



## *Beyond the Clip* **Critical Uses of Film in the Non-Film Course**

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**Abstract:** This essay considers ways of using film in the classroom to facilitate and deepen students' critical interpretations of their culture. Noting that digitalization has the effect of leveling distinctions between textual and visual media, the essay considers the pedagogical importance of understanding rather than abolishing such distinctions, because without them films might be reduced to mere illustrations of texts. The essay considers the multimedia classroom as a space of opportunity, in which teaching students to write critically about their culture becomes more challenging but also more urgently important, particularly with respect to visual representations of race in the contemporary United States. To exemplify the essay's claims for the usefulness of film in the non-film course, the essay considers the writer's experience of teaching students to critique the racial politics of two Hollywood films, *Flower Drum Song* and *Crash*.

The digitalization of film over the last decade has not only put enormous repositories of video at our fingertips but has also made film easy to customize for classroom use. Not too long ago, the teacher's use of film was limited to the occasional "movie day," and if you were a teacher of literature, this was generally an adaptation of some piece of fiction on the syllabus. Such an approach to course design seems antiquated today, if not downright stuffy. Free software, a DVD drive, and a broadband connection now make it possible for the teacher to become a sort of disc jockey, spinning video into the classroom experience with as much facility as a line of verse.

Such a classroom experience, meticulously constructed from the materials of short film clips and other electronic media, is attractive because it includes a sort of built-in defensive mechanism against the risks of committing much class time to showing films. If the film is on the computer, all the better: we feel that we are doing more with it. Our suspicion of film runs even deeper. While we tend to assume that our culture has recently grown more fixated on visual media, the transformation of film into another branch of information technology has tended to undercut any kind of breathless fascination with the world on film that we might still have.

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Anti-visual models of Western education that have been around since Plato also retain their influence. Inculcating suspicion of what we see and show, we wish somehow to integrate film with the traditional commitment to the verbal dialectic, and digitalizing film appears to give us a way to do this. It is not merely the development of new technology, in other words, that has turned us away from entire films and toward clips; it is the entry of film into the teaching repertoire of faculty who are excited by its possibilities yet remain puzzled about how to use it.

Let me cite myself as an example. As a teacher with a special interest in questions of race in U.S. literature, I always consider it important to address questions of visibility such as the invisibility or hypervisibility of people of color. In my first-year seminar on "Race and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature," I press this theme further, considering it a matter of simple intellectual honesty to teach students approaches to visual representation, without which they may neither be equipped to confront the ever more subtle racism pervading contemporary American culture nor to appreciate the challenges to it coming not only from great literature but film. Yet my training as a scholar of texts (and eighteenth-century ones at that) does not always help me to teach film, since there is no simple analogy between the decoding of visual representation and the interpretation of a text.

I once believed that when I examined film clips with my class, I could approximate the effect of explicating a passage from a text. Yet when I tried to apply the same pedagogic methods to film as I had to texts, I recognized that clips do not offer a true equivalent to quotations, and that I could not plan the same activities with the former as I had with the latter. It wouldn't do, I found, to break students into groups to break down clips (even were this technologically feasible) with the same instruc-

tions they might be given when I asked them to analyze quotations.

It is true that a cleverly chosen clip can provide an arresting transition to arguments about the social function of literature. David Henkin, a model professor during my graduate training, once illustrated the complex relationship of social class to professional identity by extracting a few scenes from the 1999 satire *Office Space*, then asking students to compare them to conditions of white-collar labor in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." A colleague, Susan Tomlinson, uses an episode of *Law & Order* to facilitate rich discussions of the connection between race and class in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. While impressing me with their ingenuity, these mentors have communicated their recognition that the juxtaposition of movie clips with a piece of literature under discussion needs not only to be clever but to foster student interpretation. Extracts from film need to do more than "work" with the assigned readings; in the cases of Henkin and Tomlinson, they provide fresh avenues into class discussion of a text. Presentation of a clip, no matter how smart, does not automatically produce student discussion; quite on the contrary, it has sometimes tended to forestall student contributions, and frustration overcame the more fleeting satisfaction of feeling more hip. How should we teach film in the classroom if we wish to foster active student engagement, rather than a passive admiration of either the visual medium or the professor's technical virtuosity?

