



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2006 Volume I: Stories around the World in Film

Back to the Future: How Earlier Art Forms Have Influenced Contemporary Cinema in Ireland, Iran, and Africa

Curriculum Unit 06.01.12, published September 2006
by Laura V. Zoladz

Overview

When I started this process, I had the idea that I wanted to teach my students about different cultures through their cinema. I now realize I can also teach my students to understand a particular region's cinema through its culture. This symbiosis was a revelation to me, and I hope my students will delight in it as much as I have. Students can learn from the movies a great deal about a nation's or region's history, geography, and people, including their values, hopes, and fears, but to understand the way filmmakers express these through the cinema, it helps to know something beforehand of the culture from which these movies spring. In researching the cinema of Ireland, Iran, and Africa, I hope to uncover the artistic and cultural traditions out of which they arise in order to better prepare my students to appreciate their films. This unit is intended for a ninth-grade heterogeneous English class. Students of all academic levels from special needs to advanced will be grouped together in this class as our school does not "track" students according to ability. The class will also be demographically diverse. Although the majority of the students are white non-hispanic, there is a large minority (25%) of black students and a smaller minority of Latin-American students (5%). Other races and ethnicities make up less than 1% of our population. The unit should last approximately four weeks with classes meeting for 90 minutes five days a week. Suggestions for shortening and lengthening the unit are made where possible.

Objectives

Without doubt, a nation's or region's cinema will be informed by such elements as its geography, history, spiritual beliefs, material culture, and perhaps most importantly, the other types of art that preceded it. Because film is a newer form of art due to the technological advances that had to be in place for it to exist, it necessarily will be informed by older art forms such as story-telling, poetry, painting, and theater. In America, most films, and certainly almost all popular films, follow a narrative structure similar to that of a novel or short story. That is why, as a teacher of literature, I am able to use movies that are familiar to all my students as examples when I teach such plot devices as rising action, climax, and resolution. Similarly, the characters in

these films can usually be categorized in terms used to analyze characters found in the stories we read: multi-dimensional, one-dimensional, dynamic, static. Other categories we use to analyze fiction such as theme, point-of-view, setting, and mood also have their rough equivalents in Hollywood-style films. When it comes to viewing films from cultures far different from our own, the question is whether we can approach them the same way we approach popular American films. Certainly there is some overlap, but when we approach international films in exactly the same way we are used to approaching Hollywood films, we miss so much. I am guessing the reason I have had trouble getting students to buy into watching foreign films, subtitles and all, is that I have not adequately prepared them for the differences, not only in filmmaking techniques, but in the entire aesthetic context within which these films were made. With this in mind, the over-arching objective of this curriculum unit is to help students understand and appreciate international cinema by exposing them to the cultural and artistic traditions from which each region's cinema is arising. Does the cinema of other cultures extend a literary tradition different from that of the short story and novel that we are familiar with? We will ask this question as we watch foreign films. Along the way, students will be expected to learn about general filmmaking techniques and be able to identify them in the films they view. They will also be expected to compare and contrast both thematic and technical elements in films from different cultures. Most importantly, students will be able to demonstrate the relationship between the artistic heritage of each culture we study and that culture's contemporary cinema.

Strategies and Activities

Film Genres

Lesson Plan

To ease the transition from the comfortable and familiar American films to the potentially discomfiting and certainly unfamiliar foreign-language films, I will start my unit with two western European movies that look similar to the kinds of films to which my students are accustomed but which will present the challenges of adjusting their ears to English spoken in unfamiliar accents, in one case, and to reading sub-titles, in the other. Before watching anything, though, I will get my students thinking about the films they watch and why they watch them. This will start as an in-class journal-writing exercise wherein I will ask the students to list the titles of movies they have seen recently and then think their way back to other movies they have seen over the course of their lives. Usually a time-limit of 2 minutes is sufficient to give the students some sense of urgency so that they start writing, but is also enough time to get down the names of the movies that have made the biggest, most lasting impression.

In the interest of incorporating cooperative learning strategies (this is the latest trend among education researchers and our district is pushing teachers hard to employ it as much as possible), in the next phase of this activity, I will have students stand and circulate until they find another person who has at least one movie in common with them on his or her own list. Once all the students are paired, they will be asked to take turns reading titles from their lists back and forth, without repeating a title once it has been mentioned aloud by themselves or their partners. However, if they hear a title that they too have on their own lists, they can say "yes" or "me too" before going on to give a new title. This activity will last another 2-3 minutes after which they will be asked to return to their desks. At that point, I will tell the students they can add, if they wish, any additional movies to their lists that they heard from their partners or overheard from others in the room.

