

Griffiths looks at the way movies portray people

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Movies are in one way or another works of fiction even when they try to narrate reality. Yet movies can help us understand how society looks at people, places, and times, opening windows onto other worlds.

Dr. Alison Griffiths studies the ways that cinema forms those windows. A professor in the Department of Communication Studies in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York, she has spent her entire professional career analyzing how movies represent realities.

"I'm interested in the ability of cinema to tell provocative stories about people and especially about people who don't have much power, don't have much capital in terms of their ability to break into mainstream filmmaking or Hollywood," she says.

"In my earliest projects, I looked at how native peoples all around the world had been shown in early ethnographic films made primarily before 1920, and in a more recent project, I looked at prisoners on film."

A native of Wales in the United Kingdom with a doctorate from New York University, she knows how different cultures can shape the way reality is interpreted. "What I was interested in doing in my research was thinking about certain notions of Welshness as a kind of a collective feeling of shared identity, but also as a definition of oneself in opposition to the English."

Despite being a relatively small country, the U.K. is culturally diverse. "I was very interested in how Welsh national and cultural identity was inscribed in a very long running soap opera in Wales called *Pobol y Cwm* (People of the Valley). I'm interested in people who are somewhat at the margins of our society and our culture, because I think they have some of the most interesting stories to tell," says Griffiths.

With this soap opera, she took a plot that had been called the "invasion" storyline, which was about how an English family who had moved to a small community were received by the locals. There's some



Dr. Griffiths (in red jacket) sharing her experiences with her students.

Photo by Yulia Rock.

ambivalence and anxiety about the English going back centuries. "Wales in many ways has a kind of a neocolonialist relationship to England."

In the wake of Brexit, it is a really provocative question to ask how we define notions of identity within the United Kingdom. "Growing up in Wales and being Welsh is really quite a unique experience, especially if you speak Welsh, and even though I'm not claiming to be a native Welsh speaker, I certainly grew up in that community and have older brothers who are Welsh speakers."

She classifies herself as an early cinema historian. "I'm someone who is very interested in the power of visual images, and I think that visual images clearly can contain significant amounts of authenticity, of notions of the real, that sense that somebody was actually there with a camera, and yet they're constantly

framed. I think we always need to have a healthy measure of skepticism when we're thinking about the mediating effect of the camera and the mediating effect of whoever's there behind the camera."

She has also looked at the way Native Americans have been portrayed by early Hollywood. "I think what happened with some of the earliest Native American films is that they played into cultural stereotypes. But we should be mindful that Native Americans were gainfully employed in popular culture, and that some of them were quite happy to make a living performing versions of their culture which they knew would be consumable," says Griffiths.

By the same token Hollywood exploited the worst of what we could imagine about Native Americans. "They were the most predictable, racist, highly prob-

lematical narratives in terms of people being unable to assimilate, not wanting to assimilate, or really never feeling comfortable with their native identity."

In her latest book, *Carceral Fantasies*, she looked at the way Hollywood has portrayed prison populations and how that portrait has affected the way we see them. "A community that I got to know well recently is prisoners, and I think that, again, we see essences of a kind of carceral identity that in some ways was grounded in a certain reality, but it's often magnified, it's often then turned into and sort of pathologized into a stereotype that's completely out of control."

She explains that this project was very much grounded in looking at some of the earliest instances of prisoners as moviegoers. "What I was looking for was ways of accessing an inmate's subjectivity in terms of what they thought of cinema. Imagine what this must feel like—in some ways cinema was conducted like a social experiment."

Sometimes Hollywood reached for the macabre. "What cinema was essentially doing when it filmed actual executions was to reconstruct executions for the camera. The visual trauma of watching an execution, whether reconstructed or real, is the larger part of why filmmakers felt there was a market value in reconstructing someone's moment of death. People have been fascinated with executions going way back."

And even her students have a hard time trying to understand this fascination, asking her, "Why did people write to the warden of Sing Sing requesting to be one of the twelve state-mandated witnesses present at an electrocution?" It seems there were people who not only wrote repeatedly to secure a seat but even volunteered to pull the switch.

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