

Cinematic Classrooms: Teaching Cultural Theory Through Popular Films

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the pedagogical potential of well-known cinema as an aid for teaching cultural theory in academic contexts. Teachers can close the gap between students' actual experiences and abstract theoretical concepts by combining cinematic visuals into the classroom and engage students in critical thinking and interdisciplinary analysis. Popular films offer great opportunities for examining important concepts like ideology, hegemony, postcolonialism since they are easily relatable and appealing to the contemporary audiences. This study illustrates how popular films such as *Get Out* (racism and psychoanalysis), *Parasite* (class struggle and post-Marxist thought), and *The Matrix* (postmodernism and simulation) can be used as a practical tool to reveal complex themes like cultural identity, power dynamics, and systemic inequality. Cinema's narrative and visual storytelling serve as "cultural mirrors," reflecting social systems and allowing for interpretation and criticism. Along with discussing ways to promote critical thinking, the study also examines the drawbacks of this strategy, such as the possibility of oversimplification or cultural presumptions in popular films. The difficulties of incorporating movies into the curriculum are also discussed in the study, including maintaining a balance between academic precision and enjoyment. The study promotes dynamic classrooms where students actively engage with cultural theory in meaningful and transformative ways by utilizing the immersive and reflective features of film. This approach develops a platform for teachers to engage students in critical media literacy in addition to empathy and theoretical understanding to critically examine the cultural objects that influence their daily lives.

Introduction

The goal of the intricate and multidisciplinary area of cultural theory is to comprehend how social institutions, ideas, and identities both influence and are influenced by culture. Since many of the fundamental ideas of cultural theory, like hegemony, discourse, and postmodernism, are extremely abstract and challenging for students to understand, teaching it may be quite challenging. Students who find it difficult to connect theoretical books and lectures to their everyday experiences may get alienated by traditional teaching approaches. At this point, popular films become a transforming educational tool. The complex, multi-layered representations of cultural realities that cinematic narratives provide make them perfect for illuminating theoretical ideas. Students are visually and emotionally engaged by films, which also encourage critical reflection and give tangible representations of abstract concepts. For example, *Get Out*'s (2017) portrayal of the nexus of privilege and race,¹ *The Matrix*'s (1999) portrayal of ideological control,² and *Parasite*'s (2019) portrayal of class issues, social injustice, and the cultural narratives of success and failure,³ can help students better understand difficult concepts like critical race theory and Marxism. Teachers can create a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment by bridging the theory-practice gap by using popular films. This paper makes the case that incorporating films into cultural theory can improve students' understanding of theoretical ideas. It investigates how movies might function as "cultural texts"⁴ that spark thought-provoking conversations on resistance, identity, ideology, and power. It also emphasizes how crucial it is to choose a variety of films, especially those from non-Western theaters, in order to provide pupils a worldwide perspective on cultural philosophy. The study looks at how teachers might use films to encourage interdisciplinary learning, help students develop their critical thinking abilities, and motivate them to relate theory to real-world situations.

Literature Review

Although visual media use in education has been extensively studied across disciplines, little is known about how it might be used to teach cultural theory. bell hooks and Henry Giroux are two academics who have emphasized the educational value of films in promoting critical awareness. While hooks stresses the emotional significance of films in upending deeply held ideas of race, gender, and class,⁵ Giroux's work demonstrates how films may question prevailing views and inspire students to think critically about power structures.⁶ These viewpoints lay the groundwork for comprehending how movies might be used as teaching aids in critical education.

Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler expand on this concept contending that the goal of cultural studies is to comprehend how cultural forms—including films—reflect and replicate social structures and power dynamics.⁷ David Buckingham argues in *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy* that popular culture, particularly films, need to be taught in schools to help students learn how to interact critically with the culture that influences their lives.⁸ Buckingham discusses that movies have a special power to condense cultural theories into easily understood stories, giving students an opportunity to observe theory in action. He stresses how crucial it is to choose movies that subvert prevailing cultural narratives and create room for different viewpoints.

Stuart Hall's "Encoding, Decoding" provides important insights into the interpretive procedures that go into film analysis.⁹ According to Hall's theory, media texts are encoded with particular messages by producers, but viewers can decode them in a variety of ways based on their ideological stance and cultural background. This paradigm is especially useful for teaching cultural theory since it pushes students to critically examine films and understand how meaning is created and disputed.

Editors Marc Furstenau and David J. Cook contend in *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Aesthetics* that Marxist theory offers crucial resources for examining films that portray labor, class conflict, and capitalist ideology.¹⁰ They claim that Marxist cinema theory places a strong emphasis on how movies serve as ideological instruments that either support or contradict the capitalist system. Apart from ideological conflict, films can also serve as cultural windows reflecting a society's desires and fears. Films provide students a visual and emotional link to the cultures they study. Students can gain a deeper comprehension of how race, gender, and class are portrayed in popular culture by examining how these categories are portrayed in these films.

