

Sonderdruck aus

Education and the USA

Edited by
LAURENZ VOLKMANN

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg
2011

Contents

Introduction.....ix

Different Perspectives

Paula M. L. Moya

Educating for a Diverse Society in “Post-Race” America1

Christian Kloeckner

David Horowitz, Intellectual Diversity, and the Politics of
Academic Freedom.....19

Charlie Wesley

Bridging the Gap: Radicalism and Conformism39

Historical Aspects

Bärbel Höttges

Save the Man? Religious Instruction and the Ideology of
Ethnicity in Antebellum America51

Sabine N. Meyer

“Mak[ing] Noble, Law-Abiding Citizens”:
Scientific Temperance Instruction in American Public
Schools.....71

Anja Werner

Striving for the Top: Reevaluating Regional and Transatlantic
Influences in the History of U.S. Higher Education.....87

Marco Althaus

For-Profit Higher Education in America: Reform-Minded
Teaching and Learning in a Commercial University Model.....105

Representation in the Media

Stefanie Müller

The State Nobility? – The Power of the Academic Elite in
Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*.....133

Nicole Waller

Oppositional Pedagogy: Lessons about Teaching in
Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* and Ernest Gaines’s
A Lesson Before Dying143

Katja Kanzler

“To Sue and Make Noise”: Legal Theatricality and Civic
Didacticism in *Boston Legal*.....153

German Perspectives

Ulla Kriebnernegg

Unlocking Potential: The Role of American Studies
for the Bologna Process 167

Peter Freese

American Studies in the Advanced EFL-Classroom in
Germany 183

Daniel Stein

American Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and
Intercultural Competence: Morgan Spurlock's
30 Days as Educational Resource and
Didactic Model 205

Gerhard Finster

Teaching US Youth Cultures as Represented in Recent
Movies and Literature 225

Notes on Contributors 243

DANIEL STEIN

American Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and Intercultural
Competence: Morgan Spurlock's *30 Days* as Educational Re-
source and Didactic Model

Introduction

Asked to name the most influential American documentary filmmaker, most German Americanists and teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) would probably come up with Michael Moore. Movies such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), and *Sicko* (2007) have received mostly positive reviews in the German press, and as Laurenz Volkmann has pointed out, they are “on the verge of becoming part and parcel of the ‘canon’ of cultural artifacts used in German EFL classrooms to present U.S. life and institutions” (362). But for those interested in using Moore’s films as educational resources, his polemical slant and muckraking objectives pose a serious problem: They are too easily taken at face-value and as expressions of an America more authentic and more adequate than, say, George W. Bush’s aggressive neo-conservatism or the politics of the National Rifle Association.¹ One way of dealing with this problem is to approach Moore’s films as expressions of a specific political ideology and to look critically at the various means through which they seek to manipulate their viewers. I do believe, however, that there is another, potentially more productive, media text that can be used to teach a type of American Studies that makes use of modern media not only as an educational resource but also as a didactic model: Morgan Spurlock’s popular documentary series *30 Days*, which ran for three seasons between 2005 and 2008 on the FX Network (a subsidiary of Fox).²

30 Days followed Spurlock’s successful film *Super Size Me* (2004), which tackled the issue of obesity in American society and documented Spurlock as he subjected himself to a regimen of eating all of his meals from breakfast to dinner at the most iconic of American fast food chains,

¹ German attitudes toward the U.S. are notoriously ambivalent, ranging, for instance, from Bush-bashing to Obama-mania. For further investigation of these attitudes, see Volkmann 370-72; see also Kelleter & Knöbl. For an earlier study, see Freese 1991.

² The first two seasons are available on DVD, and the third season should be released soon.

McDonald's, for thirty consecutive days. The film portrays the dire consequences of excessive fast food consumption, which include chronic fatigue, depression, low libido, and high blood pressure. It is shot in a documentary style that combines expert interviews with informational segments and a video diary. Perhaps the film's most innovative move was to feature Spurlock as a participant observer, as a focalizer through whose eyes the viewers of the film get to witness his personal transformation from a reasonably healthy young man to a physical, mental, and emotional wreck. The TV series *30 Days*, which totals eighteen episodes of 45-minutes each, uses more or less the same "edutainment" format (cf. Volkman 374), but it adds two significant twists: (1) It centers on the process of cultural immersion of selected participants (not just Spurlock) into an unfamiliar cultural environment, and (2) it makes explicit its educational and didactic objectives.

The very first episode of *30 Days* tackles the issue of "Minimum Wage." Its opening sequence introduces the rationale of the show and its narrative structure. It begins with the camera focusing on a casually dressed Spurlock, who introduces himself and describes *30 Days* as the logical continuation of *Super Size Me*. In this film, he recalls, "I went through a physical, mental, and emotional transformation that was like living someone else's life. But it got me thinking: What if you could live someone else's life for just thirty days?" Moving from a personal to a national perspective, Spurlock continues: "America's a big country with lots of different people. Is it possible that we could all learn something from each other?" The questions introduced here offer an attractive starting point for American Studies and EFL teachers. It seems to me that the very premise of the show – "living someone else's life" and "seeing the world through someone else's eyes" – is compatible with what teaching methodologists call *intercultural competence*. Intercultural competence, they suggest, may be understood as a process in which students develop rational and emotional responses to a foreign culture in order to reassess their own cultural dispositions (cf. Nünning & Surkamp 159).

