students to write with a sharp, distinct focus and write with controlled or subtle organization. As mentioned previously, some time will be spent attempting to identify cultural modes of storytelling. Students will have an opportunity to experiment with the fictional style that they find most attractive.

Large and small group discussion will be promoted and students will practice strategies of accountable talk such as asking probing questions; responding with relevant information, ideas or reasons in support of opinions expressed; and listening to and acknowledging the contributions of others.

In the area of Arts and Humanities a variety of objectives will be met. Students will comprehend specific technical skills of filmmaking. They will explain the historical, cultural and social context of individual films and

analyze how culture impacts the form, technique and purpose of films.

State standards in both the arts and geography share language that promotes cross-cultural understanding. The arts and humanities standards state that students must relate works in the arts to geographic regions including Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe. Geography standards relate to five fundamental themes of geography; this unit relates to four of them: location, place, human-environment interactions, and unity of a region in terms of physical and human characteristics.

The Films

Each section below on specific films includes a short commentary on cinema in the country or continent, a brief summary of the film, background information about particular cultural or historical issues relevant to the understanding of the film, an overview of one main aspect of filmic signification that will be addressed when viewing the film, and a short discussion of the cultural storytelling techniques that might be evident in the film.

Ireland: Into the West

97 Minutes

Release Date: 1992, USA 1993

Director: Mike Newell

Screenplay: Jim Sheridan

Language: English

Setting: Contemporary, urban and rural

Comments on Irish Film

Irish film really took off in the 1980s and since then has maintained a strong presence in world film. Many critics and scholars attempt to characterize Irish film and name distinguishing themes such as a love for the land, a sense of resistance and rebellion against the British, and occasional references to national myths. Dudley Andrew, in his article titled "The Theatre of Irish Cinema," discusses other traits of Irish cinema that I think are present in *Into the West*. Andrew notes the "fresh spontaneity of Irish 'orality' and 'performance,' terms meant to give the Irish room to wriggle for space and to respond to official history sometimes through wit and irony, other times through lament."⁴

Another critic who focuses on Irish cinema, Martin McLoone, feels that medium and low-budget films that are filmed in Ireland and use only Irish directors, producers, and screenwriters, are really defining Irish film, not expensive films that might have funding from sources other than Ireland and that embrace the Hollywood mode. He lists other themes of this new Third Cinema that make it clear that *Into the West* does not fit into the classification. These are themes like a questioning of rural mythology, a desire to reveal the social and

political failures of independent Ireland, an examination of religion and women's roles in Ireland, a need to question Northern Ireland and political violence, and a new concern to imagine the nation differently.⁵

Background Information and Film Synopsis

It makes sense to start the festival with a film using the English language. The other films will all be subtitled (*Rabbit-Proof Fence* to a limited degree), so it may be easier to pull the students into the process of viewing and responding with a film where subtitles are not making the task more difficult. Directed by Mike Newell and written by Jim Sheridan, this film provides insight into the lives of a very specific cultural group in Ireland; the travelers, also known as tinkers.

Travelers still exist in Ireland today and though they are certainly social outcasts, many photographic and fictional studies have romanticized their lifestyle and existence. According to the Irish Cultural Society of New York, in 1960, over 95% of traveling people lived on the road, whereas in 1984 57% were living in standard housing or on serviced sites. Estimates of numbers of travelers vary greatly and the government has been trying for years to persuade them to settle and move into public housing, which is exactly what happens in the film. One source claims that there are 21,000 Travelers still living in Ireland, over half with no water, electricity, sanitation or refuse collection. They live in extended patriarchal families, prefer trailers, tend to nomadism interspersed with occasional house dwelling, and maintain a nomadic mindset even when settled; a house is considered only a stopping place between journeys, whether the stop lasts 20 days or 20 years!⁶ The travelers who are still on the road live in squalor, creating poor health conditions for themselves and creating a blot on the community that adds to the tension and antagonism existing between the travelers and the settled community.⁷

Two young brothers in this film, Ossie and Tito, face life in the city after their mother has died. Their father, Papa Reilly, has insisted on leaving the life of the travelers and they consequently have moved to a substandard tenement in Dublin. The father has a drinking problem and the boys are pretty much left to themselves. Their grandfather has remained true to the family tradition and still lives on the road. A white stallion approaches the grandfather as he picks up clams and shells on the shore and follows him into the city where the young brothers immediately gravitate to him. Hilarious and touching escapades ensue as Ossie and Titto first attempt to hide the horse, named Tir na nOg, in their apartment and then escape with him into the Irish landscape to evade the authorities. As the boys and Tir na nOg hide out in the countryside and in a movie theatre (playing *Back to the Future II*), they are tracked by their father as well as the authorities. Tir Na Nog leads the boys into the west, to their mother's grave, and back to the life of the travelers.

The literal translation of the horse's name, Tir na nOg (from Irish Gaelic) is "Land of the Young," and is used to refer to the afterlife. There exists an Irish legend about the mythical hero Oisín who went to Tir na nOg, an imaginary land, where eternal youth was possible.