At this point, I will have a volunteer come to the blackboard and with chalk in hand, record the movie titles that the class will be encouraged to start calling out from their lists. This can be done in a totally free-form fashion with students calling out titles as the spirit moves them, or the volunteer can be asked to call on students who raise their hands and record those responses before calling on the next. Either way, the board should fairly rapidly become covered with a plethora of titles, hopefully of movies representing a variety of genres. I will then ask students to look over the titles on the board and to think about ways to categorize the movies. Do any of the movies fit together because of some common element? Which ones? How? Can we agree upon any over-arching categories that these movies could fit into? It might be fun to put the chosen categories on large chart paper, tape these around the room, and have students walk around and write titles from the board on the chart people bearing the appropriate category. If some titles appear on more than one piece of chart paper, it will serve to stimulate further discussion—are our categories broad enough? If we decide they are, can a single movie fit under more than one category? These are questions I will ask the students to keep in mind as they watch all the films in the unit.

Other issues related to the question of genre are those of audience expectations and filmmaker's purpose. To start I would ask, "Why do people go the movies?" and I would try to elicit several reasons in response. Then, we shall think about why different kinds of movies are made. What is the filmmaker's purpose in writing a comedy, a documentary, an action film, a passion film? How do our expectations of the type of film we are going to see affect our enjoyment of it? Is it fair to judge films from different genres on the same set of criteria? And oh, by the way, how *do* we decide if a film is worthwhile or not and how is this tied to purpose and expectations? These additional questions will give the students even more to think about as they watch. Creating a graphic organizer of some sort where they can jot down their ideas under appropriate headings might help students not to forget the questions as they get caught up in the story and images of the film.

Film Terminology

The students will need one more lesson before viewing the first film, and that will be a brief lesson introducing them to the vocabulary of film-making techniques. This is important to give us a common language to use while viewing and analyzing all the films in the unit. Corrigan and White's *The Film Experience* will be my teacher's guide for this part of the unit and I highly recommend it for other teachers who have not taught or studied film before. Part I of *The Film Experience* is broken down into four sections covering mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound. The glossary is an invaluable reference tool for quick definitions of the different kinds of shots, camera angles, takes, frames, sounds, and lighting techniques. While viewing the first film of the unit, the teacher should point out examples of the various techniques in action and eventually have the students start to identify them for themselves.

Introductory Film (Sweden)

Background and Preparation for Viewing

For the students' first taste of international cinema, I will use the 1985 Swedish film, *My Life as a Dog*, directed by Lasse Hallstrom because it contains situations and themes that my ninth-graders will have already encountered in the short stories we read from the ninth-grade textbook. In *My Life as a Dog*, the protagonist and narrator is Ingemar, a school-age boy who faces an inordinate number of losses including loved ones,

residences, and, inevitably, innocence. At the same time, he begins to learn about sexuality and love. These two separate areas of his experience are reconciled in the end, allowing him to mourn and move on.

Because it follows a fairly straightforward narrative structure and the main character is one with which my students should be able to relate, this movie is very accessible and probably will keep the students engaged in spite of its slower pace, different geographical landscape, and most forbiddingly, unfamiliar language requiring the students to read sub-titles. However, I must note that it has indeed been my experience that students find the prospect of reading sub-titles threatening enough to stage a near-rebellion over it whenever I have shown foreign films in the past, but I am confident that with some frank discussion their concerns can be allayed. For the teacher facing this very real challenge of sub-title resistance, it is important to remember that many students have been programmed by their upbringing, their peers, and perhaps even their prior educational experiences to believe that movies are solely for entertainment and that entertainment cannot involve work or effort. As a teacher about to embark on a unit full of foreign films, it will be important to address these fundamental assumptions right off the bat. This conversation may naturally arise out of the discussion of genre, purpose, and expectations mentioned above, but if it doesn't, the teacher should make a point of bringing it up before the first film is screened. Allowing students to express their particular objections to reading sub-titles, acknowledging their concerns, and addressing them in a sensitive manner may be the best way to win the students over initially, and then the teacher can let the films themselves do the rest of the work of keeping the students interested enough to want to keep reading.

Lesson Plan

Immediately before we start to view this first international film, I will ask the students what comes to their minds when they think of the country Sweden. A volunteer will write students' responses on the board. If necessary, I will prompt the students with questions: What do you think the people there look like? What language do they speak? What religion(s) do they practice? What are the geography and climate like? As with every new culture the students will confront throughout the course, this pre-viewing questioning will hopefully get them interested in seeing how the realities presented in the movie compare to their predictions. It is a technique I will use each time we move to a new part of the world.

Another pre-viewing activity I intend to use for *My Life as a Dog* involves reading an excerpt from a Swedish short story called, "The First Room," published in 1988 by Kristian Petri. In this story the adult narrator reminisces about his childhood and the premature death of his mother. I will have the students read just the first 24 paragraphs of the story because in them Petri touches on many topics and themes which also appear in the movie. After they read, we will add to the board any new ideas or insights the students have about Sweden.

