Seeing the big picture

exploring American cultures on film

Ellen Summerfield and Sandra Lee.

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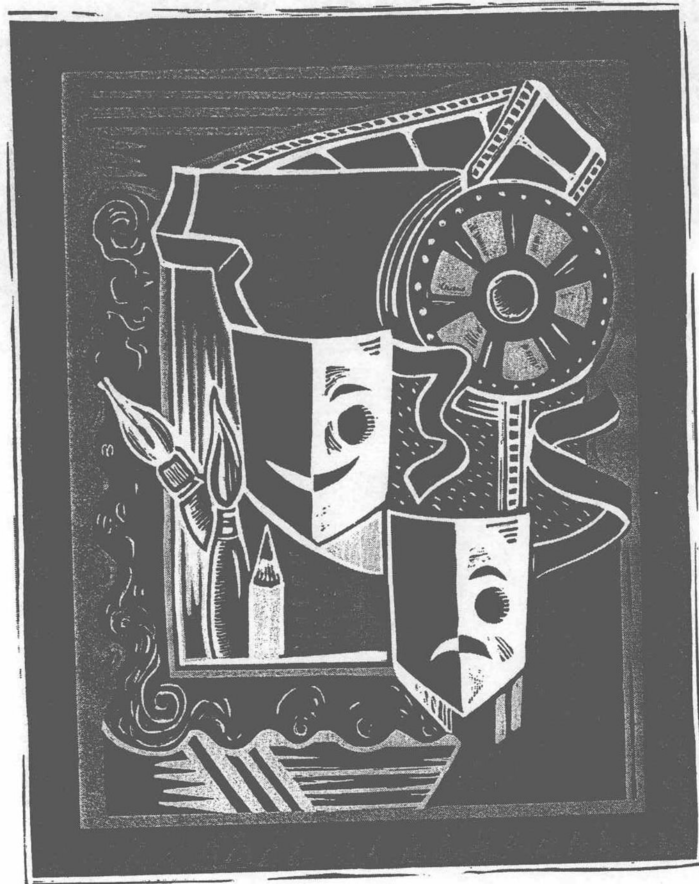

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INTERCULTURAL PRESS, INC.

First published by Intercultural Press. For information contact:

Intercultural Press, Inc.
PO Box 700
Yarmouth, Maine 04096 USA
001-207-846-5168
Fax: 001-207-846-5181
www.interculturalpress.com

Nicholas Brealey Publishing
36 John Street
London, WC1N 2AT, UK
44-207-430-0224
Fax 44-207-404-8311
www.nbrealey-books.com

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Printed in Canada

05 04 03 02 01 1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Summerfield, Ellen, 1949–
Seeing the big picture: exploring American cultures on film/Ellen Summerfield and Sandra Lee.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
Contents: Native American Culture: Dances With Wolves, Thunderheart—African American culture: The long walk home—Chinese American culture: Joy Luck Club—Japanese American culture: Come see the Paradise—Mexican American culture: Lone Star—Mainstream white culture—Gay culture: Wedding banquet—Deaf culture: Children of a lesser god.
ISBN 1-877864-84-6
1. Minorities in motion pictures. 2. Motion pictures—United States—History. I. Lee, Sandra. II. Title.

PN1995.9.M56 S86 2001
791.43'6520693—dc21 2001 024425

To Phil and Mom

To Kate and Daniel

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Acknowledgments

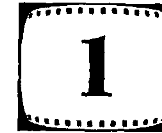
The authors wish to express gratitude to many groups and individuals who have lent support and assistance during the making of this book. At Linfield College we have often relied on the expertise of our wonderful library staff. In past years the student group Fusion has made regular visits to our classes, helping us and our students understand issues affecting gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. We owe enormous thanks to our Linfield work-study students, especially Hildi Nicksic and Stephanie Sayles. For his splendid work on the maps and drawings, we are grateful to Steven Shoffner.

We have enjoyed and appreciated the contributions of the many American and international students at Linfield College who have thoughtfully worked with revisions of the evolving manuscript. We also wish to thank Linfield College for supporting our requests for sabbatical and leave time to devote to the book.

The Oregon School for the Deaf has welcomed us and our students to its campus many times, and we have greatly appreciated the expert advice of Fred Farrior, Patti Togioka, and Alan Yankus. We are indebted to Dr. Hyung-a Kim (Australian National University) for her suggestions on the Chinese American chapter and to Dr. Toni Humber (California State Polytechnic University, Pomona) for her assistance with the section on Black English.

