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Voices from the Field:
Lights, Camera, Action:
Using Film and Graphic Novels to Explore Themes of Power
and Social Control in the High School English Classroom

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Successful approaches to media literacy can take many forms in contemporary classrooms. For English teachers, who are required to assign a book or “cover” a novel for curricular reasons, the question arises: how do we do this, how do we make a classic relevant, how do we pull the significant points from a time-worn text and meet the objectives of the curriculum? How do we connect literary analysis and media literacy? The answer, I believe, lies in the ability of students, with the guidance and support of their teacher, to appreciate how works of literature are situated in the context of history, psychology and current events. By using media texts and technologies, we can present works of classic and contemporary literature with clarity and relevance.

For many years, I coordinated a humanities program at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, a program that included a strong component in media including print and online journalism, television and radio. The teachers in this program, who are dedicated to interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, worked on teams to build units connecting English, social studies and media to address current issues, such as elections, and texts, such as *1984*. These teachers met daily to plan, review and assess these units. This program offered an opportunity for students to pursue projects in classes blocked for group work. State requirements were met while students were freed from desks and anthologies to explore current and historical topics from a wider perspective. The examples I'd like to discuss include some ideas and materials from the units developed in the Communication Arts Program at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver

Spring, Maryland, as well as some that have been developed since that time in my second career as a student teacher supervisor at American University in Washington, DC. Even since my retirement, I have found that the explosion of media and student involvement is having a greater effect on the classroom.

The theme of power and man's control or lack of control over human nature is a universal theme in English. Classic texts for this generally include George Orwell's *1984* or *Animal Farm*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. More contemporary texts sometimes used to explore these issues include Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or *The Year of the Flood*, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. When beginning the unit, it is important that students see the application to their lives and the community around them. Sometimes, even the brightest students need to be reminded that these issues face them daily. The use of media helps make this realization clearer to both the most capable students and the reluctant readers.

For these reasons, it is often helpful to begin a unit or the study of a text with film or newsreel clips which set a mood without specifying the larger issue. For this unit, the clips of the Hitler youth rallies in 1930's Nuremburg and the massed displays of the Chinese Red Guard teenage soldiers can establish a picture of crowd mind control and passion. The use of political propaganda is always a relevant discussion. Also, in a less political fashion, clips of rock concerts and huge sports crowds carry the same connotation of mass frenzy. Figure 1 offers some examples of clips that can be effective in provoking discussion. After

viewing these clips, students can be paired or put in small groups to discuss and share impressions. After the small group work, the class comes together for a larger discussion of mind control and propaganda. When the text is distributed, students are reminded to keep the sound and the pictures in the clips they just viewed in mind as they begin to read the books.

Figure 1: Exploring the theme of power using film clips

Sample Films
<p><i>Gattaca</i> (trailer) - government directs births of children based on DNA, a flawed utopia http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi3304260377/</p>
<p>Matrix (trailer) - story of a man trying to break from a controlling society http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/video/gallery</p>
<p>THX 1138 (page with video) - sci fi Lucas film about individual struggling with control. Some nudity and adult situations. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066434/video/gallery</p>
<p>V for Vendetta - originally a graphic novel, film released in 2005, demonstrates the corruptive power of a totalitarian government. Clips: http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi1509294873</p>
<p>Watchmen - graphic novel and film released in 2009. Deconstructs the concept of superhero and demonstrates what happens when men are given power. Clips: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0409459/video/gallery</p>
Sample Websites & Clips
<p>1984 Apple Computer ad, Super Bowl 1984 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYecfV3ubP8</p>
<p>Hitler Youth Rally, Nuremburg 1935 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuMajt-qooE</p>
<p>Hitler addressing the Hitler Youth from Nuremburg with subtitles http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1KepSpRv5A</p>
<p>Red Guard and Maoist China http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaz8sVaK8s4</p>

Using Graphic Novels and Television Shows to Explore the Themes of Power and Social Control

For some learners and in some situations, the use of graphic novels carries more impact than traditional texts. Sequential art narratives are a way of reaching some students who have previously been reluctant readers. Many English education experts now argue that skillful reading of this medium can be conceptualized as a new measure of literacy (Carter 2009). There is an undeniable emotional power to

graphic novels since the visual effect of the story may carry more significance than the printed text. The use of graphic novels in English education reflects an appreciation of student learning styles and the multiple intelligences they bring to the classroom; the use of a variety of methods and approaches enables us to reach more students (Gardner 1993).

