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6. How should the political content of cinema and other media or issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc., be presented in the classroom? Are there certain hazards in tackling such matters?

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Miller: Great question for those of us who teach to the many US residents whose lives are implicated directly in the military-industrial complex (poor people whose families survive under this particular form of deadly welfarism). They are understandably caught up in both nationalistic and economic representations of the ideology of US imperialism/militarism—and have many important stories to share about it that can educate professors. The dialogue can be very fruitful, but it must always work with the students' own views as much as the professors'.

Nichols: These questions assume or appear to assume fear or rejection: can we, should we dare to be political? Isn't that bad or risky? Apoliticism is a political position; quietism is not an escape; ideology has no outside. It is more a question of what kind of politics and whether it is conscious or unconscious rather than should we or shouldn't we.

Field: The hazards of ignoring political content and issues of race, class, gender and sexuality far outweigh the potential hazards of addressing them. I find it far more productive to think about how content and context function to create meaning rather than imposing artificial parameters by which we approach media. However, classrooms should be spaces that are open to respectful disagreement. Often there is a presumed collective opinion that is asserted by either the professor or a student without being challenged and this can do as much damage to open critical inquiry as the negligence of such issues.

Tryon: This is an interesting challenge for me, especially in my freshman composition classes where I often invite students to look at "political" texts in order to gain a stronger understanding of argument and rhetoric. I don't believe that students should be treated as captive audiences, forced under the authority of the red pen to listen passively as I "educate" them about political beliefs. Not only would it be an inappropriate use of my position as an instructor, but it would also likely have the effect of hardening students against those very political beliefs. Instead, I typically try to play the role of "classroom contrarian" (Bérubé's term) in order to challenge my students to think critically about whatever topic we may be addressing, an approach that often means that I end up voicing positions I disagree with in order to liven class discussion.¹

In film classes, I'm usually most successful in addressing the political content of film and other media when I present that content in the service of interpretation. In courses on film history and film aesthetics, it is virtually impossible to ignore the influence of "political" filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein on film aesthetics. Quite

often, however, I use ostensibly political films to illustrate that a movie's politics is not always transparent. For example, when teaching Errol Morris's [The Thin Blue Line](#), I invariably challenge students to identify an overt position on the death penalty. While the film clearly offers an unassailable argument that Randall Dale Adams was not guilty of the murder for which he was convicted, the film's overt position on the death penalty is less clear. The question forces students back into the text, to seek out evidence in order to support their interpretation.

In other contexts, I've taught or discussed Michael Moore's [Roger and Me](#) and [Fahrenheit 9/11](#), not necessarily because I share Moore's politics but because his documentaries raise important questions about documentary form. Once students begin to accept some of Moore's arguments, I introduce the widely discussed controversies over Moore's manipulated chronologies in [Roger and Me](#), I then ask them whether their views of his larger arguments change. In both cases, the goal is to sharpen textual analysis, to focus student arguments around issues of documentary ethics and audience response to "political" films.

Notes:

1 Bérubé, Michael. What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts? Classroom Politics and "Bias" in [Higher Education](#). New York: Norton, 2006. 12.

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