



Political Socialization: Finding Ourselves in Film

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Introduction

What are the challenges that teachers have today in conveying practical information about the American political system to students? Well, I think there are many. The modern political arena is an increasingly complex one. There are two major parties that have been around in some form for many years but even they have trouble adjusting to contemporary issues that challenge their ideological center. More and more often they have trouble differentiating themselves. Evidence of this can be seen in the onslaught of third parties like the Reform party of the early 90s that had a dramatic effect on the outcome of the presidential elections and the current Green party that was blamed for "stealing" votes from the far left.

There is also a drastic flux of information in and out of the American consciousness that happens so fast we barely have time to notice. With so many news outlets competing for the newest, hottest story, what we think about as present can be very distorted. An issue or story that is headline news one day is gone and forgotten the next. Old news is merely weeks old.

The numbers of stakeholders in policy decisions have multiplied, as the world has become a more interconnected place. Now American legislation, more than ever, may either have an international intent or prime motive. Indeed, a very real part of debate in America has been about whether or not to base our laws on foreign models, for instance, following the lead of Europe in outlawing capital punishment. Lobbyist organizations like the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) often referred to as one of the most powerful in Washington, lie like a shadow of the world across the changing landscape of American lawmaking.

And so, we teachers sift through the murky waters of court decisions, blathering party pundits, talk show rhetoric, and ubiquitous news flashes to bring our students closer to some practical meaning. This unit is meant to tackle this situation. So how will it help? Let me first say that I teach Advanced Placement American Government and Politics and have designed this unit to fit with the curriculum requirements for this course as outlined in the Advanced Placement College Board program. The program insists that teachers and students study several aspects of American government and politics including units on the role of major media in politics, political ideologies in the United States, and concepts of political socialization, which I will discuss at greater length later in the unit. This unit is meant to weave together parts of each of these. It will not necessarily be a comprehensive study of each, but a combination of important elements from each that can help prepare students to engage pertinent issues within the parameters of course requirements and help

penetrate the political world that surrounds them.

Because the problems I have indicated are so big, I have devised this unit to employ film analysis as a way for students to come to grips with problems in their political culture. Let's face it; our students are often the prime targets of the entertainment industry and whether the objective is economic, cultural or political, it is the responsibility of teachers to help them to be informed consumers. Since film is a major part of the cultural malaise I described earlier, it seems an appropriate juncture to meet the place my students occupy. But I should also say that later in the unit I am going to offer some alternative or adjunct assignments that might appeal to students, including using popular music, poetry, television, and visual art for the same purposes. But I digress. . . on to the unit.

The first point is the easiest to relay to students, and that is to recognize that films have some ideological motive. Regardless of the depth of political reach, each film makes a point that can be linked in some substantial way to political thought or theory. It is of course no secret that media exert a very powerful cultural influence. It is the sole reason for the advertisement industry. And so it is inarguable that parts of that influence can have political ramifications.

Next, it will be crucial to have students assess the impact that films have had on shaping their own political views. I will not approach this as if my students lack discretion. Instead, I will ask them to do some metacognitive exercises using some of their favorite films in order to determine whether or not the political beings they have become might have some relation to the films they choose to analyze. Also, I want my students to investigate why filmmakers might choose to transmit a particular ideological message. In other words, the students should first answer the question: what is the cultural text of the film or what point is a film making? They should then speculate as to the significance of the film within the political context in which it was made (Turner, 131). These will be the essential elements to the academic exercise I describe in this unit.

This Unit and My School

I teach in an arts magnet school making this unit especially relevant. The students who attend our school arrive there by way of application, followed by an audition at which time they may be entered into a lottery. Needless to say it is not easy to get into Northwest School of the Arts, Charlotte, North Carolina. The positive side of these bureaucratic hurdles is that we have a population of students quite dedicated to improving the quality of their arts endeavor. Students are exposed to all art forms in their middle school years (our school is 6-12) and unlike other programs, upperclassmen can choose an arts major in visual arts, dance, theatre, orchestra, chorus, or some combination of these. An overwhelming majority of our graduates continue their work as they enter institutions of higher learning.