We consider ourselves most fortunate to work with the staff of Intercultural Press, who have helped shape the manuscript in important ways. Both of us extend heartfelt thanks to Toby Frank for her wisdom and encouragement; to Judy Carl-Hendrick for her consummate editing skills and tactful, helpful criticism; and to Patty Topel for her creativity in layout and design.

Finally, Sandra Lee thanks her children, Kate and Daniel, who have watched *Dances with Wolves* far too often; and Ellen Summerfield acknowledges with special affection her husband, Phil, a talented editor who has also watched more than his share of cross-cultural films.



To the Students

Sneak Preview

You are about to embark on an exciting journey through America's* diverse cultures as presented in contemporary feature films. This journey will be more meaningful to you if you have a rough idea of the itinerary. The following two sections will give you essential background information on the two areas we consider: cultures and film.

Why American Cultures?

Did the title of this book surprise you? Shouldn't we speak of American culture rather than American cultures? Is there, after all, more than one American culture? Is the United States to be thought of in the singular or the plural?

These questions are at the heart of the current identity crisis in the United States. Put bluntly, America no longer knows who she is. This crisis is all the more astonishing in view of the fact that, not too many decades ago, she knew exactly what she represented to herself and to

*For reasons of economy and convenience, we have elected to use America and Americans to refer to the United States and citizens thereof, though we realize that the word actually belongs to the entire continent and that Latin Americans, for example, generally refer to us as *norteamericanos*, or North Americans.

the world. Having emerged victorious from World War II, she considered herself to be "number one," the greatest nation on earth. Her belief in her own superiority—that she represented the ideal political, social, and economic system—was borne out by unequaled military and financial success. Many Americans assumed without question that their values and way of life were a model for the entire world.

This way of life was distinctly Anglo in nature. Because of the country's grounding in the language, government, religion, and system of laws of England, the core identity of the country was white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (WASP). Admittedly, as a nation of immigrants, the United States was populated by millions of people who did not fit the Anglo mold, but they were expected to leave behind their old lives, languages, and selves and to assimilate. The *melting pot theory*, popularized at the turn of the century, expressed this ideal: differences, however vast, will be melted away, and newcomers will be reborn as "Americans."

The problem is that for many people the differences have never really melted away. Even ardent supporters of the melting pot idea admit, for example, that African Americans were "unmeltable." They and many other "minority" people and groups were excluded from the system, ignored, left out. They were never part of the "American Dream."

Unable or unwilling to "melt," and no longer content to be deprived of full and equal participation in American life, African Americans and many other groups began to demand change during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In this book you will learn about the momentous struggles of the civil rights era, and you will see that this is where the rethinking of America began. In those tumultuous years African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized groups began to claim their right to help define what this country is and what it represents. Why, they asked then (and continue to ask now), should they always be the ones to conform and adapt to the mainstream society? Could not the larger society also adapt to, and learn from, them?

Forty years later, as we begin a new millennium, the idea of the so-called *multicultural* or *pluralistic* society has widely replaced the idea of assimilation. In a multicultural society, cultural pluralists argue, many different ways of life can coexist, all contributing to the whole but not necessarily becoming identical. Rather than a melting pot, a more appropriate metaphor is a tossed salad, a mosaic, or a patchwork quilt. In contemporary America, so the theory goes, we can actually value and celebrate diversity rather than ignoring or devaluing it.

Of course not everyone applauds or believes in the multicultural ideal. Especially those whose faces match the old American portrait

and who have benefited from the old system can feel uncertain and threatened. They may be reluctant to welcome others to the table if they fear that the other person's gain may be their loss. And they may find it hard to share what in the past has been exclusively theirs.

Should this seem a bit too abstract, try to imagine some of the things that are now to be shared. If you are white, think about sharing coveted spaces in prestigious universities or professional employment opportunities with people of color. Other examples include sharing space on store shelves (with African American hair products and Mexican foods), on the airwaves (with Cuban American music), and in history books (with heretofore neglected stories of women and minorities). Depending on who you are and what you have come to expect as privileges, life may be getting a bit crowded with all the new competitors.

These competitors are undeniably engaged in a power struggle with the dominant, or mainstream, society. As you study the films presented in this book, always remember to keep in mind the issues of power and control. The multicultural society does not take shape quietly; it is generating fierce debate and opposition. Ongoing battles in the so-called "culture wars" are being fought in government, the courts, the schools and universities, the media, and in many other contexts of our everyday lives. One of the most divisive disputes has to do with curricula in schools and universities. Whose history, for example, should be taught? That of conquerors, presidents, and military leaders—or perhaps of women, children, workers, and slaves? In this book you will learn about compelling histories that have long been neglected in America's schools.

