Diversity Curriculum Infusion within a Film and Video Directing course

Gregory Gutenko

University of Missouri at Kansas City

Diversity Curriculum Infusion within a Film and Video Directing course

Gregory Gutenko

University of Missouri at Kansas City

This paper reports on a "diversity curriculum infusion" course design process as it was applied within the long established Film/Video Directing class at the University of Missouri - Kansas City during the Spring 2006 semester. The Curriculum Diversity Infusion Institute "is designed to facilitate the goal of infusing diversity into UMKC's curriculum campus-wide. Faculty have the guidance and resources needed to successfully engage in diversity curriculum infusion."

> As we begin the 21st century, student populations are increasing in diversity; projections indicate that students from diverse backgrounds will constitute a significant composition of the student body in higher education in the decades to come. A curriculum that ignores and marginalizes the experiences of those who are an integral part of society not only shortchanges students but constitutes a disservice to the institution, the nation and the world. (Initiative 5)

This process is distinct from the more typical approach of offering courses with topics specifically about other cultures. An example of the latter would be Multicultural Aesthetics in Film and Video (as presented at the 2003 CCA Conference in Halifax). One drawback to this approach is that it self-identifies and segregates the diversity mission and so appeals to students likely to be already "on board" philosophically. The diffusion process instead avoids compartmentalizing cultural diversity (eg. the chapter on Women, Black history month) and instead blends consideration of diversity as homogeneously as possible. Diversity, then, is not distinctive in presentation or regard.

Some of the courses that were under diversity diffusion in 2006 presented major challenges, such as Applied chemistry, Physics, Italian Renaissance music, and others that would nominally appear to have scant cultural foundations (an objective "hard" science) or alternative cultural options.

The Directing class had a different challenge. Film and video productions are clearly aesthetically diverse and also have many cultural and national traditions. But traditions have much to do with story, theme, behavior, and other content variables. Traditions may have little to do with creative media aesthetics.

□□□

There is little difference between the before and after syllabi for the Directing course since it remains primarily a film and video <u>directing</u> class, and the key objectives remain the same: to develop students' directing talents, concepts, and skills in the pre-production and production stages of media creation. The <u>original</u> Directing class focused entirely on the aesthetic conventions of contemporary domestic film and television production, plus the organizational aspects of media production such as scheduling and budgeting. Student productions were evaluated on the application and sophistication of standard aesthetic techniques.

The <u>diffused</u> Directing class refocused on aesthetic foundations that could be applied to different cultural audiences. It is very unlikely that a media director, assigned to create a product for an audience of a cultural background different from their own, will neglect do the necessary research and design adaptations to insure that the <u>content</u> of the media product will address the audience "on their terms". Language use, existing knowledge and beliefs, realistic behaviors, learning styles, and portrayals are among

these considerations. All of these content issues concern what is in front of the camera. Media production aesthetics, on the other hand, concerns what is behind the camera: camera and lens placement and movement, composition, editing, etc. Aesthetic choices are what make one production's form different from another's, even when both are created from the same script, objectives, and original treatment. Certainly, the personal aesthetic choices made by all creative participants in a production result in unique outcomes in form, but these personal choices are informed, proscribed, and constrained by the cultural backgrounds of the individual media makers.

To diffuse diverse film form, films from other cultures were screened and discussed that presented aesthetic variables in conjunction with those same variables that were under analysis in the texts. A second text, *Through Navajo Eyes*, was added that laid the original foundation for cultural diversity in film aesthetics. The final production for the class required students to create two versions of a film, one for a Western audience and one for a non-Western audience. Students had to define the aesthetic variables for each audience and to explain their choices in adaptation:

Mission Statement: To create two distinct, culturally diverse and culturally
                                    relevant film/video aesthetic treatments of one concept or script.
Version A will be "sensible", "rational", and perfectly reasonable in time and appearance for a Western European (including USA) audience. **Version B** will be "sensible", "rational", and perfectly reasonable in time and appearance for a non-Western European audience. Keep in mind the differences between "natural aesthetics", "historical aesthetics" and "reflexive aesthetics". You are trying to work with **natural aesthetics** here. Natural aesthetics are human sensation based (eg. "natural" vision of IMAX), often subliminal (psychological and physiological, eg. Lüscher), are unconsciously or

experientially learned, and are biased by adaptation to the environment (natural and artificial, eg. horizonal vs. vertical orientations in space).

