Approaching an expansion of teaching American studies through popular culture texts

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ABSTRACT: The present study aims to consider an expanded approach to teaching American Studies at the Universidad de Alcalá, achieved by using popular culture texts to assist the comprehension and analysis of foreign sociocultural contexts. Given the pervasiveness of American products framed by an increased access provided by digital globalization, it would seem particularly useful to approach such texts from a critical academic perspective. Stemming from the answers a diverse range of students gave—and considering their limitations—the study delves into how popular culture informs and shapes the students' disposition toward learning, consequently outlining how a course in American Studies could be developed in order to exploit such texts and effectively stimulate a more diverse understanding of the American context(s).
Key words: American Studies, US popular culture, cinema, TV series, cultural studies

Acercamientos a una expansión de la enseñanza en Estudios Norteamericanos a través de la cultura popular

RESUMEN: El presente estudio tiene por objeto la expansión de la enseñanza de Estudios Norteamericanos en la Universidad de Alcalá a través de la implementación de textos de cultura popular para apoyar el proceso de comprensión y análisis de contextos socioculturales extranjeros. Considerando la penetración de productos estadounidenses en el marco de una mayor accesibilidad dada por la globalización digital, resulta particularmente útil el acercamiento a tales textos desde una perspectiva académica y crítica. Derivado de las respuestas proporcionadas por un grupo diverso de estudiantes, y teniendo en cuenta sus limitaciones, el estudio enfoca cómo la cultura popular informa y configura la disposición de los estudiantes hacia el aprendizaje, permitiendo plantear cómo se podría desarrollar una asignatura en Estudios Norteamericanos con el fin de explotar tales textos y estimular eficazmente un conocimiento más diverso de los contextos estadounidenses.
Palabras clave: Estudios Norteamericanos, cultura popular estadounidense, cine, series TV, estudios culturales

1. Introduction

The Universidad de Alcalá (Madrid, Spain) has a Modern Philology department where English Philology courses are taught, a research centre dedicated to American Studies (Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Estudios Norteamericanos Benjamin Franklin), and a research group dedicated to American interdisciplinary cultural studies (AMICUSS). Held by Dr Julio Cañero from 2017 through 2020, the course "The US through its cinema" (open to BA students in the area of English Philology) was aimed at guiding students through a selection of films to better understand cultural, historical, and political aspects related to the American context. The master's degree in North American Studies, offered on an annual basis by the *Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Estudios Norteamericanos Benjamin Franklin* (in collaboration with the Universidad Complutense de Madrid), also includes a compulsory course on American Visual Cultures, in which the students engage in the analysis of a few selected films relevant to grasp the importance of visual representations in the construction of American identity. Despite the existence of these two courses, a specific syllabus on critical analysis of popular culture is lacking. This study aims to examine the students' perceptions on the matter, testing the ground to possibly structure the course on American culture more effectively, widening the range of texts, topics, and representations employed in the learning process. Teaching through popular culture is not a matter of "radical pedagogy", as David Buckingham (1998) stressed over three decades ago, delving into the issues related to educative innovation and the use of popular culture texts in education. Nonetheless, the debate and the conflicts about employing popular culture as a teaching tool are still present despite its increased acceptance in higher education contexts (Peacock et al., 2016).

1.1. Multimedia texts and foreign culture learning

When considering the teaching of a foreign language and consequent foreign culture in higher education, it is evident that to develop their command the students benefit from the exposure to language beyond the mere "transactional-functional orientation" of mostly grammar-based syllabi (Pachler, 2000, p. 26). As far as language learning is concerned, cinema has long been recognized as a "potential goldmine" for advanced-level foreign language education (Kaiser & Shibahara, 2014). In general, it has been found that students often enjoy learning a language through videos (Canning-Wilson, 2000), which help them develop a more rounded insight into target cultures. Nonetheless, it has been underexploited in higher education despite its possibilities to help students improve their proficiency in the context of second language learning, to an extent relegated to the role of extra tool to stimulate interest in the class (Pegrum et al., 2005).

The visual context of an utterance delivered in a film is fundamental to grasp its meaning (Kaiser & Shibahara, 2014) in the context of language learning. The vision of undubbed films positions the students within the representation of a specific cultural context, in which they have the possibility of "seeing language-in-use" as meaning-making and moods are conveyed through a variety of visual cues besides verbal structures (Harmer, 2001, p. 282). Furthermore, cinema proves a useful tool to approach specific learning areas that might be harder to tackle for students, such as specialised domains (Bonsignori, 2018) and English

variants, dialects, and different local slangs. For example, the use of film has been proven fruitful to help students get acquainted with legal language (Vyushkina, 2016), making the learning process of complex uses more approachable (Kahn, 2015; Grubba, 2020).