Finally, in addition to having students pay attention to film-making techniques as they watch *My Life as a Dog*, I will also ask them to keep a two column chart with one column titled "Images of Death and Decay" and the other titled "Images of Life and Sexuality." Both are prevalent in the movie and will provide fodder for post-viewing discussion. When the movie is over, we will discuss the notes they have taken on Life and Death, and we will compare their expectations of Sweden with what they learned about the country by watching the movie. We will also discuss how it felt for them to watch a feature-length film with sub-titles and if the experience was what they thought it would be. Importantly, the students will be asked to write in their journals any thoughts on how this film differed from movies they usually watch and whether these differences were good, bad, or neutral for them.

As a culminating activity we will have a little fun with the title of the film. How was Ingemar's life like a dog's

life? This too would be a good topic to have the students write about in their journals before attempting to discuss with the whole class because it is going to take some thought and consideration. I might prompt them to think about Ingemar's own dog in the film and ask them to consider whether there were parallels between his own life and that of his dog. From there we will do a little creative writing based on a wonderful book of poems I came across written from the point-of-view of the poets' dogs. The book, written by Hempel and Shepard, is called *Unleashed, Poems by Writers' Dogs*. One of the poems, "Rusty," by Gordon Lish, is a good place to start because of its thematic overlap with the film. After reading a few more of these poems aloud in class (I highly recommend "Shelter," by R.S. Jones) the students will write their own poems. They will have the choice to write from the point of view of Ingemar's dog or from their own dogs, if they have or have had one. Because I like to build in as much choice as possible when assigning writing tasks, I would also offer students the opportunity to write a poem from Ingemar's perspective about any of the experiences he encounters in the film, if they prefer that to writing from a dog's point of view.

The Cinema of Ireland

The next film we will watch in the unit will give the students a break from sub-titles, but will serve as their introduction to one of the primary objectives of the unit: exploring the cultural and artistic traditions that have influenced national cinemas. Mike Newell's 1992 Irish film, *Into the West*, written by Jim Sheridan, neatly follows *My Life as a Dog* because of several overlapping themes such as the death of a young boy's mother, a strong bond with a beloved animal, and a journey away from home that also serves as a journey toward adulthood. In both films, the beloved animal serves as a substitute for the absent mother, and in both films, when the animal is lost for good, the mother is, in some form, recovered. This recovery of the mother marks the end of one stage in both children's life journey, allowing them to leave behind their mother substitute and move on to the next stage of life, presumably their entrance into young adulthood.

Preparation for Viewing

Prior to watching *Into the West*, I would expose my students to a few selections of Irish poetry, some traditional Irish music, and to the paintings of Jack Yeats, brother of poet W.B. Yeats. Both during and immediately after the movie, discussion would revolve around these pre-viewing activities and whether the students notice any resonances in the film with the poetry, music, and painting. Here I must point teachers to some readily available resources: For Irish poetry, I recommend three books: Cahill's *Gather Round Me*, *The Best of Irish Popular Poetry*, Sourcebooks's *Voices and Poetry of Ireland*, and any anthology or collection of W.B. Yeats's early works. The first book gives a good sampling of traditional Irish verse dating as far back as the 18th century and the second includes a compact disc of famous Irish personalities reading their favorite Irish poems. Yeats's first three books, *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), and *The Wind in the Reeds* (1899) contain several lyrical poems that work well with the film. In terms of specific poems that have some thematic relevance to the film, I intend to use the following:

Four poems from *Gather Round Me*:

"Brian O'Linn"

"The Workman's Friend"

"My Love is Like the Sun"

"A Pair of Brown Eyes"

Seven poems from *Voices*:

"The Fairies" read by Maureen Potter

"Ode" read by Ronnie Drew

"The Ballad of Reading Gaol" read by Gavin Friday

"To L.L." read by Gabriel Byrne

"Never Give All the Heart" read by Andrea Corr

"Dublin Made Me" read by Colin Farrell

"First Annual Report" read by Sharon Corr

Three poems from *Crossways*:

"To an Isle in the Water"

"Down by the Sally Gardens"

"The Stolen Child"

Two poems from *The Rose*:

"The White Birds"

"The Sorrow of Love"

Two poems from *The Wind Among the Reeds*:

"Into the Twilight"

"The Song of Wandering Aengus"

Lesson Plan

With all these poems to choose from, teachers can lengthen or shorten the unit at will. In my case, I will probably make a packet containing all the poems listed above, and break the class up into six groups of four holding each group responsible for three poems that I will assign. The three poems each group will work with should represent a good cross-section of poets and time-periods, and each group should have at least one poem from the book *Voices and Poetry of Ireland* so that they can hear what this poem sounds like read with an Irish accent. Once the groups are formed and poems distributed, the assignment would involve reading the poems aloud to one another (I would insist that each group member read each poem aloud once, so that everyone in the group hears every poem four times), choosing favorites (if the group members cannot agree on a single favorite poem for the entire group, each group member can select his or her own favorite), and filling out a questionnaire about the chosen poem(s). This questionnaire would cover poetic elements such as imagery, sound devices, and figurative language. At the end of this process, the group will choose a member to read aloud to the whole class one of their favorite poems, after which another member will share the

groups' comments about that poem from the notes they have written on the questionnaire.

