What Are You Watching?

Considering Film and Television as Visual Culture Pedagogy

B. STEPHEN CARPENTER, II AND LUDOVIC A. SOURDOT

The use of visual culture to engage students in critical discussions about the politics of power, culture, and identity in educational contexts is not new, particularly in art education (Duncum, 1987, 2006; Eisner, 1997; Freedman, K., 1997, 2003; Tavin, 2003). The field of art education has, for more than two decades, opened the discourse of its own practices to consider the roles, values, and influences of visual culture. This consideration has not been completely favorable, and the inclusion of visual culture in or even as art education has sometimes been framed as a confusing, problematic project (Dorn, 2005). Supporters of visual culture in art education recognize the potential benefits that come from more explicit attention, interrogation, and construction of the increasingly available amount of visual experiences in the daily lives of learners. Such socially relevant content has placed increased attention on contemporary concerns related to representations of identity, culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, and race. Because visual culture places these concerns in question with respect to imagery (Mirzoeff, 1999), exploring its role in classroom discussions and school assignments seems like a sensible pedagogical project.

Within the field of art education, visual culture is an interdisciplinary discourse that continues to evolve and embrace a variety of modalities, sites, and practices (K. Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003). Among its various forms and sites, such as amusement parks, shopping malls, advertisements, film, video, and television, visual culture also offers rich opportunities for substantive inquiry and production (Duncum, 2003). The inclusion of visual culture is not a new concept as a field of scholarship within education (Nadaner, 1981), and the visual culture of film and television is readily available to more and more teachers and students today than in the recent past. Many examples of these forms of visual culture further perpetuate and complicate racial, religious, cultural, and other identity stereotypes. When overlooked, these stereotypes implicitly perpetuate and encourage both positive and negative views and assumptions about identity representations.

In this chapter we reflect on our own pedagogy through visual culture and focus on the use of film and television to engage pre-service teachers and veteran educators in the critical analysis of cultural narratives (Pauly, 2003) and identity representations. After a consideration of film and television in education, we offer brief descriptions of how we have used these forms of visual culture to assist in the exposure of our own students’ biases toward racial, cultural, and religious subjectivities. These engagements are important to all educators, and have provided our
What Are You Watching?

• 445

own students with meaningful experiences through which to consider complex issues related to identity. We focus our discussion on how viewers have participated in discussions and critical readings of *Mad Hot Ballroom* (Agrelo & Sewell, 2005) a documentary film, and speculate about how *Aliens in America* (Guarascio & Port, 2007), a single-season television situation-comedy, might be used in similar situations.

Our examples do not constitute an exhaustive sample; instead, we offer *Mad Hot Ballroom* and *Aliens in America* as vehicles for understanding identity construction in visual culture, how viewers might better make sense of such constructions, and how educators could make use of similar examples in their own pedagogy. Our discussion in this chapter considers how various character representations might assist educators to make “real life” situations relevant to their students through film and television while working to provoke cultural and critical engagement.

McLaren and Hammer (1995) advocated for the creation of a “media literate citizenry that can disrupt, contest, and transform media apparatuses so that they no longer possess the power to infantilize the population and continue to create passive and paranoid social subjects” (p. 196). We have found that official curricula that seek to define what is learned in schools and the lives of students may be enriched through engaged and critical operational curricula informed by discussions, debates, and activities generated through critically viewing and engaging with visual culture. Furthermore, the implications derived from such approaches may lead to improved and more meaningful teacher preparation programs and instructional methods in a multicultural society. Educators willing to incorporate this content as curriculum seek to resist the perceived negative influences of popular media on children and simultaneously assist viewers in the development of their own critical cultural, visual, and media literacy.

