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FLARR Pages #1: Art Speak: a Collaborative Workshop on How to Teach Films about Artists (from Watching to Speaking)

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- Teaching Cultural Films, Practical Ideas
- Culture (Mex.)
- Artwork (Mex.)
- Murals (Mex.)

“Art Speak: A Collaborative Workshop on How to Teach Films about Artists (from Watching to Speaking)”

-Thomas C. Turner, University of Minnesota, Morris, Convener

During the Fall of 1994 FLARR held the first of its “collaborative” workshops, where conference participants meet in groups and report back to the larger body on a topic of common interest.

A film about the art of Diego Rivera was chosen (see description to right) and groups were asked the following questions:

1. What could be done previous to the showing of the film?
2. What could students be doing in the target language while watching the film?
3. What kinds of assignments could be made following the session?
4. What kind of language exercises could be devised for the following session?
5. What questions could be asked and assigned in journal writes (at home or in class)?

6. Could teacher recordings of listening passages be devised to enhance listening skill?
7. What related topics could be used for expansion on the film in various subject areas?
8. What questions arise with regard to critical thinking and the film (is there a bias)? (over, please)

“Portrait of an Artist: The Frescoes of Diego Rivera,” narrated by Michael Moriarity, 35 min., color

This is a particularly beautiful film about the life and times of Diego Rivera, a leader in the Mexican mural renaissance movement in the 1920s and 1930s. The film traces his life, politics, and his development as an artist who felt that an artist should be the conscience of his age. The sequences about his work in the United States are particularly interesting. His philosophy is explained through his art and there is an interpretation of the history of Mexico evident in his work.

Four separate groups were formed:

1. Group one suggested that some pre-listening exercises would be beneficial, such as asking students if they know several artists, or asking them what the difference is between art and propaganda. Students might be able to answer questions about the colors used, or the occupations portrayed, about the buildings where the murals are portrayed. Other questions: What about cultural pride? Is it important? Who is your favorite painter? Can you compare this painter with Rivera? This group suggested using an English version and then showing parts of the video in the target language. Other questions for students: Who was Lenin and what did he advocate? Are Rivera's ideas still alive today? Where? (Perhaps some research could be done on these questions) Is there a cultural bias? Pro-new world? Anti-Europe?

2. Group Two decided that they wanted to do short clips from the movie of from 3 to 5 minutes (The Chapel at Chilpancingo, the Rockefeller Mural, River Rouge in Detroit). At the advanced level, politics could be discussed. Beginners could use description: colors, figures, etc. Helpful advanced organizers could be vocabulary sheets, descriptions of historical context, etc. This group recommends turning off the sound for previewing and less difficult narration. Tourist Guides could tell more about sites. There could be some discussion of current events (like Chiapas). Teachers should try to draw on the students' own backgrounds to get them involved.

3. Group three mentioned that teachers could talk to students about the cities involved (geography, etc). A history of the Revolution should be provided with

other political background. The "idea" of murals should be discussed. Have you seen one? If you were to make one, who would be in it? Where would you put it? What aspects of local history would you put in it? Teachers should give vocabulary for a few key items in the target language. Afterwards true-false or matching questions could be used. A more advanced discussion question: Why did Rivera choose the themes he chose? Projects for future study could include: the Mexican Revolution, Cubism in Art, Socialism and Cubism in Mexico. A question for more advanced students: Should art be propaganda? Must art have a message? Is it appropriate to paint a philosophy in a church?

4. Group four suggest showing the film in segments. Segments could be used repeatedly for different language tasks. Things to do: Generate a list of vocabulary items that are relevant for the film. Students could begin this in class and continue it at home. Advanced students might explore the topic of how language, culture, and artistic expression all influence each other. It may be possible to stop the film or use stills in order to provide for a discussion. Tasks could be designed which are appropriate to level. Students could develop (or act out) dialogues for two people in the film. At advanced levels these dialogues could be quite involved. How do indigenous people differ in appearance from Europeans? Is this similar to American history?