In addition to exposing the students to Irish poetry in the manner described above, I will show the students paintings by Jack Yeats, brother of the poet. The paintings that for me resonate most with the film we will be watching are: *The Lonely Sea*, *Canal Water*, *The Embanked Road*, *On to Glory*, *Freedom*, and *My Beautiful, My Beautiful*. Pictures of these paintings can be found via a web search and can then be saved onto the teacher's computer. From there the paintings can be projected onto a large screen for the whole class to view at once. An activity I might have the students do while looking at the paintings is to jot down their own made-up titles for each image. I will withhold from the students the actual titles of the paintings until after they have seen the film. When the movie is over, if technology allows, I would love to juxtapose the paintings with similar stills from the movie to see if as a class, we can discern whether the painter did indeed have an influence over the filmmaker's aesthetics, just as it would be interesting to go back through the film and pause it on shots that evoke some aspect of any of the poems we will have read, although this type of one to one relationship will be more likely to exist with the paintings since they are visual than with the poetry because it is primarily oral.

Teachers who have more musical knowledge or background than I do would be encouraged to expand the lesson by introducing students to Irish folk music at this point. My sense is that music contains many of the same elements as poetry such as rhythm and repetition, and when the music also has lyrics, the words are usually filled with images and figurative language such as one finds in poetry. Hence, if students can find poetic techniques at work in Irish cinema, they will at the same time be finding musical techniques.

After viewing *Into the West*, I would like to revisit the poems, paintings and music to see if the students find their responses to them to have changed as a result of watching the film. Did watching the film help them connect with any of the poems better? Would they change any of the painting titles they originally gave? Does the music carry any new connotations? These are good questions for journaling and for discussion.

At this point in the lesson, having stimulated them with a multi-media presentation including poetry, music, painting, and film, I will be giving the students a good old-fashioned worksheet with questions on topics and themes arising in this film that have not yet been directly addressed. There are binaries to consider: the Magical vs. the Real, the City vs. the Country, the Travelers vs. the Settled, the Children vs. the Adults, the East vs. the West, the Cowboys vs. the Indians, the Past vs. the Future, and Journeys vs. Destinations. There is the symbolism of the horse. Finally, there is the comparison of *Into the West* with *My Life as a Dog* that was mentioned earlier.

The Cinema of Iran

Background

From Ireland I will move east to Iran. Here the territory will become a little less familiar, but because of the emphasis on young children, these films should also engage even my reluctant students. Children's problems are limited in their scope and therefore there is more overlap from culture to culture. Unlike adults who operate in a complex social/political/economic world where almost every major decision has multiple ramifications, children operate much more simply. They seek to have their basic needs met: safety and security, affection and friendship, opportunity to play, and intellectual stimulation to satisfy their expanding minds. Children in all cultures are also more or less dependent on adults, so they have in common the problems that arise when one's well-being is almost completely in the hands of others. These similarities will be important to emphasize in order to get American students to identify with Iranian characters. What will be more challenging is helping students appreciate the stories and the story-telling techniques used in Iranian

film.

Here it may be interesting to note a felicitous irony of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking. Indeed, the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1977-1979 brought about a temporary reduction of the number of entertainment films coming out of that country after what had been, prior to the change of regime, an established and prolific industry since the first new wave of Iranian films had started in the late 1960s. Once filmmakers started working at full speed again, they were limited in the stories they could tell by the political and religious dictates of the Ayatollah. One might have predicted that under this more oppressive regime, Iranian cinema would falter, putting out less interesting films due to the limitations imposed by the new political circumstances in which it was operating. But instead the industry exploded with beautifully crafted films as fine as any that had come before. As stated by Fischer in outlining the concerns addressed by a 1998 Tehran conference on Iranian film,

. . .the struggle of the Islamic state—much like the earlier Hollywood Hayes code in the United States—to set moral boundaries. . . while restrictive, functions at times like the rules of the sonnet, that is as a creative game that can generate some excellent results

In addition, outstanding directors like Abbas Kiarostami, have been able to make films complex enough as to obfuscate any suspected undermining of Islamic teaching by refusing to tell stories that employ easy answers or cheap stereotypes. As quoted in Fischer, Kiarostami says, "A movie is good, I think, when the censor does not understand what should be censored."