In this film, as well as other Irish films such as *The Secret of Roan Inish*, the west serves as a romantic symbol. Dudley Andrew, in an article in the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, points out that when the British overran Ireland, the Irish "looked to the West for spiritual resistance. . . and still do."⁸ According to Martin McLoone in *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, the landscape in Ireland is loaded with political and ideological significance. The west represents a nostalgia for the "way things used to be" - always better than they are now. McLoone sees this as a regressive ideology and criticizes the film for this reason.⁹ Students might be interested in comparing what the west symbolizes in the United States and what it symbolizes in Ireland.

Students can also point out the many conflicts present in this film that support the main conflict of East versus West, such as city/country, corporate/communal, travelers/urban poor, children/adult, cleverness/education, and campfire lore/TV dramas.¹⁰

As an aside, it might be fun for students to know that Jim Sheridan directed a film about rap star 50 Cent titled *Get Rich or Die Tryin*. Sheridan claimed that this rap star had a very "Irish" story to tell.

Irish Literary Style Translated to Film

When attempting to identify a cultural Irish literary style that is mimicked in this film, Dudley Andrew suggested that William Butler Yeats's lyric mode might be applicable. Two traditional Irish literary schools exist: Yeats in the west and James Joyce, who moved to the mainland, in the east.

"Oral deftness has a long tradition in Ireland. William Butler Yeats could have had cinema in mind when he distinguished Ireland as a nation where tradition flashes up in transient images, given off through the anecdotes of oral poets, a nation of clever songs rather than of the thick novels and history books that anchor mighty England."¹¹

What is the lyric and how might children experiment with this style? The lyric poem conveys the poet's own responses to something in a non-narrative manner. The poet's subjective feelings are important to the lyric poem. Although *Into the West* does tell a story, it conveys a mystical sense and strong emotion. Students might want to read "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by Yeats to see if they can identify qualities that could be parallel to the film. Certainly the imagery in the poem and deep sense of homesickness connects to Ossie's need to learn about his mother and the overriding nostalgia for the west.

"I will arise and go now, for always night and day I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray, I hear it in the deep heart's core."

Students can attempt to write a lyric poem using the myth of Tir na nOg, Ossie's longing for his mother, images of Irish countryside shown in the film, and a longing for the old life of the travelers.

Film Elements to be Introduced With Into the West: Plot and Character

Since this is the first film to be viewed, the film aspects studied can be ones that students are already familiar with: plot and character. Literature study in the middle school pays a great deal of attention to these two elements and their presence is strong on the state standardized test. Children can be asked to create a traditional plot diagram for the film, naming the scenes or events that represent the exposition, development of conflict, and resolution of conflict. Teachers can use a variety of questions to help students identify the plot structure of the film. Can you identify the beginning, middle and end of the film? Are flashbacks used to provide information to the viewer? Identify the event that begins the path towards a conflict and disturbs the status quo. What event signals a turn in the plot development and a turn toward the resolving of the conflict? Students can also be asked to analyze the structure of the film's plot by defining plot points. A fellow teacher who specializes in playwriting has used this method successfully with middle school students. A third way of analyzing the plot of the film is through an analysis of a character's motivation. Students can identify the main problems and motivations of one or more characters, then study the film in light of the character's progression in solving the problem.

Most often middle school students analyze character personality in literature by examining what the character

says, what the character does, how the character thinks or feels, what others say about the character, and the character's facial expressions and body language. These same five elements can be used to define characters in film. Corrigan and White suggest another interesting way for students to think about characters in film. They allude to an assumption that "all central film characters are a mix of the ordinary and the extraordinary."

¹² Students can discuss Ossie and Tito in this way. What is ordinary about each boy? What seems to be extraordinary? Finally, students can discuss character development in terms of the plot, as mentioned above. How do Ossie's and Tito's needs, motivations, and problems drive the plot?

Australia: Rabbit-Proof Fence

90 minutes

Release Date: 2002

Director: Philip Noyce

Screenplay: Christine Olsen

Language: English/Aboriginal

Setting: 1940, rural outback

Australian Film

Many American viewers probably don't even realize that certain films they have viewed are from Australia, the style of them is so much like Hollywood. Films that fit into this category are *Babe* (1995), the *Crocodile Dundee* series (1986 and 1988), *Moulin Rouge* (2001), *Shine*, and *The Piano* (1993). Although Hollywood influences are strong, critics and academics do attempt to define categories and trends in Australian film. Jonathan Rayner, in his book *Contemporary Australian Cinema*, discusses road movies; glamour, kitsch and camp movies (also named glitter movies) such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla*; and male ensemble movies such as *Breaker Morant* and *Crocodile Dundee*.¹³ Ben Goldsmith claims that this variety is the characteristic feature of Australian cinema. It is "an intricately interwoven and imperfectly aligned skein of people, texts, elements, social practices, discourse and technologies. . . it is a cinema which readily and wryly acknowledges generic or technical influences from Hollywood and the cinemas of Europe, and returns them with a twist."¹⁴