My answer is to embrace the risk of offering the class movies on their own terms, asking that students interpret the material *as* film. The radicalism of this proposition entails the understanding that films cannot, as my colleague Linda Dittmar once insisted, be seen as mere "illustrations" of texts. To the extent that teachers see film merely as illustrating some point made in assigned readings, we miss half of their

pedagogic value, which derives from the movement back from the text to the film, which can serve as the basis for an interpretive text students produce *about* the film. The model for the latter text can be an exercise that invites students to recognize that they are *already* interpreting films as they view them. What happens to our initial impressions, I ask students, when we view a film again, or just a clip that I have selected from it? With the assumption that students' ability to understand film is a starting-point rather than an ever-postponed end goal, I identify their writing project as the discovery of a vocabulary to articulate and test their interpretations, comparing initial reactions to an entire film with their later analysis of small clips from it.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing the articulate student, rather than the "competent" one, as the measure of my success as a teacher, I teach film theory only as a means toward initiating student writing projects. For reasons both obvious and obscure that I will discuss in a moment, the relation between theory and practice is different in film pedagogy than in the teaching of literature. First-year college students might be sometimes surprised to learn of the very existence of a body of scholarship about film,<sup>2</sup> yet they are usually receptive to a discussion of directorial technique. This perhaps surprising phenomenon reflects the fact that the boundary between theory and practice in film studies is *different from* the boundary in the study of writing, and teachers must ac-

cordingly break this stultifying boundary in a different way when we introduce a film. While we expect students to show verbal acuity in interpreting course readings, we don't ask them to demonstrate their understanding of films by showing that they can make them themselves. Consequently, overcoming the dichotomy of theory and practice in film studies does not mean that we ask them to create a film, but instead to step out of the role of passive audience and to imagine themselves in the position of the director, where they can recognize the techniques at a director's disposal, and understand yet also critique the choices that director has made. This is often best modeled on small selections from the film, but it can help to begin with a more general presentation on technique, which can lead naturally into a discussion of the theory and politics of film. A PowerPoint introduction to film technique constitutes a foundational activity in my "Race and Ethnicity" classroom. While this introduction is by necessity much more staged than subsequent activities, it does not turn students off, for the simple reason that understanding what anyone can do behind a camera is not difficult—which is not to say that anyone can make a great film, only that understanding technique allows us to escape passive spectatorship. (This also happens to be related to the reason I do *not* teach writing as technique, an approach which tends to be alienating and intimidating—a key difference between film and literature pedagogies.)

Discussions of film technique are readily available in many textbooks, but I prefer to host most such discussions in class, because the film medium lends itself well to interactive learning. For example, students may be invited to consider how variations on a shot change its meaning. Drawing on terms and examples from Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Film*, I give students a small glimpse of the universe of alternative possibilities within every decision made by a director. If teachers are tech-

<sup>1</sup> Here I draw on Jacques Rancière's radical gestures toward an egalitarian classroom in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> If necessary, a teacher might mention to students a few striking tidbits from Dana Polan's history of film pedagogy, which testifies to the little-known fact that film has been taught and studied in U.S. universities longer than American literature has been. See Polan's *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

savvy, film stills can be tweaked even in PowerPoint to make very simple adjustments to the image displayed, adjustments that might involve framing (zooming in on a small part of an image), angle and composition (reversing or rotating an image), color, and so forth ... and of course confident teachers might also invite students to the front of the class to do the experimenting themselves.