An interesting parallel exists between the limitations imposed on Iranian filmmakers and those imposed on the children who are so often central characters in Iranian films. Both must negotiate carefully and ingeniously a world in which a higher authority must be either answered to or circumvented, depending on the circumstances. Hence, in addition to the relatively "safe territory" that stories about children provide the Iranian filmmaker, these stories also provide a character who is the filmmaker's own counterpart in the fictional world of the film; a character, who, like the filmmaker him or herself, is hindered by obstacles and restrictions.

Two Films by Majid Majidi

Two movies directed by Majid Majidi illustrate the intelligent and resourceful ways children confront their problems and limitations. The earlier film, *Children of Heaven*, deals with a classic theme of Persian literature dating back to Firdausi's 1010 epic, the *Shahnameh*: the conflict of fathers and sons. At first glance, *Children of Heaven* may appear to be about a relationship between siblings, and that it is, in part, but the brother-sister relationship in the movie is overshadowed by the looming specter of the father and his temper, something the sister calls up at her convenience and the brother never forgets. In this film, primary school aged Ali loses his sister's shoes on an outing to the market, a fact he cannot bring himself to confess to his poor parents who are behind in the rent and struggling with a newborn. He is especially afraid of the anger his carelessness will provoke in his frustrated and temperamental father, so he persuades his sister not to tell, and they devise a plan that allows them to hide the truth. Younger sister Zahra wears the shoes the first half of the day in order to be able to attend school properly dressed, and then she runs to a meeting place to turn over the shoes to Ali, who wears them in the afternoon when he attends school.

This seemingly simple arrangement is made complicated by various factors that compel Ali to find a more permanent solution to the problem. That solution presents itself when Ali reads about a footrace in which the second place winner receives a pair of brand new sneakers as a prize. Determined to qualify for the race and

win second place, Ali attempts to right the wrong he committed when he lost the shoes. Although the outcome of the race is not what Ali hopes for, a brief, single shot lets the audience know that the final outcome will be a happy one because his father has managed to purchase new shoes for both his elder children with money he has made working as a gardener.

The tone of the movie remains sad to the very end, however, even with the knowledge that the children will both receive new shoes, because as dramatic irony would have it, Ali does not know what the audience knows, and the audience is left with the image of a dejected child, sullenly soaking his blistered and swollen feet in the wading pool outside his apartment. That the goldfish curiously swim up and poke at his ankles underwater in what almost seems an act of consolation is of no apparent solace to the miserable boy, a non-Hollywood ending that will infuriate the majority of my students, but one that is in keeping with the realism of contemporary Iranian cinema and Iranian attitudes toward sadness: "Sadness in Muslim Iran is a central philosophical attitude, instilled through childhood teasing, cultivated through poetry as a companion to the soul, and elaborated in religion . . . Sadness is associated with depth of understanding, with thoughtfulness, with maturity, with awareness of the true nature of reality."

To help American students come to terms with the ending of this and other Iranian films, it will be important to expose them to this different understanding of the role of sadness. For students accustomed to Hollywood films, sadness is probably seen as a temporary state to be transcended or a lasting one to be endured, in the latter case evoking great pity, but these responses to sadness in the Iranian film would be inadequate if a true appreciation of the film and accurate understanding of the culture is to be achieved.

Sadness pervades Majidi's *The Color of Paradise* as well. It is established very early in this film that the young blind protagonist, Mohammed, is perceived by his own widowed father as little more than an inconvenience. This heart-wrenching reality is mitigated greatly by the appearance of his loving grandmother with whom he enjoys a happy, healthy relationship even while his father lurks about, often creating a sinister tension. In time, we learn that the father wants to remarry and sees Mohammed as an obstacle to his future happiness, so he takes his son away to train with a blind carpenter in hopes that Mohammed can someday become self-sufficient by learning this trade. It is a pragmatic solution to the father's problem, but a decision that seems to be made with little thought as to what may be in Mohammed's best interest since it requires separating Mohammed from his grandmother, sisters, home, and academic education. As a student in the school for the blind as well as in the school his sisters attend, Mohammed proves to be quite the agile learner. He is an excellent reader of Braille who astounds his non-blind classmates with his fluency. But he is yanked from all that and delivered to the blind carpenter without ceremony or apparent second thoughts. Luckily, the carpenter is kind to Mohammed, so once again the sadness is made bearable to the viewer by Mohammed's resiliency in the company of a caring adult. With Mohammed out of the way, his father is free to pursue his marriage plans until his mother, Mohammed's beloved grandmother, falls ill, perhaps, the movie suggests, from grief over Mohammed's departure and her son's selfishness. She eventually dies at an inauspicious time, causing her son's wedding to be called off by the bride's family. Grief-stricken, Mohammed's father goes to retrieve his son from the carpentry apprenticeship, and on the way home an accident nearly claims both their lives. When the bridge the two are crossing collapses beneath them, Mohammed plunges into the river and is swept away. After a somewhat too-lengthy pause, his father pursues him valiantly until he can continue no longer. The final shots of the film leave a question as to whether Mohammed survives the ordeal and the ending is neither happy nor sad, or rather both, as the viewer is led to believe that Mohammed is dead until a feeble but powerful sign of hope is offered, almost like a tease, and the film is over.