Background Information and Film Synopsis

The 2001 film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* presents a true story of three young half-caste Aboriginal girls in 1931 who suffered a terrible plight as the result of government policy. The policy, which lasted until the mid 70's, separated half-caste children from their families and sent them to the Moore River settlement with the eventual hope of "breeding" them to be more white. The settlement was 2000 miles from their village of Jigalong, in Western Australia. Molly, the oldest of the three, leads an escape and the girls run away from the settlement, taking over two months to make the journey home. Part of the journey consists of traveling along the rabbit-proof fence, a fence that is 1800 kilometers long, constructed by the government to divide the pastoral land from the dry bush lands in the eastern part of the state of Western Australia.

The images in the film are stunning, consisting of incredible landscapes and beautiful portraits. There is very little dialogue, so the visuals are the dominant element in this film, although the musical score by Peter

Gabriel, an adaptation of Aboriginal melodies is haunting.

The stalwart determination of young Molly is unusual and should captivate the imagination of middle school children. Most American adolescents are not given opportunities to demonstrate strength of character to this degree and I think it is an important trait for them to think about. Where in their lives are they challenged to be strong willed and determined? Do they live up to the challenge?

Students will find it interesting that the three young leads had no prior experience in front of the camera, but their presence on the screen is powerful.

Film Element to be Introduced in Rabbit Proof Fence: The Shot

After viewing the film, a directed lesson on elements of the shot will be held. A shot is everything recorded on film from camera on to camera off. In other words, everything recorded between the director calling "Action" and "Cut." The shot is the smallest unit of the narrative. Four specific shots in the film will be analyzed. Possibilities for shots to view on the DVD are chapter 3 when the car containing the three girls pulls away from the crying women; chapter 5 when Molly, Daisy, and Gracie wake up at the Moore River Native Settlement; a long shot image in chapter 9 with the three girls walking; and a portrait of Molly at the fence in chapter 12.

Students will observe four techniques used; type of shot, point of view of the shot, angle, and frame or movement. After identifying the variables of the shot, they will attempt to articulate the effect that was achieved. A graphic organizer for this activity is available in the appendix.

Iran: Children of Heaven

88 minutes

Release Date: 1997, Iran; 1999 USA

Director: Majid Majidi

Screenplay: Majid Majidi

Language: Farsi

Setting: contemporary, urban

Comments on Iranian Film

For preparation in writing this unit, I viewed six Iranian films. They were strikingly alike in that all of the stories were about children, minimal plot lines were employed, and real locations instead of studio space were used that resulted in cinematic realism. Certainly *Children of Heaven* contains all of the above.

The father of contemporary Iranian film is Abbas Kiarostami and most discussions of Iranian film refer to his style, but Majidi's work is quite similar. Dudley Andrew describes Kiarostami's films as being collections of realist images, framed or arranged in a poetic way.

The predominance of films about children in contemporary Iran is an interesting issue. Hamid Reza Sadr in an article titled "Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema: When we Were Children," tells us that the unique tradition of focusing on children in films has its beginnings in the late 1960s when a governmental

organization, The Centre for Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents, was founded to make films and publish books. After the revolution in 1979 this institution had a smaller influence, but did produce four of Abbas Kiarostami's films. Filmmakers continued to create films in which the world was explored through the eyes of children. Sadr states that "gradually the portrayal of children. . .came to dominate Iranian cinema."¹⁵

Sadr summarizes the effect the use of children has had on world viewers of Iranian films. "Children have been cast in Iranian films as majestic statues of men and women, and sometimes as everyone's alter egos. They have almost been parodies of reports about Iran in the world's media during the last two decades. Iranian cinema was identified as presenting a more civilized way of life than was to be found in other media."¹⁶

The issue of censorship is often raised when discussing Iranian film. Strict Islamic laws do put restrictions on filmmakers and some suggest that this is another reason why films about children are so abundant. However, Kiarostami insists that he would have probably made the same films even without censorship. He has also stated that the banning of Hollywood films has encouraged creativity in Iranian filmmaking.¹⁷

Background Information and Film Synopsis

Of the five countries presented in this unit's movies, Iran may be the country that most middle school children know the least about and certainly have misconceptions about. It is also the country that they may have the most fear of because of current stories in the media regarding its possible nuclear threat. That is one reason that this beautiful film of childhood in a loving and safe community is an important one for them to see. While watching this film, the viewer senses a communal and familial affection and support for children. A universal humanity is convincingly portrayed. This type of imagery is rarely seen by Americans who more and more view this area of the Middle East in a negative way. Although many cultural aspects of the lives of Ali and Zahara are different from the lives of my students, many of the family issues are the same; financial problems, desire for a better life, and concern for each other.

