ABSTRACT:
The question of the role of theory outside classroom walls poses a challenge for cinema and media studies because of the need to qualify the application of film and cultural theory to everyday contexts. While the theorization of media’s functionality examines the cultural, social, and political productions of meaning inside and outside cinematic texts, students question the significance of theory and whether representations in media really do matter. This portfolio reflects on the use of film and cultural theory as a tool to understand the historical and social construction of race and ethnicity in the media. More specifically, I focused on implementing various activities and assignments that foster fruitful learning experiences designed to extend the transfer of the application of film and cultural theory to everyday contexts. My findings suggest that early assessments of students difficultly in comprehending film and cultural theory provide students the necessary opportunities to make larger connections between theory and everyday practice.
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C201: AN INTRODUCTION

C201: Introduction to Race and the Media is an introductory-level survey course offered in the Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University. The focus of the course is to examine the complex historical and social constructions of race and ethnicity in popular U.S. media. Drawing heavily upon film analysis, film and cultural theory, media criticism and texts, students examine how various ethnic groups, including African Americans, European whites, Latinas/os, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Middle-Eastern and Arab Americans are represented in film and television. Furthermore, students also gauge the impact and consequences of such representations on everyday experiences.

I separated my course into two parts because I wanted to focus on early cinematic representations of African Americans and allow students to feel comfortable examining problematic stereotypes. Thus, the first part of my course addresses the theoretical foundations of film and cultural theory as well as the history of early cinema to the 1960s, while the second part of the course focuses on contemporary filmic and televisual representations (see Figure 1). Since this is an introductory course, it presumes that students contain no prior knowledge of film analysis or film and cultural theory.

This course is typically offered to major and non-major Communication and Culture (CMCL) undergraduates in Fall and Spring semesters. A range of students from different disciplines make up the enrollment of the class because the course satisfies a College of Arts and Humanities requirement. The course is typically taught by one Associate Instructor for the entire academic year and is responsible for the course syllabus, readings, film screenings, assignments, examinations, and grading—it is important to point out that my findings reflect only one semester teaching C201 as a different Associate Instructor taught the Fall semester. My final enrollment of the course was 31 students of which ten students were either a CMCL major or minor. The demographics of my classroom consisted of 18 females and 13 males and only two people of color, and the grade levels consisted of three freshman, 11 sophomores, 12 juniors, and four seniors. I must mention that my role as a Mexican American male teaching a class on race made discussing problematic stereotypes difficult at times because of the predominately Anglo demographic of the class. Yet, in order to better serve my students, I promoted a “transfer based on previous experience” to help students contextualize difficult film and cultural theories and connect learned knowledge inside the classroom to everyday experiences outside the academic setting (How 68). This allowed students to feel comfortable addressing the politics of representation and the historical and social construction of race.
OBJECTIVES

Prior to teaching C201: Introduction to Race and the Media, I taught a Public Speaking course with a Service-Learning component in the Fall of 2010. I used a combination of film and cultural theory to provide students an avenue in which to explore and investigate Hollywood’s (mis)representations and challenge commonly assumed attitudes that frequently go unaddressed. It was apparent in my assessment of students’ work and my course evaluations that students had difficulty learning, transferring, and applying film and cultural theories to new contexts. As I prepared my syllabus for C201, I wanted to implement activities and assignments that fostered a transfer of the application of film and cultural theory to everyday contexts. Thus, my objective in the second half of the Teagle fellowship was to address students’ theoryphobia and find ways to engage them in the usefulness of film and cultural theory and its application to everyday experiences.

A critical aspect of C201 is to examine the politics of representation in media and address questions concerning the issue of power, history, and ideology. Furthermore, students explored the historical and social construction of race and ethnicity and the ways in which race and ethnicity are defined in media. Working off of Gill Branston’s article, “Why theory,” I attempt to illustrate the significance and the special “activity of theorizing” to students (25). Two driving questions in class discussions were: (1) How have media portrayals of racial groups in the U.S. impacted our opinions about those groups and shaped the ways in which we think about race? and (2) How do film and television content about racial and ethnic groups continue to inform the social constructions of race and ethnicity in the media and impact our (in)ability to talk about race and ethnicity? I used both questions to foster conversations concerning racial and ethnic stereotypes and to address the function of film and cultural theories in rendering the oppressed and marginalized politically visible (Perkins 90).