It is worth noting that this unit might be especially attractive to my students who are in an educational atmosphere where they have their choice of classes like Film Studies, Drama levels I, II, and III, Musical Theatre, and Shakespeare in Film. What binds these kids together is their understanding of the persuasive nature of art. They each understand, perhaps in different ways, that a song, a dance, and a canvas can move an audience and can speak to people in a profound manner. They are driven to do, in their creative work, this very thing and have persistently, in the ten years I have been a teacher there, shown great promise when allowed to bring their arts expertise into their academic classrooms.

Rationale

During the 1970s and into the 1980s the American women's movement, punctuated by the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, was driven under the slogan "the personal is political." Indeed, women of the period (and beyond) were justified in suggesting that their socio-economic condition was not plainly personal but a manifestation of political attitudes and behaviors. Women's salaries were not (and are not generally) comparable to men's in similar occupations. Divorce laws favored men and so on (Farragher, 450). For the purposes of explaining this unit I would like to borrow this adage.

It might be said that much of what we encounter in daily living is political. It could get a little annoying to think about life this way but bear with me as I flesh this out. Let's say that you and a friend decide that on a Saturday afternoon you are going to meet at the YMCA for a spin class then go to a late afternoon lunch and see a movie in the early evening. The political crossroads here are endless. First, there are speed limits that may hinder your progress (if you choose, as I do, to think of them as a buttress to progress). Second, if you are working out you are probably health conscious and will choose a restaurant or something on a given menu that contributes to your continued good health. Good health is strongly linked to things such as disability and life insurance that derive from various codes tied to legislation born largely from interplay between state and federal officials and insurance corporation lobbyists. Lastly, the film that you choose will undoubtedly have an ideological edge that is unavoidable. Films are stories with plots and themes that attempt to make a point. Often times that point is of a political nature. But in a practical sense this day represents the fact that nothing that we encounter, even the most innocent of situations, can be completely devoid of political implications.

What does all this mean? The personal is political. It is unavoidable. The truth of the matter is that laws guard our lives. Those laws, rules, or regulations are created through the American political process and it is our job, since we have sovereignty, to comment on them, ask that they be changed, follow them alertly, or condemn their creators. Voters might be said to have the ultimate democratic comment when they participate in elections. But it is naiveté to think that the process is not far more involved than that. So who is making all the noise? Voters must be informed and the information is largely the responsibility of America's mass media. There is an inarguable link between the function of our federal system and the media that charges itself with giving us the tools we need to be good citizens. Indeed most Americans depend on multiple forms of media to teach them about politicians, political issues, and political happenings. For this unit I've chosen to focus on film as a key part of the media whose effects are often recognized. Specifically I want to deal with political rhetoric in various films showing how the cinema might contribute to one's ideological or political perspectives.

Film and Politics

This summer my wife and I saw the movie *Spider Man 3*. It was a typical computer-generated theatrical thriller with a common plot: good vs. evil. Or so it would seem. The storyline took a bit of a turn, however, as Spiderman became tempted to seek revenge against his apparent enemy and in one scene even contemplated killing him. The audience discovers with Spiderman that allowing temptation to overcome one's self is a dangerous proposition with many unpredictable outcomes. He eventually realizes the error of his

thinking when the antagonist reveals himself to be a decent and heartfelt human being worthy of forgiveness, which is quickly granted. But for our purposes this film does far more than allow about an hour and a half of reality escape through fantasy.

What could the storyteller be saying? Let's answer this by looking at the film through a political lens. Pay careful attention to this next bit as I try to model for you the kind of thing you might want to describe to your students in class. It is perfectly plausible for us to link this story with the current conflict in Iraq. After the 9/11 attacks our government was anxious to find the culprits and bring them to justice. In a calamity of this kind politicians are never apt to be patient as they feel the pressure to respond to the wishes of constituents who are eager to find someone to blame. And it has been a frequent predicament in United States History from the so called "Bloody Massacre" in Boston, to the Alamo to Pearl Harbor.

So, we knew Islamic fundamentalist jihadists in the Middle East calculated the attacks, we had a "bad guy" we could toss into the fray, and an American public ready to "smoke them out of their rat holes," as President Bush put it. It was this rush to judgment and need to exact vengeance that has led us to the befuddling situation we find ourselves in today. Therefore, we could say with great validity that *Spider Man 3* wants us to consider whether tolerance, patience, and forgiveness are values we ignored and by giving in to the dark temptations for revenge, we have left ourselves in a rather pitiful condition. Maybe *Spiderman* preaches that real heroes behave with fortitude, depth of thought, and in a calculatedly respectful way. They are not, as the theme of this film is suggesting, apoplectic, myopic and headstrong.