"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Laura Mulvey offers a feminist perspective on cinematic representation.¹¹ Mulvey's criticism of the male gaze in the essay provides a starting point for discussions on gender and power. Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* can be used to analyze the way Western media reinforce colonial ideology,¹² a topic that postcolonial theorists like Edward Said have also studied in *Orientalism*.¹³

Despite these contributions, there remains a lack of comprehensive pedagogical frameworks for integrating films into teaching cultural theory. Existing studies frequently ignore the more general issue of how films might be methodically incorporated into curriculum in favor of concentrating on particular movies or theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, the importance of developing digital media and non-Western film in teaching cultural theory has received less attention. By providing a comprehensive method for utilizing movies as teaching aids in cultural theory classes, this study aims to close these gaps.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the instructional potential of popular films in teaching cultural theory using a qualitative, mixed-methods approach. Three main parts make up the methodology: the selection and analysis of films, student surveys and interviews and classroom observations.

Selection and Analysis of Films

The selection of films was focused on how well they addressed important cultural theory topics like resistance, race, class, and ideology. Hollywood blockbusters (*The Matrix*), independent films (*Get Out*), and non-Western films (*Parasite*) are just a few of the varied genres and cultural

settings represented in the chosen films. To show how these films relate to issues of cultural theory, they were examined utilizing theoretical frameworks such as postcolonialism, feminism, and Marxism.

Student Surveys and Interviews

Students who took courses that included film-based instruction were surveyed and interviewed. Likert-scale and open-ended survey questions were used to gauge students' knowledge of cultural theory and opinions on the films' instructional worth. Deeper understanding of the students' intellectual and emotional reactions to the films was revealed through semi-structured interviews.

Observations in the Classroom

To examine how students engaged with the films and how teachers led conversations, observations of the classroom were made. The application of theoretical ideas, student involvement, and the contribution of emotional reactions to comprehension were the main areas of observation. Thematic analysis was used to find recurrent themes and patterns in the data gathered from various methods about the pedagogical impact of films.

Discussion

The integration of films into the study of cultural theory represents an exciting convergence between entertainment and academia. The addition of films to the traditional classroom setup, which usually focuses on theoretical books, can help students learn about complicated concepts related to gender, race, class, identity, and power in a more dynamic, interesting, and approachable way. Therefore, using well-known films as critical texts to teach cultural theory offers students a novel way to investigate abstract ideas through relatable and poignant stories. The educational advantages and difficulties of utilizing popular movies in cultural theory classes will also be examined in this study. This discussion will explore how films engage students intellectually and emotionally, how they can be used to critique oppressive systems and societal norms, and how they facilitate the exploration of power structures and ideologies, drawing on a variety of cultural theories such as postcolonialism, Marxism, and critical race theory.

Bridging Abstract Theory and Lived Reality

The fact that movies help in bridging the gap between students' lived realities and abstract theoretical notions is among the study's most important conclusions. For example, movies like *The Matrix* make Marxist ideas of ideology and class conflict more approachable, even though students frequently find them obscure. Marxist concepts of false consciousness and ideological control are echoed in the movie's depiction of a simulated world. The machine-controlled virtual world in the movie is a metaphor for how ideologies obscure the actual structure of societal power and control. Neo, the main character, is forced to face the realities of his own life inside a false system when he learns the truth about the Matrix. The film questions the nature of reality, truth, and the ways that knowledge is influenced by outside circumstances as it directly addresses postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas. Students can critically interact with Michel Foucault's concept of "power/knowledge" by examining this film.¹⁴ Foucault's concept highlights the interconnected nature of power and knowledge, emphasizing that knowledge is not neutral or objective but deeply embedded in systems of power. They will learn how the media and other institutions of society control and use knowledge in order to preserve the status quo.

In a similar vein, *Get Out*'s examination of the relationship between privilege and race brings critical race theory to life and encourages students to consider systematic racism in modern society. The film critiques the subtle and insidious forms of racism that persist in contemporary society, particularly within liberal, white spaces. The film uses horror elements to expose the ways in which Black bodies are commodified and exploited in a society that claims to be post-racial. Students can use *Get Out* to examine how race is represented in the film, as well as how the film critiques the racialized power dynamics that exist within both personal relationships and broader social structures.

Parasite uses class conflict, familial issues, and the idea of "the other,"¹⁵ to examine the disparities between the rich and the poor in a class-based world. The movie shows how economic disparity is

maintained by cultural norms and beliefs that affect how individuals see themselves and other people. As an allegorical tale of economic despair and social mobility, *Parasite* draws on Marxist philosophy, particularly the notion of class conflict and the estrangement brought about by societal stratification. Through their interactions, we witness how cultural markers—such as lifestyle, taste, and education—are used to protect social divisions. Marxist cultural theory can be better understood by students watching this movie through discussions on class, labor, and exploitation.