What should children know about Iran before they view this film? A pre-viewing survey of knowledge is most important for this film. The teacher should list on the board what students already know. These can be discussed, misconceptions can be corrected, and research may also be conducted if needed, before the film is viewed. Iran was never an Arabic nation like Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco and other north African countries. Iran was also never colonized. Certainly students should know that Iran was known as Persia until 1935 and it became an Islamic republic in 1979 after the ruling monarchy was overthrown and the shah was forced into exile. Conservative clerical forces established a theocratic system of government, a religious scholar has ultimate political authority. This position is now held by Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei. Iranian-US relations have been strained since a group of Iranian students seized the US Embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979 and held it until 20 January 1981. During 1980-88, Iran fought a bloody, indecisive war with Iraq that eventually expanded into the Persian Gulf and led to clashes between US Navy and Iranian military forces between 1987-1988. Iran has been designated a state sponsor of terrorism for its activities in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world and remains subject to US economic sanctions and export controls because of its continued involvement. The population is 98% Muslim.

The actual story line of the film is a simple one. The older brother, Ali, picks up his sister's shoes at the shoemaker for repairs. He sets them down when stopping at the grocer's stand and a rag picker accidentally takes them. Much of the rest of the film chronicles the efforts of the children to hide the issue of the missing shoes from their parents, figure out how Zahara, the sister, can attend school without her shoes, and most importantly how they can get a new pair of shoes without asking their parents, who certainly have no extra

money for shoes. Early in the movie a tense and foreboding tone dominates. There is a certain severity and coldness in the early shots of family life. Ali and Zahara sit in a silent room with their parents, passing notes back and forth about the shoe catastrophe while they are supposed to be doing homework. The father figure is a bit threatening and the head master of Ali's school certainly adds to the sense of something terrible on the horizon. However, sensitive and helpful adults outnumber the menacing ones and by the end of the movie the feeling of impending doom is alleviated.

Film Element to be Introduced in Children of Heaven: Sound

Sound in film, consisting of music, speech, and sound effects, may be the film element that middle school students are least aware of or have most likely not paid careful attention to its significance in film. Corrigan and White provide an excellent overview to the importance of sound in film and claim that "listening to movies defines the film going experience just as watching them does. Too often given secondary status, sound engages spectators perceptually, gives key spatial and story information, and affords an aesthetic experience of its own."¹⁸

The use of sound in *Children of Heaven* is really quite simplistic and unsophisticated, and that might make it even more appropriate for middle school children to study. The early parts of the film consist mostly of realistic sounds of the market, streets and alleys, school rooms, and other common urban sounds. The opening scene of the shoemaker repairing Zahara's pink shoes is a long one and sounds are prevalent. These are sounds of footsteps, vendors hawking their wares, conversations and an occasional hammering of the shoemaker. Students can study this soundtrack and attempt to analyze why Majidi included them. The sound of footsteps is dominant throughout the film, and the teacher can alert her students to this. Footsteps are heard whenever Zahara and Ali are running through the streets and alleys, but the footsteps of others are present as well.

There is music in this film. It is used sparingly and it would be easy to isolate the few instances where it is present and engage students in a discussion of its purpose. The music was created for the film by and seems to be in a traditional Persian style. The first time music is heard, other than Ali's father listening to his radio, is when Zahara is in the schoolyard and notices her pink shoes on the feet of the rag picker's daughter. She silently walks through the school yard looking down at each girl's feet, trying to locate her shoes. The other instances of music include when Ali and his father venture into the rich neighborhood to look for gardening work, when Ali plays with the rich boy as his father prunes and fertilizes trees, and at the end of the race when Ali is about to win. This music is mixed with Ali's heavy breathing and the sound of a helicopter. The film ends with music playing as Ali's bare feet soak in the pond and goldfish swim around them.

The viewing cues provided by Corrigan and White will work well for studying the use of sound in *Children of Heaven*. They suggest that students can watch a single scene in the film several times and take notes on as many aspects of its sound as possible, turn off the sound and see if the action can be followed as easily as with the sound on, attempt to define whether the viewer's emotional response is changed when the sound is turned off, or try substituting different music for one scene and see how the experience of viewing changes.¹⁹

Iranian Literary Style Translated to Film

Iran's literary heritage focuses mainly on poetry and *Children of Heaven* can be viewed in this light. In general, the movie is really a collection of realistic images arranged in a poetic style. Dudley Andrew provided an easy way of understanding this concept when he discussed *Where is the Friend's House*, another Iranian film by Abbas Kiarostami. Andrew compared the filmmaker's arrangement of images to the florist's arrangement of

flowers. The florist doesn't create the flowers, just their arrangement.