We could also think about this in another politically oriented manner. The debate over capital punishment has been a hot topic in recent years especially since DNA testing has revealed a number of miscues on the part of our legal system. In the film *Spiderman* is a celebrated character and held iconic by the community. He is the ultimate authority for good. Indeed, the one force that keeps criminals at bay. But because he blames the Sand Monster guy, who is never given a name during the film, for murdering his Uncle he contemplates killing his foe. It is a perfect setup for commenting on the death penalty. Spidey forgives and forgets and the Sand Guy, or whatever he is called, lives and learns a valuable lesson. There is even an offering in the end that Sand Guy is going to change his ways, which he has been rehabilitated and will ostensibly be a productive member of society. By the way, it is an interesting consequence to this metaphor that the enemy is a walking desert!

Now, I think it is worth asking what difference it makes if in fact our assessment of this film, or any other, is logical and meaningful. Well, in the AP course we are asked to teach about a process called political socialization, political ideologies, as well as to teach about the political effects of major media. And as was mentioned in the introduction, this is not an easy prospect given modern political complexities. This type of specific political analysis can help us do both, but first some clarification with regard to terminology.

Political socialization is the process by which people become their political selves. It is the accounting for and perhaps the accumulation of all the possible influences in people's lives that have led them to take some political path. Political scientists have theorized about this process for many years. It is through this socialization that people adopt some ideology that acts as a guide to their political opinions and activities. Among the most important of influences is a person's family which includes racial and cultural considerations, religion, the region where a family lives, the mother's and or father's occupation and educational background with of course a great deal of attention being paid to the families traditional political leanings.

For this unit, however, I want to also give credence to the role media, specifically film, might play in this development. As times have changed and children expose themselves to and are often manipulated by

multiple forms of Media, it is worth asking whether or not their political opinions are potentially a byproduct of the materials they consume. It seems quite likely. So we have the makings of a unit that will supply teachers with the ability to teach students about the role film based media play in developing political ideologies for American people in a process referred to as political socialization. Now let's put them all together.

Film Analysis: Making it Work for Your Students

There are several important caveats to this procedure that we should discuss before getting into lessons and strategies. I will break these down into component parts by using boldfacing to separate ideas and begin each with an essential question. Also I want to explore film analysis with animated films and realistic ones in separate categories paying particular attention to the differences we should notice between the two types.

But I would also like to interject here a couple of points related to the following narrative. There is a wide range of films from which I could choose examples. But there are no preexisting categories of the types. So, I will essentially be instituting my own structure that you may use or redefine as you see fit. Don't be confused by this. I will discuss those kinds of films that make analysis quite easy but also those with heavy doses of symbolism that are wrapped around sometimes complicated metaphors that can make the inference I have written about so far more difficult. Keep in mind that there can be lots of variations between those I am going to describe, but for the sake of time and simplicity I will not muddy the waters with the entire gamut of alternatives.

Also, I will not promote any conspiratorial views of media and politics. This is not a unit about the supposed liberal bias in Hollywood. Nor is it an exploration into the monolithic status of media giants and their so-called attempt to control human beings through subversive marketing techniques.

Are films in fact influential?

This is a fairly objective academic exercise, but not so objective that it allows us to dismiss the significance of film in our political evolution. If we refuse to accept the politically relevant content of films and perceive the action of watching films as pure and simple entertainment, meaning that somehow we exist outside the process, then the films themselves lose much of their meaning and significance. We should not avoid the fact that our interaction with films makes them a part of us and so they must have social, cultural, and political consequences.

The point of this is not to promote the idea that some particular film or set of films is definitive in creating political ideologues, but rather that it can be a contributor to any evolving political being. Viewers connect with films often times in very meaningful ways. Therefore, young children who think, for instance, that *Happy Feet* is the "best movie ever," grow up with some special stake in the message. It is part of their personal culture, and as we discussed earlier, the personal is political. It is not to recommend that there is a one to one correlation between what the film says and what then the viewer believes. This is not an absolute science. But it is an undeniable fact that movies are a prevailing presence in our lives. And just as parents and friends are

instrumental in shaping us, our choices of media too can powerfully spark, reinforce, or perhaps change our interests in the world.

