

## **TEACHING WORLD REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY THROUGH FILMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Films are potentially very effective ways of teaching world regional geography. Unfortunately, few feature films are geographically complex enough to be useful, but when they are, they provide the next best thing to travel and an innovative way to teach active and critical learning of geography. A world regional geography course using seven films is described, and detailed information is provided on the films: five geographical themes and relevant concepts for all of the films; and for each of the seven films, student-drawn map titles, student-located thematic map titles, and major geographical themes.

**Key words:** geographical teaching, films, world regions, active and critical learning

### **INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING GEOGRAPHY WITH FILMS**

Ideally, geographers would take students on field trips to see the places they are talking about. In large undergraduate geography courses, taking 80 or more students on around-the-world trips is hardly feasible in terms of course conflicts, work requirements, time, and money. Geographically-based films are a great substitute for such travel. Watching films is the next best thing to doing field work; films are virtual, yet complex and “messy” ways of experiencing the world. Indeed, films “hook”

students with their emotional, psychological, and story lines in ways that geography textbooks and even travel can never do.

Almost all films are placed somewhere, but their locations usually play minor roles in the plot of the films or are only backdrops to the characters, such as showing the skyline of New York City or the Eifel Tower. But when films are rich in geography details, students can really learn to see the world in ways that geography textbooks can never achieve. As to the characters and plots of the films, we leave that to English courses.

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: GEOGRAPHY AND FILMS**

Using films to teach geography is a well-developed theme in the geographical teaching literature. Emphasis is almost always placed on the overall value of using films to geography with a few examples or developing geographical concepts in great detail for a particular film. Everhart (ND) discusses the use of films in teaching Advanced Placement (AP) geography courses, but very little of this is related directly to geography. She has four “Steps for Teaching through Films,” and uses the Whale Rider as an example with discussion questions and project ideas. Except for describing the cultural landscape of the Maori, most questions focus on cultural forces, gender roles, and generational conflicts, but not explicitly geographical concepts or themes. She provides a list of 13 films with a few key geographical concepts for each film. “Under Tips for Using Film in the Classroom,” she recommends showing only excerpts of films and to using supplemental newspaper articles to enhance the topics in the films.

Lawhorn (2003) uses films to explore various regional and thematic topics but does not focus explicitly on geographical concepts. She uses films to teach geography in her fifth grade curriculum. She defines geography, lists 12 different sub-fields, and identifies five themes of geography. Both feature and non-feature films are compared and a very detailed lesson plan, including specific film titles, is outlined by scale, from planet earth to colonial New Haven.

Orueta and Valdes (2007) talk about three geographic ideas -- space, landscape, and territory -- as they relate to the making of films in general, but no specific films are mentioned. Tidd (2000) makes general statements about the value of using films in teaching in general and then recommends his top 10 geography films. Engert and Spencer (2009) use films to teach about international politics.

Algeo (2007) provides an excellent example of how to use one film, *Bend It Like Beckham*, in teaching cultural geography, but alas she only uses one film, which hardly is sufficient in scope and depth for a semester long geography course. She argues that "classroom analysis of popular films encourages students to apply critical thinking to everyday experiences, to uncover ideologies embedded in their taken-for-granted world" (2007, 133). She employs the concepts of ethnicity, migration, acculturation, assimilation, and social construction of identity, all of which unfortunately are not examined in geographical or spatial terms. Except for one map of the migration of Sikhs from India to East Africa, Southeast Asia, and later to the United Kingdom, the application of her concepts has more in common with post-modern analysis and cultural studies than geography. Likewise, Alderman and Popke (2002) propose to use one film, Michael

Moore's *TV Nation*, to learn about humor and geography.

Aitken (1994) prefers to see films than read books -- most undergraduates would agree. In another article, Aitken (2003) uses several films set in Los Angeles that deal with "difficult aspects of identity." Maybe because this course was taught by three faculty members from different disciplines and colleges, this article has no geography in it. Even though words like "racial geographies," "geography of exclusion and betrayal," "racist landscapes," and "racial space" are cited, I find no evidence of actual geographical analysis, let alone maps and photographs, but only extensive narration of sociological topics. Call me old fashion, but this article is not about teaching geography with films even though it deals with very important socio-economic topics. Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) also explore four future post-modern research topics for the sub-field of film geography by using the film, *The Day After Tomorrow*: geopolitics, cultural politics, globalization, and crisis of representation, realism, ideology, and power. Despite the rhetoric, they provide little actual geographical analysis and content.