Some claim that the multicultural struggles are tearing the country apart and threatening its very existence. These traditionalists fear that the nation's most cherished values of freedom, democracy, equality, hard work, honesty, and self-reliance are being shattered, to be replaced with many competing sets of values. Opponents of multiculturalism use terms such as *fraying* or *disuniting* to suggest that in a multicultural society there will no longer be a common American ground, no glue to hold all the parts together. They fear that there will no longer be anything that is distinctly "American" and that we will disintegrate into dozens of separate, squabbling, disunited groups.

In this book you will become familiar with many Americas. Do you think that all these different cultures can live together peacefully? What will America look like—and represent to the rest of the world—once the old portraits are abandoned? What can hold together such a diverse collection of peoples, ideas, histories, religions, and ways of life?

If you are from a country other than the United States, think as well of multicultural issues and struggles in your own country. While

the issues and controversies presented in this book are identified with American society, there is virtually no corner of the earth untouched by multiculturalism. Other societies and nations are facing their own multicultural issues, and many are becoming acutely aware of the need for new approaches and creative ideas.

If you look through the Table of Contents, you will notice that in addition to white mainstream culture the book contains five ethnic cultures as well as two other types of *subcultures* (also called *cocultures*). Admittedly, many ethnic and other subcultures are missing. We included Mexican Americans, for example, but not Puerto Ricans, and we included a discussion of Deaf culture but not of people with other disabilities. Nor do we have a chapter on Jewish culture or Arab American culture or the culture of the elderly. Clearly, in a single book, we had to make choices. The choices are based on our attempt to give you a representative sample. We also had to base our decisions on the feature films that are available and of sufficiently high quality. We hope that this introduction to cultures on film will entice you to fill in the gaps on your own.

Finally, we need to explain that while each chapter heading focuses on one single culture, in reality neither film nor life presents single cultures in isolation. Cultures are always multiple and interrelated. In any group, for example, you have people not only of different ethnic backgrounds but also of different religions, geographical origins, ages, genders, and so on. In each chapter we will try to bring out this interrelatedness of cultures. For example, in the chapter on *Lone Star*, the main focus is on issues related to Mexican Americans, but we can also look at African Americans and Texans. As we go along, try always to keep in mind the complexity of cultural interactions.

Viewing Films in New Ways

This is a book about cultures, and it is also a book about film. We will not, however, study the history of film or learn more than just a smattering about the technical aspects of filmmaking. What we will do is ask you to look at films in new ways. Most of you have undoubtedly grown up with film, television, and video. You already possess a rich store of experiences with film. But you are probably used to viewing feature films primarily as entertainment. This is not to say that we are denying the value of entertainment. We are great fans of all the films discussed in this book, and we hope you will enjoy them as much as we do. But we also want you to develop a new set of eyes. Your "film eyes" need to be alert, skeptical, and always questioning.

What the eight films discussed in this book present are different interpretations of the cultures of this country, as developed by directors, producers, writers, camera operators, and actors. Your job is to decide whether—or to what extent—you trust and respect their interpretations. You will be asked to give your own evaluations of the films in terms of their validity, integrity, and reliability in depicting cultures.

But on what basis can you make your evaluation? How will you know if a film portrays a culture in ways that are superficial, distorted, or erroneous? How can you recognize whether a film is the product of in-depth familiarity with a culture and whether it is respectful of that culture's complexities? When you see *Thunderheart*, for example, how can you determine if life on the South Dakota reservation has been depicted truthfully and knowledgeably? When you see *The Long Walk Home*, how can you tell if the mood of the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott has been reliably captured?

Furthermore, can we justifiably hold a feature film to particular criteria of truthfulness and accuracy? Don't filmmakers have the right to fictionalize even historical events? This question of truth and fiction is fascinating and far-reaching, and it will come up again and again. As you think about it, remember that even though plot and characterization may be fictionalized, feature films, like literary fiction, can reveal profound truths about people and cultures, or they can misconstrue and misrepresent.

We will help you deal with these complicated issues. Throughout the book you will be exposed to essential tools and skills that will further your ability to view films critically. One of these tools, for example, is simply to view a film twice. In any first viewing it is hard to be critical, since you are caught up in the plot and simply enjoying the film. The second viewing is quite different; you can step back and look at the inner workings of the film, at the *how* and *why* rather than the *what* of the presentation. Another tool is to read reviews, and yet another is to explore the director's background.

When you have developed your new film eyes, you will find that they will enable you to look at other forms of media differently as well. You will begin to see how everything we read, watch, and hear in our media-filled world is presented from a particular point of view. Even relatively "objective" media forms such as documentaries and *New York Times* articles are still to be understood as interpretations; the filmmakers and journalists inevitably have their own unique slant, their personal "take" on the material. One documentary filmmaker may, for example, tell a story about the successes Deaf students experience at Gallaudet University, while another may present a story on the failures. While both stories may be "true," they leave us with entirely different impressions.

