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The Use of Visual Text in Teaching Political Science

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ABSTRACT— *The use of visual text, such as film, documentary or current affairs program, can play a powerful role in teaching courses where human interaction and motive are central to academic explanation. The place of three such texts, Cajun Country, Jonestown, the Life and Death of People’s Temple, and Frontline Diaries, Apartheid’s Children in teaching a political science course, is evaluated positively.*

Keywords—Visual Text, Teaching Political Science, Cajun Country, Jonestown, Post Apartheid

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual text refers to a series of images possibly accompanied with sounds that can be “read” or interpreted, as distinct from a written text consisting of words. For the purposes of this discussion, visual text refers to film, documentary or visual Internet presentation, which can be important resources when teaching political and social science (Werner, 2002).

2. VISUAL TEXT AS A TEACHING TOOL

Film (and other visual text) has unique features which makes it “an uncommonly powerful teaching tool.” (Champoux, 2007: 2). Drawing on Champoux’s analysis, it can be noted that film and other visual text records physical reality but in a way that is different from normal human experience. Through the close up it can direct the viewer’s attention, through the shot/reverse shot technique it can present human interaction from more than one perspective, and through nonverbal clues such as the close up focussed on eye movement or facial expression, it can lead the viewer towards an interpretation. When this is backed with music, the effect can have unsurpassed power. As Champoux notes, film can use both hemispheres of the viewer’s brain: the left for digital, deductive tasks, and the right for iconic, intuitive tasks (Champoux, 2007: 7).

Should the film and other visual text be placed before or after the discussion of theories and concepts in the typical teaching situation? Champoux suggest either: before provides a recallable visual image, while after can help as a case study (Champoux, 2007: 10-11). Another technique could be to present the film and other visual text first, and then after textual analysis and discussion, review key excerpts of the film.

A disadvantage of film is that, through its aesthetic content, it could be divisive in a classroom, but Champoux refers to an extensive body of research indicating positive course evaluations (Champoux, 2007: 13). Another potential issue is the ambiguity of film particularly in regard to cross-cultural areas, and sensitivity must be shown in the choice of visual text (Mallinger & Rossy, 2003).

3. VISUAL TEXT 1: U.S.A. CAJUN COUNTRY

The course HSA2/301 Race and Ethnic Politics at the University of Tasmania has a section focusing on the resettlement of the Acadians in Louisiana, which is presented as an historic example of ethnic cleansing. The Cajuns began their life as a distinct ethnic group when the first settlers from France arrived on North America in 1604. They spent their first winter on Sainte- Croix Island off the coast of Maine and developed a settlement on the mainland in an area they called La Cadie, derived from L’Acadie, the name given to the area by the Italian explorer Verrazano. Later they moved north to Nova Scotia after Acadia was captured by the British. After that area was in turn also captured by the British, a deportation of French speaking Acadians, later called the Great Expulsion (le Grand Dérangement), was commenced in 1755. In the first year over 6000 were deported to other parts of the British Empire: to

the American colonies, to the Caribbean and even the Falkland Islands, and some 3000 to England.

Many found their way to the French colony of Louisiana, in the south of the North American continent, settling there from 1765. In 1803 Louisiana was sold by France to the United States, and from that time, the Acadians, who became known as Cajuns, began their struggle for survival.

In the process of dispersal, about one third perished: from military conflict, starvation, exposure, reduced immunity, or by accidental death. Many were drowned as two of the ships taking some of them from Nova Scotia to France in 1758 sank with heavy loss of life (Jobb, 2005).

The lecture material is backed up with a visual text consisting of a report originally screened on Australian television on July 24, 2002 presenting the situation of modern Cajuns. (ABC, Foreign Correspondent, 2002). One of the community leaders, Mr. Warren Perrin, stated that he has taken a petition to Queen Elizabeth II to request an apology for the deportation of the Cajuns, which he described as the only example of ethnic cleansing of Europeans in North America. He reported that the UK Government advised him that as Nova Scotia was now part of Canada, he should take the matter up with the Canadian authorities. His research on the matter revealed that the original Deportation Order had never been rescinded, so that technically it was still in force at the time of the visual text, preventing any return by Cajuns to Nova Scotia. As a footnote, it can be added that in 2003 a Royal Proclamation acknowledging the Great Expulsion which began in 1755 was signed by Queen Elizabeth II (Perrin, 2004).