Children of Heaven is filled with such images: the door to the family home; the courtyard; and alleyways repeated over and over again — long shots, short shots, panned shots, Zahara and Ali running through the alleys to school, running to meet each other, and waiting for the trade off of shoes. Then there are the images of shoes: shoes in piles outside of the home, shoes in shop windows, shoes outside of a mosque when the men pray, shoes on the feet of Zahara's classmates, and shoes put out to dry. The final image of the film is incredibly poetic: Ali's bare feet in the courtyard's pond, with goldfish swimming around them. Middle school children who have been trained in the recognition and creation of sensory images in poetry will see this connection.

Another commentary on the films of Kiarostami can be related to *Children of Heaven*, as Majidi's style is similar. The essay to which I'm referring compares Kiarostami's films to the poetry of Sohrab Sepehri, one of Iran's most celebrated contemporary poets. Sohrab Sepheri was a poet and a painter who lived from 1928 to 1980. His poems are arranged images, much the same as the films of Majidi and Kiarostami. Although there is a linear story to the movie, images can replicate short stanzas of verse. Films employ frozen or memorable 'images' in the way poems can. They also work out small and large patterns in time, just like poems. . .using equivalents of rhyme, repetition, opposition, rhythm. The teacher may want to share some of Sepehri's poems with students and challenge them to make comparisons between his work and the arrangement of images in *Children of Heaven*.

A creative writing assignment that illustrates these connections can challenge students to use either the images of shoes or the images of alleys in the film and create a collection of textual images that describe them and link them together in a narrative tale.

Senegal, The Little Girl Who Stole the Sun (La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil)

45 minutes

Release Date: 1999

Director: Djibril Diop Mambety

Screenplay: Djibril Diop Mambety

Language: French and Wolof

Setting: Contemporary, urban

Comments on African Film

Three categories of information might be of interest to teachers reading this unit. The first relates to the financial constraints that burden African filmmakers, the second is a differentiation between filmmaking in countries colonized by the French compared to countries colonized by the British. The third is a presentation of ways to classify African film.

The lack of funding in Africa for filmmaking affects both the number of films made each year and the technical magic that can be used in the production of the film. A few African nations have created governmental agencies that attempt to promote filmmaking, but many filmmakers must raise their own money. Money

mostly comes from wealthy nations such as France, Germany and Italy. Funding also comes from cultural groups or NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) sponsors who have specific agendas to address, such as female genital mutilation or aids prevention. A filmmaker hoping to pursue his or her own creative vision finds it especially difficult to raise funds.

It is also interesting to note that most films being produced in Africa come from nations that were colonized by the French, such as Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The textbook *Teaching African Cinema* states that 80 % of films produced in Africa come from Francophone nations.²⁰ In contrast, nations colonized by the British such as Nigeria and Ghana, have almost no film industry. Most theories explain this phenomenon by noting that French cinema has maintained a strong presence in the world and during colonization a definite film culture existed in these Francophone West African nations. It should be noted, however, that since 1992 or so a 'Videofilm industry' has blossomed in Nigeria. These are not films that are projected in theaters or seen in festivals but they are duplicated on video cheaply and sold locally: 600 a year. This Nigerian phenomenon is known as Nollywood.

Regarding ways of classifying African films, there are several critical approaches put forth by scholars. Manthia Diawara, a film critic from Mali, divides contemporary African film into three groupings: "social realist narratives, films of historical confrontation that put into conflict Africans and the European colonizers, and return to the source movies which stress the existence of a dynamic African history and culture before the European colonization."²¹ *The Little Girl Who Stole the Sun* seems to fit into the first category of social realist narrative. Dudley Andrew offers a scheme for African film that works for all film. Andrew suggests the categories of entertainment films, didactic or teaching films, and aesthetic films which can be referred to as films of discovery or revelation.²² Using this method, *Little Girl Who Stole the Sun* demonstrates attributes of both didactic and aesthetic films.

Background Information and Film Synopsis

This film is part of a planned trilogy by Djibril Diop Mambety, who died before it was completed. The trilogy is named *Tales of Little People*, or "petits gens" — an affectionate term for the lower classes in Senegal. The film is the story of Sili, a young girl making her way in the contemporary city of Dakar. Although the viewer might at first feel that Sili's situation is too unbelievable, that no young child facing her adversities could possibly be as resilient as she is, by the end of the film her situation seems plausible and real.

Sili has only one leg and lives with her blind grandmother who panhandles with a host of other poverty stricken people. Sili is determined to help out and begins by begging as well. After watching roving gangs of unruly boys selling newspapers, she decides that she is capable of doing the same. The film images as Sili attempts to sell the newspaper in various places around Dakar are informative and provide important glimpses into every day life in that city. Several individuals help Sili, including one wealthy man who is impressed with her spirited salesmanship. Two other characters watch out for her and come to her aid when the unruly boys threaten her ambition. We don't learn enough about these two, one a teenage male and the other a man with no legs who maneuvers through the city on a wheelchair. But middle school viewers might have ideas about these strangers and why they help Sili.