Do all films work as political rhetoric?

The clear answer is yes. There are plenty of films that may not seem to have any abiding political qualities. For example the Jim Carey film *Dumb and Dumber* is, I believe, not representative of any political issue or situation in a contemporary or historical sense. Any attempt to manipulate the story line to make it correlative to political theory would seem to be far too contrived. However, as Dudley Andrew my seminar leader put it, it is much like ingesting food. No matter what we eat or drink it affects our bodies in some way. That could range from the very positive fruits and vegetables to the very negative Big Mac with a wide array of possibilities in between. So if there are any allusions to masculinity or gender roles, wealth or class identity, as there positively are in the Carey comedy, it is being "ingested" by the audience and consequently there has to be some level of mental acquiescence. But to clarify, there is a broad political spectrum across which films may be placed.

How do we differentiate between films that will work for this model?

This is perhaps the most difficult task we as teachers would encounter in using this unit. I say this because there are so many variables at play that can create problems for those who are analyzing films. The problems, however, exist on two levels. First we have to provide some categorical relationship to distinguish one group of films from another. So I have created three discernible categories, each separately triggering a particular level of political intent: **Open or Editorial, Allegorical, and Entertainment**. The next difficulty is when we deal with realistic and animated films.

The one clarification to be made about animation is that it forms a distinctly dissimilar sort of bond with the viewer than do realistic films. I am not a film expert but do realize that an audience approaches animated films with a completely different set of expectations. Cartoon characters have no limits and so we cannot intimately relate to the world in which they exist. The result is that we do not connect with them in the same ways we do human beings. We will never take them as seriously. They may be lovable, entertaining, and even unforgettable, but we will never be cartoons and they will never be human; so our experiences will always be poles apart.

How do we compare realistic films within the given categories?

The easiest category of politically rhetorical films is the **open** documentary or **editorial** type film. Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and most recent film *Sicko* along with Errol Morris's *Fog of War* are in this category. It is in fact the intent of the filmmaker to produce an open political statement in hopes of encouraging audiences to think similarly about certain issues. In other words there is no question that these films are politically argumentative. They also, by the way, are probably not the types of films lots of students would see voluntarily and so might not be useful, but that would depend on the kinds and ages of

students you teach.

Within this group are films quite overt in their message but dramatic in their text. One of the best in recent years would be *Syriana* starring George Clooney and Matt Damon. The film is fictional but there is no mistaking the intended message. It is a criticism of and comment on American foreign policy in the Middle East, the corruptive relationship of oil giants and the federal government, and in so being, a serious indictment of the current administration. Another of these types of films is *Crash* starring Sandra Bullock, Don Cheadle, and Matt Dillon. It is a racially conscious film during which several characters casually and abruptly intersect. The motive of the filmmakers is clear. They ask that the audience reflect on their own prejudices and experiences calling us to wonder if there is ever any justification in promoting or mentally cultivating racial stereotypes. In the end people from all backgrounds must think about how much effort they put into appreciating the multitude of cultures and customs that comprise modern America and how the perpetual ignorance of one another can lead to sometimes tragic misunderstandings.

A stark contrast to the revealing plot in *Crash* we might find in a movie like *Million Dollar Baby*. This is a good example of a tragic **allegory**. It is about a girl from the other side of the tracks who finds her calling in boxing and in being trained by the stoic Clint Eastwood. During the film their relationship flourishes, as does her talent in the ring. Unfortunately, both are interrupted when she is paralyzed after a fiendish blow from a particularly nefarious opponent. She then attempts suicide on multiple occasions but succeeds in stopping her life when her trainer pulls the proverbial plug.

There are many noteworthy issues at play in this one. An issue of feminism since a woman enters a traditionally male-dominated, violent sport. An issue of government entitlements and class struggle permeates the story. The girl's family is a stereotypical bottom-feeding group more interested in staying on welfare than moving beyond it. And of course there is the issue of euthanasia perfectly relevant to Dr. Kevorkian and the right to die movement. Then there is an intertwining and persistent theme that suggests we have somehow lost value for just being alive. The trainer afraid of complications is unwilling to take risks and, the girl wants to kill herself because she can't box and sees nothing else to live for, and her family is not remotely satisfied with anything but material goods. It is a marvelous but intricate film for students to dissect. And any of these political conclusions can work. By the way, the analysis I used for *Spider Man 3* in the rationale section would also work in this category.