Yet this opening sequence also raises concerns about media awareness, media literacy, and media competence. While introducing the basic structure of the episodes to follow, it also presents a series of racial, religious, and social stereotypes. "Would you feel comfortable as a Christian walking in a Muslim's shoes for thirty days?" Spurlock asks, addressing the camera, and thus the viewer, directly. He is wearing traditional Muslim clothing and is surrounded by two stern looking, bearded men of Arab descent and by two women in burkas, all of whom are coded as the racially and religiously Other. A moment later, Spurlock appears as a gay bartender, bare-chested and adorned with spikes-and-leather belt, hat, and armband. "What if you were a straight man living in a gay man's world?

Would it change who you are?" he ponders, flirting with one of the male customers of the bar.

Such depictions, I would argue, can be interpreted in two ways, both of which raise awareness about the cultural power of media representations. As I will argue below, the episode on "Muslims and America" confronts viewers with a Muslim community in the U.S. that is ethnically and religiously diverse, heterogeneous and hybrid rather than homogeneous and monolithic. Thus, the faceless women of the opening sequence are supplanted in the episode by inhabitants from Dearborn, Michigan, whose individual life stories cannot be easily reconciled with the popular image of the Arab women as veiled victims of patriarchal oppression and religious control. One could also argue that for Spurlock to slip into the role of a stereotypical gay man trivializes the complex social, economic, political, and cultural issues tackled in the series. Ultimately, however, the question is whether the series reinforces or complicates, perhaps even deconstructs, the initial dichotomies between Muslim/American, Straight/Gay, Atheist/Christian, Pro-Life/Pro-Choice, and any of the other issues it addresses. While the degree to which stereotypes are actually dismantled and the success with which they are deconstructed remains open to debate, these initial depictions of cultural Others are meant to pick up popular stereotypes and to dramatize the contradictions between these stereotypes and the individual lives that they claim to represent. This, in my estimation, is why the series can serve as productive teaching material for American Studies students and EFL learners.

As I want to demonstrate in the following, *30 Days* is also more than an educational source about current conflicts in American culture. In fact, it is the very format of the show, the simple but powerful idea of intercultural exchange and cultural immersion that makes it an intriguing didactic model. The series asks viewers to adopt standpoints antithetical to their own, even if only for a limited period of time: 30 days for the participants; 45 minutes for the viewers. It also subscribes to the notion that conflicting views about social, political, and cultural issues must be addressed through dialogue and interaction. In other words, the series treats culture not as a fixed object but as a discursive and emotionally charged process, and it treats its viewers not as "'receptacles' to be filled with factual information" but promotes exactly the kind of personal involvement and exploration that characterizes the shift from traditional *Area Studies* approaches to *Cultural Studies* perspectives on foreign-language-teaching: "a shift [...] towards the *intercultural*, i.e., the processes of meaning creation happening *between* representatives of the target culture and their addressees in other countries" (Delaney & Volkman 12-13). Moreover, I believe that a critical consideration of *30 Days* as an educational resource and didactic model can help us bridge the gap

between American Studies scholarship and EFL teaching and improve the “troubled relationship,” as Peter Freese has put it recently, between these two professions (Freese 2005).³ This is why my suggestions will have both undergraduate university students and advanced EFL learners at the high school level in mind. Possible contexts in which *30 Days* could be used are the American Studies BA curriculum, for instance in a Cultural Studies course on the economic, social, religious, and legal conflicts that have shaped American culture in the last thirty years, and the *gymnasiale Oberstufe*, where selected episodes of the series could be studied in various teaching units, for instance on topics such as immigration, ethnic minorities, the American Dream, etc.

Criteria of Selection

To provide a sense of the scope of topics covered in *30 Days*, I have created a syllabus based on the series which could be used as a basis for a semester-long course. As I have suggested, different teaching units at the high school level could be based on individual episodes, two of which (“Muslim & America;” “Immigration”) I will discuss in detail below.

1. Economic Issues: Minimum Wage (Season 1)
2. Economic Issues: Outsourcing (Season 2)
3. Social Issues: Straight Man in a Gay World (Season 1)
4. Social Issues: Same Sex Parenting (Season 3)
5. Social Issues: 30 Days in a Wheelchair (Season 3)
6. Social Issues: Animal Rights (Season 3)
7. Social Issues: Off the Grid (Season 1)
8. Social Issues: Jail (Season 2)
9. Social Issues: Life on an Indian Reservation (Season 3)
10. Religious Issues: Muslims & America (Season 1)
11. Religious Issues: Atheist & Christian (Season 2)
12. Legal Issues: Immigration (Season 2)
13. Legal Issues: Pro-Life / Pro-Choice (Season 2)
14. Legal Issues: Gun Nation (Season 3)

This is just a suggestion. The topics could be arranged in a different order or grouped under different headings, but their thematic breadth and cul-

³ Donnerstag and Volkmann have pointed to the deconstruction of traditional Western literary canons and the prevalence of poststructural theory since the 1980s as the causes for a “dwindling influence of American Studies on the school subject” (7). Taking seriously the fact that media perform significant cultural work in mediating individual experiences as well as constructing national and transnational imaginaries, however, means that American Studies and Media Studies perspective are highly relevant for students of *Amerikanistik* and for EFL learners at the high school level. On the connections among American Studies and Media Studies, see Donnerstag & Volkmann; see also Kelleter & Stein.

tural relevance – and thus the principal suitability of the series as teaching material – should be apparent.⁴

All of these episodes provide insights into conflicting views of, and attitudes toward, the social issues and political debates that have dominated and continue to dominate American culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet they also raise questions beyond their immediate historical and cultural contexts. The “Minimum Wage” episode, for instance, provides a background for the current debate in the United States about Health Care reform; it contains a segment on the financial trauma faced by minimum wage earners who get sick and cannot afford appropriate medical treatment. The episode on environmentalism (“Off the Grid”) is especially topical in the context of the ongoing efforts to contain global warming, particularly the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (2009), while “Life on an Indian Reservation” takes on special significance in the wake of the recent decision of the federal government to pay Native Americans 3.4 billion dollars as reimbursement for the mismanagement of Indian lands.

