

An interdisciplinary project for the 12th grade elective “Film in History” grade 12, at the John F. Kennedy School based on the film “Comes a Bright Day”



School Profile and Learning Group , grade

The John F. Kennedy School, founded in 1960, is a bilingual, bicultural German-American tuition-free public school. It offers an integrated elementary and high school program that combines the strengths of both the German and American educational traditions. Acknowledging and appreciating cultural diversity, the Kennedy School serves German- and English-speaking students of many nations for the purpose of developing international understanding. The languages of instruction, German and English, are equally respected. Within this framework the educational program incorporates the essentials of the German and American school curricula. The school offers the high school diploma and German *Abitur*.

This learning group is made up of 12 students in the American high school diploma track. None of the students had participated in a film course nor had they considered the relevance of investigating film as a medium to convey historical awareness and as a historical document unto itself. While motivated, the skills and competencies of the individual students vary widely, something that is reflected in the level of their performance and the final product.

Didactic-methodical considerations

At the outset of the course, students were introduced to cinematic terminology and camera techniques and effects through an analysis of Fritz Lang's 1931 film "**M**". This and subsequent films were studied and placed within their historical context. The films and historical themes / epochs included the following: "**M**" (Weimar Republic/cinematography); "**Spartacus**" (Roman Republic, slavery in antiquity, Hollywood black lists in the Cold War era); "**Modern Times**" (modern man in the industrial era, the concept of alienation); "**The Great Dictator**" (National Socialism, developing a moral compass). It was at this point that we were invited to view "**Comes a Bright Day**."

The film and its subject matter did not immediately lend itself to a history course and the broader themes under investigation. Consequently, another approach had to be taken. The instructors and students began reinvestigating central themes dominant in the previously viewed films. From these deliberations three central issues surfaced: firstly, the question of being trapped in an existentially threatening and / or demeaning condition, situation, or social-economic relationship; secondly, the moral dilemma posed by this; and lastly, one's behavior under such circumstances.

For the students it became evident that the leading characters in "**Comes a Bright Day**" were "boxed-in," trapped in a jewelry store by two violent and unpredictable robbers. Their routines were disrupted and intruded upon when the robbers forced their way into their lives. The entire action is played out in an exclusive jeweler. In order to make the film relevant to our course, a second film was viewed: Jan Kadar's 1968 classic "**The Shop on Main Street**." As in the first film, this film takes place in a shop where the central character Tono is likewise "trapped." He is trapped in a button shop that he reluctantly takes over from its elderly Jewish owner; he is trapped in the sense that he too is a party - albeit unwittingly at first - to the process of Aryanization underway in a Slovak town during World War II; and although all he wants to do is live in harmony with himself, the elderly Jewess and the community around him, in a panic he finds himself trapped into committing an irrational action with far-reaching moral consequences. Although both films have very different themes, both address the central question as to how one behaves when intruders (the psychopathic hoisters in "**Comes a Bright Day**" and the Slovak Hlinka Guard with their fascist ideology in "**The Shop on Main Street**") burst into one's life, not only upsetting the daily routine but forcing one to look into oneself.

In order to compare the movies and relate how their themes and message are conveyed, the learning group identified the following areas for appraisal: symbols, cinematic effects, settings, and transitions. Students selected those areas of greatest interest to them. One student particularly skilled in IT volunteered to be responsible for finalizing the project on a DVD entitled: "Trapped." This approach takes into consideration the spectrum of interests and abilities of all participants. The project also ensured practicing and applying analytical and methodological competencies, critical discussion of media and value-based assessment.

Project structure

A web-site for the class and the project was created by Ms. Thompson (see **Worksheet 1**). The students were taught how to create their own site and enter their ideas and the results of their work. Clips from the films, etc., were selected, edited and assessed in terms of their relevance for the final DVD.

As stated earlier, the individual student's assignment and contribution were determined according to his/her interest and ability. A unit outline, including assignments, was developed by the instructors (see **Worksheet 2**). Since two movies were being compared, the project took more time than had been originally anticipated. On the basis of student responses, students collaboratively developed a working script for the multi-media presentation "Trapped." (**Worksheet 3**). The instructors acted as facilitators enabling the members of the class to be co-constructors of the learning sequence.

Materials and Student Results

Worksheet 1: History in Film Website: <http://historyincinema.weebly.com>

Worksheet 2: Berlinale Project Unit Outline and Assignments

Worksheet 3: Google document collaborative Script: "Trapped."

Final Reflections on the Project

Both students and instructors felt that the two films intended for young adults were in the final analysis uninspiring and the subject matter of little direct interest to them on a personal/emotional level and on an intellectual level. After previewing the alternative film, "Two Little Boys," the instructors felt that due to the subject matter and excessive and blatantly visual reliance on violence it would be inappropriate to take the class to the film. Consequently, we strove to create a project that would enable the students to practice and apply skills and knowledge previously gained to an analysis of a film not immediately addressing historical subject matter ("Comes a Beautiful Day") but in its message might well be compared to a second more course-related film ("The Shop on Main Street").

Initially it proved difficult to develop a concept as to what form the project should take. Nonetheless through brainstorming sessions with students we were able to develop an idea for a class project. This afforded us an opportunity to create a student centered project that addressed their interests and skill sets.

The students' initial response varied, ranging from enthusiasm to bewilderment as to what form a project might take. As our discussions progressed there emerged a clearer understanding of both films and the moral and personal dilemmas confronting the central characters. Overall the students have demonstrated new skill sets and an openness to view and compare films critically. They have also gained IT competencies through the use of the website class assignments and project coordination.