Yet no such technical fireworks are needed to demonstrate how shots convey meaning. While imparting some basic film vocabulary can make students' analysis more precise, focusing their attention on core threads in the course isolates those qualities of form and politics that produce interesting grounds for comparison. In my race and ethnicity course, I ask students to analyze several Hollywood films, two of which (*Flower Drum Song*, 1961, and *Crash*, 2004) provide strikingly different versions of the continuing U.S. concern with *e pluribus unum*. Short assignments facilitate engagement with the films as we view them, such as a written response to a musical number of their choosing in *Drum Song* and a movie review of *Crash* that refers at least two of the ten published reviews I have asked students to examine.

But when I return to the two movies near the end of the course as part of a larger essay assignment on film, I put clips from the films side by side in order to elicit comparative analysis of technique. Such juxtapositions were intended to surprise students, since the two films could hardly be more different. *Drum Song* is perhaps less remembered today as a Hollywood breakthrough (featuring for the first time a complete ensemble of Asian-American actors) than as a fluffy and patronizing account of San Francisco's Chinatown after World War II, while *Crash* remains widely regarded as an earnest and responsible meditation on racial prejudice in twenty-first-century Los Angeles. While *Drum Song* tells a story of cultural assimilation

against a backdrop of segregation which it largely takes for granted, *Crash* presents an opposite vision which assumes a context of integration, a world in which racial boundaries are crossed repeatedly and as though by chance.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the casting of *Drum Song* reveals a reckless indifference to ethnic particularity, the atomizing effect of "political correctness" on *Crash* is to produce a "myopic focus on geographically specific ethnic origins, which [...] dismisses any identities or alliances that transcend these groupings."<sup>4</sup>

By this point in the course, each film has gotten close attention in turn, but the larger payoff comes from considering them in relation to one another. To focus our discussion, we view one scene from each picture side-by-side a few times. In the case of *Flower Drum Song* and *Crash*, I pick Auntie Liang's citizenship ceremony followed by the "Chop Suey" musical number, and Officer Hanson's tragic shooting of Peter in the San Fernando Valley. While viewing the two scenes, I ask students to complete a chart in which they must describe the Mood, Context, and several aspects of the Form of each scene, with no mention yet of the language (dialogue or lyrics or voiceover) of the scene. Sound should nonetheless not be muted, because attending to music provides an important nonverbal expression of meaning.<sup>5</sup> The effectiveness of this activity depends on isolating the scenes, postponing discussion of language, and paying close attention to all of the other categories of analysis we derived from Giannetti's text. On their charts, I ask students first to describe the Mood of each scene, which generates obvious contrasts

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *Crash* reflects the underlying assumption that segregation and an attendant automobile culture cannot keep a diverse range of individuals from meeting in their daily lives—a hope that might surprise observers of contemporary L.A.

<sup>4</sup> Hsuan L. Hsu, "Racial Privacy, the L.A. Ensemble Films, and Paul Haggis's *Crash*," *Film Criticism* 31.1-2 (Fall-Winter 2006): 145.

such as Euphoria versus Depression. A second item, Context, helps to provide greater understanding of the mood: in *Flower Drum Song*, euphoria because Auntie Liang serves as model American citizen; in *Crash*, shock and disillusionment because the lone anti-racist in the white police force has made a horrific misjudgment of his authentically sympathetic passenger.

Yet since I have required students to list similarities between the two scenes, they are forced to turn to features of cinematic form, where surprising connections begin to emerge. In considering music, for example, students readily see that “Chop Suey” the song is, as the elderly Chinese man Master Wang says, a mix of everything, and this leads to the recognition that chop suey the dish, an American invention once commonly accepted as authentically Chinese, offers a satirical alternative to the melting pot as a metaphor of Americanization. The musical score provides an objective correlative to the dish, swinging wildly from one time signature to another, attempting to fuse musical styles that remain basically incompatible. And this of course is exactly how the scene from *Crash* works: it begins with a folk song which has been set to a modern electronic score. Of course, students won’t recognize the folk song’s language—it’s Welsh—or what the voice sings about, which is “Negligence.” The opening Welsh electronica sets up a very different kind of folk song, Merle Haggard’s “Swinging Doors.” The improbable meeting of folk styles matches, of course, the improbable