But beyond this initial assessment of the series’ suitability as an educational resource, how does it relate to the five criteria of textual selection that Peter Freese has suggested as a guide for the EFL teacher?⁵ These criteria are:

1) *Linguistic accessibility*: A text that is beyond its prospective readers’ knowledge of English as a foreign language cannot be successfully taught. As the opening clip of the “Minimum Wage” episode illustrates, Spurlock uses relatively simple sentence constructions and a language that is understandable yet demanding enough to expand the advanced learner’s vocabulary. The dialogue among participants may be more complicated, but I would argue that colloquial speech represents a form of authentic learning material much closer to real-life interaction in the target culture than material devised especially for EFL students. Moreover, many students will be familiar with at least some of the many dialogue-heavy shows on MTV (often with subtitles), including *The Real*

⁴ Since university semesters are usually scheduled for 14 sessions, I have excluded four of the total 18 episodes: “Anti-Aging,” “Binge Drinking Mom,” “New Age,” and “Working in a Coal Mine.” This choice is based in part on my assessment of each episode’s suitability as an educational resource – the “New Age” episode, for instance, approaches questions of spirituality and religion in ways that would most likely seem obscure to the average German high school or university student – and in part on my evaluation of each episode’s didactic values – “Binge Drinking Mom” is more interesting in terms of a mother’s troubles of relating to her daughter than in its treatment of alcohol abuse among teenagers and young adults.

⁵ I am citing five out of six criteria Freese proposes (2005: 193; emphases mine). The sixth criterion, *general educational value*, is too broad to be useful in the context of my argument. Freese concentrates on text-based materials, but I believe that his criteria can be applied to the medium of television as well.

*World, Pimp My Ride, Room Raiders, Charm School, and Flavor of Love.*⁶

2) *Intellectual appropriateness: A text that is not geared to the mental age of the target group will remain incomprehensible.* The many informational interludes that appear in every episode strip down complex economic, social, religious, and legal processes to a level accessible to EFL students and university undergraduates. They do so by combining voice-over narrative with graphic forms of illustration, such as graphs, charts, and, most often, cartoons. In addition, *30 Days* is targeted at a crossover audience that ranges from high school and college students to viewers in their thirties and older. The main characters of the show include high school seniors, college juniors, young couples, and middle-aged professionals with children. In addition, the fact that Spurlock himself is still relatively close in age to a college audience (he was born in 1970) and that he began his career as an anchor for the MTV show *I Bet You Will* (which is set at college campuses around the U.S.) should ensure a basic willingness among German students to engage with this American media text. Moreover, as Spurlock explained on BBC's *HARDtalk*, the show is specifically directed at an audience at eye-level with its producers: "The most important goal for me is to make people think about what's happening [...] in a way that doesn't make you feel you're being preached to, that doesn't make you feel you're being talked down to." The objective of his work is "trying to break down the pieces [...] in a way that [...] is accessible" (Sackur). Implied author and implied reader, to pick up terms from literary narratology, are constructed as equals in terms of educational background and cultural competence.

3) *Intrinsic motivational power: Since classroom reading is not a voluntary but an enforced activity, only an "interesting" text or topic will appeal to an initially reluctant audience.* The simple fact that *30 Days* is a television series – i.e., a serial format with specific narratological structures and visual aesthetics with which students will most certainly be familiar – should motivate student interest. Moreover, the fast pace of action, the mix of documentary style footage with video diaries and cartoon segments, and the frequent incorporation of humorous scenes make *30 Days* an accessible and entertaining media text, despite the fact that it

⁶ Donnerstag and Volkmann have argued that television no longer seems to be the dominant medium for students and that digital media have now become the medium of choice as well as the medium that reflects students' cognitive style more adequately than television (6). While I generally agree with this assessment, I also think that new television formats, especially MTV shows like the ones just mentioned, have reacted to the pressures of media competition by focusing heavily on dialogue, interaction, and an on-screen didactics that enacts learning processes as entertainment. The title of Christina Meyer and Barbara Krah's DGfA workshop, as part of which an earlier version of this article was presented, captures this assumption: "Charm School, Talk Shows, Soap Operas and other TV-sites of (Cultural) Education."

deals with serious and hotly contested issues. Finally, the show's focus on personal interaction, character growth, and emotional identification rather than on the detached presentation of information can be used to engage students in critical analysis and discussion of individual conflicts and viewpoints.

4) *Degree of representativeness: Since only a few texts or topics can be dealt with in the available time, they need to be as representative of the target culture as possible.* In a university setting, time is not a problem since a semester's worth of classes could be devoted to the series. But even a two-week teaching unit on the high school level would offer enough time to explore the issues raised in one particular episode. In terms of its potential representativeness, I would argue that *30 Days* not only covers a wide spectrum of cultural conflicts (and is representative in that sense), but also that it puts discursive pressure on a variety of opinions that all claim to be representative at the expense of other opinions. The "Atheist & Christian" episode is good example in this context. Spurlock introduces the episode as one in which "diametrically opposing belief systems collide," and the ensuing action illustrates the difficulties the members of a Texan born-again family have with accepting the non-religious views of their guest Brenda. Particularly interesting are the different ways in which the family members handle the atheistic world view displayed by their guest. Michael, the father, never seems to get to the point where he can truly and fully accept her opinions – at one point he says that "we really don't know what you believe. We know what you don't believe." But his wife Tracy eventually realizes that she has much in common with Brenda, who, like her, is a mother and shares many of her concerns about raising children. In a similar manner, all of the episodes of *30 Days* selected above complicate the very notion that certain opinions are culturally representative while others are not.⁷