Di Palma (2009) goes so far as to assert that students must actually make films themselves with geographical content before they can learn effectively. She reports on teaching secondary school students to make their own films "to teach geography in an active way." She realizes that films focus on characters and storyline, with the location and geographical settings being in the background. She wants students to view the background as the foreground -- placing geography at the heart of the learning experience rather than as an incidental aspect of the films viewing experience, and

by extension, life itself. I would disagree that viewing films is in and of itself a passive learning mode; and only making films is a creative, active act. Films with complex geographical themes demand attentive and critical thinking that engage many skills, as discussed under Goals of the Course.

### **WORLD REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY THROUGH FILMS COURSE**

For several years I have taught a geography and film course as a special topics upper division course for geography majors in which I experimented with different films that would be best suited for a geography course. Despite the vast selection of feature and non-feature films, and documentaries, very few films contain a variety of geographical themes, let alone deal with complex issues of scale, environment, history, race, ethnicity, politics, religion, gender, and class within geographical contexts. I have settled on seven full-length feature films that are particularly rich and complex in physical and cultural geographical themes set in a variety of world regions (**Table 1**). These seven films, with all the limitations that these films entail for geographical scope, require students to apply their observational and analytical abilities and skills to examining a wide range of films from many world regions.

In this article I describe teaching a geography-films course for general education (GE) credit to undergraduates. I find that a GE course has more benefits than a seminar for majors because non-majors are exposed to geography in a more dynamic way. They get to discover and explore the world of geography in the films they see, which are both challenging and rewarding, while still learning much of the geographical content and many of the techniques that are normally covered in traditional introductory geography courses.

### **GOALS OF THE COURSE**

Active learning is required when viewing films and in applying relevant geographical themes and concepts. Students must take responsibility to learn geography. Faculty likewise need to be attentive and creative in applying their geographical expertise to the films in the classroom and grading.

Students achieve the following tasks in this geography course:

1. Observing films, in a careful, detailed, and thorough manner, for more than two hours;
2. Note-taking, detailed and thorough -- an almost lost skill of undergraduates;
3. Thinking about what they see in the films and how these relate to geography;
4. Conceptualizing relevant geographical contents, ideas, and concepts as they relate to the films;
5. Prioritizing geographical themes in the films for their projects;
6. Applying geographical themes and concepts to the films for their projects;
7. Decision-making on what materials should be included in the final projects; Team work, learning to coordinate and collaborate with different students;
8. Creating various kinds of maps and diagrams with appropriate software;
9. Using presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint), appropriately and effectively;
10. Referencing all materials, whether in print or on the internet;
11. Creating complete bibliographies -- another much neglected skill of undergraduates; and
12. Producing seven projects, which constitute the course grade.

**Table 1** Course and alternative films with substantial and complex geographical content

<b>Course Films (Year): Minutes</b>	<b>World Regions: Countries</b>
The Field (1990): 113	Western Europe: Ireland
The Sheltering Sky (1990): 138	North Africa: Morocco
Out of Africa (1985): 161	East Africa: Kenya
A Passage to India (1984): 164	South Asia: India
Indochine (1992): 156	Southeast Asia: Vietnam
The Mission (1994): 125	South America: Argentina & Brazil
El Norte (1983): 140	Central & North America: Guatemala, Mexico, USA
<b>Alternative Films (Year): Minutes</b>	<b>World Regions: Countries</b>
The Emigrants (1971): 191	North America: Midwest USA
Central Station (1998): 106	South America: Brazil
Motorcycle Diaries (2004): 126	South America: Chile to Venezuela
Emerald Forest (1985): 110	South America: Brazil's Amazon
Bride Flight (2008): 130	Oceania: New Zealand
The Piano (1993): 116	Oceania: New Zealand
Rabbit-Proof Fence (1992): 92	Oceania: Australia's Outback

## STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

This geography course is taught over a 15-week semester and meets only once a week in order to show the films, most of which are longer than two and half hours long. If your university or college has the capability of streaming films on-line, more classroom time can be used to discuss and relate the geographical aspects of the films. Streaming lets students view the totality of the films, because there are no class time restrictions. And they have the flexibility and convenience of viewing films when and where they want on their own electronic devices or in computer labs on campus. Students are assigned a world atlas and an introductory world regional geography textbook to use as references while they search for more detailed and varied information, maps, graphs, and photographs on the internet for their projects. This kind of a geography film course has only been

possible with the advent of the internet. The enormous factual, visual, and cartographic materials on the web allow students to compare multiple sources, decide on the most appropriate materials to be used for their projects, and then create complex geographical responses in their final projects.

The powerfulness of the internet for this film course is illustrated by one example from *A Passage to India*: many maps of varying quality and details are available on the British control of India and the Indian independent kingdoms. Students confront the complexity of original map materials and are forced to decide which maps suit their purposes best. They then have to locate and indicate (by means of colored shapes) where the film is set on the maps and relate these thematic maps to the geographical themes and concepts in the film. Furthermore, when using computer software to draw their

maps, students have many map symbols available on the internet which they probably would not be able to create themselves (e.g., symbols for Hindu temples and Islamic mosques), resulting in attractive and professional looking maps. These are challenging tasks for all levels of students.

At the very first introductory meeting, we discuss the course structure, the films to be viewed, the format of the preliminary and final projects, and the nature of geography. In the second week class, the first film is viewed (**Table 1**); in the next weekly class, the film is discussed and preliminary student presentations are made. In the third weekly class, the final student team projects for the film previously viewed are due and another film is viewed. This cycle is repeated for each of the films.

During the discussion classes, several activities are conducted:

1. After the first geography-film projects have been submitted, the previous week's preliminary film projects are reviewed by the faculty in class to provide students with feedback so they can learn individually and collectively what they did well and what they need to improve in their geographical analysis. Having students meet in a computer lab greatly enhances helping them improve their geographical thinking and projects.
2. Faculty present mini-lectures on geographical topics related to the film which students saw in the previous week. This assures for the relevant presentation of geographical analysis.
3. Faculty discuss with students what they think is geographically interesting and important in the film which they viewed in the previous week.
4. Four randomly selected students share their preliminary presentations, using

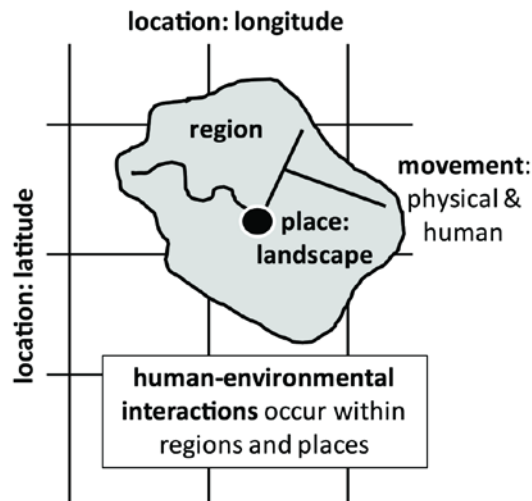
PowerPoint, of the previous film with the class. Faculty need to discuss and illustrate effective PowerPoint formats. Although students are familiar with writing papers and getting evaluations on this form of communication and analysis across most of the curriculum, almost all students are "visually challenged," meaning that they have a hard time interpreting data, tables, and maps -- they just don't get enough exposure. Geography is inherently more visual than other disciplines, so teaching this distinctive perspective creatively and critically is crucial. For ideas on how to teach presentational spatial skills, see Edward Tufte (2001, 1997, and 1990). Papers could, of course, be substituted for PowerPoint projects if faculty feel so inclined.

5. Students critique these presentations as they are being shown, and faculty challenge students to think innovatively about drawing maps and the range of geographical themes and concepts which are applicable to the films. In these classes, students learn the strengths and weaknesses of the film topics that they selected and the presentational material which they included to assure that these are relevant and important to the films.

