DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 385 TE 001 215

By-Grenier, Charles F.

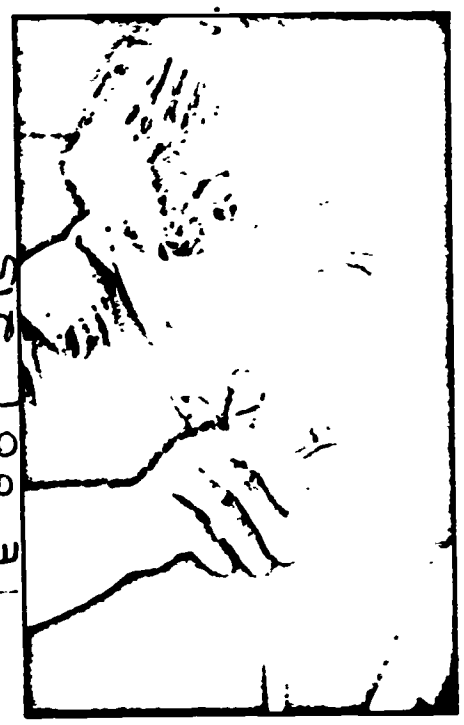
Film Study Hang Ups.

Pub Date Jan 69
Note-4p.
Journal Cit-Educators Guide to Media & Methods; v5 n5 p31-3 Jan 1969
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.30
Descriptors-Audiovisual Communication, Creative Teaching, Discussion (Teaching Technique), Empathy, *English Instruction, Films, *Film Study, *Identification (Psychological), Role Perception, Self Concept, Student Attitudes, Student Experience, *Teaching Methods

The interest and delight which students find in film should be preserved from a teacher's excessive zeal to analyze and explain. As the beauty of poetry is frequently diminished through exhaustive analyses of similes, rhyme schemes, and other technical devices, the value of film to high school students can be weakened through too great an emphasis on "film appreciation, movie comprehension, image recognition, visual-media technology," and other standard but dull teaching devices. Rather than following such methods, a teacher should watch and react to the film with his students, talk with them afterward, listen to their opinions, guide them back to the film when necessary, let them explore relationships between the film and their imaginations and lives, and, above all, let them see the film their own way. Instead of explaining how and what the film means, the teacher should encourage the student to expand his awareness through empathy and identification with what he sees in the film. (LH)