5) *Transfer value: Since what is learnt about foreign cultures must be assimilated into the learners' horizon, the objects of EFL-learning must possess aspects which can be transferred into their own world.* The central dynamic of the series – full cultural immersion for thirty days – resembles the experience most German students will undergo when they

⁷ As this example indicates, the viewer is supposed to identify mainly with Brenda, who is the focal character. In that sense, the episode betrays a preference for one particular perspective over another; Brenda's atheistic world view is privileged over Michael's and Tracy's evangelism. Yet it is noteworthy that this preference does not preclude an extended debate of the issues. When Brenda visits the local Bible study group, for instance, the participants question her about her convictions and get ample screen time to talk about their own beliefs. In contrast to Michael Moore, who frequently ridicules his political opponents, Spurlock allows them to present their arguments in greater detail and with a greater degree of sympathy. Moreover, he reverses the narrative logic of the cultural immersions he depicts: In some cases, the privileged perspective (and thus the editorial, directorial, bias) follows the person who enters the new culture, as in Brenda's case; in other cases, the narrative privileges the culture that is being entered, as is the case in the "Straight Man in a Gay World" episode.

spend time abroad. In addition, debates about poverty and outsourcing, the dialogue among different religions, the integration of immigrants, and ethical questions concerning environmental preservation, abortion, homosexuality, same-sex parenting, disability, animal rights, and gun control easily transfer to the high school or university student's world. Think, for instance, of the alarming series of school shootings in Germany (Erfurt, Emsdetten, Winnenden, Ansbach), which have raised questions about German gun laws and which could be discussed in the context of the "Gun Nation" episode, or the recent Swiss referendum against the building of minarets, which could be analyzed in relation to the episodes on "Immigration" and on "Muslims & America."⁸

Cultural and Media Studies Didactics

As I have indicated, *30 Days* is a worthwhile media text for the American Studies and EFL classrooms. But the question remains how the series can be usefully taught and studied. How can students be motivated to engage productively in the "intercultural dialogue with matters American" that Gerhard Bach and Jürgen Donnerstag identify as the central objective of "doing" American Studies [...] in German classrooms" (Bach & Donnerstag 315)? My suggestion is to approach *30 Days* through the lenses of current cultural and media studies and to understand the culture that has produced this series as a complex entity actively defined by concrete people (cf. Delanoy & Volkman 12). It is important to realize what this suggestion entails: it entails a shift away from "reading processes aiming at unity and closure" and instead "favors reading processes which emphasize difference, contradictions, rifts, covert meanings, hidden agendas, etc." (Bach & Donnerstag 316); it seeks to encourage an understanding of the target culture as a social, political, and discursive community that is diverse, plural, and heterogeneous; and it is interested in "teaching a controversial, contradictory image of America" (Volkman 373; cf. also 371).

The shift toward a cultural and media studies perspective has didactic consequences. If traditional *Area Studies* approaches "tend[ed] to simplify complex situations by reducing facts or by presenting idealised pictures" of the target culture, as Doris Teske maintains, approaches from the realm of *Cultural Studies* often "use individual case studies in order to analyse the complexity of current (and past) cultures and the individual's position in it" (Teske 25). They seek to attain moments of self-

⁸ Michael Moore's portrayal of the Columbine school shootings in *Bowling for Columbine* could be used to investigate not only different arguments presented in Moore's film and Spurlock's television episode but also to assess the different ways in which Moore and Spurlock approach and package their respective treatment of this event.

reflection through defamiliarization, facilitate processes of intercultural learning, create empathy with members of the target culture, and establish a dialogue between the self and representatives of that culture (cf. Teske 27). *Cultural Studies* approaches focus "on the role of the reader as an interlocutor and a partner in the communicative processes engendered by a text, film or video, a podcast or any other culturally significant medium" (Bach & Donnerstag 316), and they try to turn the study of foreign popular artifacts into a personally meaningful experience. As I will show in the following, *30 Days* constructs "America" as a diverse, plural, and heterogeneous culture, a culture that is shaped to a significant degree by controversies and contradictions. It also offers individual case studies rather than idealized pictures and, perhaps most importantly, places the process of cultural interaction at its very core and structure. Viewers are not only cultural interlocutors themselves, interacting with a media text from a foreign culture; they can also empathize with the personal experiences of cultural interlocutors on screen.⁹

In order to flesh out this argument, I want to discuss two episodes of *30 Days*, "Muslims and America" (season 1) and "Immigration" (season 2). "Muslims and America" stages what Spurlock calls "a clash of cultures," a resonant phrase that signals an awareness of post-9/11 sentiments toward Arab-Americans. In fact, the episode begins with a montage of film and cartoon clips from pre-9/11 times, which offer popular media images of Arab culture as "belly dancers and snake charmers and the *Arabian Nights*." These images are then contrasted with television footage of the World Trade Center attacks and terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. "Many Americans have new questions about their Muslim neighbors," Spurlock concedes, questions such as "Who are they? What does this religion [Islam] teach? What's it like to be Muslim in America?" Important in the context of my argument about *30 Days* as a didactic model is the change in perspective that underlies these questions. Like the opening sequence of the "Minimum Wage" episode, these questions start out from the seemingly normative perspective of an imagined American mainstream. Muslims in America are coded as Other ("Who are they?"), but the purpose of this encoding is not to stigmatize them as potential terrorists with anti-American views but rather to take stock of what many Americans actually believe. This becomes clear in various scenes in which Spurlock asks Americans on the street what they associate with the word "Islam" – the most frequent answer is "terrorism" –

⁹ In their chapter on intercultural communication, Nünning and Surkamp argue that the prime objective of a didactics of intercultural understanding is to de-center monolithic world views through cognitive and affective modes of learning: "Perspektivendifferenzierung"/"Perspektivenwechsel" (distinguish and switch among foreign perspectives) and "Perspektiventübernahme"/"Perspektivenkoordination" (adopt foreign perspectives and coordinate perspectives on a meta-level). Cf. Nünning & Surkamp 27-33.

and when he plays them a recording of the Muslim call to prayer, with which most of his interviewees are unfamiliar or, if they do know what it is, reject as un-American.¹⁰ Rather than come to a similar conclusion, Spurlock introduces two guiding questions with significant didactic potential, one of them cognitive (“What does this religion [Islam] teach?”), the other one affective (“What’s it like to be Muslim in America?”).