In contrast, historical aesthetics are culturally codified and consciously learned (eg. "what is beautiful"), formally and theoretically defined (eg. *mise-en-scene* and *montage*), and have the arbitrary, artificial constructive characteristics of language (eg. film "grammar").

Reflexive aesthetics arise out of the use of aesthetically biased technology (a Steadicam™ shot that begins in a descending helicopter and continues as a POV walking through a crowd; a cool transition effect in editing software). Reflexive aesthetics may or may not relate to or expand on natural or historical aesthetics.

Your Assignment: Storyboard, shoot, and edit **Version A** and a **Version B** short film/videos sharing the same communications objectives (creative intent). Each production should be 3 to 5 minutes long. You might (or might not) be using shared footage, actors, etc.

SUBMIT your **choice of cultural audience** for Version B.

SUBMIT the set of **aesthetic "rules"** you are using for Version B.

SUBMIT **storyboards** for each version.

SUBMIT the shows.

Work Flow:

(A) Develop a film/video concept, script, or experience that is complete and has a meaningful objective.

(B) Storyboard Version A. Remember that this should be rendered for a "normal" and conventional Western European overall aesthetic effect.

(C) Most challenging of all: Research and codify the aesthetic attributes that should be "normal" and conventional for another cultural audience. "Adopt" a cultural "client" and then consider and define:

Sensible and rational camera POV (omniscient or character, eye contact or eyeline)

Sensible and rational video proxemics (intimacy or deference)

Sensible and rational field of view (width of viewing angle and shape of screen).

Sensible and rational depth of field (deep or shallow DOF, near or flat perspective)

Sensible and rational rate of time/motion

Sensible and rational flow of time/motion (linear or cyclical) (continuity or ellipses)

Sensible and rational inclusion or exclusion of event significance (eg. walking)

Sensible and rational representation of human beings

Sensible and rational representation of nature

Sensible and rational representation of spirituality

Sensible and rational dream structure

Sensible and rational story structure

Sensible and rational sound (perspective, literal, intrapersonal, collision montage,
            video/sound montage, nonliteral, music)

(D) Storyboard Version B. Remember that this should be rendered for a "normal" and
       conventional other cultural overall aesthetic effect.

(E) Create Version A and Version B.

       A number of questions were grappled with over the semester:

• Have different cultures developed and so possess different sensory
responses and sense ratios? If so, how do they differ?

• In "selective seeing" are there shared cultural predispositions as well as
individual predispositions? How culturally representative would an
individual director's approach be?

• What aspects of film aesthetics can be considered culturally variable?

• Is it even possible to protect culturally diverse film aesthetics from being
overwritten by the dominant Western aesthetic models in wide distribution?

• How does one research and discover the film aesthetics of another culture
(aside from watching films produced within that culture that may be
aesthetically compromised)? How valid and relevant to film and video
would be the aesthetics found in painting, sculpture, and other pre-
technological media (which often exhibit obvious cultural diversity)? Can

such distinctions, which evolved early during relative cultural isolation, be "transcribed" to modern media?

A **major issue** dealt with in the class was whether or not there remains any authentic cultural diversity in film production aesthetics due to the dominance of conventional "Hollywood" and broadcast cultural imperialism worldwide. While topics, stories, and characters abound that are culturally diverse, the techniques of presenting these topics, stories, and characters remain homogenous.

Aside from practice, the media technology that has been developed also carries a cultural bias. Regarding the adoption of film and television technology by Third World nations, Katz (1977)has remarked "There is a sameness in the style of television and radio presentations which has come packaged with the technology, almost as if the microphones and cameras came wrapped together with instructions for presenting a news program or variety show". Inevitably, much of this is due to the conscious imitation of Western television models, and less directly to the dependence on Western training in production methods and organization (Katz and Wedell, 1977). But a most powerful determinant is the structuring of the medium itself. As Wober (1974) observed, different styles of communication are related to different modes of sensory elaboration in much the same way that McLuhan recognized that different styles of communication are related to different communication technologies.