Visual Culture as Public Pedagogy

In 2005 the Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed a national sample of third through twelfth graders in the United States and determined “young people live media-saturated lives, spending an average of nearly 6½ hours a day (6:21) with media” (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005, p. 6). Parents and guardians do not always monitor the content of television shows their children watch or engage in critical discussions with them about what they have viewed, and it is unclear from this study what young viewers learn from these shows. In fact, the content of what viewers of all ages see on television can inform the opinions, perceptions, and responses to cultural, ethnic, religious or other groups of people. For example, The Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2007) investigated Americans’ opinions of Muslims. One major conclusion of this research suggested, “The biggest influence on the public’s impressions of Muslims, particularly among those who express an unfavorable opinion of Muslims, is what people hear and read in the media” (¶ 14). What remains unclear is how and to what degree the media informs public impressions of Muslims, or any person or group. Discussions with television viewers about how cultural, ethnic, religious, and other forms of identity are visually constructed and perpetuated can suggest possibilities for public pedagogy.

With respect to the pedagogical implications of television, what seems certain is that school age children in the United States are exposed to an implicit or hidden curriculum (Freedman, K., 2003; Posner, 1992). This curriculum competes with official school curricula on a daily basis and, “In a sense, television has become the national curriculum and the media now provide edu-tainment” (Freedman, K., 2003, p. 142). Similarly, Cortés (2000) argues that mass media were multicultural education long before “school educators ever began talking about multicultural education” (p. xv, italics in the original). In this regard, a variety of lessons about race,
culture, politics, identity, religion, and social norms are taught everyday through televised visual culture.

Visual culture can be conceptualized in three registers (Tavin, 2003): ontological—various ideas related to the roles, implications, and effects of visual culture on our lives; pedagogical—curriculum and content taught, interpreted, and learned; and, substantive—objects, events, sites, productions, and experiences. Within the substantive register one might find films, videos, television shows, advertisements, and other similar cultural productions. Such examples are intended for public access, consumption, and contemplation, and therefore can be considered as forms of public pedagogy. We consider “teaching visual culture” to be both a verb—the engaged act of inquiry based on and informed by visual culture—and a noun—a ontological, pedagogical, or substantive example of visual culture that educates. In this sense, visual culture as public pedagogy falls in line with curriculum reconceptualized as currere (Pinar, 2004), in which it moves from being a course to the engaged and embodied running of the course as “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004, p. 9).

Such possibilities are echoed outside of the scholarship on education. In the opening paragraph of his review of Generation Kill (Simon, Noble, Calderwood, Faber, & Pattinson, 2008), a television miniseries based on the Iraq War, Joshua Alston (2008) uses a pedagogical metaphor to establish the context of his interpretation. Of the new miniseries, as is the case with creator David Simon’s previous hit show—Baltimore-based police drama The Wire (Simon, 2002)—Alston suggests that viewers of Generation Kill should also expect:

…a learning curve as steep as a black-diamond ski course and a teeming population of Marine grunts who, like a teeming population of Baltimore cops before them, speak tactical jargon like bards. Simon’s programs can feel like homework, but they tend to unfold in surprising ways that reward the massive investment required. “Kill” is no exception. (Alston, 2008, ¶ 1)

Similarly, Johnson (2005) explained that in recent years television programming has evolved to the point where many programs now require viewers to be fully engaged and invested as they watch in order to follow the complex plots and elaborate storylines. In this chapter, we see public pedagogy as being concerned with, and taking place within, the discursive spaces of public issues, situations, and events that surround television and film. That is, viewers of film and television public pedagogy can encounter meaningful learning opportunities through critical engagement within this form of visual culture. This form of public pedagogy requires the active participation of viewers to make meaning of the complex nature of the narratives they experience on multiple levels. As Johnson (2005) points out,

Some narratives force you to do work to make sense of them…part of that cognitive work comes from following multiple threads, keeping often densely interwoven plotlines distinct in your head as you watch. But another part involves the viewer’s “filling in”: making sense of information that has been either deliberately withheld or deliberately left obscure…to follow narratives, you aren’t just asked to remember. You’re asked to analyze. This is the difference between intelligent shows, and shows that force you to be intelligent. (pp. 64–65)