The episode’s central figure is Dave Stacy, a white Protestant from Charleston, West Virginia, who will spend a month with an Arab-American family in Dearborn, Michigan. Like all participants of *30 Days*, Stacy must follow three basic rules that require him to immerse himself fully into his new life. For Dave, these rules are dressing in the traditional Muslim grab (which includes growing a beard), observing all of the religious and cultural rituals of his host family, and reading the Koran daily. These rules have an immediate effect. At the Charleston airport, Dave is racially profiled on the basis of his clothes and headgear; as he later tells his host family, he has traveled from this airport many times, but this was the first time that he was being selected for a “random” search. He also relates to the camera that his new appearance has “really changed the way people react to me.” This initial irritation climaxes in a later discussion Dave has with Haaris Ahmed, a lawyer for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). While Dave thinks that he is undergoing a life-changing experience, Ahmed reminds him that “at the end of the day, after thirty days, you can go home to your wife and your kid, shave off your beard, and go back to being a white American, Anglo-American Christian. I don’t have that luxury.”

In another significant scene earlier in this episode, Dave is frustrated with the seemingly strange rules and regulations that structure the life of his host family, the Haques, who are of Pakistani decent. At the breakfast table, Shamael Haque requests Dave to leave the house when he goes to work because according to Islamic belief it would not be appropriate for Dave to stay in the same house with Saudia, Shamael’s wife, while her husband is away. Dave takes this request as a personal insult; he is hypersensitive toward what to him is an offensive request even though he seems to have no sense of his own insensitivity when he asks the Haques and their friends a few days later whether they know of any terrorist sleeper cell activity in their neighborhood. In addition, he struggles to reconcile what he believes to be an expression of gender intolerance with the family’s professional qualifications: Shamael is a doctor, and Saudia is studying to be a lawyer.

¹⁰ A later segment covers the public controversy over the call to prayer in Hamtramck, Michigan, where the major bone of contention is the question whether the call to prayer, which is issued five times a day, is similar to the ringing of church bells and thus protected by the U.S. Constitution.

Dave frequently confesses to the camera that he is afraid of “compromising my belief” and “turning my back on my faith.” His faith is tested, he feels, whenever he attends the common prayer at the neighborhood mosque. But it is tested beyond this immediate context as well: when he attends a bachelor party in Ann Arbor and when he talks to his spiritual advisor, the Imam Al Husaini. In both cases, actual intercultural dialogue takes place. Differences and contradictions, rather than unity and closure, characterize these exchanges. When Dave acknowledges that the event “is not like any bachelor party I have ever attended,” that it is “drastically different” from the cultural practices with which he is familiar, and when his Arab American hosts present this event as “our version of a bachelor party,” the viewer confronts diverse cultural practices that eventually lead to an intercultural learning experience. Dave, who takes on the role of the interlocutor, notes: “After you watch them pray, it seems like they’ve had some type of experience, that they connected on some pretty deep levels.” “I’m interested in learning,” he then tells the Imam, who engages him in a discussion – an intercultural and interreligious dialogue – that shows the possibilities and limits of intercultural communication. In this and other talks, the Imam urges Dave to consider the connections rather than differences between Christianity and Islam, to reflect on his own religion by seeing it through the eyes of an Imam.¹¹ Yet while the Imam sounds a note of religious reconciliation and understanding, he also tries to convince Dave of the superiority of the Islamic faith. What is more, he is also offended by Dave’s intercultural awkwardness. Unable to sense his student’s uneasiness with the new rules he is supposed to follow and unwilling to give Dave the benefit of the doubt, the Imam notes that Dave has neglected to take off his shoes, as the sign at the door had clearly commanded him to do: “Are you comfortable with this way of sitting?” he asks, noting that “the Muslims sit different” and that “facing shoes” violate the principle of showing the “highest level of politeness ... in the House of God.”

We see something similar in the “Immigration” episode, where we encounter contradictory images of America: the hardships of undocumented immigrants like the Gonzales family, whose seven members live in a tiny apartment in Los Angeles, and the nativist and nationalistic views of voluntary border patrollers like Frank George, a member of the Minutemen who sees it as his civic duty to report to the authorities those trying to cross the California-Texas border illegally. The individuals involved in this dialogue inhabit complex positions. Frank is actually Cuban and

¹¹ As part of his religious and cultural introduction to Islam and as part of the episode’s didactic interest in explaining Islam, Dave learns about the purpose and meaning of *Juma* (Friday prayer), the *Halal* (rules for living, for instance the banning of alcohol and pork), and the *Hjab* (the headscarf worn by Muslim women).

speaks Spanish fluently. He fled his home country with his parents during the Cuban revolution in 1957 and has to reconcile his own status as an immigrant with his anti-immigration sentiments. Frank's past apparently fuels his present efforts to prevent illegal border-crossings. In what seems to be a process of overcompensation, he laments the loss of the America he learned to love (and most likely idealized) when he became an American citizen. Witnessing thousands of Latino demonstrators on the streets of Los Angeles who demand citizenship for undocumented immigrants, he speaks of the event as the beginning of a revolution and fears the "dissolution of this country."