The more you understand the notion of "point of view," the less vul-

nerable you will be to manipulation by the media. Where, you will always ask, is this particular author or journalist or filmmaker coming from? How is the medium at hand being used to convince me to agree with what is presented? Are the tactics legitimate?

Of course filmmakers are not simply manipulators but are also artists who use their medium to the best possible advantage. As the various films are considered in the book, you'll be introduced to some of the basic techniques and vocabulary of filmmaking. For example, to give you an idea of how a familiarity with film techniques can illuminate viewing, look at the following quotation (from Michael Hilger's *The American Indian in Film*), which explains how film techniques in traditional westerns are used to bias viewers against Indians.

> *The long shot, which emphasizes the setting, often stresses the landscape of the West, with either hostile Indians hiding or threatening to attack or conquered Indians vanishing into the horizon in long processions. High angle shots, in which the audience looks down on the subject, may suggest the vulnerability of the whites about to be ambushed by Indians. Low angle shots...can emphasize the threat of the Indian lurking above his victims or the power of the hero.* (1986, 4)

Hilger further explains how editing, especially cross-cutting between pursuers and pursued (rapidly alternating shots of the two groups), heightens fear of the threatening Indians. Composition, which is how the picture is organized within the camera frame, places white heroes in higher or more central positions, reinforcing the idea that Indians are inferior. Music and sound, such as hostile-sounding drums and rescuing bugle calls, and acting roles that reduce the Indians to wooden masks that barely speak or to fierce, war-whooping warriors also send clear messages to the audience about who the enemies and the heroes are.

- In the section entitled Why American Cultures? you will find a number of provocative questions. Choose two of the questions that interest you most and respond to them in the film notebook that you will keep throughout this course.
- Think about the cultures to which you belong, and write a short entry in your film notebook describing who you are, culturally.
- Which cultures other than your own would you like to know more about, and why?
- Review the film techniques described in Viewing Films in New Ways (page 4). Were any of them familiar to you? In your notebook write briefly about a film you have seen in which you recall one of these techniques being used. What do you think was the filmmaker's intention? Was the use of this technique effective for that purpose? (A more comprehensive list of film terms is provided in the next section.)

Your film notebook will be a personal record of all of your writing, from rough notes to more polished formal entries. Use your notebook not only for exercises in the text but also as a place to jot down your thoughts as you watch the films and listen to class discussions. Include in it your reactions to class field trips and any information you gather from fieldwork, surveys, interviews, or other assignments from the section entitled Hands-on Activities.

Your film notebook will also become a valuable repository of ideas you may wish to use in oral reports and research papers.

Always bring your notebook to class, since your instructor may wish to collect it or may ask you to read a specific entry to the class. We suggest you use a three-ring binder and that you date your entries.

One form of writing that you will be asked to do in your film notebook—and that may be new to you—is called freewriting. Freewriting means simply to put your pen to paper and let your ideas flow over the page. When you are freewriting, you are "thinking aloud on paper" and recording what comes to mind without worrying about organization, sentence structure, grammar, or spelling. You may find it useful to freewrite often as an initial way of getting thoughts and reactions on paper before attempting to write or speak in a more organized fashion.

Whenever the icon depicted above appears in the text, you'll be asked to freewrite, write, or draw in your film notebook and to be prepared for class discussion.

The clapboard icon indicates that an activity or a discussion will take place, often accompanied as well by some form of writing in your film notebook.

Script

To deepen your understanding of cultures and films and to express your own ideas more clearly and powerfully, you will need to acquire new vocabulary. The following two sections will help you get started. Familiarize yourself with the terms now, but don't try to learn them all at this point. Instead, refer back to the lists as you work through each chapter and try to use the terms in class discussions. Also, as the course proceeds, add terms of your own to the lists. The definitions below are necessarily brief, so check your dictionary and other references for additional clarification. Philip Herbst's *The Color of Words* is an excellent resource.

Read the definitions on the following pages with pen in hand, and jot down in your film notebook at least five terms that are new to you or about which you have questions or comments.

Essential Vocabulary on Cultures

There are many definitions of *culture*, but an easy one to remember is that it is the entire way of life of a group of people. It is usually, but not always, passed from one generation to the next. It may be acquired either by birth or by choice. It includes things that are observable, such as food, clothing, dress, housing, and behavior, and things that are not observable, such as beliefs, knowledge, values, and attitudes. The cultures you belong to, or with which you identify, play a major role in determining who you are, how you think, and how you behave.

