

The Politics of Production

Enduring Understandings:

- All media are constructions of reality.
- Media productions are not simply artistic creations, but also the product of economic factors: i.e., they cost money and make money.
- Media contain beliefs and value systems that reflect a filmmaker's point of view.

Essential Questions:

- How do budget constraints shape the form and content of a film?
- How are new technologies absorbed into society?
- How does bias find its way into media?

Notes to the Teacher:

New communication technology is bringing change to societies and cultural institutions, and it is increasingly clear that film and other visual media are powerful, accessible tools for telling personal and cultural stories that influence our perspectives and facilitate social change. Therefore it is important for students to become knowledgeable about all aspects of media. The focus of this lesson is on how commercial considerations influence both the form and content of a film.

Hollywood studios have huge budgets with which to fund films but as the old saying goes, "He who pays the piper calls the tune." Thus the studio can interfere with and reshape any aspect of production. The studio makes its demands based on a desired target market, competition from other films, influences from corporate, governmental or social watchdogs, financial limitations, egos, contractual obligations, and so on. In addition, Hollywood movies are legally bound to pay all of the filmmaking crew according to union regulations. A known celebrity can generate substantial earnings at the box office and therefore commercially desirable actors' fees can be astronomically high.

Independent film producers work with much smaller budgets, and very often with amateur or unknown actors. However, these producers have the ability to offer an outlet for filmmakers who are marginalized by the large studios. Production techniques in these films are somewhat simpler and cheaper, thereby giving voice to a wide range of storytellers.

Khyentze Norbu harnesses his passion for film to bring his understanding of Buddhist wisdom to a wider global audience. The success of this first film both at world wide film festivals and at commercial venues will give Norbu the reputation and income to fund future film projects to advance his ideas.

In Activity 1, students learn that films are carefully constructed, using visual and sound technology, to tell stories that have emotional power and esthetic qualities specific to the medium. This is an important introductory activity as it helps students understand a film text and it helps the teacher assess student understanding of the story. Students should be encouraged to engage in a creative brainstorming session with the class.

Activities 2 and 3 discuss values and build on students' existing knowledge of stereotyping and Activity 4 gives students a taste of some important aspects of filmmaking, writing scripts and pitching ideas.

At the end of the lesson plan is a rubric (Handout 1) you may give to your students so that they know how they will be evaluated on their presentations. If you wish, make your own rubric, adding categories based on class discussion about what will make a convincing presentation.

DURATION OF LESSON:

Two-three periods

ASSESSMENT:

Student pitch of screenplay (see rubric)

LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS
Indicators addressed by this lesson

STANDARD 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)

1. Understands a variety of messages conveyed by visual media (e.g., main concept, details, themes or lessons, viewpoints)
6. Understands how symbols, images, sound, and other conventions are used in visual media (e.g., time lapse in films; set elements that identify a particular time period or culture; short cuts used to construct meaning, such as the scream of brakes and a thud to imply a car crash; sound and image used together; the use of close-ups to convey drama or intimacy; the use of long camera shots to establish setting; sequences or groups of images that emphasize specific meaning)
7. Understands reasons for varied interpretations of visual media (e.g., different purposes or circumstances while viewing, influence of personal knowledge and experiences, focusing on different stylistic features)
9. Understands techniques used in visual media to influence or appeal to a particular audience (e.g., production techniques, such as designing a news program as entertainment; persuasive techniques, such as exaggerated claims, portrayal of appealing lifestyles, bandwagon, glittering generalities; subliminal messages; narrative style)

STANDARD 10. Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)