It is the shows that force viewers “to be intelligent” that are perhaps the most socially relevant and “educational” as they require viewers to make meaningful connections with their own lives. Attentive viewers can, and in some cases must, reach beyond the actual time spent viewing a television show and supplement this experience as he or she reads and contributes to blogs,
fansites, and fanzines, or purchase and collect merchandising associated with specific television shows and films. That is, following Johnson’s claims, the content of a show may exceed the boundaries of the medium and extend to the daily conversations and experiences of viewers. One such example is the ABC television show *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005), where viewers can access a blog on the World Wide Web that is understood to be maintained by the fictional nurses on the show. The nurses post commentary about the doctors in residence, and viewers must stay current with the blog for additional narratives generated by the fictional characters. The posts are a form of analytical discourse that exemplifies what Johnson finds valuable in “shows that force you to be intelligent” (p. 64) because viewers must engage in intellectual work off-screen to better understand the narrative onscreen.

**Film and Television in Educational Research and in Classrooms**

Scholars have long made the case for using film in educational research and in classrooms. Eisner (1997) described segments of two films, *Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt, Thomas, & Weir, 1989) and *School Colors* (Andrews, Olsson, & Robinson-Odom, 1994), a film about Berkeley High in Berkeley, California, to support his argument in favor of alternative forms of data representation in educational research. As justification for using film as an alternative form for education researchers to present data worthy of thoughtful consideration, Eisner (1997) commented,

> [Films] contain dialogue and plot, they display image, and they can use sound, particularly music, to augment image and word. Put another way, film can teach. With film, we can ask: What does the soundtrack tell you, the expressions on the faces of those portrayed, the visual features of the setting? Put another way, how do these films inform? What did the filmmakers do to make this happen? (p. 6)

In *Dead Poets Society*, Eisner (1997) notes, “The filmmakers have created a visual narrative that displays an array of values, not by describing them, but by depicting them” (p. 6). While Eisner recognizes that the school depicted in the film does not actually exist, it represents aspects of many schools that students attend. Although Eisner provides these films to show how data from educational research might be represented, his efforts also support the use of film as educational content. Eisner (1997) reminds us, “the question we are asking is, what do the filmmakers make it possible for us to learn?” (p. 7). Seen in this way, the fictional content of films might offer important lessons for viewers available only through such representation.

The fictional content of television provides possibilities for meaningful application in classrooms. This content is important with respect to school age children who view numerous images on television that reflect important issues, among which include race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. As for the significance of television for teachers, “the images are too easily accessible and their influence is too powerful for teachers to ignore [how] ethnic groups and issues [are] represented in television programming … students bring this information and its effects to the classroom with them” (Gay, 2000, p. 123). In this light, the content of many television shows and films offer problematic and complex representations of identity, especially of people of color. As one example, in his critique of the film, *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Smith, 1995), Giroux (1997) highlights the importance and place of race in these forms of visual culture. Further, Giroux warns that critiques of visual culture should address the seemingly harmless representations of youth depicted in films and television rather than, as Eisner’s question above might suggest, simply name producers and filmmakers as racist.

What happens when viewers and educators overlook problematic and complex representations
of racial, cultural, ethnic, and other subjectivities? To what degree do depictions of cultural, racial, religious, sexual, and other identities solidify misguided and narrowly-constructed conceptions of identity for pre-service and veteran educators? Below, we consider our own use of film and television visual culture as a pedagogical site to analyze cultural narratives and identity representations and to expose racial, cultural, and other biases.