I tailored the learning objectives of the course to provide the successful transfer of film and cultural theories to everyday experiences. Four key objectives of the course are: (1) discuss race and its historical and social construction, (2) assess and evaluate dominant U.S. racial discourses that inform popular media representations of racial and ethnic groups, (3) reflection on ideology and how it shapes and is shaped by media representations, and (4) gain tools for interrogating and analyzing film and television representations as well as other forms of media. With these objectives in mind, I made sure to illustrate the applicability of film and cultural theories to media representations and connect everyday experiences to learned theories.
PROMOTING THEORY: IMPLEMENTATION

My innovation for this course was to implement learning environments that promoted the learning transfer of film and cultural theories and the application of theory to everyday contexts. Because of my experience using film and cultural theory in a Public Speaking course, I designed a syllabus that fostered a knowledge-centered environment. A knowledge-centered environment afforded me a way in which to promote the usefulness of film and cultural theories and that there is a reason for its use within the field of cinema and media studies and outside the classroom walls. More specifically, I wanted students to view film and cultural theories as tools to better understand the historical and social construction of race in media.

Understandably, getting students to view media, especially Hollywood films, as more than entertainment is a difficult task. Furthermore, to get both CMCL majors and non-majors to view film and cultural theory as a tool that can be used in other disciplines is equally as difficult. Thus, I designed my course syllabus to foreground the benefits of film and cultural theory and illustrate its use in analyzing early cinematic representations (fight films and silent productions) and connecting problematic stereotypes to contemporary Hollywood and television productions. I used course assignments to provide students a space to critically summarize three articles from the readings and reflect on learned material (see Figure 2). My use of critical summaries provided students an opportunity to think about an author’s argument and what struck students as an interesting point. In their reflection essays, students were required to write two reflections essays that (1) identified a question, problem or term the student found interesting from the readings and/or discussions, (2) explained why it this question/problem/term is significance when considering the social construction of race and ethnicity, (3) relate their discussion back to the film(s) screened in class, and (4) reflect upon how the student’s example(s) addresses her/his questions, problem or term (see Figure 3). Both of these assignments aimed at allowing students to extend the application of film and cultural theory to issues related to the course.

In classroom discussions, I implemented group activities for students to share thoughts and ideas concerning the politics of representations, stereotypes, and films. Similarly, I took popular magazines, either ones I owned or ones brought in by the students, to view the representations of race and ethnicity in other media. At the end of most classes, I used Classroom Assessment Techniques to assess students understanding of film and cultural theories. All CAT activities were anonymous, and on certain occasions, I addressed students’ questions in the next class meeting or used the questions to facilitate other discussions.
STUDENT WORK AND FEEDBACK:

Throughout the semester, I collected students’ work to monitor their understanding of course material and assess whether activities and assignments promoted the learning experience I designed for the class. The bulk of my data comes from critical summaries, reflection essays, mid-semester evaluations, and CAT exercises—it is important to point out that I do not include any students’ names nor do I change any grammatical or mechanical errors. Although my data is not extensive by any means, it does offer a brief snapshot that reflects students’ positive reaction to understanding and applying of film and cultural theory.

A striking observation in assessing students’ work occurs in the critical summary assignment. In providing students a space to comment on the most striking point of an article, I found that students were able to link film and cultural theory to the social construction of race. For example, after watching King Kong (1933) and reading James Snead’s article “Spectatorship and Capture,” one student wrote, “A particularly interesting point that I found was the strong comparison between the female character and Kong... We see this in Kong as the phallic black male and in Ann as the damsel in distress who is abducted by the ‘black man.’” Responding to the same article, another student wrote, “Throughout the film, visual design play a part in depicting separations between black and white characters.” At this early stage in the semester, students were already noting the way sexuality and the visual design of the film frame the construction of “whiteness” and “blackness.” Equally interesting is that the more students liked the films screened in class, the more they connected early cinematic representations to contemporary films.