The **entertainment** film is the most ubiquitous film in our culture but probably the most complex for this unit. On the surface these films look as if they have no redeemable political qualities. Just as the daytime soap opera seems to lack anything beyond emotional attraction, there are a myriad of messages to be found. Let's try one.

Could *Animal House* have political content? Well, maybe the writers and directors (Harold Ramis and John Landis the most notable from that crowd) were not overly concerned with proselytizing about any political events of the late 1970s but their characterizations clearly lead us to some socio-political conclusions. There are very clear implications about social class and educational level. Women in the film are objects of men's desires not relevant for their thoughts or concerns. And there is a standard set for teenagers who head to college and the kinds of things they should do to rebel against the established authorities therein. Thomas Jefferson supported the need for rebellions saying, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." I think John Belushi's character Bluto would have agreed with that then smashed a beer bottle over his head. Perhaps this otherwise goofy movie is suggesting to us that it is time for a rebellion and that young adults will take the lead, rise up against their stuffy aristocratic oppressors and

make a new more spontaneous America.

How do we compare animated films within the given categories?

I am going to use the popular movies *Spirit*, *Happy Feet* and *Shrek*. They are all animated films from the DreamWorks studios. The main differences among these animated films lies in their texts. *Spirit* is intended for a much younger audience, having a narrow and simple story line, *Happy Feet* and *Shrek* garner a wider group ranging from toddlers who are drawn to the silliness of the characters to adult enthusiasts who enjoy clever satire. Nevertheless, the animation satisfies all viewers in its clever form and function. The primary consideration for us is how easily our students might read the political content.

Set in post Civil War America, *Spirit* is about a renegade horse that leads a pack of wild horses against the force of settlers who are attempting to exploit the untamed west. During the film parallel stories are conjoined as the audience is shown that both wild horses and Native Americans are part of the resistance. They are of course resisting white settlers embodied in the movie as the United States Cavalry. In a particularly revealing clip, the apparent captain of the military crew proselytizes about the sanctity of discipline and order, conceding the recklessness of free will. It is a classic rendition of conservatism or traditionalism versus liberalism or progressivism. As the directors would have it, the heroes or winners in this war are the mavericks. The rebellious spirit is celebrated while the intruders are cast as insensitive, capitalist pigs. This is an example that would fit easily into the **open/ editorial** category.

The animated movie *Happy Feet* is a great example of an **allegory**. Let me quickly run down the plot. An outcast penguin leaves the comfort of his habitat to find out why the fish population has run a shortage and has left his kinsmen without proper nourishment. He is captured and put into a zoo but released when humans discover that the young penguin has the ability to dance. During this time humans also realize that the fishing industry has harmed the natural penguin habitat. It is very interesting to find the film switch to realistic video that shows people arguing about policies that bear on the question of interrupting the penguin ecosystem. Eventually, men suspend their own fishing rights and restore the climate, allowing the penguin to thrive.

Okay, so it isn't the most powerful political message but that's not the point. The story builds empathy for the main character whose life is being sabotaged by an unwitting enemy. The enemy is humankind who destroy the environment. So once the audience is sufficiently in love with the central character penguin they then have no choice but to pull against humans who are hurting him and his extended family of penguins. Isn't it possible then that young people, who are living in a political era that is becoming greatly concerned about environmental conditions, couch this experience, among others, in a way that ultimately fosters an environmentalist perspective? Why not?

The plot in *Shrek* is a bit more allusive to this exercise because it is advertised as sheer **entertainment**. The Ogre is the central character who discovers love and self-reflection in the process of rescuing the person who will eventually be his bride. The story is funny and exciting. It is a smorgasbord of allusions and puns. But for the politically minded and the culturally aware it is, allowably, also a reflection of class conflict. The rich king (an intentionally napoleonic figure) is set in opposition to the poor, ugly, crude, uneducated ogre of the swamps who eventually wins the love of the princess despite his naiveté. It is a classic tale of the disadvantaged overcoming the odds.

It is also readily applicable to our lives in that our social and educational station is very closely related to our own political influence, or at the very least, the perception we have of our own abilities to be influential. It is a common sentiment among Americans who do not vote to claim, "I can't make a difference since I represent only one vote". There is a strong identification in this movie with powerlessness and oppression and the struggle to overcome, so to speak. *Shrek* shows us that anything is possible. Taking his lead, we can be instruments for change.