Lesson Plan

This movie gives the teacher a great deal of material with which to work. Because it is incredibly rich in brilliant, saturated color, rife with a variety of diegetic sounds, and even manages to convey a strong sense of texture as Mohammed fingers the objects that make up his world to feel what he cannot see, students can be asked to keep a running list of sensory images they perceive as they watch. I would have them create a graphic organizer with four boxes: one for sight, one for sound, one for touch, and one for smell. If asked to list examples in the appropriate boxes as they view the film, the students' attention will be on more than just the plot of the story, enhancing their appreciation of the poetic elements of the film. This will also help them better tolerate portions of the film where the story moves less rapidly than what they are accustomed to in the movies they watch solely for entertainment.

Other poetic elements in the film that students can keep track of as they watch are recurring metaphors or symbols. With my students, I would consider giving out a list in advance of certain items to look for as they watch, asking them to jot down a few thoughts as to what these might represent, explaining that their ideas should be revisited at the end of the movie at which time they might want to revise them. This list would include the bird Mohammed returns to the nest, the fish grandmother returns to the stream, the upended turtle, the eggs that are passed from hand to hand in close-up, the fog that Mohammed sees when his grandmother dies, and the auditory phenomenon the father hears from time to time, a strange, dissonant sound that evokes a most unpleasant sensation even in the viewer. There are also the two occasions when the father sees his image reflected over and over in a window or fragments of glass.

I would also use this film to introduce my students to the concept of the unsympathetic character, who according to Chaudhuri and Finn, is "central to many Iranian films [and] marks a divergence from the Hollywood norm." Earlier I referred to Mohammed as the protagonist of *The Color of Paradise*, but his father is also a contender for this role because as the movie progresses, he becomes more and more central to the story, and in the end, he is the only character who truly evolves. In fact, his character arc is similar to that of a Greek tragic hero, another point worth exploring with students. Although he is not a person of high rank in the classical sense, he is the most important and powerful person in the life of Mohammed. By virtue of being the only adult male in the family unit, he has final say over all of the family's decisions, and he certainly uses this power to further his selfish ends. Continuing the analogy, Mohammed's father can be said to fall due to a character flaw or miscalculation when he sends Mohammed away to live with the carpenter, for this selfish move precipitates the illness and eventual death of his mother, which leads to the additional loss of his betrothed. Finally, when the father chooses to risk his own life to save the life of his son following the collapse of the bridge, he redeems himself for his previous selfishness, thus proving to be a dynamic character, that is, one who evolves and matures as a result of his experiences.

For my 9th grade students, then, *The Color of Paradise* makes for an excellent preview to the Greek tragedies many will read as part of their 10th and/or 12th grade curriculum, and it provides an opportunity for the type of character analysis they are expected to do when reading fiction. By the time they view this film, they will have learned the differences between round, flat, static, and dynamic characters, and they will know how to identify them using evidence from the stories they read. That they can do this with an Iranian film will help them connect with the film by exploiting its similarities to fictional elements with which they are already familiar. On the other hand, the fact that Mohammed's father is such an unsympathetic character throughout most of the film can be used to look at the differences between Hollywood cinema and Iranian cinema. It also relates to the discussion of sadness in Iranian films. I might ask the students to think about films they have seen where a parent is portrayed negatively and whether the portrayal is softened with exaggerated comical elements or erased with an obvious total reversal by the film's end. I would suspect in most cases, the devastating sadness, without comical relief, of being under the care and control of an extremely

selfish/unsympathetic parent, is one that they have not encountered in the Hollywood films they watch.

Children of Heaven and *The Color of Paradise* invite comparison. Both are about children, both contain a father/son relationship which exists within a framework of other family and community relationships, both child protagonists face obstacles and attempt to overcome them in their own ways, both films have ambivalent, though not necessarily ambiguous, endings. On the other hand, *Children of Heaven* is a simpler story and I would challenge my students to explain what makes it so, urging them to start by looking at character growth and complexity. While both movies contain complex characters, only in *Color of Paradise* is there any clear change or growth in a major character. These are concepts 9th graders could easily explore and discuss orally or in writing.