Students are provided with a list of five broad geographical themes: location, place, region, human-environmental relationships, and spatial movement (Joint Committee 1984), illustrated by **Figure 1**. In addition, a list of specific, detailed concepts under each broad theme are also provided (**Table 2**), which must be applied to each of the films as they are relevant. The Geography Education Standards Project (1994) provides additional ideas and justifications for specific geographical skills. During the discussion classes, various

geographical themes are considered and preliminary presentations are made by about four students. Students also select

**Figure 1** Five broad geographical themes



partners during the discussion classes. Two-person final PowerPoint projects are submitted by the following week, before another film is viewed. The final projects for each film consist of four parts:

1. **Appropriate project titles**, including some form of geography and the film title, with appropriate geographical photographs.
2. **Locational maps**, created and drawn by the students using a variety of software (e.g., PowerPoint, Paint, Abode Illustrator) and showing regional and site specific aspects for each film. Map-making and cartographic skills are taught as semester-long courses in geography programs; hence, some of these skills should be taught in introductory courses as well.

To encourage decision-making, students select the map topics, details, and symbols and the appropriate software on their own or with their immediate group member. **Table 3** provides a list of such student-drawn map titles for each of the films. An example of such a map is the travel route through North Africa based on *The Sheltering Sky* (**Figure 2**).

3. **Geographical themes and concepts**, consisting of mapped and un-mapped ideas. These are researched by the students, largely from the internet. First, students find relevant thematic maps on topics that relate to each of the films. **Table 4** provides a list of such map titles for each of the films. Second, these thematic maps must show the approximate location (if not exactly known) of where the films take place. Third, these thematic maps must also be justified and placed in the context of major geographical themes in each of the films. Of course, not all geographical themes and concepts can be mapped, but when they can, they should be. For example, this applies to many human-environmental concepts, yet they should, nevertheless, be included in the projects and related to the films. **Table 5** provides a list of major broad geographical themes and specific concepts in the seven films. Appropriate diagrams must also be included; see **Figure 2** for examples.
4. **References**, appropriately cited, for all materials used in the projects.

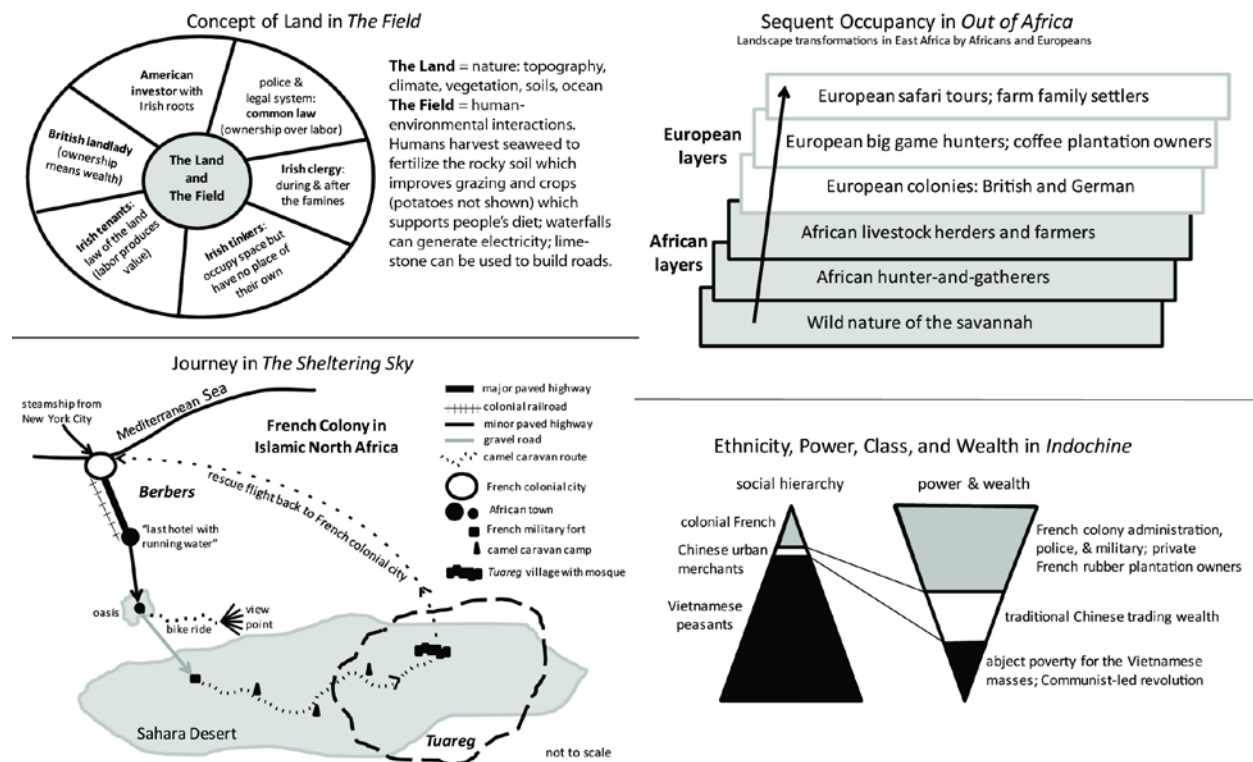
**Table 2** Broad geographical themes and concepts for all films