The **main benefit** of infusing diversity was challenging the "conventional wisdom" and "industry standards" of Western European filmmaking aesthetics. It made the "western" film students even better at being "western". The challenge of including and defining aesthetic diversities made it essential that aesthetic conventions be deconstructed to

reveal both their arbitrary establishment and their physical and environmental core foundations. This is one of those topics in which you can understand your own reality better by examining the reality of others.

Exploring media production aesthetics that people are only unconsciously familiar with through life-long exposure is difficult enough. Considering aesthetics that are not already intuitively known is a huge leap outward. Establishing the concept of aesthetic diversity was much easier than establishing the mechanisms of aesthetics.

Students appreciated easily the significance and value of considering the widest possible range of aesthetic potentials, of going outside their own conventional creative rules. Actually applying diverse aesthetics proved difficult, and "taking the leap" in their film work was hesitant and subdued. So while students were sympathetic and appreciative, they were reluctant to create outside of their own cultural comfort zones. This is, perhaps, only respectful on their parts. They respect the fact that aesthetic diversity is real and not a passing stylistic fad to be employed casually.

As mentioned previously, the main benefit was challenging the "conventional wisdom" and "industry standards" of Western European filmmaking aesthetics. It made the "western" film students even better at being "western". Playing Devil's Advocate to one's own assumptions provided a powerful learning perspective. Students have also become more interested in watching films from other cultures since they now realize that aesthetic aspects they previously thought were odd or irrelevant, mere curiosities or eccentric style, they now recognize as being alternatively significant yet experientially relevant to all.

Notes on the Structural Constraints of Form

The formal rules of film and video aesthetic applications are often referred to as a language. It is the structure of spoken language that determines the realms of conceptualization that can be defined and conveyed. That is what determines a language's capacity, or lack of capacity, to distinguish and convey experience and value. The revolutionary power of electronic media, especially since the advent of the Internet, lies in their pervasive and instantaneous delivery of particularly structured images and sound. The frequently overlooked inadequacy of these media lies in their extremely limited capacity to define experiences and values outside their formal aesthetic conventions. It is this structural inadequacy that is likely to leave the complex realities of the world's diverse cultures and perspectives beyond the grasp of even a sympathetic transposition into the electronic media.

Perceiving the structural influences of culture on media form is not necessarily easy to do. Not only do the beliefs, logical forms, and myths of a culture constrain perception, but the autonomic processing of sensation is also an intervening variable. Anthropologists have suggested that different cultural world views are mediated by cognitive maps that have in turn been influenced by different sense perceptions of reality (Kearney, 1984, p. 45). The experience of what "time" itself is varies between cultures, depending on its perception as being linear, as in an industrially based society, or oscillating, as in an ecologically based society. Different concepts of time will affect the perception of its rate and depth, and the significance of the immediate moment as opposed to the past or future (Kearney, 1984, pp. 99-102). Cultural differences in the conception and perception of time may

account for formal diversities in the structure of calendars and the temporal pacing of media productions. The concepts of space and of human orientation within space are also culturally relative (Kearney, 1984, pp. 141-161). These differences in world views are rooted in the sensory processes and the percepts that are admitted to the mind.

Culture and cognition, then, are interdependent with the senses. As Wober observes, different styles of communication are related to different modes of sensory elaboration (1974, p. 127), in much the same way that McLuhan recognized that different styles of communication are related to different communication technologies. Members of different cultures have been defined by Wober as *sensotypes*, by which is meant a cultural group with a specific pattern of relative importance of the difference senses. The *sensotype* description defines both the balance and the acuity of the senses. Berry (1974, p. 130) has described relationships between visual discrimination and artistic design and execution in subsistence level cultures, and Doob (1974, p. 199) has found that there are both race and environmental variables that account for differences in the recall and visual persistence of eidetic images (after-images).

With fundamental perceptions of time, space, and images being often highly disparate between cultures, the ethnocentrism of film and television is noticeably narrow and one-dimensional. Not only can the conventions of film and television form--the coding of space and time--appear nonsensical or awkward to those unaware of the codes, the limited significations and rules of film and television form are unable to convey the perceptions of other *sensotypes*; not their images, dreams, or their privileged understandings of reality.