2. Understands the different purposes of various media (e.g., to provide entertainment or information, to persuade, to transmit culture, to focus attention on an issue)
5. Understands aspects of media production and distribution (e.g., different steps and choices involved in planning and producing various media; various professionals who produce media, such as news writers, photographers, camera operators, film directors, graphic artists, political cartoonists)
6. Understands the ways in which image-makers carefully construct meaning (e.g., idea and word choice by authors, images created by photographers, television programs created by groups of people, photos or cutlines chosen in newspapers)
7. Understands influences on the construction of media messages and images (e.g., the historical period or place in which they were made; laws that govern mass media, such as truth in advertising; the socio-cultural background of the target audience; financial factors such as sponsorship; cause-and-effect relationships between mass media coverage and public opinion trends)

Materials needed:

HANDOUT 1: Rubric

HANDOUT 2: Pitch organizer sheet

Procedure:

ACTIVITY 1: Likes, Dislikes, Puzzles and Patterns: A Deconstruction Exercise

1. Place the words LIKES, DISLIKES, PUZZLES and PATTERNS across the top of the chalkboard or on separate pieces of chart paper. Have a brainstorming session with the class and classify their thoughts about the film into the four categories. (PUZZLES refer to things that a student didn't understand or had a question about. PATTERNS refer to things that are repeated in the film. This repetition could occur in the visual elements, with a character, setting, audio, text, acting, mood, lighting etc. Suggested responses: chanting ceremonies, repetition of soccer images, the playfulness of the young monks.)
2. If a point appears in more than one column, have students discuss their different points of view. For example, some people will be sympathetic to the abbot's homesickness for Tibet, while others feel this detail adds nothing to the story. Some students may like an aspect of the film that others dislike. Ask the students why they feel that certain things were repeated. For instance, the young monks kicked a Coke can in the courtyard and there was a Coke can in the fortune-teller's home. What does the can represent, and why the repetition?

3. If *The Cup* is the first film in your *Journeys in Film* program, you should expect to hear comments about subtitles. Ask how many students have seen a subtitled film before. Ask the students what strategies they used to view this new style of film.
4. Ask students to compare the production values (special effects, stars, soundtracks, big promotion campaigns) of this "indie" (independent) film to those of a blockbuster film like *Spy Kids* or *Harry Potter*.

ACTIVITY 2: Values

1. Explain to the students that Khyentze Norbu is a Buddhist lama who sees Buddhism more as a philosophy and way of life and less as a religion. This means he believes in following the values of Buddhism in his everyday life. Remind students that often a filmmaker's own values will be seen in the film and will affect the story he tells.

Ask the students "What values does Norbu include in the movie which help to shape the story? For each value, give evidence from the film to support your view." (Suggested responses: Everyone in the monastery is expected to help with practical tasks; it is important to respect your elders and those in higher religious positions; it is important to respect promises made to others; when people work together, they can accomplish more than when they work on their own.)

2. Ask the students to identify the influences of Western culture included in this film. (Some examples include the Coke can, the World Cup Series broadcast from

Europe, the game being played among the boys, soccer tee shirts, magazines.) Which Western values are presented in the film?

3. Ask students to comment upon their reaction to the combination of both Eastern and Western elements in the film. Students should recognize that they are not presented as "good" and "bad" but rather only as different elements. Characters are influenced by both cultures, and we see this film unites these sets of values.

ACTIVITY 3: Stereotypes

1. Discuss and define stereotypes: *a distortion of the truth based on a generalization about a group or individual.*
2. Remind students that we often make generalizations about people when we don't know them; in that situation, we usually rely on what we have heard others say, because we don't know any better. Discuss how our own biases, experiences and learned attitudes can affect how we see and relate to one another. Also mention to students that stereotyping often stems from the fear of the unknown or misunderstood "other" person whom we see as different from us.
3. Ask the students whether they recall any instances of stereotyping in the movie. Some students may have noticed that there are elements of stereotyping of both the Indian and Chinese characters in this film. (For example, "Never ask an Indian for directions" or "Chinese rice is smelly.")

