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Visual Culture and Pedagogy: Teaching Human Rights with Film and Images

November 11, 2009 | Volume 3 | Issue 10

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Contemporary globalization takes place visually – whether it be images and videos transmitted by cell phone and webcams, public video surveillance in buses or on

street corners, a protestor or journalist's capturing of political violence then seen by millions, or the plethora of international films that document diverse global experiences. Images have a democratic quality to them: regardless of one's language, level of literacy, or nationality, looking at a photo of Iraqi prisoners assembled naked into a pyramid with American soldiers grinning behind them or a video of Iranian student Neda killed by security forces in the streets of Tehran gives one evidence and perspective on state policy, human rights, and the universality of suffering. As Murray Edelman chronicles nicely in his *From Art to Politics*, our perceptions of current political events stem from the images and stories that our memory recalls from art – films, books, paintings, but also the recreated events on TV.

Given the power of images to create meaning and expose and hide multiple realities, they can be important pedagogical tools for teaching global studies and human rights; although, there are both advantages and disadvantages to its use. Film can be used to enrich the classroom in relation to substantive content and student engagement and also in terms of what perceptions and assumptions about global issues images construct for us.

Diverse and foreign films provide students with a powerful, visual *global* perspective. While this may sound obvious, film's comparative advantage of powerful images, compelling and concrete dramatic stories, and close-up shots of conflict (that are rarely directly observed or felt) means that students can be temporarily immersed into another cultural and political milieu. This can provide a jumping off point for the academic lesson, as I discuss below. In my experience, students are eager to see how issues *look* from different cultural perspectives. For example, many students naturally think of the American case when we talk of racism and discrimination. Showing a film with detailed stories and images of discrimination and violence against European immigrants and Roma-Gypsies or indigenous peoples in Central America can provide a needed comparative and global perspective and take the conversation to another critical level. It enables the idea of human rights to be universalized and individualized, thus bringing the global and local together.

Film can also inform, educate, and engage students about human rights. Not only is film crucial for representing, identifying, and providing evidence for human rights challenges, it is useful to illustrate case studies of broader concepts and importantly

as catalysts for engagement and academic study. For example, when I teach human rights foreign policy and genocide, the feature film on the Rwandan genocide Sometimes in April (dir. Raoul Peck, 2006) is a potent visual text that spurs students to ask questions about how states and international organizations grapple with the legal, political, and moral dilemmas of mass violence and genocide in general and in Rwanda in particular. It is especially powerful because through the personal story of a mixed Hutu/Tutsi family and a Hutu extremist brother on trial, we see the Rwandan genocide personalized and individualized. At the same time human rights are universalized – we see that mass violence and the struggle for security are common and global phenomena. Lastly, almost all aspects of the Rwandan genocide that can spin-off into class examination are represented in the film: the causes of genocide, its preparation and process, identity politics, role of U.S. and the United Nations, international war crimes trials, reconciliation, and the local *gacaca* trials.

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Moreover, one of the ways of using film and photography in the classroom is to examine the assumptions we gain from those images. For instance, students' common stereotypes about conflict and poverty in Africa are reinforced through film and media images of starving African children, for example. By contrast, Sometimes in April's portrayal of a conventional middle-class Rwandan family does well somewhat *not* to fall back on these common assumptions. This type of analysis can lead to an examination of how images can create or minimize the potential for international action, such as the importance of images of starving Bosnian concentration camp prisoners (that resembled Holocaust images) and spurred awareness and eventual NATO intervention.

Another example more dramatic and less political in its purpose, but that also illustrates the catalyzing power of film is Lilya-4-Ever (dir: Moodysson, 2002), a gripping, morose, cinematographically rich tale of child abuse and transnational trafficking that *on its own* does not tell us much about the broader causes, effects, and local/global efforts to ameliorate human trafficking. It focuses intensely on Lilya's post-Soviet life. (Interesting, the U.S. State Department screened this film in connection with a discussion about policy on sex trafficking.) In my experience,

students gain an exceptional (yet tough-to-watch) visual representation of what a specific case of trafficking may look like today; it is also hard for students *not* to empathize with Lilya as she is abused and humiliated and *thus be drawn into the issue* and seek to learn deeper. While the use of emotion in film may be seen by some educators as a distraction, inappropriate, or too subjective, I believe that the dramatic nature of film can increase student's interest and commitment to the subject; moreover, it can illustrate how the effects of abuse and hindrances to protection stem from psychological, personal, and socio-cultural issues, not only political and economic issues. In learning, the categories "cognitive" and "emotional" are not distinct, but are aspects of one another.

In review, film can contribute to the goals of the human rights classroom by providing evidence and also by powerfully illustrating: (1) what abuse looks and feels like; (2) how individuals are affected by human rights struggles, including the short and long-term consequences of violations; (3) the different forms of human rights abuses and campaigns and how they are perceived cross-culturally; (4) the causes and processes, agents and actors; and (5) the explanations for action or inaction by outsiders. Film is versatile as a form of art; it has the power to challenge conventional views, to call for social action and change, but also to reinforce entrenched assumptions. All of these traits possess teaching moments.

While emotion and personal drama can galvanize interest, there is also the potential for films with human rights content to be shallow, exploitative, and visually gratuitous in an attempt to use emotion manipulatively, thus we must be selective.

This brings us to a brief overview of some of the disadvantages and concerns when using film in the global studies / human rights classroom. While emotion and personal drama can galvanize interest, there is also the potential for films with human rights content to be shallow, exploitative, and visually gratuitous in an attempt to use emotion manipulatively, thus we must be selective. Secondly, art creates order out of disorder; it presents the ambiguous as coherent. While this may be helpful to students, there is a risk of over-simplification, de-politicization, and de-contexualization of the problem. Other potential disadvantages to the use of or over-reliance on film might be: (1) over time, the proliferation of negative images may become banal, unreal, and promote apathy, as Susan Sontag cautions; (2) the post-modern critique and the myth of the image: the belief that pictures can tell the

whole story, while in fact they may conceal a great deal; (3) Shocking and violent images may overwhelm students. Here, I suggest being both understanding to those students who have trouble with violent images, but also to be clear that being shocked, saddened, and uncomfortable may be part of the learning process, particularly on the subject of genocide.

In short, and despite the potential disadvantages noted above, I have found that using film and photographic images (for example, the *Face of Human Rights* book edited by Lars Müller) brings stories and images from the far corners of the world directly and vividly into the human rights and international studies classroom. It can be a catalyst to engage students in critical thinking and deeper analysis . Furthermore, while space limits further explanation, a study of images within global studies gets us to think about how our perceptions and assumptions about the world are affected by the inundation of images that surround us.

Brief List of Recommended Human Rights Films

Night and Fog

Sometimes in April

Ghosts of Rwanda

Grbavica: Land of My Dreams

Lilya-4-ever

The Lives of Others

Standard Operating Procedure

Taxi to the Dark Side

The Prisoner: how I planned to kill Tony Blair

Dead Man Walking

Battle of Algiers

Well-Founded Fear

Srebrenica: Triumph of Evil

Long Night’s Journey into Day

Bamako

Darwin’s Nightmare

Romero

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