Students’ comprehension of film and cultural theory also increased when they read articles that resonated with them. After reading bell hooks’ article “cool cynicism,” one student explained, “Particularly striking for me in this article was hooks’ reading of Pulp Fiction... I think hooks makes a strong argument in her reading because I am also able to notice a running theme in Tarantino’s films of a dominating white patriarchy.” Another student echoes this observation: “What struck me most about the piece is that the racism and sexism presented in Tarantino’s work is so blatantly obvious that it is brushed off and summed up to be no more than an accurate representation of the real world.” Both students use their own viewing experiences to detail the dominance of “whiteness” in Tarantino’s film and connect representations to “real” world experiences. Essentially, students connected their own knowledge to course material, and in doing so, they transferred the application of film and cultural theory to everyday experiences.

Analysis of students’ second reflection essays reveals an equal comprehension of film and cultural theory. In responding to a show her/his favorite television show, one student explained, “Though what kept my attention was my realization that even this program, which appeared to challenge “whiteness” at first glance, was systematically reinforcing it through stereotypical representations of race.” Using her/his own experience in watching television, the student engaged issues of stereotypical representations and addressed the construction of “whiteness” in the program.
Similarly, this student used an article read in class to address Hollywood productions and the construction of “whiteness”:

“Benshoff and Griffin answer this dilemma by saying, ‘Hollywood films fail to point out their whiteness and therefore work to naturalize it as a universal state of representation’ (53). In other words mainstream cinema has been able to make whiteness in films mainstream and consequently make it unnoticeable to the average viewer.”

What struck me most about assessing students’ reflection essays was their use of personal experiences in viewing movies and/or television to apply film and cultural theories. While connecting everyday contexts to course material is not always feasible, it does illustrate that the assessment of students’ work early in the semester provides opportunities to make course changes that foster fruitful learning experiences.

In addition to course assignments, mid-semester evaluations and CAT exercises afforded me more opportunities to make subtle changes to the course. A few students’ responses to the readings of the class mention that “They [articles and screenings] are getting very good,” “enforce the course concepts,” and “have been very helpful for the class.” I used mid-semester evaluations to gauge whether or not students found reading material and film screening beneficial. Not all students enjoyed the films and/or readings, but in asking for their opinion, they were much more responsive to the changes I made and engaging course material. Additionally, my use of CAT exercises allowed students to anonymously voice concerns, problems with course material, and application of film and cultural theory to everyday experiences. In addition to providing valuable feedback, students also used CAT exercises to express their interest in course material. In response to the most important thing she/he learned, one student wrote, “I found it interesting that the government initially became very involved in censorship/regulation efforts because it was trying to preserve dominant ideologies.”

When I asked whether film and cultural theory can be used in everyday contexts, one student said, “I would apply Vasey’s theory to my life by using the economic/global lens to examine how and why certain characters are portrayed in my favorite television shows.” Thus, in order to connect film and cultural theory to everyday practices, students need a way in which to see the intersection between theory and “real” world contexts. Furthermore, constant feedback from students allows for changes to be made in the course that design that facilitate valuable learning experiences and, more importantly, the transfer of learned knowledge to new contexts.
C201 functions as a way to introduce students to the historical and social construction of race in the media. Students’ view of media, especially Hollywood, as entertainment presents a difficult challenge in cinema and media courses because of the disconnect between the politics of representation and everyday contexts. Furthermore, the application of film and cultural theory to everyday experiences also is dependent on whether students’ personal experiences intersect with theories. Based on my teaching innovation and the reading from the Teagle Collegium, early assessment of students’ work provides the necessary connection needed to transfer the application of film and cultural theory to everyday contexts. Understandably, the different grade levels in C201 presents a challenge in analyzing the data; however, some of the freshman scores were the highest in the class, which suggests that early assessment does provide a transfer of material. Additionally, the understanding of learning and transfer and learning environments illustrates just how effective activities, assessments, and assignments can be in fostering the transfer of learned knowledge to new contexts.