Mad Hot Ballroom

*Mad Hot Ballroom* (Agrelo & Sewell, 2005) is a documentary film that follows three groups of New York City middle school students and their dance instructors as they prepare for and compete in a citywide ballroom dancing competition in post 9/11 New York City. Throughout the film, students, teachers, administrators, and parents offer commentary about themselves and the competition. Many reviews of the film describe the students as “transformed” as a result of participating in the competitive dance program, shifting from “reluctant participants to determined competitors, from typical urban kids to ‘ladies and gentlemen,’ on their way to try to compete in the final city-wide competition” (Coming Soon Media, n.d.). The teachers in the film represent a variety of racial and ethnic identities yet embody the “hero teacher” persona (D. Freedman, 2003). These “hero teacher” films depict classroom and school contexts and situations we believe are valuable to curriculum and pedagogy considerations especially when the teacher-student dichotomy depicted mirrors the typical White teacher-student of color situation in many schools in contemporary society in the United States. Like most “hero teachers” in films and television shows, the dance instructors and teachers in *Mad Hot Ballroom* are portrayed as caring, empathetic individuals with the students’ best interests and future success at heart. The populations of the competing schools in the film share few racial, cultural, or social class similarities. For example, the student body of a school in Washington Heights is primarily comprised of middle-class, urban students from (or whose parents are from) the Dominican Republic, whereas the school from Queens is predominantly populated by upper-middle-class White children. The film seems to offer these two schools in contrast and in competition—the “rag-tag” lower-income, bilingual, students of color who are challengers in the dance competition with the affluent, disciplined, White students (and teachers) who also happen to be the defending champions. The juxtaposition of these two schools in the film provides content for the analysis of cultural narratives, identity representations, and opportunities to expose racial, cultural, and other biases in viewers.

We have shown *Mad Hot Ballroom* to various groups of graduate students and pre-service undergraduate students in different contexts. In the summer of 2006, we showed this film in a course on assessment and evaluation of school personnel to graduate students who were enrolled in a degree program for school administrators. When we showed the film, the students had previously examined several models for conducting reviews of teacher performance and instruction in educational situations. The primary purpose of using *Mad Hot Ballroom* with these graduate students was to provide a common example of several related learning situations about which they could employ the assessment strategies and models they had learned in class. Similar to our use of the film in undergraduate courses (which we will describe below), a second purpose for showing this film to these graduate students was to encourage discussion and analysis about teacher and student identity. The graduate course was comprised of two sections of approximately 20 students. These students shared their responses in person and on an online discussion board. Below are two responses from the online discussion board. These comments were posted outside of class time after a lengthy in-class discussion about the film. The two responses below are from two different educators enrolled in the class. Based solely on
What Are You Watching?

Their racial and ethnic identities, these two teachers could easily have been teachers in schools in Queens and Washington Heights, respectively.

What I felt was good were things like the male role model that the coach was. He assured the boys that dancing is a masculine activity. I was also struck by the confidence it gave to the new student who didn’t speak English. He quickly felt like part of the community and was appreciated for his ability. I was impressed by the parental support and above all by the investment of the students right from the beginning. (Comment provided by a White American woman.)

Everyone agrees that we must monitor a child’s progress; however, the manner by which we approach this shared objective has long been the source of debate within the academic community. A vivid example of this controversy is Mad Hot Ballroom. This video illustrated how educators understand and use assessments and evaluations to fulfill their goals. One of the schools integrated the students in the process of deciding who is representing the school. The children evaluated their talents and provided detailed evidence to support their decision. They were empowered and accountable for their learning. However, the other schools did not incorporate their students into the process. The teachers had the sole responsibility to make the decision. Which approach is better? When? In what context? I do not have an answer. My best approach is getting to know my students at different levels not just academic deficits and strengths. (Comment provided by a Latina student.)

The responses of these two students, soon to become school administrators, mirror the various removed and distant responses of their classmates. That is, the responses seemed somewhat superficial and did not offer interpretations to specific content in course readings about identity in the context of schools. While these two students refer to larger topics such as gender roles, second-language learners, parental support, student achievement, the value of arts education, student-centered learning, and differentiated instruction, the responses reflect a perspective that sees students as a group rather than as individuals who bring their own subjectivities to all learning situations, always. Failure to see students as both members of a group and as individuals with their own subjectivities serves to perpetuate generalized identity representations. The implications of such can lead to passing ill-formed judgments on students based on limited cultural awareness or misinformed racial, cultural, and other stereotypes.