Furthermore, the use of popular media—such as films—as a pedagogical practice provides "an academic environment in which collective experiences of learning can be shared" (Grubba, 2020, p. 89), and a critical analysis of the representations at hand can be stimulated in engaging ways. Given that in our contemporary reality the "symbolic, commodity, and ideological signification system of popular culture" (Luke, 1997, p. 45) is pervasive, engaging with multimedia texts becomes fundamental for teachers, who can both teach about popular culture media and teach using them. Through the analysis of multimedia texts, the American Studies course can become a means to help students develop critical media literacy, which is fundamental to understand the messages conveyed by texts they are exposed to every day. Widening the range of popular culture texts used in class reveals necessary to provide the students with timely learning content as well, to make education "relevant to the socio-cultural, economic, political, global, and environmental challenges of the contemporary era" (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 13). At the same time, an in-depth critical approach is necessary to guide the students through the multimedia text and appreciate further aspects related to history and culture, as the encounter with such texts is not sufficient per se.

It is worth noting that within the Spanish education environment, film has been used as support tool to teach foreign cultures and assist English language learning, especially at primary school level. As Ossenbach and Groves observed (2013), early attempts to integrate audiovisual texts in primary school education emerged during late Francoism and Transition years (1958-1982), pushed by a new technocratic interest as such media became more popular and accessible (Ossenbach & Groves, 2013). Through the years, scholars based in Spain have contributed to assess the issues related to using film in the classroom and propose critical approaches (Herrero Figueroa, 1996; Ambrós & Greu, 2007; Adame Tomás, 2009; Garipova, 2014), a focus that, more recently, has yielded local studies often developed as thesis works (López, 2014; Segarra, 2015; Ortiz Castillo, 2017).

1.2. Popular culture as a teaching tool

The task of structuring a course in the field of Cultural Studies evidences the necessity to engage fruitfully with contemporary media and popular culture. Representations of political conjunctures, shifts in the perception of sociocultural issues, and contemporary anxieties have been channelled through popular culture texts in timely manners, making the comprehension of how political and sociocultural contexts influence such texts fundamental. At the same time, it is relevant to stress how popular culture representations and narratives—given their accessibility and ubiquity in our everyday life—shape perceptions, stances, and understanding of those same conjunctures.

The study of popular culture texts seems even more fundamental when approaching the study of American culture: as Browne has underlined, popular culture "is linked fundamentally to America and people's dreams and realities" (2005, p. 19). Given the pervasiveness and dominance of the United States in the global cultural scenario—especially since the 20th century and the development of mass media and multimedia texts—the study of American popular culture embodies the "study of the American dream and the American nightmare,

the American way of life and those who have achieved it" (ibid. p. 21), as well as the study of how its representations have penetrated and shaped foreign cultures. American society has made popular culture "a cornerstone of cultural identity," providing a creative source of connections among "disconnected citizenry" (White & Walker, 2007, p. 4). Popular culture has also enabled subordinated groups to produce alternative representations and subversions of the dominant culture, proposing diverse perspectives on the multifaceted reality of American society.

Besides film and TV series, other types of multimodal texts can be implemented. Even though they have progressively been recognized and studied in academic contexts, comics and video games, and animated films (Hofmann, 2018) remain media often overlooked when teaching and analysing sociocultural contexts. A critical approach to popular culture texts is necessary to give students the tools to understand the importance of diversity and their representation through popular media (White & Walker, 2007, pp. 33-38). Furthermore, a variety of theoretical frameworks can be applied and taught through popular culture texts (Trier, 2007), and students can be pushed towards "a politicized and theoretical understanding" of the texts, how they are constructed and positioned within a cultural context (Luke, 1993, p. 54).

As other scholars have argued (see, for example, Weinstock, 2021a; Weinstock, 2021b), it is also fundamental to assess the students' perception that a critical analysis of popular culture texts might "spoil" the intrinsic entertainment they first approached the texts for. In the context of higher education, it reveals necessary to transform popular culture texts into a tool to critically engage with social issues, national narratives, ethnic conflicts, instead of being limited to passive consumption and mere entertainment, as students might anticipate approaching the course (Bertonneau, 2010). On the one hand, the students are most likely familiar with the popular culture texts employed as it is a kind of text that forms part of the cultural reality they are used to share on a daily basis. The students are used to these media and their representational devices, and they are aware of a self-reflective dimension inherent to their engagement with popular culture (Pierson-Smith et al., 2014, p. 258). On the other hand, it is fundamental to convey the importance of using the texts to analyse their "underlying values, attitudes, and beliefs, rather than simply learning about cultural products" (Dema & Moeller, 2012, p. 79) and stimulate students to critically approach such texts, thinking beyond their usual popular cultural practices strictly related to entertainment (Pierson-Smith et al., 2014). It is thus necessary to articulate a course bringing together the expertise of the teacher—who provides the critical tools to approach multimedia texts at an academic level—and that of students themselves, as they hold knowledge of youth culture, as well as personal interest in popular culture texts and practices (Callahan & Low, 2004).