Film Element to be Introduced in the Little Girl Who Stole the Sun: Editing

This movie provides an opportunity for introducing middle school children to the important art of editing. Most middle school students are aware of the important function of editing in film, to arrange and link shots and

images to actually create the movie. A fun way to make students more aware of editing was suggested by Dudley Andrew in our seminar and is also included in Corrigan and White. Students can watch a 5 or 10 minute segment of the film and simply yell out "cut" or clap their hands every time they notice a new shot.

Students might be interested in knowing that different directors employ different methods for editing. Some directors rely heavily on storyboarding their films before the shooting actually begins. Their editing relies heavily on the preconceived ideas planned in the storyboarding phase. Other directors prefer a more free flowing process. After each day of filming they spend hours editing and allow the day's shots to dictate the edits. Children can discuss the technique they think Djibril Diop Mambety used in *The Little Girl Who Stole the Sun*.

African Literary Style Translated to Film

Almost all attempts to compare African literary style to African filmmaking use the oral tradition and the griot tradition as a basis for the comparison. Films made that reflect this oral tradition are looser, more leisurely, and involve repetition. The movie *Keita, Voice of a Griot*, deals specifically with a griot attempting to pass on stories to a contemporary child. The book *Teaching African Cinema*, by Roy Ashbury, offers several elaborations on the oral tradition that can be connected to *The Little Girl Who Stole the Sun*. Ashbury points out that one characteristic of the oral rather than the literary style of African film is the lack of sub-plots. He notes that often in African films events and characters appear and disappear and are left undeveloped with no narrative closure. There are characters like this in *Little Girl*, especially the individuals who help Sili, the wealthy man who gives her money, the man in the wheelchair who watches over her, and the young teenager who defends her. Ashbury's contention that "characters appear and disappear sporadically on the picaresque journey of the main protagonists,"²³ certainly fits this film. Ashbury also comments on the tendency of African film to emphasize not the psychology of individuals, but individuals as representatives of social types and how they deal with ethical dilemmas and choices. He notes that often the films avoid close-ups and contain a predominance of long shots and mid shots which prevent the kind of emotional connectivity that Western viewers are used to.²⁴ This seems to be the case with Mambety's portrayal of Sili and other minor characters.

Griots in the African oral tradition are not just storytellers and keepers of history, they are also conveyers of morality and serve as the conscience of the community. The griot uses proverbs to aid in his communication of these moral traditions. In this respect *The Little Girl Who Stole the Sun* also fits into the genre of oral tradition. The moral directives of helping one's fellow man and persevering through adversity are strongly conveyed in this film. While quoting Ousmane Sembene, the most famous of all African filmmakers, Ashbury provides an interesting perspective on the relationship of the griot to African film. He notes that Sembene considers himself to be a modern day griot, because he acts as a storyteller who is a witness, mirror, and commentator on society.²⁵

Students can experiment with this oral tradition in a variety of ways. They may want to simply write some proverbs that are illustrated by the story of Sili. There are many books of African proverbs available to provide models. Students might want to tackle writing a story that is in the oral tradition, even preparing for a telling instead of a reading. Their story can contain only one main character, be told in a linear style, and provide a moral or lesson.

China (Mainland, People's Republic of China), Not One Less

106 minutes

Release date: 1998

Director: Zhang Yimou

Screenplay:

Language: Chinese/Mandarin

Setting: Contemporary, rural and urban

Comments on Chinese Film

The film presented in this unit is from mainland China, and teachers should know that film critics and academics divide Chinese film into three distinct groups, those from the mainland or the Peoples Republic of China, those from Hong Kong, and those from Taiwan. Film in mainland China during the years of Mao's rule served mostly as propaganda tools. During the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, feature film production virtually stopped. However, when Den Xiaoping emerged as the leader of the Communist Party in 1978, the Beijing Film Academy reopened and a new group of eager filmmakers enrolled. This group, when they graduated and began to produce films in 1984, became known as the Fifth Generation. Films produced by this group began to be accepted with high regard at international film festivals, though they were occasionally banned in the PRC. *Not One Less* was directed by Zhang Yimou, one of the most famous of the Fifth Generation directors.

There now exists in mainland China a Sixth Generation of filmmakers. These filmmakers can be characterized by a move toward urban films and an attempt to be true to contemporary currents of Chinese culture. A film called *The World*, directed by Jia Zhangke, is a good example of this stage of Chinese film. *Beijing Bicycle*, directed by , also fits into this category and teachers might want to show it because some of the problems of urban youth seem to correlate with urban poverty in the United States.

Background Information and Synopsis

I considered many Chinese films to feature in this unit, but finally settled on *Not One Less* for several reasons. It provides images of China's countryside, as well as images of a city. Although students need to know that life in Shanghai and Beijing is becoming more and more like life in western cities, they also need to know that 70% of China's population is still living in the country. Wei Min Zhi, a 13 year old girl, is given the job of substitute teacher in a one room school house in a small village called Shuixian. Early scenes in the film will have viewers wondering about her ability to handle this roomful of children in grades first through fourth with one particular trouble maker. As the film continues, however, she wins the children over in her quest to find a student who has left the village to work in Jiangjiakou City. As the children come together to help her, they form a strong bond. This unity, along with real life learning as the children calculate together to figure out how much money is needed, make for some great scenes that might encourage students to discuss what a good classroom looks like.