Figure 2: Visual media examples that address the theme of power and social control

Graphic Novels
<p>Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. 1987. <i>Watchmen</i>. New York: DC Comics, Inc.</p>
<p>Moore, Alan and David Lloyd. 2008. <i>V for Vendetta</i>. Bel Air, CA: Vertigo.</p>
<p>Spiegelman, Art. 1986. <i>Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History</i>. New York: Pantheon.</p>
Television Programs
<p>Many of <i>The Twilight Zone</i> episodes address themes of power and social control. They are available at: http://www.cbs.com/classics/the_twilight_zone/video/</p>
<p>"To Serve Man." Aliens come to Earth and solve all of man's problems. Humans travel to the other planet before they discover the magic book is a cookbook. Demonstrates how power can conceal reality until it's too late to recover.</p>
<p>"Eye of the Beholder." A woman undergoes multiple surgeries to become "beautiful;" her normal is opposite to our standards. Demonstrates the power of group ideals and lack of individual control</p>

Student-centered discussion of issues of power and social control can deepen when television and film clips are used. For many students, there is some appeal to viewing historic television programs, such as those from *The Twilight Zone*. Such programs also can inspire meaningful family communication as students share their viewing experiences at home. Figure 2 shows several titles of graphic novels and television episodes that can be used alone or as paired texts in the study of this theme. Short segments or entire episodes can be used, depending on time. Students can explore the construction of characters, mood and setting in these clips. Sometimes it is effective for students to work in teams to create their own posters and illustrations of the events of the book as they read. This can be done in small groups with time at the end of class for each group to present to the whole class. When these are displayed on the walls of the room, it adds to the sensory images generated by the text.

Because many texts that address issues of social power and control are placed in non-specific settings, (i.e., *The Giver* and *Animal Farm*), students can strengthen their understanding of the relationship between specific and universal application of the issues raised by the novel. The fable-like story of the pigs and other creatures in *Animal Farm* can be compared with those in *Maus* where the participants in the Holocaust are shown through such creatures as cats (Germans) and mice (Jews). And today, it's easier than ever before to offer students opportunities to develop research and information literacy skills that ask students to develop expertise on specific examples from 20th century history and culture. Students may research incidents of mass rallies (Germany in the 1930's), crowd mentality in pressure situations (running of the bulls, Pamplona, Spain), and dictatorial control (Hitler, Franco, Mussolini). Even the impact of television news analysts, politicians and television evangelists, depending on your community, may be appropriate for taping and viewing for a discussion of power and control.

Assessing Student Work Through Writing and Media Composition

At the completion of the novel or unit, there are several ways to assess the students' success in achieving the objectives of the lesson. The traditional test with essay questions is one way to assess students, but perhaps more in keeping with the creative nature of this unit is a project based on the concepts that have been presented. Figure 3 shows a list of sample projects and essays that I have found to be successful for students to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts of power and social control as depicted in literature, mass media and popular culture.

Figure 3: Sample of student projects and Essays

Sample Project List

1. Create a clip package of newsreels or broadcasts of persons or events illustrating power with a voiceover or narration explaining the application.
2. Develop a series of illustrations of critical scenes and characters in the novel with an accompanying essay explaining their importance.
3. Compose a dramatic script of the "next chapter" of the novel, what takes place after it ends, with an "editor's" note of explanation.
4. Select a set of movie reviews for three movies from the bibliography or other film lists with an introduction describing how this particular film illustrates the concept.
5. For advanced or AP Composition classes, compose an analytical paper which uses comparison and contrast or use of argument to explain the major points of the unit.

Sample Essay Topics

1. Choose one character and discuss the evolution of this character's attitude toward his or her situation and control exerted over them.
2. Compare the social status of a minority group depicted in the novel with attitudes and treatment in contemporary society.
3. Discuss three symbols in the story and show how these are used to depict power and exert control over society.
4. Examine the tone of the novel and show how the author uses this to create a pervasive atmosphere.
5. Discuss the use of propoganda in a novel from the list and describe how it is used as a tool to control.

In summary, we as teachers are presented with an extraordinary opportunity at this time to make use of the media that surrounds us. We can meet students where they live and use their enthusiasm and interests in media, popular culture and technology to enhance their enjoyment and appreciation of good literature. We can use both the abundant sources available and support the creativity of students themselves. This approach helps students at any level to work toward an understanding of the impact of both literature and media texts as they shape and reflect society. It is also an opportunity for teachers to share their insights and experiences across the generations. Marshall McLuhan told us many years ago the medium is the message and for all of us, the medium continues to deepen and enrich with every year. Students enjoy exploring the theme of media and social control precisely because it presents the ability to discuss the role of human agency and the potential for individuals to contribute to social change.

References

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