2. Method

2.1 Context and participants

The questionnaire was administered to a selected range of students to investigate their perceptions on the topic, also based on their previous experiences with the vision and analysis of films in class. Given the specific aims of the study, the chief concern was to define a group in which the intersection between American Studies, interest in popular culture

texts, and familiarity with the English language could be covered as much as possible. The group included students enrolled in BA courses in the area of English Philology (specifically enrolled in the courses of *English Studies* and *Modern Languages and Translation*), as well as graduate and doctoral students in American Studies at the *Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Estudios Norteamericanos Benjamin Franklin*. The total of participants was 99, providing semi-anonymous replies for privacy reasons (the students were requested to insert an email address, most of which eventually corresponded to their institutional account). The fact that the selected group does not include any student enrolled in specific cinema and audiovisual media programmes was key to avoid biased answers in terms of acquired expertise on the topics the questionnaire revolves around. For this reason, students were asked to define their academic experience in order to assess their prior participation in specific programmes and thus be excluded from the results.

2.2. Questionnaire design

The aim of the study was to assess the students' interest in a possible expanded course that would help them discover and delve into different aspects of the American culture through the analysis of popular culture texts of different kinds. Considering the group based in the Universidad de Alcalá—and thus composed eminently by non-native English speakers—it was necessary to assess their perception of the linguistic usefulness of watching undubbed American films in class. The group presented heterogeneous levels of fluency, starting from the B1 level (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[1]) required for all students during their undergraduate career, up to the C1 and C2 levels requested respectively to prospective students enrolling in the North American Studies master's degree and PhD program at the *Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Estudios Norteamericanos Benjamin Franklin*. It is also worth acknowledging that—given their average age range and digital media proficiency—even the less research-experienced and language-proficient students are most likely regular users of streaming platforms that provide the possibility to watch films and TV series subtitled instead of dubbed. Such combination captioned audiovisual material has proven particularly useful to improve the development of students' vocabulary (Bird & Wilson, 2002; Montero Perez et al., 2014). It was essential to assess the students' perception of the correlation between popular culture texts and the linguistic dimension, to ascertain if the vision of undubbed films actually felt fruitful for them to approach specialised domain language and different dialects/slangs they could experience through the text. The questionnaire is composed of 13 questions touching upon different and yet interconnected topics related to the perceived fruitfulness of learning about culture through the vision and analysis of film and other popular culture texts.

2.3. Limitations of the study

It is clear that the group of respondents chosen for the administration of the questionnaire can only provide an outline of the possible perceptions of the students on the topic

1 For more details on CEFR levels, see the official page at https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages.

at hand. The study serves as an orientation tool for the shaping of a prospective course on American popular culture, the pedagogic efficacy of which would need to be then assessed through different sets of questions both before and after the realization of the course itself. Direct quotations are taken from the students' replies.

2.4. Results

2.3.1. Question 1

The introductory question was meant to establish the topic, as well as generally assess the students' experience with the use of film in a higher education context. Participants were given the possibility to either list a few titles they remembered or provide some context to their answer.

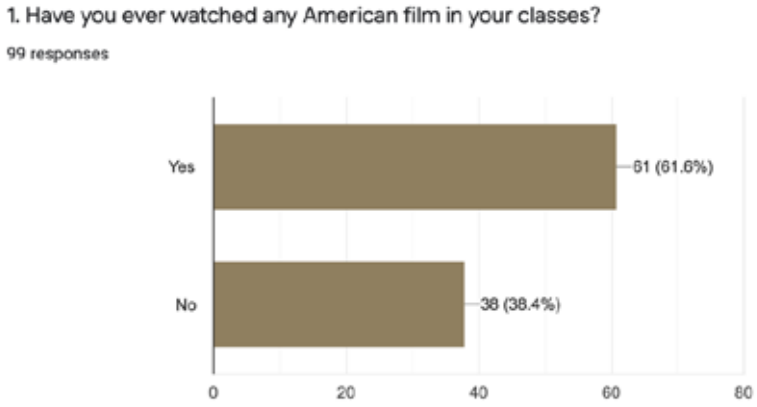

Figure 1. Question 1

The majority of students answered affirmatively to this question, as could be expected. Some specified the kind of classes where they happened to watch such films: for example, Subject 46 said that they watched them "not specifically in classes about American culture. I had film course that included American films among many others with no special attention to the culture." The films that were mentioned most times were *Birth of a Nation* (8), *Gone with the Wind* (8), Disney's *The Incredibles* (7), *Forrest Gump* (5), and *The Godfather* (5).