In regards to the implementation of activities and assignments, students were better capable in engaging the difficult subject of the historical and social construction of race. This is by no means an easy feat nor is it easy to apply film and cultural theory to everyday experiences. In hindsight, I wish I had implemented more activities that resonated with students. For instance, looking at Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube examples offer students more ways to view the social construction of race. An important factor that resulted in my study is the need to connect students’ interest with film and cultural theory. This is in no way easy or possible at times. Questions arise as to whether students will continue using film and cultural theory in other disciplines. My hope is yes, but this is difficult to measure because students will go and to take other courses. However, my evidence indicates that students are better able to make connections if they are provided ways to connect their own experiences to the application of film and cultural theory. My contention is that the result of this transfer means that students are more likely to recall learned knowledge and apply film and cultural theory to different contexts, whether in other disciplines, courses, or in everyday contexts. Further research is needed to evaluate the learning transfer of theories in other cinema and media courses and, more importantly, in the humanities field.
REFERENCES:


APPENDIX:

Figure 1: Sample Syllabus Reading Calendar

Part I

Week 1: Introduction to Film Form and Critical Approaches to Media and Culture

1/12: Benshoff and Griffin (2009), “Introduction,” America on Film, 3-17

Week 2: Conceptualizing “Race” and Ethnicity

1/19: Benshoff and Griffin (2009), “What is Race?” America on Film, 47-9

Week 3: Policing Early Cinema

Screening: Unforgivable Blackness (Burns, 2004) Selected sections


Part II

Week 11: Bad Latinos and Sexy Latinas

Screening: Machete (Maniquis and Rodriguez, 2010) 105 minutes


Week 13: The Savage and the Good “Indian”: Native Americans in Film

4/4: Benshoff and Griffin (2009), “Native Americans,” America on Film, 103-21
Screening: Last of the Mohicans (Mann, 1992) 112 minutes


Week 14: Exploiting Martial Arts: Hollywood and Asian Americans

hooks (1996), “cool cynicism,” reel to real, 47-51
Screening: Kill Bill: Vol. I (Tarantino, 2003) 111 minutes

Figure 2: Sample of Critical Summary Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is to get you to begin to read and think critically about the articles/chapters/sections we are reading this semester. For this assignment, you are required to write **THREE** critical summaries over an article of your choice. For each summary, you are to address, in a **maximum of one paged, typed, double-spaced**, the following questions: (1) What is the principal argument of the article? (2) What does the author address in terms of race? (3) What strikes you as a particularly effect point? Why?

To help you with the first question, identify the key issue for the author. Ask yourself why race? What’s the importance of race for the author? How is s/he using film and cultural theories to support the politics of race? Question number two is for you to address what aspects the author is examining in terms of race. How does her/his argument help us understand cinema, cinematic representations, stereotypes and, more importantly, race? What sort of representations does s/he examine? Finally, the third question is for you to address a particularly interesting point. What is it? Why is this point so striking for you? How does this point help you understand the author’s argument and/or understand race?

Figure 3: Sample of Reflection Essay #2

Your first reflection essay provided you a space to address class content and critically assess how it intersected with your everyday life. The basic function of the assignment was for you to engage the issue of race in media culture and how media representations of race influenced our understanding of racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, for your final reflection essay, you must (1) identify a question, problem or term that you find interesting from our readings/discussions (be very specific here), (2) explain why is it significance when considering race (what function does it play in our understanding of race?), (3) relate it to a film(s) we have screened or a film(s) you have seen, and (4) reflect upon how your film example(s) addresses this questions, problem or term.

It is important to note that you must use a term, question, or problem that we addressed after February 9th, such as resistant spectator, marking, omission, issues of race representation in horror films, SF, and/or Latino representations. While this is not an exhaustive list, I highly recommend that you use this reflection essay to begin formulating ideas for your final research paper. Think about what you will be examining in your final paper (female sexuality, gender stereotypes, ethnic representation, etc.). I also encourage you to use an article from our reading that you anticipate utilizing in your final project and addressing the author’s use of film and cultural theory. You should use the article to answer the second requirement (explain why your term, question, and/or problem is significant when considering race). What is the argument of this article? How does the article address your term, problem, and/or question? Furthermore, use these questions to help you answer the final two requirements: How does your term, question, and/or problem impact our understanding of race? Be specific here. Why is this problem, question or term significant? What does it provide us in terms of understanding race, representations and stereotypes?