<b>Locations</b>	<b>Human-Environmental Interactions</b>
longitude & latitude	agriculture & food
distance: absolute & relative	plantations, family farms, & subsistence farming
<b>Regions</b>	building materials
uniform, nodal, & functional regions	house styles
core-domain-sphere	settlement patterns
core-periphery	climatic association
nation-state	environmental symbolism
nationalism & cultural groups	environmental-cultural perception
<b>Places</b>	environmental determinism
site & situation	environmental acculturation
landscape: natural & cultural	environmental & cultural stereotypes
sequent occupancy	cultural adaption & maladaptation
population density	colonialism & imperialism
place names	uneven development
<b>Spatial Movements</b>	Eurocentricism
diffusion: contagious & hierarchical	locational & geographical racism
migration: involuntary, chain, & return	
dispersal: centrifugal & centripetal forces	
travel: personal & groups	

**Table 3** Student-drawn map titles based on the seven films

<b>The Field</b>	<b>Indochine</b>
Irish village	French colonial city
farm and surrounding countryside	rubber plantation
<b>The Sheltering Sky</b>	travel route through Vietnam
travel route through North Africa	karst topography & coastline
<b>Out of Africa</b>	<b>The Mission</b>
travel route from Denmark to Kenya	Spanish colonial town
British colonial town	Jesuit-Indian mission villages
coffee plantation	<b>El Norte</b>
<b>A Passage to India</b>	travel route from Guatemala, Mexico to U.S.
travel route from England to India	Spanish colonial town
British colonial quarter in Indian city	Mexican border city
countryside, mountains, & caves	Los Angeles metropolitan area

**Figure 2** Types of diagrams and maps based on *The Field*, *The Sheltering Sky*, *Out of Africa*, and *Indochine*



All the films deal with the complexity of the concept of land, places, regions, landscapes, spatial movements, and environmental-cultural interactions. They raise intriguing and fundamental human questions: 1) Does land ownership (by extension, wealth) belong to those who work the land or to those who own the land legally? 2) Why are some regions and places perceived as exotic and erotic? 3) Can humans, regardless of their ethnicity, class, and gender, ever “own” anything -- places, people, or even relationships? 4) Why do cultural groups, whether foreign or local, fight over land and places for natural resources, cultural, religious, and military reasons? 5) What constitutes “home” in a geographical sense, when do we ever know where home really is? Why are some people

more at home in “foreign” places than in their country of birth and upbringing? The geographies in the seven films included here raise profoundly human questions, like life itself, unlike standard geography textbooks which generally avoid such inherently human and emotional predicaments.

## RESULTS FROM THE COURSE

Students present preliminary and final PowerPoint projects for each of the seven films. PowerPoint presentations allow for visual presentation of text, maps, graphs, and photographs. Likewise, geography itself is a profoundly visual discipline in what it studies (what we see in the “real” world) and how it represents reality (in all manner of maps). Hence, geographical content in the films is