2.3.2. Question 2

The second question was open and delved further into the films the participants watched and found relevant and "most interesting and useful to learn things about American culture [that they] didn't know before watching [them]." 43 respondents commented on films that helped to have a better insight on themes related to slavery, racism, the history of the United States, and different types of discrimination (thanks to films such as *Gran Torino*, *Hidden*

Figures, *12 Years a Slave*, *The Hate U Give*, *Us*), as well as wars the United States were involved in (in particular, the Vietnam War through *Apocalypse Now* and WW2 through *Pearl Harbor*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Hacksaw Ridge*).

2.3.3. Question 3, 4, 5, and 6

The following questions focused on the possible use and efficacy of watching undubbed American films to improve different aspects of one's language proficiency.

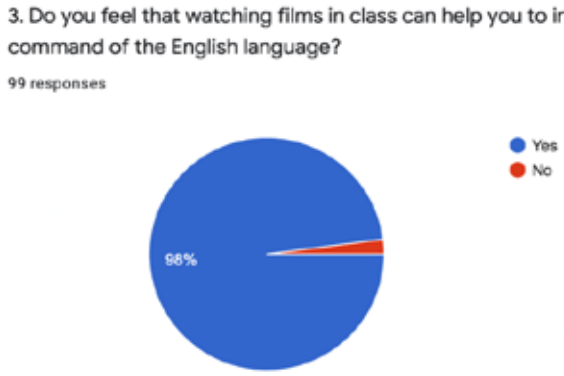

Figure 2. Question 3

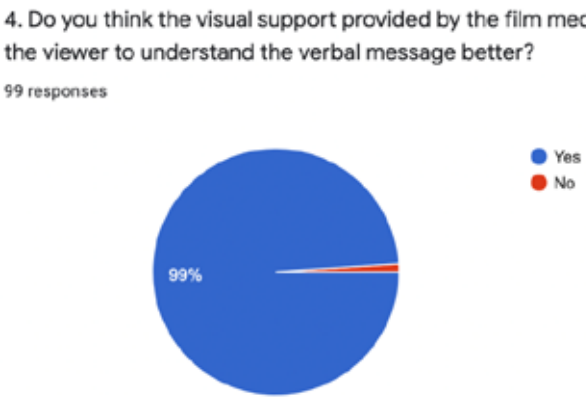

Figure 3. Question 4

Evidently, the stark majority of participants finds the visual support provided by films a useful help to understand utterances better, as well as a way to improve their linguistic skills in a passive yet immersive way. Only Subject 84 answered negatively to question 4 and avoided answering any open question except for question 8b (see below), to which they gave a rather confused, barely intelligible answer.

Figure 4. Question 5

Concerning specialised language, most students still find films useful to experience and understand better the use of terminology and context in which such types of communication occur. Participants could indicate specific films and/or leave a comment on the topic. Subject 4 commented that regardless of the specific film, "with the image, the language becomes clearer." In contrast, Subject 29 indicated that—rather than films—TV series helped them "acquiring political and legal vocabulary." Likewise, Subjects 56, 78, 88, and 91 underlined that TV series were more helpful in this regard.

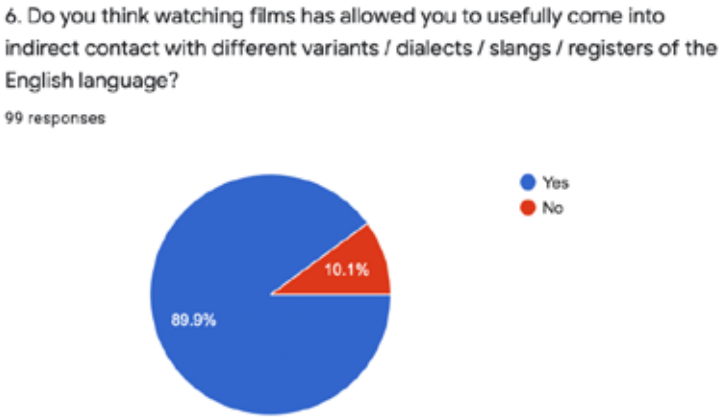

Figure 5. Question 6

Most participants also found films useful to improve their knowledge and comprehension of variants, dialects, slangs, or registers distinctive of the American English language. In this case, they could also indicate specific films and/or leave a comment. This question raised a more diverse listing of genres, as the students' choices shifted from political and historical

films to comedies (e.g. *The Hangover*), musicals (e.g. *Grease*), more peculiar biographical portrayals (e.g. *Skin*), science fiction (e.g. *Men in Black*), African American cinema (e.g. *Do the Right Thing*). Some answers were more specific on the genre or theme, rather than citing specific films: "movies from the South" (according to Subject 44), "western films above all" (Subject 28), "any teen comedy" (Subject 74)—and, likewise, "films set in high school" (Subject 98) and "films about the youth" (Subject 99). Once again, some respondents underlined the fact that TV series were also—or more—helpful to improve their linguistic skills.