In an earlier scene, in which he is just about to meet his host family, Frank tells the camera that he feels an "anxiety with respect to how I may be received because I am not in all in favor of them being here illegally. I'll be very honest, you know, my thought is to arrive and thirty seconds later have an INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] bus come and pick them up." One of the Gonzales daughters, Armita, who is a model student about to finish high school, quickly seizes on the incongruities in Frank's self-understanding. Shocked by Frank's rigorous rejection of the Amnesty law debated in the Senate at the time of their discussion – the law would grant undocumented immigrants like Armita and her parents legal status – Armita asks: "Don't you feel like a hypocrite because you were born in Cuba?" For Frank, however, adherence to the rule of law is more important than pitying those who suffer from its consequences: "But we're a nation of laws. It's very important that we abide by our laws."

This exchange is followed by two brief statements Armita and Frank record on their video diaries, talking directly to the camera. In didactic terms, this is important because they comment on the preceding scene and issue a personal appeal to the viewer to listen to their arguments. Armita reiterates the basic setup of the experiment when she expresses the wish that Frank "really gets to see what we go through through our eyes." At this point of the immersion experience, Frank is still unwilling to budge: "If I could deport the Gonzales's tomorrow, I would have to. It's the way the law is written." These statements also serve to remind the viewer of the immense gap between the different argumentative positions, and I think that they communicate very clearly that both speakers have deeply felt convictions and personal beliefs at stake in the debate.

In what is perhaps the most insightful scene from an American Studies standpoint, Armita questions Frank's notion of what it means to be an American. "You're an immigrant, like the Pilgrims were immigrants," she suggests, to which he replies: "Yes, but I am a legal immigrant." Unsatisfied with this distinction, Armita asks: "Were the Pilgrims legal, too?" Unaware that Armita is actually the more perceptive debater, Frank

argues that "they were legal in the sense that England owned America at that time," an argument that prompts another question: "How did they own it, though?" Frank is essentially lost: "Well, because they took it over ...," he concludes, and Armita finishes his sentence: "... by force." This short exchange is not only a nice illustration of rhetorical finesse and argumentative logic, but it connects the debate about illegal immigration from South of the border with dominant beliefs about American history and national identity and could thus be used as a starting point for a teaching unit on America as a country of immigration. In another diary segment, Armita even argues that her personal struggles as an undocumented immigrant in the United States relate directly to the ideology of the American dream: "This is what this nation is known for, you know, the American dream. And for him to want to stop that is, like, insane."

While Frank initially comes across as being absolutely inflexible and unwilling to acknowledge the concerns of his host family, he undergoes a personal development when he witnesses the mother Patti's love for her children (she collects empty bottles and cans and saves the money she gets for them at the recycling center for Christmas presents) and when he travels to Mexico to see the brother of Rigoberto. The Gonzales family has not been able to return to Mexico because they are afraid that they will not be able to return to the U.S. In the twelve years in which they have lived in Los Angeles, the younger children have not met their grandparents, and Patti was unable to see her parents before they died. Appalled by the poor living conditions in Mexico, Frank finally recognizes the Gonzales's wish to have a better life in the U.S. as legitimate. Upon returning from Mexico, he discusses his trip with Rigoberto. Conversing in Spanish, Rigoberto declares that the only way for his brother to rise out of poverty would be to leave Mexico and enter the U.S. illegally, to which Frank responds: "although I oppose this, I understand." He has learned to empathize on a personal level, but he still clings to his political convictions.¹²

¹² This episode and episodes like "Muslims and America" include a good amount of non-English conversations. While one might think that this decreases the suitability of the material for the EFL classroom, I believe that it actually increases it. For one, the amount of conversation in English is substantial enough to provide opportunities for listening comprehension and vocabulary training. Secondly, several people in both episodes speak American English with a foreign accent – the Imam Al Husaini with an Arab accent; Armita with a Mexican accent, etc. Being able to understand non-native English speakers, of whom there are a great number in the U.S., is an important prerequisite for intercultural competence. Thirdly, literary and cultural scholars like Werner Sollors have long advocated the study of non-English literatures and cultural artifacts in the United States (cf. Sollors). To confine our understanding of American literature and culture to English-language productions alone means to curb many of the complexities that constitute this literature and culture and to venerate certain speakers and perspectives over others. At least from an American Studies standpoint, excluding these episodes because they contain conversations in languages other than English makes little sense. Finally, since these conversations are subtitled in English, they can be used to practice reading skills.

Frank's final words to the Gonzales family, which he utters in Spanish, appear like a gesture toward the importance of intercultural empathy: "What I've learned the most here was to understand and receive your point of view directly from you. Because you can read a book, but a book does not laugh, a book does not cry, a book doesn't have memories. A book is not a human being." Moreover, in the final moments of the episode, Frank tells the camera that "I've walked away with another perspective involving human beings" and that "there comes a time when you love people for who they are. All politics aside." This perspective is certainly a sentimental one, one that assumes that social, racial, religious, and national differences can be overcome through direct contact and interaction. It recalls the scene in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Eliza arrives at the house of Senator Bird and his wife. The senator has just secured the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, which allows slave masters to cross the Ohio River into free territory and take escaped slaves back into slavery. "[H]is idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word, – or, at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle, with 'Ran away from the subscriber under it,'" Stowe's narrator observes. "The magic of the real presence of distress, – the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony, – these he had never tried" (Stowe 77).