For several semesters we have also used this film in an undergraduate arts education course for pre-service general education students majoring in early childhood education. The university population where we taught this course is majority White and middle class with the percentage of racial and international identities lower than the national average in the United States. We use the film in this course to offer students a context in which to consider the arts within larger official and operational school curricula, and to stimulate interpretations and discussions about teacher and student identity, particularly with respect to students of color. We believe Mad Hot Ballroom serves these, and other purposes well. For example, it provides an opportunity to engage learners in critical discussions about the issue of religious identity. In the film, two students make comments about their own religious identity. These comments remain unexamined by teachers or other students in the film, and we observed that our own undergraduate students also overlook how religion, gender roles, and sexual orientation are implicitly characterized throughout the film.

In one school in the film, viewers witness two boys, Taha and Muhammad, who are in charge of operating the CD player while the rest of their classmates learn dance moves from their instructor. Initially, the viewer is left unaware of why these boys are not dancing with the other
students. The boys provide the only explanation in a somewhat cryptic but succinct manner, as one declares that dancing is “against our religion.” The other boy responds with a silent gesture of agreement. The religion to which they refer is never explicitly revealed. The assumption for most viewers is that the boys are Muslim, given their names, which appear briefly on the screen. Perhaps what is most curious is that the viewer is left without further commentary about this fleeting moment in the film. Neither the issue of why the boys are not allowed to dance nor further discussion about their religion is revisited. Similarly, in the four semesters in which we have shown the film to our undergraduate pre-service students, none of them raises the issue of religion in the film unless we initiate the discussion.

We acknowledge that Mad Hot Ballroom warrants further discussion and analysis than we provide here in this chapter. The comments of the veteran practitioner graduate students and the lack of critical commentary on the part of the undergraduate pre-service teachers underscore deeply held interpretations and visions of practicing teachers about how they see or fail to see themselves, their students, and the cultural narratives of education in which they are situated. In particular, we wonder about the degree to which the representations of Muhammad and Taha in this film do little to resist stereotypes teachers might have about their own Muslim students and what these teachers may bring to the classroom, especially if they take the example of these two boys as representative of all Muslims living in the United States.

Intended as a documentary about the role of an arts program in the lives of students in New York City, we have attempted to depict Mad Hot Ballroom as a visual culture site rich with content to inspire meaningful learning experiences for pre-service teachers, graduate students, and veteran practitioners. To extend opportunities to challenge cultural, ethnic, religious, and other forms of identity construction in the film, during a second viewing of the film, students might catalog instances in which male and female gender roles are rendered explicit as part of the pedagogy of the teachers. In particular, students might make note of how the boys are instructed to hold, wait for, or lead their girl partners. Similarly, the ways in which the girls are taught to perform passive and submissive gendered identities should also be noted. To challenge such gendered stereotypes and render explicit these roles in their own experiences, students could spend a class session learning one or more of the ballroom dances depicted in the film yet perform these dances in same-sex rather than mixed-sex couples. Working through the dances in this manner would provide lived experiences for students on which to reflect about how gendered identity is constructed through such educational activities. With respect to religious identity as constructed in the film, students could carefully review the brief scene with Muhammad and Taha and consider their body language and tone. Students could reflect on the entire film to identify other instances in which religion is mentioned or implied (we have not found one) and discuss the deeper implications of such omission. Students might carefully investigate Muhammad and Taha’s argument about not being allowed to dance because it is “against” their religion. Which religion and interpretation of that religion might these boys follow? Students could critically examine how other religions and interpretations forbid, restrict, or encourage dancing. Students might also note how the other students in Muhammad and Taha’s class respond to them, especially when one of the boys helps two of his classmates refine a dance move they are unable to grasp. As a final response to this scene, students might identify other examples of visual culture and mass media that relate to issues and tensions around religious beliefs and cultural practices such as dance, music, visual art, and other forms of representation. Students could create a collaborative blog as a common site to post their findings, examples, and commentary about religious beliefs and how they have been used historically and globally to resist and negotiate practices of the dominant culture.

While we have yet to use it with our students, in the next section we offer the television show Aliens in America (Guarascio & Port, 2007) as another example of visual culture in the public
What Are You Watching?