This message may not be obvious enough to make an overpowering impression, but that is truly immaterial to the argument. When we watch *Shrek* we are ingesting the images, the plot, the theme, the tone and allowing it to become a part of us, melding with our own notions of the world and ourselves. Again, my interpretation should not be considered the only way to derive political content, but I do insist on the idea that films make a personal intrusion whether we are conscious of it or not.

Lessons and Strategies

I will start with an introduction to political ideologies. The most important, because they are listed in the Advanced Placement program, are:

1. Conservatism- a general belief in limiting government intervention into personal or business affairs and an emphasis on traditional family values.
2. Liberalism- a general belief in having strong government intervention to solve cultural, social, or economic problems.
3. Libertarianism-insists on sharply limited government, individual liberty, a free market economy and absence of extensive regulatory systems.
4. Socialism-an economic and political system based on public ownership of the means of production.
5. Communism-an economic and government system bent toward elimination of class ranks, free markets and personal property; all matters government run and operated.
6. Feminism-ideology primarily concerned with women's issues such as compensation, sexual harassment, exploitation and other civil rights.
7. Environmentalism- ideology dominated by concern for protection of the environment in all policy matters (Burns, 81).

The task here is really simple. Students will either work individually or in groups (most likely in groups) first defining each, as I have done here and then move beyond the textbook to write descriptive real world applications that fit their definitions. For example they could write that Al Gore displayed his environmentalist leanings in the film *An Inconvenient Truth*.

At this point we will discuss their answers. One caveat - it is always necessary to, when discussing ideologies, give students contextual explanations being sure that they don't misuse the terms based on erroneous preconceptions. They may have heard the terms conservative or liberal tossed around, as they commonly are, but never considered whether they had been applied appropriately. It is possible of course for a person to be socially liberal and economically conservative. It is also possible to be a predominately liberal person but take a conservative stance on any particular issue. So I think it is a real necessity at this stage to force students to consider the terms by their definitive nature rather than in generalities.

To accomplish this goal, guide students in evaluating an example. I find it valuable to use a topic that has been popularly discussed hoping they may have formed an opinion. Although you can do this by giving students a hypothetical scenario akin to an actual one that you believe will allow them to notice their own ideological bend. I like to be very explicit with these and then see where it takes us: "What do you think about drilling for oil in the barren uninhabited areas of Alaska? Keep in mind that by developing our own oil reserves we might cheapen the cost of gas and make us less dependent on foreign sources but also that there are animal species in this area and that they are currently protected as a wildlife refuge." This exercise is useful in awakening students to the prospect that in order to find themselves in the political universe they often have to make some tough choices, evaluate their views on multiple issues, and do so with great scrutiny to draw valid conclusions.

It is also valuable to put a list of pro-con type issues on the board and ask them to choose sides as a way to determine their political propensity. Issues like abortion, the death penalty, immigration reform, continued involvement in Iraq, legalizing marijuana are the kinds of things they might have previously measured. Or I may ask them to decide what ideological definition they believe applies to them and then ask them to give a short group of details that will evidence their claim. Then we will discuss the validity of their claims and, using either scenario, attempt to give the self-definition context. Why do they think they are what they say they are? What proof do they have that this summation is accurate? I will interject during this discussion that political scientists have some standard explanations as to why people are commonly moved in philosophical directions making some typical textbook references. You also might try using some of the various tools on the Internet for students to evaluate themselves. There are surveys and the like that are available online like: <http://www.misterpoll.com/1493957726.html>.

With what I hope is a clear view of political ideologies I will introduce movies into the mix. However, I will not ask students initially to analyze the films for their political content because I want them to engage the movies I choose in the way they might normally. Most likely, we will watch *Happy Feet* and *Spider Man 3* because I think the allegorical type films are the most interesting and therefore may strike a chord with my students.

Afterward we will do a simple review of the plot. I will then demonstrate how they might interpret the film, the very same plot, through a political lens (details of the analysis or both of these is included earlier in this unit). This is a really important piece in that I am modeling what they will be asked to do on their own. I don't think the kind of symbiotic relationship that I suggest exists between film and politics will be terribly foreign to them. I anticipate a sort of "ohhhhhh" reaction, at the very least letting me know that their interest will have been sufficiently piqued. It is worth noting that I will ask students to help me apply the ideologies we'd discussed to be sure that the interpretation of film is linked to our disciplinary content.