According to this understanding, by putting oneself into the position of others and by experiencing their hardships directly, people can overcome their prejudices and resentments – empathy leads to understanding leads to reconciliation, the formula seems to be. I would argue, however, that this is not necessarily, or at least not exclusively, the claim made by the show. Rather, Frank's sentimental assumption that he can fully understand what the members of his host family go through on a daily basis is the personal conclusion of one specific participant. The closing credits that follow Frank's sentimental words introduce a moment of doubt about whether the immersion experience will lead to a lasting change in his attitude toward the issue of immigration. They note that after returning to his regular life, Frank continued to be a member of the Minutemen and only left the border patrolling to others. While he is still involved in the fight against illegal immigration, he is now appealing directly to politicians to remedy the problems caused by illegal immigration. Thus, his focus has changed from spotting and reporting individuals to seeking political solutions; he is no longer preoccupied with deporting immigrants but is at least willing to consider ways in which immigration may be managed responsibly.

Classroom Activities and Projects

The fact that many immersion experiences on *30 Days* end with a personal appreciation and an increased understanding of the cultural practices of others leads to questions of media awareness and media literacy. Here, Laurenz Volkmann's suggestions for teaching Michael Moore's films can be applied. Volkmann lists four areas in which a nuanced understanding of these films may be achieved (cf. 374).

1) *Understanding the role of the media in producing national (self-) images and how this can be described in the case of Moore's films.* This is actually the most difficult category of the four and should probably be tackled after students have had some practice analyzing and interpreting *30 Days*. In the context of the series, important questions are whether the empathetic approach and focus on individual experiences trivializes social conflicts and political disputes and whether popular entertainment, even if it pursues didactic goals, will move viewers from passive consumption to active social and political participation.

2) *Understanding how media stars fashion themselves and become marketable commodities; [i.e.,] how and to what ends Michael Moore fashions his media persona.* In *30 Days*, and to an even greater extent in *Super Size Me* and Spurlock's latest film, *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?* (2008), Spurlock's persona as writer, director, host, and actor offers ample material for study. Distinctions from literary studies among empirical author, implied author, narrator, and character could be applied in a narratological analysis of the series; Spurlock's self-presentation as "an unassuming film-maker from West Virginia" (back cover of *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?*) could be analyzed as a marketing ploy; Spurlock's public persona on and off-screen could be compared to Michael Moore's self-fashioning.

3) *Understanding how information is selected, processed, and presented in the medium of film.* Spurlock has defended himself against allegations of simplifying complex issues and selling his persona at the expense of exploring the root causes of social and political conflicts. He explained on BBC's *HARDtalk*, where he discussed *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?*: "We shot 900 hours of footage that you edit down into a 90-minute film. You have to make choices, at the same time, that suit a narrative" (Sackur). Statements such as this could be used to think about the narrative structures and strategies of *30 Days*. This would include looking closely at the selection of factual information (what social and political biases can be detected?), the characterization of participants (are certain positions treated more favorably than others, and with whom are viewers supposed to identify?), and the functions of television tech-

niques (trailer, voice-over narration, editing, camera perspectives, soundtrack, 45-minute format).

4) *Understanding how Moore's products "travel" and attain culture-specific forms and patterns of reception.* One could start with an analysis of paratexts such as DVD cover designs and continue with an exploration of television reviews and blog entries by fans and critics of *30 Days*. Interviews with Spurlock are an especially intriguing subject area because they combine points two and four: They constitute moments in which a particular persona is fashioned, but they also show different ways in which this persona is received by journalists.

My suggestions for classroom activities and projects are based on two key thoughts. First, as Bach and Donnerstag have observed, contemporary teaching methodology stresses the importance of appealing to the students' "cognitive, pragmatic, and affective domains." They argue that "[t]he first two domains are concerned with cultural knowledge and the transfer of knowledge through practical negotiation between culturally diverse assumptions. The affective domain entails an attitude of respect and tolerance on the part of the learners as they are confronted with values and norms different from their own" (Bach & Donnerstag 317). Second, as Doris Teske has noted, a didactics rooted in "Cultural Studies [...] will most often resort to the ethnographic method of analytical observation of specific groups or single persons, stressing the validity of the case study and the importance of narrative" (Teske 30). *30 Days* is an almost paradigmatic example of transferring cultural knowledge – for instance about U.S. immigration laws and the precarious living conditions of undocumented workers in California, or of Muslim American lifestyles – through practical negotiation, not only between culturally diverse assumptions but also between specific individuals: Frank George's anti-immigrant views vs. the economic dreams of his Mexican host family, or Dave Stacy's concerns with sleeper cells and terrorist activities in Dearborn vs. his host Shamael Haque and his wife Saudia's experiences of discrimination and distrust. Here we see the narrative powers of the case study and personal narrative. We also see a doubly coded affective process: on the intradiegetic level, the emotionally charged confrontation between Frank's political views and his personal empathy with his host family or between Dave's religious views and the divergent views of his hosts; on the extradiegetic level, the German student's confrontation with the differences and contradictions that structure lives in the target culture complicates one-dimensional readings of this culture.