We believe that engaged critical analysis of this show may help students gain a better understanding of the world around them, help them identify social, cultural, political, and other issues at school and in their community, and empower them to question and seek solutions to these potentially problematic situations. This approach would satisfy the view that pedagogy should be the space to deal with “views and problems that deeply concern students in their everyday lives” (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. 150) because it allows for and fosters commentary about and reflections of “people’s attitudes, beliefs, and values” (Duncum, 2001, p. 106). We share a brief description of Aliens in America and then speculate on how this television show might be employed with pre-service and veteran educators.

**Aliens in America**

*Aliens in America*, which first broadcast in October 2007 on the CW television network in the United States, is a sitcom that takes place in suburban Wisconsin. The plot centers on the lives of the Tolchuks, a White, middle-class, midwestern American family of four who welcome a foreign exchange student into their home. The dynamics of the show revolve around the introduction of a Pakistani Muslim exchange student, Raja, into the White, Judeo-Christian home, lives, and values of the Tolchuks. The family initially agrees to host an exchange student under the assumption that he will look like the blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian young man depicted on the program brochure. The show’s title, *Aliens in America*, refers at once to Justin, the White son of the host family, and Raja, the Pakistani exchange student, as they are treated, constructed, and consider themselves to be aliens both at school and at home. The boys are aliens in different ways—Justin just does not “fit in” with the in-crowd in school and Raja is literally a “foreign” student in a strange land—which, in turn, makes them both quite similar. Throughout the episodes of this series appear numerous scenes that unfold within traditional public school settings of classrooms, cafeterias, sporting events, and gymnasiums and therefore parallel the types of instructional spaces most pre-service teachers and practitioners recognize. We imagine engaging students in an analysis of the show to collectively reflect on how they interpret the ways in which identity is constructed in televised visual culture.

We have identified a scene in the pilot episode that offers rich possibilities for discussion and exploration. The scene takes place in a classroom at Medora High School where Justin, Raja, and Justin’s younger sister, Claire, are students. In this scene, Raja is in the hallway during what is perhaps his first day of school. In the crowded, locker-filled hallway students stare at Raja and make comments about his clothes. Most of his new American classmates that can be seen wear blue-jeans, t-shirts, and baseball caps. Raja, in contrast wears a *shalwar kameez*—loose fitting shirt and pants often worn by men and women in Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. In the background, comments from random students can be heard, such as, “Apu where is my slushee.” This comment, a racially charged reference to Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian convenience-store clerk in the popular cartoon television show *The Simpsons*, is directed at Raja, who is from Pakistan. The comment assumes no distinction or history between Pakistan and India and thereby generalizes Raja’s identity.

In the very next scene, Raja is seated at a desk surrounded by other students. The teacher introduces Raja to his new classmates and, picking up on the presence of an exchange student in her class as a “teachable moment,” announces,

Today I am going to put aside our lesson because we have a special guest. For one year we will be in the presence of a real-life Pakistani who practices Muslimism. That means we have the opportunity to learn about his culture and he about ours. So let’s begin a dialogue. Raja, you are so different from us. How does that feel?
No doubt well-meaning, the teacher constructs Raja as a cultural other while also making explicit her assumptions about him and misleading students with incorrect vocabulary. Raja responds, “I am not sure I understand?” As happens in many classrooms when students seem less than prepared to answer a teacher’s question, Raja’s teacher recommends he “think about it.” The teacher then turns to the class and asks, “How does everyone else feel about Raja and his differences?” At this point, the teacher has further constructed Raja as a visible “other” by objectifying him in front of the class and making him a token for “otherness.” One student replies, “Well, I guess I feel angry, because his people blew up the buildings in New York.” In a supportive tone, the teacher responds, “That’s good.”