But here is the sticky part. I am then going to ask students to complete a project whereby they choose three films for political analysis. They may choose current stuff or films from their past, even animated ones. But I think it is important that they choose films to which they feel a strong connection; otherwise this becomes an exercise in relativity. They should then do a short synopsis including political analysis of the type they saw in class (see appendix A for detailed instruction). The project will include finding films on the three levels I indicated in a previous section: editorial, allegorical, and entertainment. We will then have a full class session where each student shares the information they have gathered and we talk about our perception of the accuracy of their analysis.

So here is the culminating activity and the last part of my unit, which brings together the first two and is about the concept of **political socialization- the cultural process by which people become their political**

selves. First, I want them to see if there is some correlation between the films they chose and the political ideology to which they predominately subscribe. If not, there might be an opportunity to rethink their initial analysis and solidify the connection between political thought and the films' political messages. Also they may listen to the commentary about the film that is available on most DVDs to see if maybe the filmmakers/actors/ others admit that there is a specific implication that students may not have discerned.

Next, I want them to investigate their families concentrating on several key factors: religion, party identification, cultural background, regional orientation, education level and occupations (Burns, 106). Again, we do this as a means of trying to settle on their political origins. Finally I want them to find other elements of their political evolution. It might be music, poetry, musicals, visual arts, television shows. . . anything they can find to support the idea that they have come to political conclusions as a product of multiple influences, and quite possibly, without ever taking into account that it was occurring (see appendix B for instructions).

So in summary, students will first learn about ideologies and a practical, definitive application of each. Then they will determine what they think, based on this understanding, what their own political philosophy might be with regard to those same definitions. This will be followed by a lesson in film analysis for the purposes of finding political rhetoric. And lastly they will surmise whether films and family have led them down a path that they had previously not necessarily given either credit for doing.

Bibliography

Burns, James, *Government By the People*, 2001-2002 edition (Prentice Hall). This is the Advanced Placement US Government text that is rather short and simple. It is heavily laden with terminology and is especially important in this respect in that the test is largely a measure of a students understanding of the language of government. It also, for this purposes of this unit covers concepts like the role of media in politics, political ideologies and political patterns of behavior including the idea of political socialization.

Corrigan, Timothy, *The Film Experience*, 2004 (Bedford/ St. Martin's). This book is written on the college level but might be a nice resource for teachers wanting to learn more about the discipline of studying film. For my unit chapter 10 on global and local perspectives that includes a discussion of History and Hollywood, the context of historical films and a discussion of film and culture seem particularly useful.

Faragher, Buhle, Czitrom, Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, fourth edition (Prentice Hall, 2003). Advanced Placement U.S. History textbook that can be a fairly tough read without some guidance. The real perk of the text is that it includes practice data base questions at the end of each chapter. Although the book is quite involved it proves to be an excellent reference for students of history. For this unit I simply used it as a reference for the material of the women's movement of the 1970s.

Turner, Graeme, *Film as Social Practice*, second edition (Routledge Press, 1988). A rather complicated book that deals with issues related to film and its various interrelated consequences in a larger cultural sense. But it also delves rather deep into some concepts that students on the high school level, unless quite advanced would have trouble understanding. Teachers, however, would be quite interested to read the chapter on film in text and context that I reference in this unit. It is not overly verbose, clearly helping instructors comprehend how a film has both a meaning unto itself and a meaning within the general culture from which it was derived.

Filmography

An Inconvenient Truth. Dir. Davis Guggenheim. Writ. Davis Guggenheim and Albert Gore, Jr. Paramount Pictures, 2006. Part docu-drama, part lecture this film very directly tells the audience that there is a global warning problem no longer available for debate. It insists that the notion that scientists believe this phenomenon to be unknown is false and that there is a tremendous amount of evidence pointing directly to a green house effect of unfathomable proportions. Gore also paints himself as a long time crusader for this cause and interjects a number of personal stories to draw the audience to his sense of humanity. It is at the same time an indictment of those who remain unsure about the global waning trend, most pointedly the current administration.