**Table 4** Student-located thematic map titles for the seven films

<b>The Field</b>	<b>Indochine</b>
oceanic climate in Western Europe	French colonialism in Southeast Asia
Western highlands of Europe	rubber production regions
potato production regions	paddy rice production regions
Irish famine regions	Chinese imperialism in Southeast Asia
Roman Catholicism in Western Europe	Vietnamese nationalism & resistance patterns
British landowners concentrations in Ireland	Buddhism regions
Tinker community locations	karst topography & coastline
<b>The Sheltering Sky</b>	<b>The Mission</b>
French colonialism in North Africa	Spanish & Portuguese colonialism in S. America
railroad network in North Africa	Jesuit missions locations
Africans cultural groups: Berbers & Tuaregs	Roman Catholic Church territorial disputes
Islam distributions	Indian cultural group: Guarani
Sahara desert: topography & climate	tropical rainforests
<b>Out of Africa</b>	mountain rivers
Savannah and wild life in East Africa	<b>El Norte</b>
African cultural groups: Kikuyu, Masai, Somali	Spanish colonial towns in Latin America
British & German colonialism in East Africa	Guatemalan Indian distributions
coffee production regions	illegal immigrations routes in Mexico and U.S.
railroad network	Mexican border towns
Islam & Sikhism distributions in East Africa	U.S.-Mexican international border
malaria and syphilis spatial distributions	illegal apprehensions on U.S. border by locations
<b>A Passage to India</b>	Los Angeles barrio regions
British colonialism in South Asia	informal labor market locations in U.S.
independent Indian states	
Hinduism and Islam distributions in India	
railroad network	
monsoons: temperature & rainfall	
elephants: wild & domesticated	

presented by the students in visual forms, rather than largely by words. These projects are clearly challenging to the students, including seniors. There is nothing easy about them, as the goals of

the course indicate.

1) The integration of the content of the films with geographical ideas was one major issue, even after several class discussions. For example, for the first

film, *The Field*, project titles consisted mostly of only the film title! By the second film, *The Sheltering Sky*, project titles mostly used geographical terms in the titles but no reference to the film. Only by the third film, *Out of Africa*, did most students finally use both the film's title and some aspect of geography in their project titles.

2) Detailed and complete observation and note-taking was another issue. Although most students took notes to construct locational maps, they commonly left out several critical landscape elements which were important in the films and did not draw all the maps that were possible based on the films.

3) Many students had a hard time deciding between major and minor geographical themes. For example, although the British landlady and Irish-American businessman are critical to the meaning of what constitutes Irish land ownership in *The Field*, several students inappropriately used two pages in their final products to show maps of the USA and of the United Kingdom, including national flags and photographs of scenes unrelated to the film.

4) Students were good at making lists of physical and cultural geographical features but they found it hard to conceptualize these into comprehensive perspectives. Lists of descriptive words, often even inconsistent with the page title, would be listed on unrelated

background photos, rather than with creative diagrams or tables to synthesize the details. For example, many students identified different modes of transportation (steamships, railroads, cars, bikes, camels, elephants) but only provided photos and brief descriptions without relating these specifically to the films and the geographical contexts in which these modes of transportation were used. **Figures 2** provides examples from four films of the kinds of diagrams and maps based on the films that students are expected to create.

5) Aside from learning about major world regions, the most important goals of the course are analytical skills and critical thinking. Both skills are difficult to acquire for undergraduates and require continual and repeated practice within courses and across the curriculum. By working on seven PowerPoint projects over the semester, students gradually learn both.

Over the course of the semester, students did learn from each project and improved subsequent ones. Grading these projects makes it clear how slowly students learn and apply previous lessons to subsequent work. The seven final projects provided the necessary repetition for students to achieve the goals of the course.