In an attempt to simultaneously defend himself and correct the host of cultural and factual inaccuracies that have just been uttered, Raja counters, “But that is not true.” Quick to correct off-task and inappropriate behavior, the teacher warns, “O.K. Raja, in America you have to wait until you are called on, and I would appreciate a raised hand,” as she raises hers. The teacher then asks, “Who else is angry at Raja?” Most of the students raise their hands. When she describes Raja as “a real life Pakistani,” the teacher reduces him to an objectified “other” not unlike the European and American carnival and sideshow attractions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which Africans and Native Americans were displayed in cages for public viewing. In this short scene, numerous other inaccuracies and problematic situations are presented such as declaring that Raja practices “Muslimism” rather than Islam; prompting the students to express their opinion about “Raja’s differences;” and conflating Raja’s “Muslimism” and “differences” with the terrorist events in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. The teacher makes no attempt to redirect the student who assumed that all Muslims are terrorists. Further, the teacher makes explicit her sense of cultural difference when she mistakes Raja’s attempts to clarify incorrect information by speaking out of turn. In short, this scene perpetuates stereotypes about Muslims and cultural others, exaggerates cultural differences with inaccurate statements and terminology, and ignores Raja’s individual subjectivity. Upon returning home, Raja shares his experience with Justin and begins to pray in front of him. This is the first time Justin witnesses Raja praying, and in the voice over, comments, “This was the strangest thing I had ever seen in my house, and we had a clown die in our living room.” Here, Justin trivializes Raja’s faith, perhaps to mask his own discomfort, and identifies the experience as out of the ordinary behavior for his house.

Fully aware that the show is intended as a comedy, we have attempted to convey *Aliens in America* as a source of potential content for meaningful activities and learning experiences with pre-service teachers, graduate students, and veteran practitioners. Doing so exemplifies how shows “that force you to be intelligent” (Johnson, 2005, p. 64) require viewers to extend the content of the onscreen narratives to their own off-screen lives. For example, the scene in the hallway reflects a typical ritual that takes place daily in secondary schools. As the focus of a small group learning activity, students might construct a list of the various issues, tensions, and points of discussion depicted in this scene and then identify a similar event or experience in their own lives. Each group could share their list with the other groups followed by a discussion of the points most often identified by the class. Once identified, students could work to construct strategies to resist such situations from escalating should they face them in the future. Another response to this scene might require students to return to class with examples from visual culture and mass media that relate to the issues, tensions, and points of discussion they identified in their group lists. Students might bring to class magazine covers, URLs of YouTube videos, newspaper articles, song lyrics, or scenes from other television shows that work to perpetuate or resist these points of discussion and offer alternative narratives for consideration. These visual culture examples could be displayed in the classroom as the beginning of an ongoing project to
uncover, challenge, clarify, and correct stereotypes and other social, cultural, political, racial, ethnic, and religious misperceptions.

The scene in the classroom in which Raja is objectified by the teacher and his classmates is one that also plays out often in schools that fail to adequately acknowledge diversity within the student population. Raja is reduced to an example, a “real life Pakistani,” in which he becomes nothing more than the teacher’s own “show and tell” doll from a foreign land. In response to this scene, students could pay close attention to the body language of the teacher, her intonation, the way in which she leads the discussion through her choice of words, Raja’s physical and verbal responses, and the embodied responses of his classmates. Students could extrapolate her embodied pedagogy and world-view as they provide specific clues from the scene. Students might also point out how the students in the scene are cued to respond to the prompts by the teacher and then offer alternative statements the teacher could have made. Another activity would require students to interview each other as a means to develop a biographical narrative of a classmate. Students would later share their classmate’s biography with the rest of the class. First, the class might agree on 10 questions for the interview protocol, none of which would rely on responses that could be derived from physical appearance or attributes. Instead of objectifying their classmate and assigning an identity for them, the interview would generate content about how the students identify themselves and highlight who they are, what they believe, and how they see the world.

After watching the scene of Raja praying in the living room, participants could share with a partner and then with the larger group, an experience in their own lives when they were described, labeled, or treated as “the strangest thing” someone has seen in a domestic context. We have used this task with students to consider identity construction in educational settings and have found students who struggle most with this task—the ones who find it difficult to identify an example in which they felt like or were treated as different—are the White male students. Initiated by responses to a scene in a television show, such revelations about White privilege can become public pedagogy as they become the focus of critical reflections among all involved.

