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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. But is this film image accurate? And, how might we better teach about fascism by using films?

There are several 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 also examine the roots of fascism, who was attracted to it and why, what fascism was and is, and how the fascist ideology was manifested in Europe and elsewhere. —

Films can have a major impact on the way the viewer interprets ideas and events. Therefore, the way fascism is presented through films can alter and shape our understanding of what fascism was and is. Unfortunately, most films dealing with fascism promote a simplistic caricature which does not give us much insight into the roots and appeal of fascism. The fascist is presented as the embodiment of evil (is usually a deviant) and we are asked simply to condemn him but not understand how he came to power. While it is certainly appropriate to condemn fascism, it is also important for us to understand fascism so we can take steps to prevent it from rising again. But by accepting the caricature, we almost dismiss fascism as a deviant case which will never again occur. The presentation of fascism in film is, as William Fitzgerald points out, "designed to end all debate." It is not an intellectual point of departure from which we might promote debate and discussion, but it is a debate ender.

Of course, not all films present a caricature of fascism. Some attempt to scratch below the surface and try to get to the roots of fascism. How then can we (1) use films to show students how stick-figure caricatures have shaped their understanding of fascism; (2) use films to give students a better understanding of the nature of fascism; and (3) give students a better understanding of how different elements of fascism can be seen in films which may not blatantly deal with fascism per se?

By using selected films, we can take students on a journey through the many different facets of fascism. But to do this we must organize and present films by type so as to give the students a better understanding of how his or her views of fascism were shaped, and then to present a more complex view of fascism. We can thus organize films into six categories: (1) The One-Dimensional Fascism; (2) Fascist as Deviant; (3) Documentaries; (4) Multi-Dimensional Fascism; (5) The Contemporary Neo-Fascist Film, and (6) "Innocent" Fascism.

The One-Dimensional Caricature

Initially, one should present the "B" Movie, one-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 condemnation. The danger in this view is that it is so simplistic it is unreal, and students will never know the deeper danger of fascism. If they truly believe that this "B" version is fascism, they will forever be in the dark.[1] 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 or 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 image may capture a part of the fascist appeal, but is once again overly simplistic and dangerous. It was, in fact, those whom we might consider normal who gave Hitler a great deal of his support. Some examples of Category 2 films are *The Damned* (1969); *1900* (1977); and *The Night Porter* (1974).

Documentaries

Documentaries purport to present a version of events which is "real." 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 ounce of skepticism. This is especially true for films about such an emotionally packed subject as fascism.[2] 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);[3] *California Reich* (1979); 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.[4] 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.[5] These films promote violence, armed strengths, macho-masculine images, and the viewpoint that vigilante violence is justified. They promote a brand of non-explicit fascism. They play to the fears, frustrations, fantasies and inadequacies of the audience, and promote a violent, "superman" image. These films speak to the contemporary American hybrid of Nazi-like attitudes, 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 II* (1981).

"Innocent" Fascism

Our final category of films offers a less obvious type of neo-fascist movie. These films are called "innocent" because they tend to promote ideas 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).

Teaching about fascism is a difficult, challenging undertaking. But, given the dangers and pressures of contemporary society, it is essential that we continue to study this phenomenon with the hope that those who understand fascism will work against its rise. By using films, we may be able to better show how most of us develop overly-simplistic views of fascism, and then, we may be able to give students a more complete view of what fascism is and how it arose.

NOTES

[1] Norman Kegan: *The War Film* (New York; Jove, 1974)

[2] Robert E. Herzstein: *The War That Hitler Won* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1978); Richard A. Maynard: *Propaganda on Film* (Rochelle Park: N.J. Hayden, 1975); Baxter Philips: *Swastika: Cinema of Oppression* (New York: Warner, 1976).

[3] Richard M. Barsam: *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975); Glenn B. Infield: *Leni Riefenstahl* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, Co., 1976); Ken Kelman, "Propaganda as Vision: Triumph of the Will," *Film Culture*, September 1973.

[4] Lotte H. Eisner: *The Haunted Screen*, translated by Roger Greaves, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); David Hall: *Film in the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Siegfried Kracauer: *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); Erwin Leiser: *Nazi Cinema* (New York: Collier, 1974); Louis Marcorelles, "The Nazi Cinema," *Sight and Sound*, Autumn, 1955.

[5] Joan Mellen "Fascism in the Contemporary Film", *Film Quarterly*, Summer, 1971; and Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).