One film by Panahi and Kiarostami

A third Iranian film I would like to share with my ninth-graders is *The White Balloon*, written by Kiarostami and directed by Jafar Panahi. Like *Children of Heaven*, it presents us with a pair of siblings, brother and sister, working together to solve a problem. The feel of this movie is less intense, however, as the two children enjoy some light and even comical moments during their struggle to retrieve their mother's 500 toman banknote from the grate-covered basement into which it has fallen. Among the many moments of waiting, brooding, and desperation, there are moments of hope and entertainment all of which are registered beautifully on the face of the genius young actor, Aida Mohammadkhani, who plays the sister, Razieh. This film, like the other two Iranian films in the unit, emphasizes the journey through every day life as much as, if not more, than the destination. In a significant twist of fate, the person who is most useful in helping the children solve their problem is an Afghan boy, a foreigner. This detail carries significance in a film that is so steeped in Iranian culture from the streets of Tehran, the domestic chores at home, the customary clothing, the traditional relationships between parents and their children. In retrospect, however, there are other anomalies that undermine this seeming adherence to tradition. The young central character, Razieh, in spite of being a girl and because of being a child, is able to get away with some brazen behaviors Iranian traditionalists would likely not approve. She interacts with a group of unsavory men who are circled around a street-performer wielding a dangerous snake, she carries on a protracted conversation with a strange young man who keeps us wondering throughout his presence on screen about his motives toward the little girl, she speaks her mind at times when we least expect it, and she proceeds toward her goal of getting a special goldfish for the New Year with a quite unfeminine persistence and obstinacy. Is Kiarostami being subversive in that subtle way he himself considers most desirable?

Iran has not had a long tradition of prose fiction. Instead, poetry has been the dominant art form of this culture, and in many ways, post-revolutionary Iranian films are like visual poems as much as or even more than narratives accompanied by images. With this in mind, reading some Iranian poetry might also be a good way to introduce the students to the films. The poems of Mahmud Kianush are accessible to ninth graders because of their short length and simple subject matter. One of his poems, "Hide and Seek" makes an excellent companion piece to the 1996 short story, "The Glass Marbles," by Pari Mansouri. I would have my students read and discuss these before viewing the first Iranian film because they serve as a lovely bridge from the two Western European films to the two Iranian films. Whereas the European films involve the death of a mother, the story "The Glass Marbles" ends with the sudden, violent death of a little girl's father. While no parents die in the Iranian films we will watch, there is a potentially explosive aspect to the relationships these children have with their fathers. In two cases, *Children of Heaven* and *The White Balloon*, if the children cannot work out their problem themselves, there will be the father's well-established anger with which to contend. In *The Color of Paradise*, we have a relationship that has in many ways already exploded but may be

on the mend by the film's end.

Other Iranian poets worth reading before watching the films are Forugh Farrokhzad, Nima Yushij, and Ahmad Shamlu. There is an entire website dedicated to Farrokhzad where one can find many of her poems translated into English. The poem I recommend for this unit would be *Another Birth (Tavalodi Digar)* and the teacher can have the students hear it read in Farsi by the poet herself by linking to the audiofile on her website. It may be important to note that Farrokhzad herself was a filmmaker as well as a poet. From Shamlu, I recommend the poem, *Fairies*, and from Yushij, I recommend *Waiting* and *By the River*. A simple internet search of these poets will yield several websites where their poems can be found. Teachers will immediately see the connections between each of these poems and the films in the unit and can decide how to work the poems in as pre- or post-viewing activities.

As with Ireland, the visual arts as well as the oral arts may well have played a part in shaping the cinema of Iran and for this we will turn to what is probably the best known of all Persian Art—the Persian Rug. For dozens of excellent photos of all varieties of Persian rugs along with explanations of how they differ from one another depending on the region in which they were woven, I went to the Iranian Cultural and Information Center, a website started at Stanford University. From there I was able to download a large sampling of Persian rugs to show my students. Much of the pleasure and distinctiveness of the apparently simple Iranian films about children lies in their elegant patterns of repetition and variation, which can be compared to Persian designs in rugs and other graphic arts.

Additional Films from the Middle East

For the teacher who has the time to explore films from other countries in the Middle East, I would like to recommend *Osama*, from Afghanistan, *Turtles Can Fly* from Kurdish Iraq, and *Paradise Now* from Palestine. *Osama* is the story of a young girl forced to disguise herself as a boy in order to help her grandmother, her mother, and herself survive during the tyrannous reign of the Taliban, *Turtles Can Fly* tells a heart-breaking tale of a group of orphaned children living on their own on the eve of the U.S invasion of Iraq, and *Paradise Now* tells the story of young Palestinian men who are persuaded to become suicide bombers to help their people's plight. All the innocent wonder and relatively small problems faced by the children in the Iranian films is gone completely when we move to these new regions where the cinema is much more overtly political, dealing with social injustices due to gender discrimination, poverty, and war.