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Terms having to do with cultural distinctions and groupings

assimilation Process of being absorbed into a new culture; usually refers to minority or immigrant groups becoming part of the mainstream society.

bicultural People who were born into, or who have acquired, two different cultural identities and who can successfully switch back and forth between them, both mentally and behaviorally.

class Group within society that shares a common socioeconomic background and thus tends to share common tastes, values, behaviors, and aspirations.

diversity Range of different cultural backgrounds present in a given group or society.

ethnic group Group with a shared heritage, usually possessing common language, religion, and appearance, e.g., African American, Greek American, Italian American.

mainstream culture, dominant culture Cultural group possessing sufficient economic and political power to determine the nature and direction of a given society. Usually the dominant culture is the one in the numerical majority, e.g., white European Americans in the United States.

minority Word that has fallen out of favor when used to refer to a subculture or coculture. Many people of color feel that minority connotes "lesser" or "subordinate." A minority group is usually in the numerical minority, but the term more often refers to power than to numbers; thus women, for example, are often seen as a minority group.

multiculturalism or **cultural pluralism** Ideal in which diverse groups in a society coexist amicably.

race Term used to classify people into broad groups according to inherited physical characteristics, e.g., Mongoloid, Caucasian, and Negroid races. The term is widely used and has sociological and historical usefulness, but anthropologists and scientists generally agree that the term has no scientific validity and that there are no clear-cut distinctions among races.

subculture, coculture Culture within a larger culture. Examples of subcultures existing within U.S. society include Native Americans, the elderly, Southerners, and the homeless.

values Set of enduring views on what is considered right, good, useful, and true that members of a particular culture tend to hold in common. Values provide a basis for choices and guide the behavior of individuals within a given culture.

Terms having to do with prejudice

discrimination Prejudice in action, such as refusing to give a person a job because of the person's ethnicity rather than because of individual qualifications.

ethnocentrism Assumption that one's own cultural group is superior to all others and that it is appropriate to judge others by one's own standards.

institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. Form of discrimination built into the structure of an entire society such that certain groups are advantaged over others; also referred to by terms such as **white, male,** or **heterosexual privilege.**

internalized oppression Phenomenon that occurs when individuals in subjugated groups begin to believe that they are inferior and thus participate in their own subjugation.

prejudice, bias, bigotry Preconceived, negative attitudes about a group of people or about individuals based on their membership in a specific group.

racism, sexism, ageism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism Different types of prejudice based on notions of the inherent inferiority of the indicated group.

stereotype Oversimplified, exaggerated, usually negative notion of what all people in a group are like, e.g., "Americans don't take marriage very seriously." Often based on a kernel of truth that is distorted and rigidly applied.

Terms having to do with intercultural communication

empathy Ability to put oneself in another's position, to relate to another's feelings and point of view; recognized as a basic element of effective intercultural communication.

intercultural communication Communication among people of different cultural backgrounds by both verbal and nonverbal means. Barriers to effective intercultural communication can be formidable. Not only do spoken languages differ significantly from culture to culture, but patterns of nonverbal communication do as well.

kinesics Commonly called "body language"; communication that takes place through movement, such as gestures, posture, facial expressions, and eye contact.

nonverbal communication Communication by means other than words (estimated by experts to be 60–90 percent of what we communicate). For example, we send each other messages by the way we dress, by how we touch one another, and by our use of time. Other common means of nonverbal communication include:

- **paralanguage** Not *what* we say, but *how* we say it; includes voice qualities (such as pitch, tone, volume, rate), silences, and sounds accompanying speech (groans, exclamations, sighs, yells).
- **proxemics** Communication through the use of space, e.g., physical distance between people, seating arrangements.

verbal communication Communication that takes place through the spoken word.

Essential Film Vocabulary

As you study the films presented in this book, you will frequently encounter the terms and techniques defined on pages 12 and 13. Make a habit of looking out for them as you watch the movies. Jot down examples. Be sure to note where they occur in the film in minutes/seconds. Your notes will be a useful reference for oral or written presentations.

Before we provide definitions, you need to know that films are made up of many different *shots*. A shot is simply the flow of visual images photographed by one camera from the time the camera is turned on to the time it is stopped. One shot might last just an instant, another several minutes or longer. The *editor* is the person who cuts the shots to the desired length, arranges them, and splices them together to make *scenes* or *sequences*. For example, if you wanted to film your grandmother telling a story to her grandchildren, you could combine different shots: first the empty chair, then your grandmother sitting down, then a shot just of her face, then of the children listening, then of her hand gestures, and finally of her getting up to get some lemonade. Or you could film one long shot, perhaps by holding the camera still and focusing on the entire scene or just on her face, or possibly by moving the camera from her profile in the chair, to her face, to the children, to her hands, and back to her face.