2.3.4. Question 7, 8, 9, and 10

The following four questions directed the focus on popular culture texts besides film.

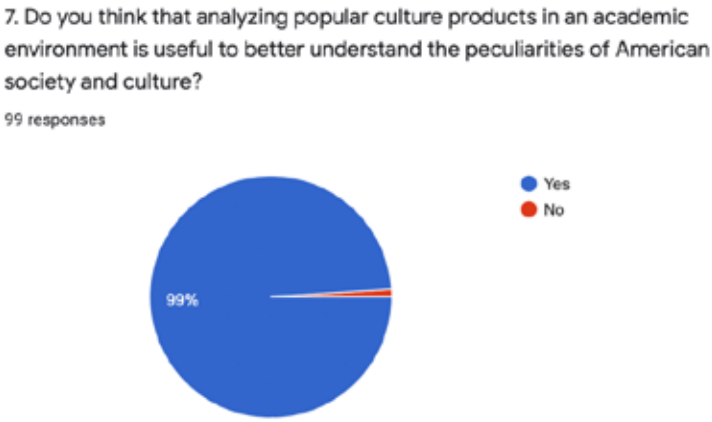

Figure 6. Question 7

The totality of respondents affirmed the usefulness of introducing popular culture texts in the study of American society and culture(s). Only Subject 73 answered negatively, falling as well among those who thought that "critically analysing popular culture products for academic purposes somehow spoils the enjoyment they give them" (see question 9). The participant also did not mention any film or other text throughout the questionnaire and avoided answering any open question except for question 8b, to which they explained that they find the study of popular culture texts more challenging than literature "bc [sic] it is culture."

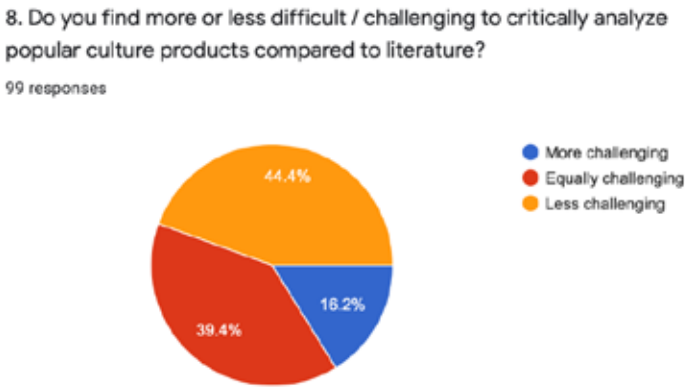

Figure 7. Question 8

As anticipated above, the following question delved into the perceived challenge posed by the critical study of popular culture texts. In this case, respondents were invited to justify their answer explaining why they would find the analysis of popular culture products more, equally, or less challenging than the study of American literature. Their open answers in many cases overlapped and brought up identical or similar arguments, which could be easily detected and summarized.

More challenging: in this case, most answers focused on the students' perception that to analyse popular culture text, a deeper knowledge of the cultural background in which the text is situated is needed. The general take on this topic seems to point at the diverse factors that influence popular culture production and the continuous changes it undergoes. Also, the awareness that they are not used to analysing this kind of texts seems to represent a challenge. Interestingly, Subject 31 stressed that in popular culture products "messages tend to not be as hidden as in literature, but I am so used to them that is difficult to see them more than at face value," evidencing the underlying obstacle represented by the underestimation and/or excessive familiarity with relation to the texts. The multimodality and, in particular, the presence of visual elements in popular culture texts raise preoccupation as well since their critical analysis implies "taking into account" factors other than text (Subject 30) such as "visuals and scenery" (Subject 49).

Equally challenging: many of the articulated answers (39) echo to some extent the main arguments offered by the respondents who picked the above option, in this case stressing the fact that both literature and popular culture are a "product of society" (Subject 16)—thus, both require understanding "the sociocultural, political and economic aspects of that era" (Subject 33). The participants also generally highlight the fact that in both cases, "the analysis should be exhaustive" (Subject 28), requiring "academic research and contemplation to create an informed academic argument" (Subject 44), as well as posing "different kinds of challenges" (Subject 99). The equal need to carry out informed analyses, thorough research work, and framework building to tackle both literature and popular culture was definitely

the leading argument, often expressed very explicitly (e.g. Subjects 46, 58, 66, 77). Interestingly—and accurately, especially if considering contemporary literature—Subject 34 noted that "in literature we constantly also find popular culture."