The actors in the film are all non-professionals and students will marvel at the realism this provides the movie. The director, Zhang Yimou, created many films that feature women and their struggles, however rarely does the heroine accomplish her goal and overcome the problems standing in her way as happens in *Not One Less*.

It might be mentioned to students, because the issue of globalization has been discussed earlier, that Zhang Yimou received funding from Sony pictures to make this film. This fact can add to the discussion highlighting

the contention put forth earlier that the world of filmmaking is becoming smaller and films that are 100% from a single nation are rare.

Zhang Yimou's films cover a wide spectrum, from the almost documentary style of *Not One Less*, to the highly stylized approach of one of his most recent film, *House of Flying Daggers*. He stated in an interview that his work fits into two very different categories. Most of his films have a "highly aestheticized approach, which places a lot of emphasis on color and the 'look' of the film," like *Raise the Red Lantern*. He claims that *Not One Less* is "completely opposite. . .everything looks extremely unadorned and simple. . .the images should strive for a kind of improvisational inspiration."²⁶ Zhang assumes that Western audiences prefer the stylized approach because they are drawn to the beauty of the images. I think it is interesting to note that Zhang Yimou and his family, because they were part of an educated elite, were victims of the repression of the Cultural Revolution and he hopes that one day there will be true creative freedom in China and that he will be able to pursue his "dream of exploring the Cultural Revolution through cinema."²⁷

When discussing this film, the teacher can touch on several issues. What is the significance of the title, *Not One Less*? What does the chalk symbolize? Children can also understand that the Communist mentality urges all citizens to work for the common good; that physical labor will garner results. But did the labor of Wei and her students really bring results? Things didn't really get better until Wei was featured on local television. Rey Chow in her article "Not One Less: The Fable of a Migration," sees the film as announcing a new collective reality for China. Human will power will be increasingly subordinated to the image. It is the image that people will give their concern and compassion and it is the image that will generate capital, social influence and political power. Chow wonders if this is a new form of oppression.²⁸ Students can take this assertion one step further and wonder if Chow's claim is really something new. Didn't Mao also depend on the power of the image, with his campaign of posters and early propaganda films?

Film Element to be Introduced in Not One Less: Mise-en-Scene

For this final film in the festival, I want students to be introduced to the important concept of mise-en-scene, a term taught in any general film studies course. The term is French and means "placed in a scene" or "onstage." Although this term could be introduced at the beginning of the unit, because certainly the director thinks about the elements of mise-en-scene early in the process of creating the film, I place it last because it seems to be a difficult concept to grasp. The term refers to everything that appears before the camera and the arrangement of those elements. These elements include actors, lighting, sets and setting, costumes, and props.

A simple identification of the elements of mise-en-scene will suffice for a middle school understanding of this term. In this movie, *Not One Less*, most of the settings are natural ones, and it is not clear if any actual constructed sets were used. Still, students can study the set of the classroom and notice the props in place and comment on the costumes. The rural landscape and the cityscape are obviously important as well and students can compare and contrast them. Students should know that the actors in the film are not trained and they can discuss how this affects the overall realism of the film. One question that might help students analyze mise-en-scene is, what element or feature of the film seems to be the most important?

Chinese Literary Style Translated to Film

Most writings that attempt to connect Chinese films to a Chinese literary style discuss the ancient and important history of poetry in China as well as the similarities between Chinese paintings and poetry. Although

the film *Not One Less* does not illustrate these connections as well as other films of Zhang Yimou such as *Yellow Earth*, and a film called *King of Masks* that I considered for use in this unit, links can still be found. In the quote presented earlier, Zhang Yimou calls attention to the realism of *Not One Less* and discusses how it does not especially conform to the typical imagist style of other Chinese films.

Catherine Yi-Yu Cho Woo wrote an essay titled "The Chinese Montage: From Poetry and Painting to the Silver Screen" in which she discusses an authentic Taoist outlook, "The soul of Chinese painting and poetry, and now the Chinese cinema, offers the vision of the unity of the human and natural worlds."²⁹ She goes on to list other elements that can be found in poetry, painting, and film. She calls attention to the "technique of a lyrical montage of simple images filmed with a static camera that Chinese movie directors are now endeavoring to express visually the emotional totality of their narratives so peculiarly Chinese that they may be referred to as Chinese montages."³⁰ Other links that she names are images of trees, flowers, plants, and weather; sentimental conventions familiar to Chinese painters and poets such as tear marked faces of men; obvious and deliberate use of landscape; and asymmetry of composition in shots.