Classroom activities that would support cognitive, pragmatic, and affective learning processes include mock debates in which students argue within the respective mindset of an episode's opposing parties, collabora-

tive research projects that place individual case studies within larger cultural contexts, and reviews of episodes or feature articles for an imaginary television guide or news magazine. Following Wolfgang Hallet's suggestion of reading closely as well as widely (cf. Hallet), one could ask students to take the "Muslims and America" episode as a starting point for a project aimed at exploring the history and cultural diversity of Dearborn. The Arab American museum in Dearborn would be a good place to start (www.arabamericanmuseum.org); additional case studies could be the anti-Semitic views vented in Henry Ford's newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, as well as Jeffrey Eugenides's literary depiction of Dearborn and its inhabitants in *Middlesex*. Pursuing a media-focused approach, a YouTube-based project could analyze Spurlock's self-presentation in interviews, for example his appearance on MSNBC's *Morning Joe Show* in July of 2008. Moreover, several Spurlock fan sites offer an abundance of material about his work and activities. If students are interested, creating a website that presents interpretation and contextualization of *30 Days*, for example in the form of reviews, blogs, research papers, hyperlinks, etc., would be a way to facilitate media competence. Finally, students could be asked to apply the objections raised by Stephen Sackur about *Where in the World Is Osama bin Laden?* to an episode of *30 Days*. Sackur questions Spurlock's "Mary Poppins filmmaking technique [...] [that] tr[ies] to get across information but [...] sugarcoat[s] it with entertainment values" and eventually loses "any credible information whatsoever."¹³

Conclusion

The first goal of this contribution was to demonstrate the usefulness of *30 Days* as an educational resource. The "Muslims and America" episode, for instance, provides a substantial amount of factual information and cultural context, including statistics about the changing demographics of Dearborn, a short history of Islam, and segments on various cultural traditions (gender roles, food, language). Second, I have tried to pinpoint the show's potential as a didactic model that promotes a personal mode of cultural investigation – walking in someone else's shoes for thirty days – and presents on screen a didactics of intercultural understanding. German students have the added benefit of a triple perspective: a) they can empathize with the different cultural positions depicted in the series, b) they can see the process of intercultural communication play out on the TV screen, and c) they relate to this process from a third-space perspective of the cultural outsider interested in learning about the ways in which

¹³ See also the companion book, *Where in the World Is Osama bin Laden*, which follows the narrative of the film but provides additional research and information.

Americans negotiate identities and debate their understanding of what it means to be American.¹⁴ Third, the shift from an *Area Studies* to a *Cultural Studies* perspective is demanded by the source material, which presents an understanding of culture as dialogue, negotiation, and controversy and provides a quasi-ethnographic view of selected case studies. Fourth, as a commercial television series, *30 Days* can be used to create media awareness, literacy, and competence. My point is certainly not that *30 Days* is unproblematic teaching material or that the show gives students immediate access to an authentic cultural experience. Rather, the point is to use the show to encourage students to explore the issues, engage in controversy, and think about the ways in which popular culture represents, mediates, and sells cultural experiences.

Works Cited

- Bach, Gerhard, and Jürgen Donnerstag. "Introduction: Teaching American Studies in the Twenty-First Century." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 52.3 (2007): 315-20.
- Delanoy, Werner, and Laurenz Volkmann. "Introduction: Cultural Studies in the EFL Classroom." *Cultural Studies in the EFL Classroom*. Ed. Werner Delanoy, and Laurenz Volkmann. Heidelberg: Winter, 2006, 11-21.
- Donnerstag, Jürgen, and Laurenz Volkmann, eds. *Media and American Studies in the EFL-Classroom*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2008.
- Freese, Peter. *'America': Dream or Nightmare?* 2nd rev. and enl. ed. Essen: Die blaue Eule, 1991.
- . "American Studies and EFL-Teaching in Germany: A Troubled Relationship." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 50.1.2 (2005): 183-229.
- Hallett, Wolfgang. "Close Reading and Wide Reading: Teaching Literature and Cultural History in a Unit on Philip K. Dick's 'Minority Report.'" *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 52.3 (2007): 381-97.
- Kelleter, Frank, and Wolfgang Knöbl, eds. *Deutschland und Amerika: Ambivalente Begegnungen*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006.
- , and Daniel Stein, eds. *American Studies as Media Studies*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2008.
- Morning Joe Show. MSNBC. Interview with Morgan Spurlock. 7 March 2008. ><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03O80mLwrls>< (12/13/09).

¹⁴ Nünning and Surkamp (29-31) offer a useful distinction among four levels of intercultural understanding, the first three of which I have addressed in this article: the story level ("Ebene des dargestellten Fremdverstehens"), the discourse level ("Ebene der erzählerischen Vermittlung"), the level of text/media reception ("rezeptionsästhetisches Fremdverstehen"), and the level of real-life experience ("Ebene des lebensweltlichen Verstehens").

- Nünning, Ansgar, and Carola Surkamp. "Text – Literatur – Kultur: Handlungs- und produktionsorientierter Literaturunterricht." *Englischunterricht*. Ed. Gerhard Bach, and Johannes-Peter Timm. 3rd ed. Tübingen: Francke, 2003, 149-71.
- . *Englische Literatur unterrichten: Grundlagen und Methoden*. Seelze: Kallmeyer/Klett, 2006.
- Sackur, Stephen. Interview with Morgan Spurlock. BBC HARDtalk. 14 May 2008. ><http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/hardtack/7400400.stm>< (12/13/2009).
- Sollors, Werner, ed. *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Spurlock, Morgan. *Where in the World Is Osama bin Laden*. London: Vintage, 2008.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. 1852. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Super Size Me*. Dir. Morgan Spurlock. Fortissimo Films, 2004.
- Teske, Doris. "Cultural Studies: Key Issues and Approaches." *Cultural Studies in the EFL Classroom*. Ed. Werner Delanoy, and Laurenz Volkmann. Heidelberg: Winter, 2006, 23-33.
- 30 Days. First Season*. Dir. Morgan Spurlock. FX Networks, 2005/2006.
- 30 Days. Second Season*. Dir. Morgan Spurlock. FX Networks, 2007.
- Volkmann, Laurenz. "Our 'Favorite American' – Teaching Michael Moore." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 52.3 (2007): 361-79.
- Where in the World Is Osama Bin Laden?* Dir. Morgan Spurlock. Non-Linear Films, 2008.