Emotional Engagement as a Pedagogical Tool

One important element in improving students' understanding of cultural theory has been identified as the emotional impact of cinema. Movies arouse feelings and empathy, which helps make abstract ideas more approachable. Students who studied *The Matrix*, for instance, frequently showed a strong emotional bond with the characters' fight against ideology, false consciousness and control, which helped them comprehend Marxist theories of resistance and agency better. In addition to making understanding easier, this emotional involvement encourages students to think critically about both their personal positionalities and societal institutions.

Promoting Interdisciplinary Learning

Additionally, films facilitate interdisciplinary education by bridging the gap between cultural theory and multiple academic disciplines, including cultural theory, sociology, psychology, history, and critical race studies. The movie *Get Out* stimulates conversations about the cultural construction of race, power dynamics, and privilege—all of which are essential components of critical race theory—by depicting systemic racism, microaggressions, and the commodification of Black bodies. It explores the psychological effects of racism and identity erasing while also exploring into psychological manipulation and trauma. From a sociological standpoint, *Get Out* challenges social stratification and the continuation of racial inequality in allegedly progressive settings. By providing students with the chance to examine its themes from a variety of academic perspectives, *Get Out* promotes a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced ways that race, identity, and power function in both cultural and personal contexts.

The Importance of Diverse and Global Perspectives

The study emphasizes how crucial it is to include films from different cultural backgrounds in order to provide students a global perspective on cultural theory. Students are challenged to look outside of West-centric frameworks by non-Western films like *Parasite*. This diversity allows students to interact with viewpoints that are different from their own and promotes inclusivity in the classroom. By tackling topics that are prevalent worldwide, like economic inequality, social mobility, and labor exploitation, the movie crosses cultural barriers. Students are encouraged to examine how local narratives reveal universal truths by *Parasite*'s complex depiction of class conflict, which stimulates multidisciplinary conversations in cultural theory, sociology, and global studies. Furthermore, the film challenges West-centric perspectives, highlighting the significance of including non-Western voices to gain a richer understanding of global issues.

Challenges and Recommendations

Although there are clear advantages to utilizing cinema to teach cultural theory, there are drawbacks as well. The danger of oversimplifying complex theories or depending too much on films as stand-alone texts is one common concern. Teachers must carefully plan their lectures to mix academic discussions with film analysis in order to address this. Students' engagement with the films and the theories can be enhanced, for instance, by coupling *Get Out* with Kimberlé Crenshaw's essay "Mapping the Margins"¹⁶ or *The Matrix* with Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses".¹⁷

Teachers should also be aware of the emotional impact of some movies, making sure that class discussions foster a welcoming and safe space for students to express their opinions. Additionally, choosing films that speak to students' experiences and cultural backgrounds might strengthen their bond with the subject matter.

Conclusion

This study shows that popular films, which provide a special fusion of visual, intellectual, and emotional involvement, are excellent teaching resources for cultural theory. Films help students understand and relate to cultural theory by bridging the gap between abstract ideas and lived reality. They encourage students to relate theoretical knowledge to practical problems by promoting critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, and global awareness.

However, careful preparation and dedication to encourage inclusive and critical discussion are necessary for the incorporation of films into cultural theory pedagogy. Future studies ought to investigate how online series and streaming services might broaden the application of film-based schooling. Furthermore, long-term research on the effects of film-based learning may shed light on how effective it is.

To sum up, cinematic classrooms have the power to completely change the way that cultural theory is taught by turning theoretical concepts into real-world experiences and encouraging students to think critically about the world.

Notes and References

- 1 *Get Out*. Directed by Jordan Peele, performances by Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams, and Bradley Whitford, Universal Pictures, 2017.
- 2 *The Matrix*. Directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, performances by Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, and Carrie-Anne Moss, Warner Bros., 1999.
- 3 *Parasite*. Directed by Bong Joon-ho, performances by Song Kang-ho, Lee Sun-kyun, and Cho Yeo-jeong, CJ Entertainment, 2019.
- 4 “Cultural Text” refers to any artifact, medium, or creation that carries meaning within a specific cultural context. These texts can include written works, films, music, advertisements, fashion, visual art, social media, and even everyday objects or practices.
- 5 hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. Routledge, 1996.
- 6 Giroux, Henry A. *Breaking into the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics*. Blackwell, 2001.
- 7 Grossberg, Lawrence, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, editors. *Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 1991.
- 8 Buckingham, David, editor. *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*. Routledge, 1998.
- 9 Hall, Stuart. “Encoding, Decoding.” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, edited by Stuart Hall et al., Routledge, 1980, pp. 128–38.
- 10 Furstenau, Marc, and David J. Cook, editors. *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Aesthetics*. Routledge, 2000.
- 11 Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.
- 12 Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.
- 13 Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- 14 Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- 15 The concept of “the Other,” rooted in postcolonial and existential theory, represents individuals or groups perceived as fundamentally different or alien by a dominant group. This is explored in *Parasite* through the stark social and economic divide between the wealthy Park family and the impoverished Kim family.
- 16 Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.
- 17 Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 85–126.