The teacher can point out some of these elements in the movie *Not One Less*. Students can discuss whether the film displays a technique of simple images filmed with a static camera. There are several landscape scenes including the opening shot when the mayor is escorting Wei to the school house, when Wei is walking to the home of Zhang Huike, when the children are running to and from the brick factory, and shots of Wei's journey to the city. There are also several shots that show the desolate village against the back drop of the mountains. These images of the rural landscape are brown, beige and barren, not typical of Chinese imagery, but there can be found some asymmetry in the composition of these shots. An interesting writing project is for students to read some Chinese poetry from the Tang Dynasty that illustrates imagery of landscape; my own students read the work of Li Bai. They can then review one of the scenes from the film mentioned above and attempt to write their own poetry that imitates work from the Tang period to describe the film's landscape.

Strategies

Film Festival Handbook

To facilitate the teaching of the unit, a handbook will be created for students. Instructions for keeping a viewer response log, guidelines for conducting small group discussions, a graphic organizer for listing the cultural traits viewed in each film, and a glossary for film terms and literary analysis terms will be included. In addition the booklet will contain maps, fact sheets, and film information pages for each film and country represented.

Sequence of Teaching Plan

I am fortunate to teach in a school where each afternoon there is a two hour block devoted to the arts. This unit will be used during that time period. Ideally, two or three two hour blocks will be devoted to each film. On the first day, both previewing and viewing activities will take place. Previewing activities will consist of assessing knowledge, studying maps and fact sheets about the countries, and reviewing background information sheets for the film. The knowledge assessment will consist of a whole class discussion. A list on the board can be generated. This activity alerts the teacher right away concerning misconceptions that students might have about the country and its people.

While students watch the film, they will be taking notes in several ways. First of all they will keep a viewer response log. This concept is discussed in its own section below. They will also be asked to choose one character for each film and jot down character traits as well as behaviors and incidents that support the articulated traits. A third task they will be charged with is attempting to identify and record qualities of childhood that they observe. Although the hope is that universal qualities will be noted, this charge will force students to think about themselves in relation to the children in the film.

Post viewing tasks include a quick writing of a short synopsis that includes theme, a directed lesson of one film technique, small group discussion using viewing response logs, reporting back to the large group, and a writing assignment. Students will write a short synopsis immediately following the viewing, and hopefully this can be done on the first day or as homework. On the second day, the first activity will be a directed lesson of a particular film concept or technique, using clips from the film. These directed lessons will cover character and plot, mise-en-scene, the shot, editing, and sound. A graphic organizer to be used with the teaching about the shot is included in the appendix. After this lesson, students will break into small groups to discuss the film using their film response logs, notes on characters and character traits, and notes on qualities of childhood they observed. Discussion groups will report back to the large group when clarification can occur. Finally, there will be a writing assignment of the teacher's choosing. Ideas for writing assignments are listed in a section below.

Viewer Response Guide

Students will be provided with suggestions for note taking while they watch the film. A viewer response guide is available in the appendix. Some types of observations that students will be encouraged to make are questions about the movie, observations about cultural aspects viewed, observations about urban or rural life, questions for the director and screenwriter, questions for the characters, emerging themes, emotional responses, and connections to other movies, books, or their own lives.

Writing Assignments

Possibilities for writing assignments connected with this unit are infinite. Possibilities for creative writing include the suggestions for modeling a literary style corresponding with each country. These are discussed with each film. Other ideas include retelling a particular scene in a movie from one character's point of view, writing a narrative of what happens after the movie ends, and creating a literary portrait of one of the characters.

Nonfiction assignments can include compare/contrast essays of two or more cultures, characters, or points of view. Students can also compare their own lives with particular characters or conditions presented in the films. Some students will want to practice reviewing films and specific guidelines can be provided for that.

Activities

A variety of activities are imbedded in the narrative section of the curriculum unit. Please review the sections under each film subtitled "translating literary style into film" and "film element to be introduced." Also in the strategies section specific ideas for responding to films and writing assignments are included.

Final Student Project

Dudley Andrew, our seminar leader, recommended a fabulous culminating activity for this unit. His suggestion is to direct students in an activity that simulates the process they have been a part of during the course of this film festival unit. Students will be asked to pretend that they are preparing a lesson for a group of middle school students in rural China who have very little exposure to films or television from the United States. They must choose a film from the United States that will provide the best cultural picture of the lives of children or adolescents in this country. After choosing the film, they will write a rationale that lists all of the cultural elements displayed in the film. What will the Chinese viewers learn about family life, the role of women and children in society, education and religion, food and celebrations, clothing, urban or rural life, and a myriad of other elements that might be evident? Then students will explain how the Chinese viewers might be misled by the film. What impressions will they get that are not correct or universal to all American children? Finally, they must identify important information about life in the United States that Chinese viewers should know about the lives of children and adolescents in this country that the film does not convey at all.

One objective of this activity is to help students understand that there are many variations of culture in this country and a single film cannot possibly represent the diversity of life here. They must understand that the same is true for the nations and regions we studied in the unit.

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