The Cinema of West Africa

Background

The final region to be studied in this cinematic trip around the world will be West Africa, or more specifically, Senegal, Mali, and Burkina Faso, all of which have been producing excellent films with a distinctively "African" aesthetic based on the oral tradition. In much of West Africa, the griot is the source of the ancient legends that are passed from generation to generation. The griot is a story-teller who comes from a long line of story-tellers. At one point in African history, griots held a highly esteemed position in society, and each important family had its own personal griot to keep the history and secrets of their heritage.

The movie that best portrays a griot in action is *Keita*, by filmmaker Dani Kouyate from Burkina Faso. *Keita* is based on the *Sundiata* epic, the founding legend of West Africa, similar to our *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This frame-tale starts out in a very clever fashion: the griot, asleep in his hammock, is awakened by a man who turns out to be one of the characters in the story the griot will later be narrating. This same character appears later,

again outside the context of the griot's tale, to the young man whom the griot, upon awakening, sets out to visit. The griot will be teaching this young man, a school-age boy, about his family heritage. When he arrives at the boy's home, he is greeted warmly and respectfully by the parents and soon the boy's lessons begin. As the griot tells his tale, the filmmaker takes us back in time to show the story the griot is telling being enacted visually for the audience. These scenes are magical in their brilliant color and spare dialogue. Cutting back and forth from the legend to the present, the film shows us that the griot's pupil has begun to slack off on his regular schoolwork and attendance, arousing the concern of his school teacher and mother. Thus is played out the conflict between the importance of book learning and that of oral history, a conflict that has many layers. To wit: Book learning, while important to get ahead in the modern world, is learning the subjects as taught from the Eurocentric point of view of West-Africa's former colonizers, the French. To stay in touch with his African roots, the boy must learn what only the griot can teach him. The mother presents a compromise that appears to balance the two points of view on the conflict: she argues that the boy should learn his heritage during his vacation time so that it does not detract from his school responsibilities, but this does not satisfy the griot, who does not understand why school learning should take precedence over learning one's personal heritage. Hence, what seems like a reasonable, balanced perspective is shown to be biased after all. The griot contends that the boy needs to learn the history of his family and his name first and foremost, and all other learning should follow from that.

What is interesting about this movie is that in showing the boy caught between two worlds, it is also showing us all of Africa caught between two worlds. Africa is a continent of nations that were once colonized and are now trying to move forward into modern society without losing their own individual identities. In that sense, the film *Keita* is allegorical. What students will like about the film is the fact that a boy in Africa today faces many of the same issues that they do: parents with high, sometimes conflicting expectations, temptations to slack off on school work, teachers who just don't "get them." Minority students in particular may see some of their own issues with identity paralleled in the film. In my school a fairly large population of students is either black or Latin-American, and most of them have an interest in staying connected with the history of their particular minority group while at the same time fitting in with the majority culture that surrounds them and of which they are equally a part.

Lesson Plan

To introduce the film *Keita* to students, I would have them read excerpts from Niane's *Sundiata, an epic of old Mali*. This is the written text version of the legendary oral tale. The only problem with this approach is that oral tales do not translate well into written ones, but even that can lead us to some interesting discussion. I would like to ask my students, "In the absence of griots, how is it best to relate one's history? Are movies a better medium to relate the oral tale or are books? Why is one better than the other?"

Another excellent introduction to this film would be to have students take a day or two in advance of the screening to speak with older family members about their personal family histories. I would have them seek out and speak to the oldest family member they can find and have that person tell them stories about the family's past.

Finally, to bring us full circle back to a film about a boy who loses his mother, and in this case, his father, as well, and then must recover her in order to progress, we have another selection from Burkina Faso, *Wend Kuuni*, directed by Gaston Kabore. *Wend Kuuni* is another good example of how the tradition of the oral tale gets translated into film. When the story begins, there is no outside narrator telling the tale, but at a certain point well into the story, the voice of an unseen narrator asserts itself. This voice over/narration returns again

later, and I must admit it causes some confusion on the part of the non-African viewer, but makes perfect sense when one considers the oral tradition out of which the film is made.

While the goal of this unit is to highlight each culture's unique aesthetic sensibilities, the fact that films from at least three of the cultures (Sweden, Ireland, and West Africa) have this theme of a lost mother who must be recovered speaks to the idea that across vastly different cultures, there are universal themes to be found. Students should be encouraged to look for other universal themes during the course of this unit, finding parts of themselves in others as they traverse what may seem, at times, very unfamiliar territory. Hopefully by seeing and beginning to understand the differences and similarities among cultures including their own, students will gain greater appreciation and tolerance of all people.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use