The documentary then went on to report that the community survives through its music, cuisine, (especially boudin and gumbo), the French language and the Catholic religion. The members of the community feared the 'juggernaut of American culture', which could be described as part of the globalization process.

The conclusions drawn in the following class discussion can cover the lasting nature of resentment of an event of over 250 years ago, the role of leadership in obtaining an apology, which can have a healing effect on a longstanding grievance, and observations on the importance and methods of cultural survival.

4. VISUAL TEXT 2: JONESTOWN, THE LIFE AND DEATH OF PEOPLE'S TEMPLE

An important section of the course HSA2/304 Politics in Literature and Film, which is taught at the University of Tasmania, includes a discussion of the Jonestown tragedy, based on the visual text *Jonestown, The Life and Death of People's Temple*, a documentary film by Stanley Nelson (2006).

The People's Temple was a religious community with political overtones created in 1955 (under a different name) by the Reverend Jim Jones (1931-1978). After founding its own quasi state of Jonestown in Guyana in 1973, the community was destroyed in a disaster involving the murder of United States Congressman Leo Ryan and four members of his investigating group, the mass suicide and murder of over 900 of its members (including Jones) himself, in November 1978. Throughout its short history, the People's Temple was a highly corrupt organization, due to the manipulation of its founder, but not its members who were mostly characterized by naivety, and who were in denial of allegations of corruption even as they began to surface in the media in the early 1970's. The organization was indeed corrupt and its activities included the theft of US\$26 million and manipulation of local government elections in San Francisco (Schepper, 1999: 26).

The members of the church were drawn from disadvantaged groups in American society whom Jones manipulated through language at the level of emotion, as can be seen in *Jonestown, The Life and Death or People's Temple* (Nelson, 2006). Invoking collective memory of the humiliation and suffering of his mostly African-American parishioners, and referring on a number of occasions to the Bible as "the black book used to repress black people", Jones operated a system of suggestion and thought control to carry out large-scale social engineering in his church. This took the form of a highly distorted sense of coherence backed up with the threat of severe punishment, both psychic and physical, including beatings and non-consensual sex (Harray, 1992: 65). As a result, contagion with fear became a characteristic of life in the People's Temple, but also brainwashing (Barker, 1986). Jones accurately diagnosed a state of wounded identity, from which he offered the healing experience of a new life in Jonestown, Guyana, a proxy-state granted land by the Guyana government in 1973. In this way, Jonestown became an example of a human society that entered a period of extreme collective mental disorder, undergoing large-scale organized violence that quickly led to major human catastrophe. Given that Jones had become a pathological leader, the previously moderately well-adjusted collective mental state of the People's Temple lost its immunity from the extreme forms of behavior that involved violence.

Most witnesses and commentators seem to agree that in the final stages of his rule, Jones was suffering severe drug-induced mental illness of a paranoid type (Cain, 1988: 22). Ulman and Abse also refer to the "collective madness" of the

community as well as Jones's paranoia (Ulman & Abse, 1983: 658). Although it is unlikely that anyone would have accurately predicted the tragic end to Jonestown, many were deeply troubled, leading to the investigatory mission of Congressman Ryan. Among the disturbing indications was the enacting of "white nights" or exercises in simulated mass suicide. (Some accounts give two or three of these simulations, but in his documentary, Nelson refers to only one).

Jones was able to seize absolute power and translate his intentions into actions, many of which were highly corrupt, through manipulation by fear, and these patterns of behavior were also a common feature in the early and later stages of many other corrupt regimes, which have imposed and maintained rule by threat of violence. In the case of Jonestown, the outcome was catastrophic, being also the largest single loss of civilian American life up to September 11, 2001. The fact that it was probably more mass suicide than mass murder, conspiracy theories notwithstanding (Moore, 2002), does not lessen its impact.

Class discussion following the lecture and a visual text presentation centered on Jones's mental state. Jones described himself as a politically progressive and was embraced by liberal politicians such as U.S. Representatives Phillip and John Burton, Assemblyman Willie Brown and Mayor George Moscone of San Francisco, who was himself to be assassinated along with Board of Supervisors member Harvey Milk a few weeks later in an unrelated incident. However, Jones was undoubtedly politically naive in thinking that the USSR, North Korea and Cuba were perfect political systems. Ultimately it was the unfavorable publicity over Jones's corruption that prompted him to leave San Francisco and take a core group of devoted followers with him to live in isolation within Guyana.