Less challenging: a minority of the respondents (6) seemed to recur to a common conception of popular culture as the embodiment of "lower" forms of culture, whose enjoyment does not "require higher cultural level" (Subject 36), whereas literature "was made at first for people of culture, of money, it requires thinking", and thus one does not "need to be very analytical to understand" popular culture (Subject 71). Subject 68 declared that popular culture texts "are not as deep as literature goes" for the mere fact that they embody "something that we all know because it has travel around the world and has been installed in our own culture." The majority of participants who picked this option, though, explicitly stressed the perception that the visual medium makes critical analysis more accessible (e.g. Subjects 1, 12, 14, 21, 29, 72), some mistakenly overlapping visual representation with "accurate context" reproduction (Subject 91). These respondents also highlighted that they feel "more connected" to popular culture (in particular Subjects 6, 8, 15, 63, 83, 86, 92), and in general, they acknowledged that popular culture texts are more accessible, engaging, stimulating, "fun" (Subject 59), contemporary, timely, and, above all, familiar to them.

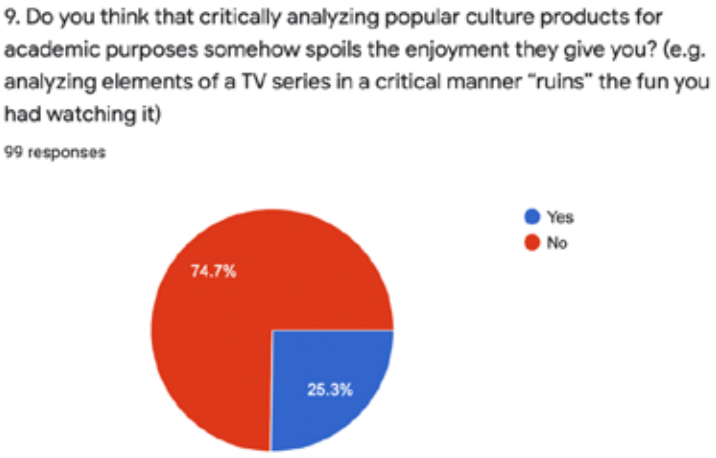

Figure 8. Question 9

Echoing the aforementioned issue of a perceived "spoiling" of the entertainment given by a critical analysis of popular culture texts previously enjoyed, question 9 revealed that three quarters of the students do not feel so.

Question 10 asked if learning "through film is equally relevant/useful as learning through the study of other popular culture products, such as TV series, video games, comics, new media, etc." Participants could pick the answers they found most fitting out of twelve choices. The statement chosen by most was "the study of popular culture products [other than film] is equally relevant/useful" (63 respondents), closely followed by "I would like to

study American culture also through popular culture products different from film" (58). The majority also stressed again the fact that "audiovisual products give you a more immersive experience of the context/reality represented" (54) and that "audiovisual products are useful to better understand messages/contexts" (52). It is worth noting that half of the group also picked the statement "I would understand better the pervasiveness of American culture if I could compare different products/media" (49).

2.3.5. Question 11

Question 11 listed a series of fifteen film genres and thematic types, allowing participants to suggest which ones they thought might be useful to learn about American society. As expectable, most gravitated towards political (79 respondents), historical (83), films focusing on ethnic/racial issues (81), as well as issues related to gender/sexuality (76). The majority also indicated the comedy genre (58), documentary film (54), and films "produced/directed/starred by ethnic minority Americans" (54), whereas a little less than a half of respondents picked films focusing on environmental issues (45). The less favoured genres—possibly considered less suitable for academic analysis—were horror (15), mockumentary (14), science fiction (27), western (27), thriller/crime (28), and (surprisingly, considered the definite preference for the historical genre) biopics (21). A little more than a third of respondents picked films focusing on science and technology (36).

2.3.6. Question 12

The following question focused on the students' perception of how popular culture texts can be approached in a fruitful manner.