**Table 5** Specific geographical themes in the seven films

<b>The Field</b>	<b>Indochine</b>	
British landlords	French colonialism in Southeast Asia	
Roman Catholicism	French colonial cities	
Irish tenants	French rubber plantations	
potato famines	Chinese merchants & mansions	
Tinkers, landless	Vietnamese peasants & villages	
oceanic climate	paddy rice production	
Western Uplands	Christian missionary stations	
seaweed and bogs	“forced” labor by French colonial government	
land & ownership: use value vs. market value	cultural conflicts: Western music, dance, clothing vs. Vietnamese theater, clothing	
<b>The Sheltering Sky</b>		
French colonialism in North Africa	conflict over land & people:	
colonial railroads in North Africa	French, Chinese, & Vietnamese	
local people: Berbers & Tuareg	independence movements:	
gender & place: exoticism & eroticism	nationalists & communists	
tourists vs. travelers	tropical climates	
travel guidebooks	karst topography & coastlines	
Sahara desert	<b>The Mission</b>	
desert climate	Spanish & Portuguese colonialism in L. America	
oasis agriculture & towns	Spanish continental empire	
caravans and salt trade	Roman Catholic Jesuit missions	
<b>Out of Africa</b>		
British & German colonialism in East Africa	slave trade in the Americas	
colonial railroads in East Africa	Indian cultures: “civilized” & “primitive”	
coffee plantations	geopolitics of the Roman Catholic Church: Treaties of Tordesillas (1494) & Madrid (1750)	
African tribes: Kikuyu, Masai, & Somalis	spatial repentance: journey of endurance	
European settler empire	conflict over land & people in physical & cultural spaces	
tropical disease: malaria	tropical rainforests	
Savannah vegetation	topography: water falls	
ivory & big game trophy hunting		
safari tourism	<b>El Norte</b>	
ownership: land, people, & relationships	<b>Guatemala:</b>	
World War II conflicts in the colonies	Spanish colonial planned towns	
<b>A Passage to India</b>		
British colonialism in South Asia	Mayan Indians distributions	
independent Indian kingdoms	political oppressions: military & paramilitary	
colonial cities & architecture: bungalows	civil war: 1954-1996 in the Highlands	
colonial railroads: various gauges	<b>Mexico:</b>	
Hinduism & Islam	border towns	
independence movements: Hinduism & Muslim	illegal immigration routes	
cultural conflicts: religions, customs, & laws	<b>United States:</b>	
gender & place: exoticism & eroticism	border landscapes	
“Eastern mysticism” vs. “Western rationality”	Los Angeles barrios	
monsoons	immigrant groups: legal & undocumented	
topography	spatial expressions: gender, class, work, & home	

## CHALLENGES OF THE COURSE

A film-based regional world geography course cannot cover as many topics and concepts as regular textbook-lecture-based courses, but what materials are covered are more challenging (less clear than textbooks) and rewarding (self-learning and discovery are better retained) to both students and faculty. Discovery and exploration, the ultimate elements of geography, are put back into learning. This kind of a course trades virtual experiential learning and discovery with detailed geographical, cartographical, and presentational skills against traditional formats which cover more regions with greater breath of topics. Similar trade offs confront faculty and departments when they offer topical-versus regional-based world geography courses. Each achieves what the other does not and therefore is not suited for all faculty. Whether teaching through films really does a “better” job in installing in students the geographical concepts and themes germane to world regions (as one reviewer put it), all depends on what “better” is defined as. In this case, “better” refers to different goals than standard lecture-format courses which can thus not really be compared to the course formats.

This course requires considerable amount of work in the grading of seven final projects, even if they are submitted by two-person teams. In my class of 40 students, the 20 projects every two weeks required about five or more hours of grading and emailing my evaluative responses to the students. In addition to viewing the films, another five hours or so are required by the faculty to analyze the films for geographical content and to select the appropriate concepts for class discussions. The more often this course is

offered, of course, the less time would be required for this part of the course.

Another significant challenge was managing the two-person teams. A different list of team members had to be created for each film and emailed to the class. Exceptions, such as serious illness, had to be accommodated for individual students, resulting in individual projects. By mid-semester, almost half the students had lost some points for failing to answer emails from their partners, to attend planned meetings, and/or to contribute significantly to the joint projects. In addition, when grading the final projects, it was impossible to determine who contributed what to the projects. This was particularly important because the quality of individual slides in the PowerPoints varied significantly. To remedy this “free rider” phenomenon, two improvements were made: 1) students were required to complete on-line peer evaluation forms for each film; and 2) each slide in the final projects had to have the name(s) of the author(s). Points could then be properly assigned to each of the students in the teams, reflecting their individual contributions in terms of quantity and quality. All these problems of managing teams could, of course, be avoided by requiring only single-author projects or having students self-select their partners. Experiment with what works best for your students.

Regardless of the challenges, if you want to inspire undergraduates to learn geography creatively and you want a challenge in teaching geography in stimulating and creative ways, then try teaching world regional geography through films.

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