The editor also links different scenes. For example, the scene of your grandmother telling the story might be followed by a scene in which the children run outside and act out the story Grandma has just told them. The *transition* occurs when the film moves from one scene to another. The way the director arranges characters, props, and setting in a *frame* (the area encompassed by the borders of a shot) is called *composition* or *mise-en-scène*.

Filmmakers

cinematographer Directs the photography. Supervises the camera operators and works with the director to film the specific shots. Responsible for the lighting and quality of the camera work.
director Shapes the film by determining how it should be shot. The director usually supervises the entire cast, selects the location(s), and has ultimate responsibility for artistic decisions. The director's vision is essential to the effectiveness of a film.
editor Assembles, cuts, organizes, and joins the available shots to create the film sequences.
producer Is responsible for obtaining financing and establishing and managing the budget. The producer's responsibilities may go beyond financial matters to other aspects of making the film, such as hiring the director and lead actors, working with the director on artistic matters, and solving problems and disputes.
screenwriter Writes the script for the film, often adapting it from a novel or other source.

Types of Shots

close-up Focuses on a subject in great detail to emphasize its significance or meaning. Whereas a long shot might show the entire forest and a medium shot might show several branches, a close-up would show only one leaf.
long shot Gives an overview of the action, often introducing a scene. Commonly used in epics or historical movies to show the setting or locale from a great distance, with humans appearing as tiny specks.
medium shot Is often used in introducing characters and for dialogue where characters are shown from the knee or waist up.

Types of Lenses

telephoto Functions like a telescope, magnifying objects from a distance.
wide angle Allows the camera to photograph an area wider than normal.
zoom Allows the camera to move a distant subject closer or to make a close subject more distant, moving the viewer rapidly into or out of a scene.

Moving Camera Shots

boom shot Can move in any direction; camera is mounted on a long pole or support.
pan or **panning shot** Moves horizontally; short for panorama.
tilt shot Moves vertically in either direction.
tracking/trucking or **dolly shot** Moves with the subject; camera is placed on a moving vehicle.

Types of Camera Angles

bird's-eye view Views a scene from high overhead, often creating an illusion of power or omniscience.
eye level or **flat angle shot** Views the subject at eye level.
high angle shot Is not as high and imposing as a bird's-eye view, but gives an overview of the scene in which the characters seem less important than the setting.
low angle shot Shoots upward to make characters and objects appear taller and bigger. This shot can be used to make the subject seem powerful, fearful, or important.
oblique angle shot Views subject at an angle and is achieved by tilting the camera. Characters and objects appear to be falling over. This angle is disorienting and is often used to create anxiety.
over the shoulder shot Usually focuses on two characters in dialogue. The viewer sees the back of the head and shoulder of the person speaking, often causing that person to dominate the scene.
point of view shot Views the world from the "eyes" of a character. To obtain a little girl's point of view, for example, the camera would be placed at her eye level and thus view things as she would.

Other Techniques

cross-cutting Alternates rapidly from one film shot to another occurring in a different setting to indicate that both are taking place simultaneously.
dissolve Occurs when a scene slowly fades out and a new scene fades in. At one point the images usually seem to be blended together.
fade-in Occurs when a scene gradually becomes brighter and clearer from black to normal light, usually indicating that a new sequence is beginning.
fade-out Occurs when the brightness of the scene gradually decreases and becomes black, usually indicating the end of a sequence.
fast motion Speeds up the action.
flashback Interrupts actions and events in the present time to take the viewer back to a previous time.
flashforward Interrupts actions and events in the present time to take the viewer forward in time.
slow motion Occurs when the action seems to be occurring at a pace slower than reality; may give the scene a dreamlike quality or prolong the emotional impact.
voice-over Conveys the thoughts or memories of a character who is not speaking on camera; the spoken commentary is recorded separately from the filmed sequence.

Stage Directions: Guidelines for Discussion

In this course you will learn a great deal about American cultures and cocultures, not only by watching the films and reading the texts but also by listening to your classmates' points of view. Your peers will bring to the discussions cultural backgrounds and experiences different from your own, and at times you may find yourself reacting to what they say with surprise, disbelief, or even shock. Whatever your reaction, try to realize that your differences are valuable resources for learning. It is precisely these differences that will lead to more interesting, enlightening discussions and to a clearer understanding of the films you have viewed together.

To help make your discussions as productive, satisfying, and worthwhile as possible, we wish to suggest some guidelines. These will allow you to express yourself more freely, confident that your peers will treat your comments with respect and interest, regardless of their own perspectives. Please read the suggestions below and add to the list any others you wish.