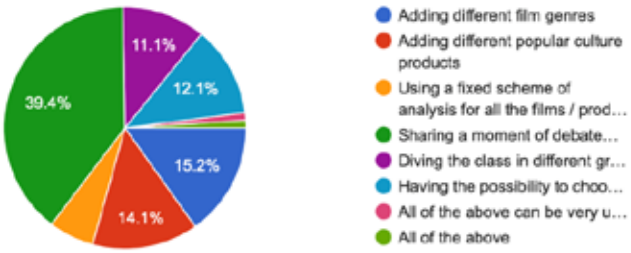

Figure 9. Question 12

Many indicated as the most useful activity to learn about American society would be "sharing a moment of debate after watching each film" (39 respondents). Some participants chose the option represented by adding different film genres (15) or different popular culture products (14) to the course program. Less popular were the possibility to work in groups articulated as "diving the class in different groups, each group is assigned different films, and then each group presents its assigned films to the other groups" (11), and the option to carry out some independent work choosing "one film to present to the class" (12).

2.3.7. Question 13 and additional comments

The closing question asked participants to suggest 1-3 films that they would like to watch for a course on American culture. On the one hand, many students focused again on films that touch upon ethnic/race-related issues (e.g. *Gran Torino*, *Django Unchained*, *American History X*) often in historical perspective, with some recurring titles: *12 Years a Slave* (15 respondents), *Hidden Figures* (5), and *The Help* (5). Many indicated cult films they personally enjoy, although the one cited the most was *Forrest Gump* (18).

A few participants left additional comments on the survey, mostly to add to the argument they built throughout the questionnaire, stressing that "including TV series and other audiovisual products beyond film would also be very valuable" (Subject 46) and that "it is really useful to use this type of content in class not only because it improves our listening and speaking skills but because it is an alternative way to learn history, economics and the ways of society that will keep everyone attentive" (Subject 78). Interestingly, Subject 85 added that they would "appreciate if there was care when discussing controversial themes, such as sexuality or racism, avoiding indoctrination because we never know (and cannot ask) who has what mind set."

3. Discussion

3.1. Issues raised by the students

Overall, students seemed preoccupied with suggesting films that could give them a more in-depth insight into aspects of American culture they perceive as complex and multifaceted, usually related to historical events and periods. From their answers, they clearly find to an extent easier to learn about historical details through watching films that reenact microhistorical narratives. Most likely, the individual, biographical element—whether fictional or not—helps them grasp better the macrohistorical conjuncture through an underlying affective aspect. Nonetheless, the absence of a guiding process emerges as they do not seem completely aware of what exactly they learned through such reconstructions. It is evident that one of the main thematic lines they feel relevant to learn about is the history of slavery and getting to "see" how the socio-economic system revolving around the plantation functioned, as well as the inherent violence and dehumanization.

Despite the anticipated choices in the genres and themes they suggested—mostly selecting those related to history and perceived as "more respectable"—through their final film recommendations, it can be argued that they feel the choice should be actually more varied. Many seemed to suggest films they personally enjoyed and found interesting and culturally stimulating, rather than films traditionally proposed in class as, to an extent, "representative" of American culture (such as *Birth of a Nation* or *Gone with the Wind*). The students' suggestions are often more contemporary and timely. They include comedy and also films that could be considered inadequate to be screened in class due to violent or sexual content, for example.

A few participants expressed their preoccupation with the potential complexity of critically approaching popular culture texts since they are not used to such a task, and they feel that the visual elements would require effort to be untangled effectively. Most expressed their perception that "learning about culture" is a complex matter and that the analysis of popular culture texts requires the acquisition of contextual knowledge to be carried out properly. Such a stance is interesting and possibly revealing of the lack of proper teaching in the field of Cultural Studies in their courses. When suggesting possible teaching improvements for the course, they clearly expressed the need of debating the popular culture texts in class as a fundamental part of their critical analysis. Evidently, the type of texts raises the possibility and—at the same time—the necessity of an interactive learning process.

3.2. Issues stemming from the students' perceptions

3.2.1. Genres and themes

On the one hand, more or less explicitly, many respondents highlighted their interest in representations related to history and ethnic/racial issues; on the other hand, their perception about such issues reveals rather limited. Several explicitly stressed that the films they watched helped discover historical events that they were not aware of before, specifically mentioning the Vietnam War, WW2, and slavery. As far as racial and ethnic issues are concerned, the students' awareness seems to be focused only on the history of African Americans, whereas only one person (Subject 49) touched upon Native Americans and none mentioned, for example, Latinx, Asian American, Jewish, or Arab American minorities among many. None cited representations of class and poverty, with the indirect exception of two respondents who mentioned the film *Nomadland* (Subjects 41 and 46). Despite 76 participants recommending the addition of texts tackling issues related to gender and sexuality, only one of them suggested a film falling into such thematic realm (documentary *Paris Is Burning*, Subject 46), and another one mentioned having watched *Brokeback Mountain* in class (Subject 93). Clearly, there is a lack of general knowledge on American history, possibly derived from limited teaching on the subject, as well as a fragmented awareness of sociocultural issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. The participants seem to acknowledge the importance of such thematic areas, yet barely any of them can mention popular culture texts that touch upon them. The exception of African American history is evidently influenced by the popularity of some of the texts mentioned, as well as the obligation to watch specific films in class (such as *12 Years a Slave*). Shaping a course based on popular culture texts would definitely require the introduction to such thematic areas, supported by a selection of films that could help students to discover useful texts and develop a more informed stance. For example, a film such as *Paris Is Burning* (1990) would require the introduction of the main topics related to the ball culture and queer studies in general; furthermore, it could be accompanied by the analysis of a recently produced TV series such as *POSE* (2018-2021)—which most of the class would know to some extent due to the acclaimed it has received—through its correlations and differences with the context of the documentary.