4. Explain the difference between objective and subjective statements:
 - a. Objective statements are *facts*, things that most reasonable people would agree about. Facts also don't change very often or easily. For example, the movie is 93 minutes long; the main character's name is Orgyen. (Most reasonable people would not argue about these details, nor would they change their mind about these details at a later date.)
 - b. Subjective statements are *opinions*, things that reasonable people may very well disagree about. For example, the best scene in the movie is — . (There could be much disagreement about which scene is the *best* scene. Furthermore, a person could change his or her mind about a favorite scene after discussing with friends, after a second viewing, after time elapses.)
5. Go back to the instances of stereotypes discussed earlier. Ask the class whether these are objective or subjective statements.
6. Select a scene of your own choosing from the movie to review with the class and discuss instances of objective and subjective statements made in the scene. If applicable, you may also wish to look for actions and behaviors that *imply* objective or subjective thoughts that are not verbally articulated.

ACTIVITY 4: Writers Pitch Ideas to Potential Producers (Simulation):

1. Explain to the class that most filmmakers don't have the money to produce their own films. Instead, they must convince investors or producers (people who will provide some money up front, and will expect to be paid their own money back, plus a profit, once the movie is finished and makes money) to fund their films.
2. Ask the students to imagine any potential problems a filmmaker might have in getting the necessary funding to make his/her film. Prompt students to consider what an investor will be looking for when he chooses which film to support. Will an investor care about the same aspects of a film as the filmmaker trying to get money? How should a filmmaker approach and speak to a possible investor if he/she wants to convince the investor to provide funding?
3. Often a filmmaker will have an opportunity to "pitch" an idea to a potential producer but may only have a few minutes to grab the producer's attention. This is a case of "less is more."
4. With the class discuss how Norbu may have "pitched" *The Cup*: "This is based on a true story about a young Tibetan monk who rebels against the rules of a monastery in exile. He has devised a plan to indulge in his passion to see the World Cup soccer match on TV. How he manages to get the technology to make this possible and how he convinces his superiors to accept this scheme make the story both compelling and heartwarming. The film is shot in a spectacular setting, etc. "

5. Arrange the class into pairs and designate them as teams of script writers. Tell them that they will be coming up with their own “script pitch” that will attempt to convince investors to provide financial backing for an independent film. Ask students to come up with a simple script scenario based on a true story that one of them has experienced or heard about. Regroup in sets of 4 and have each pair share their story idea for feedback, clarity of story and any other positive suggestions. Encourage students to state what they like, dislike and don’t understand about the other pair’s story.
6. Assignment: Each writing team will prepare an oral presentation to pitch their story idea to potential producers to fund the film. (Cue cards should be used to record key points students will refer to during presentation.) In this case the “producers” are the class and teacher. Explain to students that they will be judged on how convincing their pitch is. Ask the class to offer suggestions as to what makes an effective presentation. They should offer (or you can offer) comments. (Examples: preparing simple cue cards; not reading directly from cards; having a well-thought-out story; using humor, suspense, or drama; having a strong delivery; mentioning special features like music, setting, actors; sounding convincing so investors will see that the film has potential to be successful, etc.) Suggested presentation time is 3 to 4 minutes.
7. An evaluation rubric has been included in this lesson plan, but it will be helpful to have the class discuss ahead of time what will make a good presentation.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. Recommend that students, in partnership with parents, embark on an independent study unit at home to compare production values and belief systems in a variety of age-appropriate studio-financed and independent films available at local video stores.
2. Some story ideas could move forward into simple production, storyboarding, writing of a key scene, etc. Refer to the media lesson from the *Children of Heaven* unit for information about doing a storyboard.
3. Encourage students with an interest in film production to begin writing scripts from their story pitches. Excellent screenwriting software is available, e.g., *Final Draft* and *Writers’ Blocks*, that could be used in the classroom.
4. Invite a real filmmaker, writer, actor, or producer into the classroom to speak on how to pitch a film idea, etc.
5. Essay question: Research the way in which the film *The Cup* was produced. Khyentze Norbu created his first feature film *The Cup* on a very small budget. Describe three production decisions he had to make in order to work within the budgetary constraints of an independent film. Did these decisions improve or detract from the film? Use evidence from the film to support your argument.