1. Listen considerately and respectfully to each other.
2. Take risks by discussing topics about which you may have previously been reluctant to air your views.
3. Develop trust by supporting your peers whenever they have difficulty expressing their ideas or when they express views that may be unpopular.
4. Respond frankly but sensitively so as not to hurt others' feelings.
5. Avoid sarcasm and cynicism at all costs.
6. Maintain a sense of humor without trivializing the discussion.
7. Do not judge what a classmate says quickly; instead, ask questions that will help you better understand the point being made.
8. Try not to be afraid of emotions; the topics you will discuss can be sensitive and upsetting, and emotions will surface. Regard them as a source of learning.

Depending on the topic or exercise, you may be asked to work with a partner, in groups, or with the entire class. If you find it difficult to speak in front of groups, you might try one or more of the specific discussion roles outlined below, especially during the early stages of the course. Many of these roles allow you to contribute to a discussion

without having to feel pressured to make a brilliant remark, have special oral skills, or be an expert on the topic at hand. Gradually, as you grow more accustomed to group discussions, you can begin to drop the roles. Also remember that in any discussion you may adopt multiple roles.

The roles are also useful for those who may already be confident and experienced in group discussions but who tend to play the same roles all the time. You can improve your discussion skills as well as your ability to function constructively in groups by becoming more aware of the different roles you can assume.

1. **Initiator** You help to get the discussion started or recharged whenever it begins to lag.
2. **Information Provider** You give the group information about a topic when you think it will enhance the discussion.
3. **Feedback Provider** You listen and respond to the Initiator and/or Information Provider verbally or nonverbally. For example, you might explain why you agree with what was just said or simply nod your head in affirmation.
4. **Idea Clarifier** If you think an idea or piece of information is not sufficiently clear, you can ask for clarification. Remember, if you don't understand something, chances are that others don't either. Or you can restate the idea in your own words to confirm whether you and others understand. You can also provide a personal experience as an example of the point being made in order to clarify an idea further and to get confirmation from the Information Provider.
5. **Encouragement Provider** If you become aware that a group member is being left out, you can verbally or nonverbally encourage that person to join in. You might express your interest in hearing the person's point of view or simply make an encouraging gesture.
6. **Group Tension Reliever** If you are discussing a particularly sensitive and controversial topic, the discussion may become quite heated. Without trivializing the topic, you may be able to inject a lighter note or make the group laugh.
7. **Misinformation Tracker** This is a difficult role, because it involves confronting and/or disagreeing with information that has been given. If you hear something you believe is incorrect, you can step in politely and correct it in a nonthreatening way. For example, you can say something like "I'm not sure that date is correct—I'd be glad to check it" or "I wonder if we have correctly understood the difference between ASL and Signed English. Let's check in the text." Remember, you are confronting the information, not the person.

8. **Idea Challenger** You have the most sensitive role because you are challenging another person's ideas or opinions. Always proceed carefully and respectfully. Usually it's a good idea to acknowledge something you liked or agreed with before bringing up the point of contention. You might say, for example, "Yes, I do think it is very important for Latino children to learn English, but I really believe that their Spanish language skills and culture should be maintained."
9. **Discussion Tracker** As a discussion progresses, it may go off on a tangent or become confusing. Your role is to keep an eye on the discussion and bring it back on track if it strays too far. A comment such as "I think we are getting away from the main point here—can we return to the discussion of the Issei and Nisei?" is entirely appropriate.
10. **Questioner** You ask questions to gain information, to provoke thought, and to stimulate further discussion.
11. **Timekeeper** If you become aware that one group member is dominating the discussion or that your group is running out of time, you help to keep the discussion moving or bring it to a close. You can politely interrupt and remind people how much time is available to finish certain tasks by saying, for example, "I think that's a good thought, but we've only got a couple of minutes left, so can we quickly review our main points?"
12. **Summarizer** Your role is to jot down the main points your group has made. You may be called upon in the last few minutes of a discussion to summarize the group's ideas in preparation for a class discussion or to take notes for a group presentation, such as for the Spotlight section in each chapter of this book.

In your film notebook, identify two roles: one you feel you can play easily and another that you feel less confident in assuming or that you have never tried. Give reasons for your choices, perhaps with examples from previous discussion experiences.

Sequel: Further Suggested Resources

Herbst, Philip H. 1997. *The Color of Words: An Encyclopædic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States.* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Hilger, Michael. 1986. *The American Indian in Film.* Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.