The underestimation of genres such as horror is also a sign of the common perception that some genres are more "legitimate" and valid in their conveyance of relevant messages and their representation of society. Such a stance reveals that most of the respondents have not experienced articulated teaching through cinema nor other kinds of popular culture texts; thus, their position on genres is biased and resorts to dichotomic categorisations of legitimacy and adequacy. Likewise, the majority seemed to reject thematic areas related to science and technology, as well as science fiction, less worthy of being included in an academic course. This specific perception is interesting—perhaps surprising—and critical at the same time, considering the pervasiveness of science and technology in the students' everyday life. Evidently, issues related to posthumanism, transhumanism, and similar thematic areas would need to be tackled in a course on American popular culture and articulated, keeping in mind this specific unawareness emerged from the questionnaire.

3.2.2. Estimation of the analytical task

Despite the consensus on the necessity, fruitfulness, and value intrinsic to adding popular culture texts to the syllabus, an underestimation of the critical task at hand pervades the students' answers. Those who established a dichotomic relation between literary and popular culture texts chiefly did so by either stating that literature is more valuable than popular culture or affirming their preference for popular culture by detracting from literature. The majority affirmed the importance of popular culture texts through correct and articulated arguments, but very few acknowledged the mutual influence and correlation between literature and popular culture. The lack of education revolving around critical media literacy and the study of popular culture emerges evidently from the group's answers. Most students seem to be aware of the value of popular culture texts, but many fail to highlight the complexity inherent to their critical analysis and academic study. While the relevance of watching a film about slavery is clear to most of them, they seem to lack the critical tools to actually analyse not only the apparent content but also the implicit messages, the quality of the representation, the accuracy of the context reconstruction, and so forth. As many pointed out, multimodal texts usually combine visual elements that contribute to the description and thus help the viewers' comprehension; nonetheless, it is important to articulate the teaching through popular culture texts highlighting the complexity, influencing factors, and objectives characterizing them.

As mentioned before, whether implicitly or explicitly, the awareness that audiovisual texts—and most likely multimodal texts in general including graphic narratives and video games—pose "new" challenges as they hold a specific complexity and require the acquisition of new frameworks that emerged from the participants' reflections. Their preoccupations understandably stem from their educational experience, characterized chiefly by the study of literature and occasionally by the watching of films without a specific preparation beforehand. The participants' recurrent emphasis on the necessity to delve into the sociocultural context to better understand and analyse popular culture texts is revealing of their perception of the contextual relevance and, at the same time, their lack of adequate skills to tackle it. Thus, it proves necessary to structure a related course providing the students with theoretical and critical tools specific to the study of the selected texts.

4. Conclusions

The opportunity to update and reshape the course program represents a fruitful occasion to explore the possibilities and issues inherent to teaching within the field of American Studies, pushing the syllabus beyond the mere integration of American films in the program. By delving into the students' perception on the topic, it could be possible to develop a course in which they could at the same time improve their language skills—in relation to the American variant of the English language—and understand the diverse sociocultural background, as well as come in contact with historical and political narratives.

Expanding the range of texts the students can work on is key to help them approach culture-related topics in a more critical way, providing them with the tools to increase their critical media literacy and analyse popular culture texts they are pervasively exposed to in a passive way. In fact, from the survey, it emerged that the teacher's role is fundamental in the process of negotiating and mediating between the students' perception of popular culture texts—influenced by the familiarity with the medium and its observed pervasiveness—and their critical analysis, providing contextual knowledge and tools to carry out the task. Being guided through the discovery of different layers of message and representation, the choice of texts can help the students develop interest and engagement, as well as perceive that they are learning about fundamental facets of a disseminated culture they participate in. More generally, it seems fundamental to expand the reach of American Studies and English Philology related courses to well-articulated Cultural Studies in order to provide the students with much fundamental sociocultural and historical insight and culture-oriented critical thinking.

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