Potential Aesthetic Variables in Film and Video Form

The work of John Worth and Sol Adair, recounted in their book *Through Navajo Eyes*, revealed several formal dimensions that could be examined in the exploration of a culturally specific media aesthetic. Their 1966 communications project involved providing seven Pine Springs, Arizona, Navajos, who had either very limited or no contact with film or television, with film equipment and only operational training. Worth and Adair withheld all indications or guidance as to how films should be shot or edited. Except through implications inherent in the simple fact that a camera had a variety of lenses, or that an editing bench could cut film apart and reassemble it in a new order or length, there were no models for the Navajos to refer to in creating their cinematic structure. Although there were some similarities between the films produced by the Navajos and novice counterparts in the Western film schools in the United States which Worth and Adair used for comparisons, there were several specific formal features in both the Navajo's films and in their logic of filming that revealed a uniquely Navajo visual perception and cognition of reality.

Nature or Nurture? Hardware or Software?

Evidence of the adaptability and elasticity of the brain continues to accumulate. Recent brain scanning studies of London taxi drivers have found that those areas of drivers' brains that process spatial modeling, to accommodate "the knowledge" of London's complex labyrinth of streets, is significantly more extensive than is typical. The same has been found of professional musicians and the areas of the brain associated with musical perception and performance.

It is often observed that students learning media production first need to be taught how to listen to sound and how to see film and video images.

Their sensory apparatuses do not need to change, but how their brains attend to sensation does. Children less than a year old will respond to any speech sound from any language; once they begin learning and using their "own" language, they no longer can discern the more unfamiliar vocalizations. Their ears do not change, their brains do.

If the brain is selective of sensation, attuned to what is found to be relevant to environmental fit and oblivious to what is not, and the brain can change its patterns of selectivity and development, our definitions of any particular *sensotype* or intracultural aesthetic will be unstable. There may be no certainty of an inheritable *sensotype*. The brain may be hardwired regarding which stimuli are processed where, but it is not hardwired as to how sensations are selectively processed to manifest sensibility and the interpreted experience of reality. Aesthetics is essentially software.

Global and Transcultural?

When Marshall McLuhan broached the consideration that "the medium is the message" media makers were challenged to recognize that the modality and form of mediated communication could be as significant as the content in creating or limiting meaning. The differing forms of media are cognitively specialized. Media translate experience and information, altering their reception through the use of distinctive sensory modes.

While McLuhan often discussed different cultures' uses and responses to various media, especially when the media were newly encountered, he saw the effects of media mediation as being transcultural, and fostering a "global village" of electronically networked human pseudo-consciousness. While McLuhan's arguments were often misunderstood to be favorably inclined towards an inevitable evolution of mediated human communication,

he was in truth disquieted at these prospects. The global village (not a global metropolis or global cosmopolis) would have the parochial aesthetics of a small town!

Of greater influence than a misread McLuhan on the acceptance of a transcultural media aesthetic has been the Hollywood film and television industry and its globally nurtured "mass" audience. Western media are highly stylized and culturally specific products. Conventional structural approaches to these media are ethnocentrically assumed to be "correct", because dominant Western European social groups have been the principal developers and users of these technologies. The design and documentation of mass media tools and devices imply how they are expected to be used, and how the products of these tools are to be visualized and assembled.

Existing production curricula in secondary and post-secondary institutions in the United States foster and maintain a culturally biased approach to media, either by directing students into an unquestioning imitation of TV program formats (Robinson, 1985), or by consciously encouraging conformity to industry practises with ultimate career assimilation in mind (Hamilton, 1984). Even in elementary classrooms, when student creativity and imagination is encouraged through play and experimentation with videotaping, the media acculturalization process is at work, as children learn the "proper" way to bound their reality within an image frame (Kaplan, 1986). By the time students reach the middle school levels, they have learned compliance with the shape of the media around them (Greene, 1984). In non-production courses that focus on critical and analytical skills, film and television are analyzed principally on the basis of messages, persuasive intent and methods, psychological implications, and veracity (Lieberman, 1980).

And so the **structural** bias and ethnocentrism of media remain largely unrecognized. A globally dispersed common media aesthetic is the norm; "the medium is the message."

