


<i>Seeing the Big Picture: A Cinematic Approach to Understanding Cultures in America</i>		
Author:	Ellen Summerfield & Sandra Lee (revised edition, 2006)	
Publisher:	Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press	
Pages	ISBN	Price
Pp. xxxiv + 205	978-0-472-03167-2 (paper)	\$27.50 U.S



English, ESL, EFL, foreign language teachers all use films for a variety of language learning purposes. Films bring many benefits, as they usually present authentic language in a variety of settings and situations, with visual and auditory input to support understanding. Given the plethora of films, Summerfield and Lee are to be commended for their thoughtful selection of films in *Seeing the Big Picture: A Cinematic Approach to Understanding Cultures in America*.

Summerfield and Lee set out to "broaden students' awareness, understanding, and appreciation of many cultures and subcultures in the United States today" (p. xvii). This encourages students to "reflect on their own culture, language, and worldview" (p. xvii) as they become more critical film viewers and thinkers. In addition, the book also creates community in the multi-cultural classroom by encouraging a respectful exploration of others' points of view. When both students' appreciation of and respect for different cultures and their communication skills increase throughout a course, students actually see the "big picture" in the book's title.

As the authors point out, neither students nor instructors are expected to be conversant with the language of film analysis and discussion. This book, however, provides the framework and tools to develop critical film viewing and analytical skills, allowing for a truly "cooperative learning experience about cultures and about cinema" (p. xxix). It is also flexible enough to allow a specific focus on one or the other, as I discovered during a

six-week ESL course for international students in University of California, Berkeley's Summer Session.

Seeing the Big Picture includes eight chapters, each of which focuses on a particular American culture: Native American, African American, Chinese American, Mexican American, Irish American, Muslim American, gay, and deaf. With the exception of the chapter on Muslim Americans, each focuses on one representative film, but options are provided at the end of each chapter. The chapter on Muslim American culture includes a selection of six films because the authors were unable to find a suitable film about Arab Muslims in contemporary America that "would allow for an exploration of Arab and Muslim cultures in the United States as well as for a discussion of contemporary realities subsequent to September 11, 2001" (p. 110). The selection includes two documentaries, a film set in France, and three films about non-Arab Muslims. The authors suggest group projects in which students present these films to the class, giving students the opportunity to take charge of discussing the six--and why the authors had to alter their selection method for this chapter. The sequence of activities and readings in each of the eight chapters is essentially the same:

- an introductory activity based on a visual to sensitize the students to the issues
- an introduction of the film, filmmakers and actors
- a list of characters in the film
- a list of culture-specific vocabulary
- historical information
- fieldwork activities
- suggestions for further exploration of a specific theme
- a food section
- suggested activities that enable students to express their point of view
- an annotated book and film list

Many of these sections refer to or use information from the Internet, and in "To the Instructor: Behind the Scenes" (p. xviii-xxxiv) the authors suggest how to sequence the activities and assignments. One can follow such a sequence, but a different order of readings and activities is possible without loss of content coherence. In addition, although sufficient materials are provided for a year-long course, with significant reading, writing, and research activities, the stand-alone quality of the chapters allows one to select just a few chapters or parts of chapters for short courses.

The penultimate chapter of the book, Chapter 9, synthesizes various themes through a comedy about Thanksgiving, *What's Cooking?* A movie that provides a light-hearted counterpoint to—at least in my class—often difficult and intense discussions of stereotypes and discrimination, and an overview of relevant periods of American history that one student labeled "un-American." One writing assignment in the chapter on gay culture, for example, directs students to write a letter to a relative or close friend who has come out of the closet. Following a frank discussion of the treatment of homosexuals in the students' home countries and in the U.S.A., many struggled in completing this assignment because of its emotional demands. (The respect agreement, found in

Appendix A, signed by the students and the instructor at the start of the course proved extremely helpful in guiding and reassuring students.) By Chapter 9's comedy students are ready to sit back, laugh and relax. Also, this chapter as well as the film at its center have an iterative quality that facilitates a review of the course. It also prepares the students for the reflective activity within the chapter "Flashback/Flashforward," the last, one-page, chapter of the book.

Appendices support the discussions in the text with easy-to-read charts, and thematically organized lists of film sources and works cited provide information to jumpstart more expansive student research projects.

Throughout the book, the authors avoid most technical film jargon, yet provide options for developing such vocabulary through film-focused websites with glossaries and examples. The language level of the text may provide challenges for both ESL and native speakers at the introductory composition course level. Thus, the reading assignments provide many opportunities for vocabulary mastery in addition to picking up colloquial language from the movies themselves. Adding teacher-generated activities based on the readings would undoubtedly increase students' comprehension of text and films. Compared to the time that would be required to compile suitable background information on the films and the cultures discussed, designing these tasks—in my case at least—was easily combined with viewings of the films.

This book encourages language teachers to become part of a learning community, as most of us do not have extensive expertise in film studies, sociology or American history. Exploring cultures with students provides opportunities to critically examine one's own point of view as a member of one or more American cultures. Leaving one's comfort zone in the classroom can be challenging for both student and teacher alike, so I wouldn't recommend this book to a novice language teacher. Based on my experience using *Seeing the Big Picture*, it should help any language learner see the current cultural context of the United States while developing her or his critical thinking and language skills. One might disagree with the film selection, but the combination of films and textbook should stimulate English language learning in any classroom.

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