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Teaching About Fascism With Films

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With Films

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The further removed we are from World War II, the more difficult it is to teach about fascism. It is difficult enough for those who went through the war to understand the rise of fascism, its appeal to the masses and to the business community, the ideology behind it and what conditions may have led to its rise. But now we face students born after World War II whose knowledge of fascism may be limited to the caricatures presented in "B" war movies. In fact, today's students probably know more about fascism through films than all other learning sources combined. Is this film image accurate? And, how might we better teach about fascism by using films?

The following general characteristics of fascism which can be brought out to students through film. For example, we can examine how contemporary views of fascism developed and what the student thinks fascism is (a socialization perspective). We can discuss how we teach about fascism by using films? What is the presentation of fascism in film? For analysis of the film we can examine films into six categories: (1) The One-Dimensional Fascist; (2) Fascist as Deviant; (3) Documentaries; (4) Multi-Dimensional Fascism; (5) The Contemporary Neo-Fascist, and (6) "Innocent" Fascism.

The One-Dimensional Caricature. Initially, one should present the "B" movie, on-dimensional image of fascism. This is the dominant film image which is probably etched into the minds of most movie-goers. It presents the Nazi as the archetypical bad-guy, but does so in such a simplistic way that we are asked to condemn the fascist, but never go beyond condensation. The danger in this view is that it is too simplistic; it is unreal, and students will never know the deeper danger of fascism. If they truly believe that this "B" version of fascism, they will forever be in the dark. Some examples of Category 1 films are Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939), Hitler's Children (1943), and Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) Fascist as Deviant.

Here the fascist is portrayed not as a determined political activist or even a military opportunist, but as a deviant, usually a sexual deviant. In this category, "normal" people are not and would not become fascists.

Thus, only strange people are susceptible to the seductiveness of fascism, people with deep personality disorders. Students might be tempted to believe that one could not be, on the surface, normal, and still be a Nazi. This may capture a part of the fascist appeal, but it is once again overly simplistic and dangerous. It was, in effect, those whom we might consider normal who gave a great deal of his support. Some examples of Category 2 films are The Damned (1969); 1984 (1977); and The Night Porter (1974) Documentaries

Documentaries purport to present a version of events which is factual. But of course, as hard as a filmmaker may try to capture reality, it is always a reality seen through the eyes and prejudices of the filmmaker. Some documentaries are better than others, but all should be viewed with an oxen of skepticism. Thus, especially true for films about such an emotionlized subject as fascism? But it is worthwhile to expose students to some of the documentary films dealing with fascism. Some examples of Category 3 films are Triumph of the Will (1934); Triumph of the Will (1973); and Why We Fight (Series from 1940s). Multi-Dimensional Fascism

While most films promote the one-dimensional view, some attempt to present a more complex, multi-dimensional vision of fascism. These films tend to show how either the average citizen might get caught up in the rise of fascism, or how fascism or fascistic tendencies might exist within any society. These films give a more realistic view of fascism, that is, why they are so much better than and more frightening than Category 1 or 2 films. The message of these films is "It Can Happen Here," and this is why or how. Some examples of Category 4 films are Lacombe Luciene (1973); Citizen Kane (1941); and Meet John Doe (1941).

The contemporary Neo-Fascist Film

In the past ten years, a new type of film has risen in popularity, the neo-fascist film. These films promote violence, armed strength, macho-masculine images, and the viewpoint that vigilant violence is justified. They promote a brand of non-exceptional fascism. They play to the fears, frustrations, fantasies and inadequacies of the audience, and promote a very contemporary fascist image. These films speak to the contemporary American hybrid of Nazi-like attitude, and as such are valuable tools for learning in the classroom. Some examples of Category 5 films are Death Wish (1974); Dirty Harry (1971); and Death Wish 2 (1981) "Innocent" Fascism

Our final category of films offers a less obvious brand of neo-fascist movie. These films are called "innocent" because they tend to promote images which may border on fascism, but seem to do so unintentionally, almost without thinking about it. That is precisely the danger though. These films may, on the surface, appear to be rather innocent, but the ideas promoted may be dangerous. Some examples of Category 6 films are My Bodyguard (1980); Straw Dogs (1971); and The War That Hitler Lost (1978). Teaching about fascism is a difficult, challenging undertaking. But, given the danger that fascism poses to contemporary society, it is essential that we continue to study this phenomenon with the hope that those who understand fascism will work against its forces. Should we be able to better show how most of us develop over-simplified views of fascism, we may be able to give students a more complete view of what fascism is and how it arose.

NOTES
1 John Mellen, "Fascism in the Contemporary Film," Film Quarterly, Summer, 1971; and Mellen, "Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film" (New York: Pantheon, 1977).