

Flash Gordon (dir. Mike Hodges, 1980)

Lesson by Fabienne Crocket, Teach First

History,
Key Stage 3

In this lesson, students will be introduced to the concept of a dictatorship. The beginning of the lesson will focus on establishing the key characteristics of dictatorships. Learners will then explore the implications of living in a dictatorship through watching *Flash Gordon* and creating a role-play about overthrowing Ming the Merciless. Students will be encouraged to use performance and melodrama to explore the motivations of the various parties involved in Ming's dictatorship.

Lesson Objectives

- To be able to distinguish between democracy and dictatorship
- To consider the different perspectives of people living in a dictatorship through the setting and characters depicted in *Flash Gordon*

Curriculum Links

- **Content:** The rise of dictators in the 20th Century
- **Skills:** Understanding the concept of dictatorship

You will need...

Trailer

Propaganda poster based on comic books (provided in attached PPT)

Main Attraction

DVD (timings)

Democracy dictatorship worksheet (provided below)

End Credits

Character profile worksheet and role-play success criteria.

Activities

TRAILER: Who is Ming?

Students are shown a propaganda style poster based on the comic book version of *Flash Gordon*. Students choose a sentence to finish off and write it on a post-it note. They then compare with their partner. Alternatively students could walk around the room and find people to compare with.

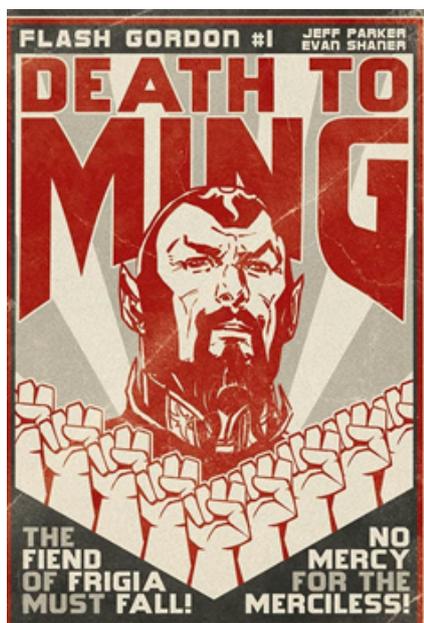
This activity is to get students thinking from different perspectives, and thinking specifically about what might have happened to make the person/group who produced the poster so angry.

The word 'merciless' would potentially need to be clarified, and students could begin to think about what kind of 'person' Ming the Merciless would be? What job do they think he does etc.?

Differentiation:

Sentence starters

Extension: 'what do you think Ming's side of the story is?'



Who

I think this poster was made by....

Why

I think they made it because...

What

I think Ming is a ...

Where/when

I think this poster was made in...

MAIN ATTRACTION: What is a dictatorship?

Students watch a 20-minute extract of the film about thirty minutes in, a section which reveals the political climate of Planet Mongo, and will show how Ming acts as a dictator. Flash Gordon has been tricked into launching into space by Dr Zarkov and has just been arrested by Ming's officers, despite trying to initiate communication in a positive fashion. This

Give students the Dictatorship or Democracy handout (see below). One column is a list of the characteristics of democracy, the other is a list of the characteristics of a dictatorship. They must tick off the characteristics that they see depicted in the film.

AfL: Class vote - Is Planet Mongo a dictatorship or a democracy? Thumbs up for dictatorship, thumbs down for democracy. Take feedback on why and how it is a dictatorship.

END CREDITS: Melodrama

As a class, brainstorm adjectives to describe the style of *Flash Gordon*. Alternatively, for classes with lower levels of literacy, provide a list of adjectives and students identify the ones that apply (for example: ridiculous, subtle, colourful, understated, over-the-top, boring, dramatic etc)

Students are divided into groups of five and are each given a character profile (see below). They must use this to inform their role-play.

Each group must create a role-play depicting an attempt to overthrow Ming. Emphasise to the class that they are trying to replicate the style of the film, e.g. OTT, melodramatic, comic book style. Use a volunteer to model melodrama, e.g. saying a sentence normally, and then saying it melodramatically. Tell class that any violent scenes must be acted in slow-motion to minimise risk.

Performance of role-plays:

Depending on time constraints, students watching can decide to shout out FREEZE. They must then have a question to ask one of the characters.

Extras

Other Ideas

Students could apply the concept of dictatorship to other historical contexts they have learnt about or know about. Could be done as a similarities/differences table, a Venn diagram or a map. Could also be done by using contemporary news articles/cartoon strips.

Students could also discuss the potential problems that Flash Gordon's intervention might cause and apply this to other historical contexts e.g. British colonialism.

You might also discuss how Ming is characterised and the film's possible xenophobic and racist depiction of Asian leader. Could Ming's portrayal be construed as offensive? What kind of stereotypes are deployed?

Read

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury (1953)

Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell (1949)

Forbidden Planet by Fred M. Wilcox (1956)

Watch

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977)

Planet of the Apes (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968)

SCI-FI

DAYS OF FEAR AND WONDER

DEMOCRACY		DICTATORSHIP	
In a democracy the leader of the party with the most votes is in control, but they still have to answer to their political party, and the voters.		In a dictatorship there's just one leader who has total control over the party and the country.	
In a democracy political parties represent different points of view and compete for the votes of the electorate. In a democracy political power is secured by winning a fair election.		In a dictatorship the government tightly controls all aspects of the state and will often ban or tightly control groups and meetings.	
In a democracy newspapers are free to print the truth and can criticise the government when mistakes are made or if there's disagreement.		A dictatorship completely disregards the rights of individual citizens. The government and state will try to control all citizens through laws, police, spying and force. The government and state is the most important thing to a dictatorship.	
In a democracy, the government has less control over how people spend their time and what they believe. People are free to join clubs, political parties and other groups.		In a dictatorship there is only one group who are in control – all opposition is repressed, banned or destroyed.	



Your name is Ming the Merciless

- You are the emperor of Planet Mongo.
- You want to destroy Planet Earth
- You believe that in execution as a form of punishment, and you are prepared to execute Flash.
- You believe that power is important
- You are obsessed with Dale and are trying to make her marry you.

Your name is Prince Vultan

- You are the leader of the Hawkmen (an army of bird like men)
- You do not like Ming the Merciless but you are too scared to try and overthrow him.
- Flash Gordon wants you to help him overthrow Ming the Merciless



Your name is General Klytus

- You are the commander of Ming's secret police force
- You are Ming's right-hand man and will do anything to keep him happy. This means making sure Flash Gordon is dead.
- You are a robot which means you do not have any opinions of your own.



Your name is Flash Gordon.

- You are the hero of the story and you are in love with Dale
- You think Ming should be overthrown because he does not treat his citizens with respect and does not give them enough freedom.
- Even more importantly he wants to destroy Earth, which is where you are from.
- You want need to try and persuade Prince Vultan to help you overthrow Ming.

Your name is Dale Arden

- You have travelled from Earth with Flash Gordon, who you are in love with
- Ming is obsessed with you and tries to make you marry him
- You are very brave and kind-hearted, although sometimes you trust people too easily.