The Rev Jim Jones reveals himself in the film to be a charismatic leader who led by transforming peoples' lives, filling the emptiness of a lack of meaning and offering healing of the hurt of discrimination and poverty. He also showed signs of mental illness in the form of believing his own self-created mythology that he was a divine embodiment, which gave him permission to break all normal moral codes of behavior as well as financial ones, and ultimately the Commandment "Thou shalt not kill", taking the lives, by encouraging or enforcing suicide and murder of 913 parishioners at Jonestown, Guyana. Whether his substance abuse was a product of his mental illness or a cause of it can be speculated upon. One can therefore say that his leadership was flawed.

In watching the film, students can observe the charisma of Jones's leadership and the sense of betrayal and deception that participants later felt and the naked fear as the tragic end approached, and make comparisons with other leaders they may have studied.

5. VISUAL TEXT 3: APARTHEID'S CHILDREN

A section of the course HSA2/301 Race and Ethnic Politics deals with South Africa as a case study. Specifically, it studies the early history leading to the Apartheid policy of institutionalized discrimination, which was official from 1948 to 1994, when majority rule came into being. At the end of a series of lectures, students were shown the television documentary by Michael Davie *Frontline Diaries: Apartheid's Children* (Davie, 2002).

This gives a presentation of the lives of young South Africans of various backgrounds after a short interview with exPresident Mandela. The documentary was filmed in and around Johannesburg, the "City of Gold", which is the richest city on the African continent, the one with the highest income differentials and has endemic violence. We are introduced to Sylvia Makwebo, a 16-year-old schoolgirl living alone in a shack in Alexandra, the same slum community where Nelson Mandela came from. She is being supported by a social worker Ms Bihali who supplies her with clothing, books and food. Sylvia's mother is dying of HIV/AIDS. We then meet Mrs. Tandi, a very successful businesswoman, and her daughter Mamarana, who attends an exclusive private school. Mamarana identifies with many of the lifestyle and values of her white classmates but still sees herself as African. We then meet Johannes Swartz, a 24-year old police inspector who is also a fully qualified paramedic. Johannesburg has many car crashes, carjackings and a murder rate 9 times that of the USA. His team has already lost five colleagues and they commence their duties with a prayer meeting. We then meet Lesley, a rehabilitation officer in Leeuwkop, one of Johannesburg's largest juvenile prisons, and she has started her own program called Coulisse, which could be translated as behind the scenes, and has achieved remarkable results in getting young offenders to turn their lives around. We then meet Dr Carole Benn, aged about 30, who is in charge of the Emergency Room at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital (the largest hospital in the Southern Hemisphere). This ER receives about 3000 gunshot wound victims each year, and the British Royal Navy send their medical officers there for training in battle injuries. Critical patients have a sticker marked "Dringend/Urgent" put on their heads at triage (one can note the use of the Afrikaans language). The reporter notes that Dr Benn could get a job as head of ER in any hospital of the world but chooses to stay because she sees a bright future. She is ably assisted by Dr Ashwar a young South African of Asian background. The film finishes with Nelson Mandela stating that in his view the most important need for South Africa is hope for the future.

Discussion after the screen of this visual text focuses on the future stability of South Africa, the effect of over four decades of institutionalized race discrimination, the rise of a black middle class, the menace of HIV/AIDS, underlying violence, and the importance of hope. And students can assess the magnitude of the task as seen by young people of mostly a similar age to themselves.

6. CONCLUSION

The use of visual text, such as film, documentary or current affairs program, can play a powerful role in teaching courses such as in political science, where human interaction and motive are central to academic explanation, by giving students direct access to the participants in great historical events. In the case of *Cajun Country*, students can witness the nostalgia and grievance felt by present day descendants of the expelled Acadians. In *Jonestown, the Life and Death of People's Temple*, they can observe the charisma of Jones's leadership and the sense of betrayal and deception that participants later felt and the naked fear as a tragic end approached. In *Apartheid's Children* they can assess the magnitude of the task of rebuilding a country, through the experiences of young people of mostly a similar age to themselves. Thus the use of visual text in political science courses can be evaluated positively.

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