(Suggested answers: Norbu was both writer and director; the set was a monastery that did not charge him for filming; actors were monks not celebrities; money was spent on transportation of cameras; script was improvised because no translations were available; he saved time and money by waiting to view film.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Print Materials

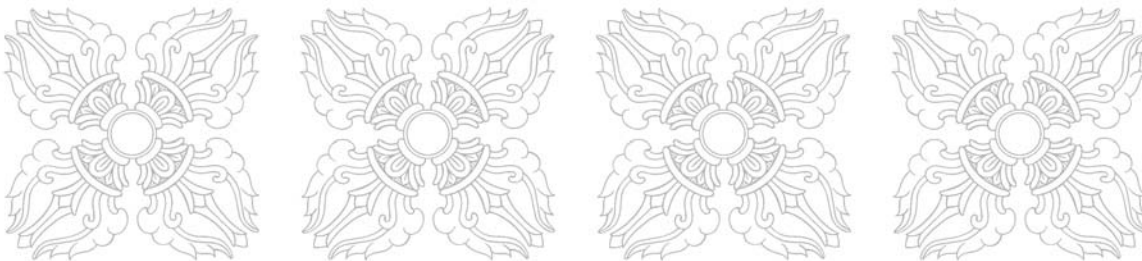
Theodosakis, Nikos. *The Director in the Classroom: How Filmmaking Inspires Learning* (San Diego, CA: Tech4 Learning Publishing, 2002)

Kenny, Robert *Teaching TV Production in a Digital World* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001)

Internet Resources

bfi.org.uk/education

The education page of the British Film Institute, with many useful teaching resources.



HANDOUT 1 Assessment Rubric for “The Pitch”

The pitch is an oral presentation to persuade the listener to act. This is an important life skill since students attempt to persuade their parents, friends and teachers to do certain things every day. This is a case of “less is more”: having a well-thought-out idea boiled down to a three or four minute presentation.

To assess the effectiveness of the oral presentation, your teacher will use the following rubric:

Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
<p>Preparation:</p> <p>Has a basic story idea prepared</p> <p>Has notes or has prepared cue cards</p>	<p>Preparation:</p> <p>Has a clear vision of the basic story idea</p> <p>Touches on production</p> <p>Has prepared</p>	<p>Preparation:</p> <p>Knows story, setting, characterization, who the audience will be; can visualize the production in a general way and describe some key production elements that make this unique (like direction, music, lighting, cinematography, sets, props etc)</p> <p>Has prepared cue cards</p>
<p>Presentation Content:</p> <p>Completes a basic presentation</p>	<p>Presentation Content:</p> <p>Gets across some interesting points about the project</p>	<p>Presentation Content:</p> <p>Gets across a strong, clear and creative idea, making strong points about the project.</p>
<p>Effectiveness of Delivery:</p> <p>Reads throughout presentation directly from cue cards</p>	<p>Effectiveness of Delivery:</p> <p>Stays on topic, using notes to keep track</p> <p>Uses basic speaking techniques</p>	<p>Effectiveness of Delivery:</p> <p>Engages audience, is animated, referring to notes subtly, uses persuasive techniques such as arguments in favor, humor, suspense, logic, etc.</p>

Making a Pitch

This worksheet will help you organize your ideas as you create your story and develop your pitch. Students must decide who the audience will be for their film and why the film should be made. The reasons may be sheer entertainment value, a commercial money-making idea, telling the world an important story, etc.

BASIC STORY IDEA

AUDIENCE (Who is this movie going to appeal to?)

PRODUCTION NEEDS:

a. Actors (general or specific)

b. Locations/Sets/ Costumes

HANDOUT 2 ▶ P.2

c. Music/Sound/Cinematography

d. Special Effects

THE PITCH:

What makes this a great project and why should someone want to fund it?

(Continue on another sheet of paper if necessary.)