Conclusion

In light of the pervasive conventions of Westernized media aesthetics, is there a practical need or justification for considering culturally specific alternatives? Is this an "academic" issue? It can be argued that all minority cultures are by necessity bi-cultural, and therefore will be adept at understanding the media forms of the dominant culture. Even if an intraculturally specific media aesthetic is identified for a target audience, is that audience living and sensing within the environment that "naturalized" the aesthetic, or has it adapted its senses and cognitions and so is functioning effectively within a Westernized environment?

Is adaptation of production design as significant as adaptation of content and representation in instructional design?   Or is there but one "best" universal visual and temporal aesthetic for electronic media, the media of the global village?

 McLuhan saw the disintegration of cultural and cognitive diversity by media usage as an inevitable consequence of technological progress. It was his hope, however, that awareness of media's subterranean effects on human consciousness would reveal choices to us that we didn't know were there. The practical significance of cultural aesthetics in media production may be questionable, but it can be of value to know that there are choices.

A Useful Bibliography

Bazin, A. (1967). <u>What Is Cinema?</u> Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Berry, J. W. (1974). Ecological and Cultural Factors in Spatial Perceptual Development. In J. W. Berry & P. R. Dasen (Ed.), <u>Culture and Cognition: Readings in Cross-Cultural Psychology</u> (pp.129-140). London: Methuen.

Bobker, L. R. (1969). <u>Elements of Film</u>. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Bowker, H. (October 26, 1997). Artists making a 'Sensation' in London. Retrieved May 18, 2005. www.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/26/brit.shock.art/

Callenbach, E. (1961). Optometrical criticism. <u>Film Quarterly</u>, <u>16</u>(4). p. 25.

Costella, J. (20 November 1995) "A Beginner's Guide to the Human Field of View" Retrieved from http://www.ph.unimelb.edu.au/»jpc/papers/gaa.ps

Doob, L. W. (1974). Images Among the Ibo. In J. W. Berry & P. R. Dasen (Ed.), <u>Culture and Cognition: Readings in Cross-Cultural Psychology</u> (pp.197-204). London: Methuen.

Eisenstein, S. (1949). <u>Film Form</u>. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Greene, R. V. (1984, April). Video Pulls 'Em In at Pacoima High. <u>EITV</u>, <u>16</u>, pp. 54-58.

Guilmet, G. M. (1981, Summer). Oral-Linguistic and Non-Oral Visual Styles of Attending: Navajo and Caucasian Children Compared. <u>Human Organization</u>, <u>40</u>(2), pp.149-168.

Gutenko, G. (1997, Winter). Evaluating Shakycam: Possible Criteria. <u>Feedback</u>, 38 (1). pp. 28-29.

Hamilton, D. (1984, October). TV Curriculum at Trenton High. <u>EITV</u>, <u>16</u>, pp. 67-71.

The Institute of American Indian Art: Politics and Real Estate. (1981, December). <u>ArtNews</u>, <u>80</u>.

Kaplan, D. (1986, January). Making a Scene With Video. Instructor, 95, pp. 56-58.

Katz, E. (1977). Can Authentic Cultures Survive New Media? Journal of Communication, 27(2).

Katz, E. & Wedell, G. (1977). Broadcasting in the Third World. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Kearney, M. (1984). World View. Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp.

Lieberman, D. (1980, September). A New High School Curriculum: Critical Television Viewing Skills. NASSP Bulletin, 64(437), pp. 53-59.

McLuhan, M. (2001). Understanding Media. (1st MIT ed.) MIT Press.

The American Federation of Arts. (1976). The Medium Viewed: The American Avant-Garde Film. A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema.

Reyhner, J. A. (1981, November). Indian Teachers as Cultural Translators. Journal of American Indian Education, 21(1), pp.20-28.

Robinson, M. (1985, June). "And Now the News" at West Orange High. EITV, 17, pp. 47-48.

Ross, A. C. (1982, May). Brain Hemispheric Functions and the Native American. Journal of American Indian Education, 21(3), pp. 2-5.

Tafoya, T. (1982, February). Coyote's Eyes: Native Cognition Styles. Journal of American Indian Education, 21(2), pp.27-28.

Wober, M. (1974). Sensotypes. In J. W. Berry & P. R. Dasen (Ed.), Culture and Cognition: Readings in Cross-Cultural Psychology (pp. 119-128). London: Methuen.

Worth, S. and Adair, J. (1972). Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration In Film Communication and Anthropology. Indiana: Indiana University Press.