Native American Culture: *Dances with Wolves* and *Thunderheart*

Dances with Wolves
Setting the Scene: Freewriting and Discussion

> *Like most children of the fifties, my first impressions of Native American people were not very positive. Indians were widely portrayed as devils, whose destruction was purely a matter of necessity in the process of taming the West. Every publication or film I saw as a child was slanted in this way.*
>
> *But from the first, I sensed somehow that the story was incomplete.* (Costner, Blake, and Wilson 1990, xv)

These words by Michael Blake, author of the *Dances with Wolves* screenplay, reveal that his early ideas about Native Americans* were formed by stereotypes. First review the concept of stereotyping from the Essential Vocabulary on Cultures (page 10), and then jot down in your film notebook some stereotypes of Indians that are prevalent in American culture. Freewrite about the extent to which you are personally affected by these stereotypes. Discuss and compare your thoughts in small groups.

*For alternative terms and definitions, see Related Terms, page 23.

Wide-Angle Lens: Historical and Geographical Perspectives

History of Westward Expansion

The nineteenth century, during which the film is set, was a time of great westward expansion beyond the Mississippi River and of accompanying major conflicts throughout the West between Native Americans and white citizens (see Map 3, page 26). In popular language this is the era of the "Wild West," the "frontier," the "cowboys and Indians." It has given rise to enduring and cherished national myths about the heroism of white settlers who conquered the frontier.

Actually, when the nineteenth century began, the United States of America had only been in existence a short time. Having emerged victorious in 1783 from the War of Independence against England, this new nation was soon to become the sole possessor of immense territories once claimed by the major colonial rivals England, Spain, and France (see Map 2, page 25). The purchase of the huge Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, coupled with several major annexations at midcentury (explained below), meant that America stretched from coast to coast. But, in truth, the claims to this vast land by the new settlers ignored the rightful ownership of its original inhabitants—the American Indians.

Let's recall that at the time of Columbus' landing in the New World in 1492, hundreds of Indian groups occupied a vast stretch of territory equivalent to one-fourth of the earth's habitable land, extending from northern Alaska to Cape Horn. The population at the time of Columbus is uncertain, but estimates for those Indians living in North America (north of present-day Mexico) suggest that there were at least two million native inhabitants.

As the colonial powers waged their campaigns for land and riches in the new continent during the three centuries subsequent to Columbus' landing, the Indians were forced to deal with the invaders, many of whom were originally received with hospitality. Despite periods of relative peace, uneasy truces, and accommodation, the first three hundred years of contact with Europeans overwhelmingly demonstrated to the Indians that the white man's presence ultimately meant betrayal, destruction, and death. Indian groups repeatedly tried to resist the white man's attempts to convert, deceive, subjugate, enslave, and dispossess them, fighting numerous battles as well as major wars—ranging from the Pueblo Revolt (1680) to Little Turtle's War (1790–1795)—but their struggles were fruitless. By the nineteenth century, European-borne disease and the depredations of continuous warfare had decimated or in some cases completely wiped out entire Indian populations. As Indians struggled to survive, the young nation was flexing its muscle.

In 1830 a new era of oppression was launched by the U.S. government under President Andrew Jackson in the form of the Indian Removal Act. Though greatly reduced in land and numbers, most eastern Indian tribes still occupied portions of their original homelands—until Jackson forcibly relocated them west of the Mississippi. Some groups, such as the Florida Seminoles and the Georgia Cherokees, resisted removal, but the decade between 1830 and 1840 saw more than fifty tribes (80,000 Indians) driven from their homelands. The removal had tragic consequences. Not only did many Indians perish on the trek west, but subsequent clashes occurred between the displaced peoples and those Indians already occupying the western territories. In return for uprooting the tribes, Jackson's government set apart an "ample district west of the Mississippi…to be guaranteed to the Indian tribes as long as they shall occupy it" (Richardson 1896, 458).

This promise of security was soon broken. From 1845 to 1853 the sudden acquisition of enormous additional western lands (Texas, California, Oregon Territory, and parts of the Southwest) stretched the country from ocean to ocean. Still, the western lands might have remained remote, inhospitable, and uninteresting to white settlers had not gold been discovered in California in 1848. That event decided the fate of western Indians forever. While trappers, traders, and missionaries had roamed the territories and some wagon trains of settlers had been rolling westward on the Oregon Trail across Indian lands since the early 1840s, suddenly tens of thousands of fortune hunters surged westward through Indian territory. This relentless migration and the accompanying growth of railroad and communications lines severely disrupted Indian hunting and fishing practices, destroyed food-gathering grounds, depleted natural resources, and spread hitherto unknown diseases.

The whites called this encroachment on Indian lands *Manifest Destiny*, a doctrine proclaiming that they, as superior, civilized, white Europeans, had both a right and an obligation to expand the nation

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