Bowling For Columbine. Dir. Michael Moore. Writ. Michael Moore. Alliance Atlantis Communications, 2002. This film exposes various problems with the American gun ownership and begs viewers to consider whether or not violence in this country is directly attributable to our obsession with the protection of the right to bear arms. Michael Moore, in particular, focuses his animus on the National Rifle Association and its' President Charlton Heston.

Fahrenheit 9/11. Dir. Michael Moore. Writ. Michael Moore. Lions Gate Films, 2004. This film attempts to portray the Bush Administration as insincere in its motives to begin the War with Iraq after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Moore uses visual imagery and his own overdubbed editorial to make the President look like a fool in most cases, and in others, to have motives that are completely apart from what his rhetoric might otherwise indicate. It is a severely critical view of our impetus to war and unsympathetic in its presentation of Bush, his Family and his administration.

Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara. Dir. Errol Morris. Writ. Errol Morris. Sony Pictures Classic, 2003. This documentary deals with various historical and political issues that arise from the various experiences of Robert McNamara, one time Secretary of Defense under both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. In the film McNamara and Morris explore questions about the use of the Atomic bomb, complications surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis, and our entry into and exit from the Vietnam War. It is reconsideration, if you will, as former Secretary McNamara looks back at his life and tries to give Americans some sense of the wrong and right in war. Indeed, his testimony reveals how thick sometimes the fog of war can be, thus clouding our vision of the true nature of its existence,

Appendix A- Film Analysis

For this project students should choose three films. They should fit within the three categories we discussed in class: **editorial, allegorical, and entertainment**. The films should also be those about which you have a particular fondness. If you cannot seem to identify one for all three please ask your parents for direction. For instance they may remember films from earlier years in your life that you cannot. If all seems lost please talk to me about your progress. Once you have identified the appropriate films you will fill in the following:

- a. Title of the film and other bibliographic information (studio, director, writer, producer, and year of production).
- b. Identify the main characters.
- c. Synopsis of the Plot- Students should simply describe what happens in the film. Here is an example:

In Happy Feet the main character is a young penguin that is outcast from the greater community of penguins because of his inability to sing like the others. His own talents and his ambition to show his worth lead him on a trek of self-discovery and bravery that leads to his capture by human beings. This also, ironically, reveals the cause of problems the penguins have experienced in their ecosystem. Primarily fisherman have depleted the waters and left the penguins with little sustenance. In the end,

his persistence and success in communicating with humans results in the triumphant return of the young penguin, his being accepted by his peers, and his stopping the damaging activities of men.

- d. Political Analysis- Students should then speculate about the political trappings in each film. To make sure there is some continuity to this piece I ask students to complete the following objectives:
- What political points are being made? How do they relate to modern or historical political moments? Why might the filmmakers choose this topic? Do they seem to have some special interest?
 - If there is a commentary track available, please listen and note if there is greater insight provided into perhaps political motivations in the film.
 - Also, students should find and read at least one review of the film in a popular publication. This might be in a newspaper, magazine, or online review.
- e. The last part of the project involves your opinions. What impact did this film have on you? Do you agree with the films' political bend? Did you previously notice the films political implications? Do you think this film has played a part in shaping your own political views? Why or why not?

Appendix B- Political Socialization

In this exercise we want to delve into our intimate political surroundings as a way of determining perhaps our own **political socialization**. There are several parts listed below.

1. Define the term political socialization.
2. Ask your parents if they identify themselves with a political party, if they have consistently voted in one direction and then ask them to list at least 4 reasons they would give to support this decision. If they waffle a bit ask them to explain why they do not subscribe to one or the other.
3. Identify the education, religious, and ethnic background of your parents and grandparents (as best you can). Using the explanations in the textbook see if perhaps this demographic information aligns with the answers in number one.
4. Identify your own political leanings and see if one and two align with who you have become politically. In other words answer the question, "does my families political identity, our ethnicity, our religion, and our cumulative educational achievements have something to do with my political opinions?"
5. Look further into your world to find hints of political influence. Find two examples in your favorite music, two examples in your favorite television shows, and at least one other example that is specifically pertinent to your every day likes or dislikes. It could be a piece of poetry, visual art, a musical, an example in a piece of literature, or maybe even a video game. Analyze these just as we did film. What political points are your examples making and why? Do they seem to match what you think on a particular subject or set of subjects? Have any of these played a role in your political socialization? Do they lend credence or create a sense of validity about a way you have previously thought on a given subject?

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