Conclusion

Films and television shows are not the only forms of visual culture that merit use in education or fit our conception of public pedagogy. Increasingly, televised public pedagogy as substantive forms of visual culture appear on the World Wide Web through video hosting sites such as YouTube and BlipTV. These and other sites offer continuous access to content that resists and reproduces identity stereotypes. Now, viewers easily become producers of such visual culture, post their productions online, and participate in a global discourse of identity representation. These resources are just as available to educators as they are to any other person able to login and view videos online. In this respect, the amount of visual culture as televised public pedagogy available for educational purposes seems endless.

This easily accessible supply of televised visual culture is often viewed without critical reflection outside of educational settings, save the comments offered on blogs or in response to videos posted on YouTube. For example, during the final weeks of the United States presidential campaign in 2008, segments of speeches and town hall meetings by then candidates Senator John McCain and Senator Barack Obama frequently filled the television screens. At one rally in Lakeville, Minnesota, on October 10, 2008, John McCain fielded questions directly from audience members who were also his supporters. One audience member, Gayle Quinnell, seemingly frustrated and afraid of the possibility of Senator Obama winning the election, searched for something disparaging to say and admitted she was scared of him. The woman, White and in her mid-seventies, confessed,
“I can’t trust Obama. I have read about him and he’s not, he’s not…he’s a, um, he’s an Arab” (Retrieved October 14, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7R-s-71csY). At that moment, Senator McCain takes the wireless microphone from the woman’s hands, shakes his head “no” and replies, “No Ma’am, no ma’am. He’s a decent, family man that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues. And that’s what this campaign is all about” (Retrieved October 14, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7R-s-71csY). Senator McCain’s response, greeted with a smattering of applause, seems to be an attempt to protect his candidacy for president rather than provide a critical and factual response. McCain’s response portrays “Arab” as the opposite of or incompatible with being a “decent, family man.” Such characterizations without further critical response from either campaign or the news media perpetuate public fear and misunderstandings through televised pedagogy in a forum and format available to a large numbers of viewers. Four days after multiple copies of the video appeared on YouTube, viewers had posted more than 1,000 comments. In the same time period, the major news networks in the United States also aired the clip, however, viewers saw no analysis or critique of the implications of McCain’s rationale that an Arab and a family man are incompatible identity constructions. While not from the mainstream news media, we found two critical engagements of Gayle Quinnell’s comment. One appeared on YouTube (YouTube, 2008) but was removed shortly thereafter, and the other between Jon Stewart and Aasif Mandvi on the satirical television program The Daily Show broadcast on October 14, 2008, on Comedy Central (Javerbaum & Stewart, 2008). The first video depicted a freelance journalist interviewing Quinell in a crowded school gymnasium in an attempt to probe her further about her political stance. The second video from The Daily Show presents Stewart and Mandvi deconstructing Quinell’s comment to McCain and his response to her. Both of these critical engagements sought to expose the racial, cultural, and religious bias against Barack Obama, yet at some level also overlooked how they may implicitly portray all McCain supporters, by association, as holding these same views. As an additional opportunity to examine identity construction in televised visual culture, students could compare the comments by Quinell about Obama at the McCain rally with the comments by students about Raja in the high school hallway. Are all of the rally attendees or students in the hallway in agreement with these comments and therefore “guilty by association”? Engaging in such analysis can work to resist perceived negative influences of popular media on students and simultaneously encourages the development of critical cultural and media literacy.

The examples we have described in this chapter are taken from our own experiences using visual culture in these contexts. We have intended to present examples that serve as intersections of formal institutions, classroom practice, and public pedagogy. Although not mentioned in conjunction with these examples, we have also used magazine advertisements, t-shirts, corporate logos, and other forms of visual culture to serve similar and other purposes. We recognize that some educators resist the use of visual culture in and as curriculum and public pedagogy. Our position is that to ignore these public cultural productions is to shut out and shut down meaningful opportunities to engage students with socially and culturally relevant issues, content, and ideas. In other words, to ignore visual culture as curriculum is to consciously avoid public pedagogy. Our intention is that the examples in this chapter begin to suggest how school curricula and the lives of students may be enriched through discussions, debates, and activities generated by critical engagement with visual culture in the public sphere.

References