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<sup>5</sup> I might note that a similar inattention to language can be helpful even in teaching literary texts. To illustrate the rewards of examining form, my friend Rachel Meyer liked to suspend the semantic function of language by asking non-German-speaking students to speculate about the subject of Paul Celan’s great poem “Todesfuge” after seeing it on the page and hearing it read aloud in its original language. Students are surprised to discover that they can produce ingenious interpretations of the poem, reinforcing a useful lesson about the way that semantics are but one aspect of meaning.

encounter of cop and hitchhiker on a snowy night in L.A.’s San Fernando Valley. The principle underlying the use of musical styles in each clip reveal a similarity in their conceptions of the way in which many become one, but they appear to do so to opposite effect: *Drum Song* would appear to stand for harmonious integration, and *Crash* for a vicious separation.

We then consider such formal features as type of Shot and Color Composition. Shot seems particularly important in interpreting the scene in *Crash*, which begins the scene by constructing an opposition between inside and outside the automobiles through a mix of close-ups and longer shots. This leads up to the crucial moment when the director silences the music and takes us outside the car for a middle shot where, in a blinding flash of light, we see the gun going off.

As my student Sarah Hodges astutely noticed, this change of shot is absolutely crucial to the meaning of the scene. The fact that the act of violence is not directly rendered because we are viewing it from a disembodied position instills a sense of tragic inevitability. The film would, in effect, ask us to see the killing as just another black man being shot on the highway.

Now, as the discussion took us toward a careful analysis of form, the class begins to develop a sense of the racial politics of the two films, one that is quite different from where we had started. Students had begun by seeing *Flower Drum Song* as hokey in its view of race, and full of offensive Asian stereotypes, which it certainly is, while *Crash* seems unsparingly realistic, which it also to some extent is. Now these first impressions begin to be revised, and the very simple contrast between the two films becomes more complex.

At this point I invite the students to begin talking about words, about dialogue and lyrics. We look at the actual language of the song from *Flower Drum Song*, and the film seems to put the idea of Americaniza-



Figure: Officer Hansen's gun is fired, killing his hitchhiking passenger in *Crash* (2004). Still taken from *Crash* provided through the courtesy of Lionsgate Films.

tion in a deeply ironic light, as though to endorse Master Wang's dismissal of the citizenship ceremony, his conviction that chop suey is so much "bally hooley":

*Living here is very much like chop suey.  
Hula hoops and nuclear war,  
Doctor Salk and Zsa Zsa Gabor,  
Bobby Darin, Sandra Dee, and Dewey,  
Chop suey, chop suey!*

.....

*Mixed with all the hokum and bally hooley.  
Something real and glowing grand.  
Sheds a light all over the land.  
Chop suey, chop suey!*

Students now see that all this apparent jubilation harbors an underlying bitterness at the forms of disenfranchisement that paradoxically accompany Auntie Liang's new American identity. As Anne Cheng suggests, the musical genre is well suited to *Flower Drum Song's* expressions of "pathological euphoria," a compulsively manic, manufactured glee on the part of an Asian-American community which serves as psychic compensation for the grief that came from decades of exclusion.<sup>6</sup> When the cho-

rus claims that "something real and glowing grand" underlies their new American identity, they protest too much. The "real" might also reflect the terrors of the Cold War. As the unlikely origins of the word "bikini" in the horror of atomic testing might suggest, the phrase "hula hoops and nuclear war" is an appropriate way of identifying the historical conjuncture of titillation and terror.

As their short responses to these two clips revealed, attention to cinematic technique can facilitate students' understanding of the theory and politics of film. While several students had initially found *Crash* the most politically progressive film imaginable, and *Flower Drum Song* hopelessly retrograde on the question of race, our discussions of film technique led them to revisit these impressions, and to write analyses that contributed to my own sense of the racial politics of both films.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Teachers might also point to the importance of this context by prefacing *Flower Drum Song* with a short documentary on DVD entitled *The Slanted Screen* (dir. Jeff Adachi, 2007) which concerns the gendering of Asian male actors in Hollywood cinema.