MEDIA & METHODS

January 1969 Vol. 5, No. 5



How to read this issue

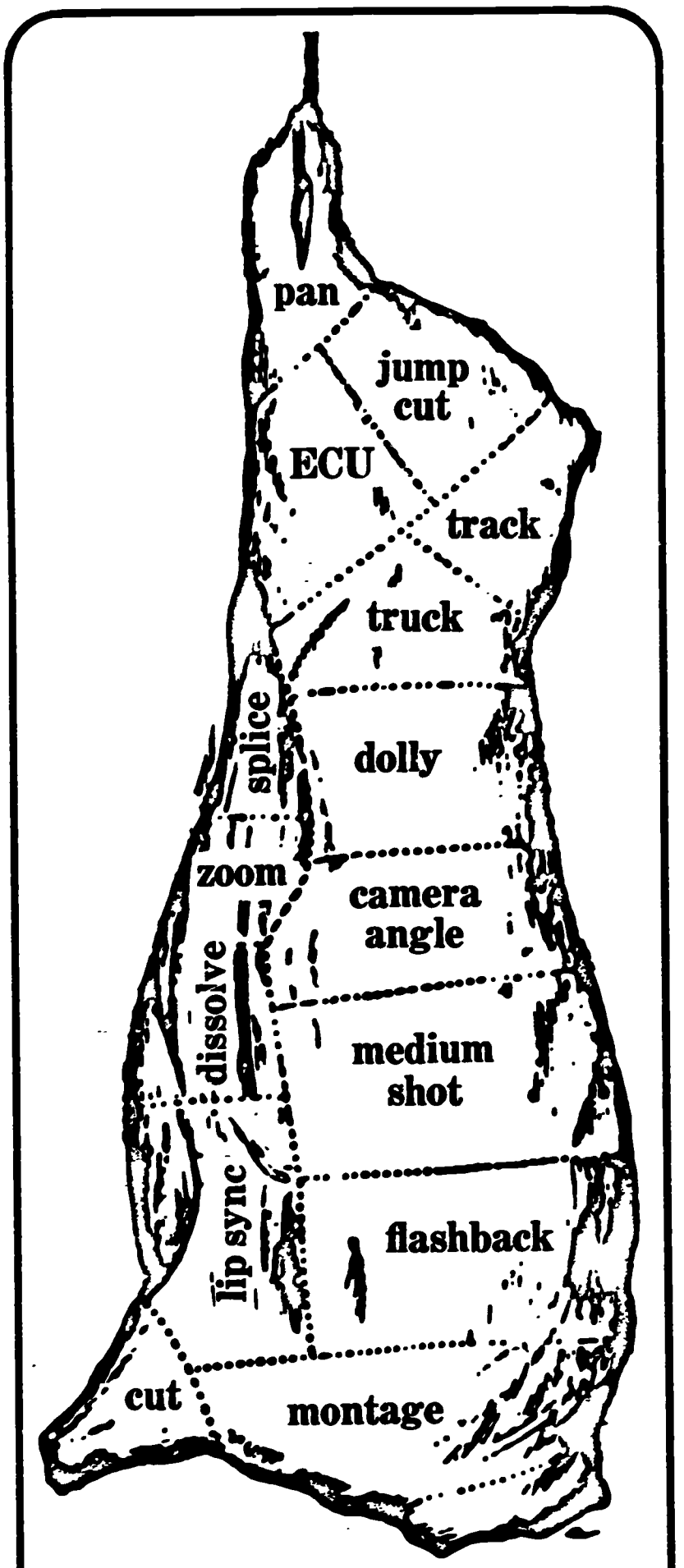
If you can identify half the people on this month's cover, there's still hope for you. Three-quarters? You're on your way. This assemblage represents a mini-roster of "popular" culture figures who engage the attention of today's kids and should, ideally, engage yours too. If you're not familiar with them (by their works, if not their faces), you may be interrupting your students education.

Somewhere between absolute topicality and the irrelevance of textbook interment lies a middle ground of ideas, people, values and events that are not yet of mere academic interest, yet are far enough from the modish aspects of popular culture to be truly substantive. We feel this middle ground should be the primary concern of education today.

Frank McLaughlin's opening article **(A Recipe for Triggering Relevance,** p. 22) sets the issue theme: if students don't appropriate knowledge, there is no learning. Simple enough—but the teacher, not the student bears the primary responsibility for the learning. To take a lesson from the "real" world: If a TV commercial is not successful, it is not the audience that is taken to task. The copywriter is fired, or the agency is changed. Likewise, if you are not making contact with your students, the last thing that should enter your mind is their possible perversity. Out there, beyond the classroom walls, there is a world kids don't find painful, something to be gotten through, boring. They relate to it naturally, informally and meaningfully. From it they assimilate a set of values, a code of conduct that is workable for them, although it may lack coherence and be felt rather than reasoned. It is this world that the classroom must relate to—at least for now (Who knows what manner of learning the exigencies of the environment will demand in 1975? Maybe how to make stone tools).

Most of the articles in this issue seek to relate that "real" world to the formal learning process. **From Pepperland With Love** (p. 43) discusses **The Yellow Submarine,** a Beatles film, which should be playing near you. Your students will see it—and will certainly be interested in talking about it if you see it also. Charles Grenier **(Film Study Hang Ups,** p. 31) discusses ways of saving film from the cold death of overanalysis. **Hugh Hefner Wears PJ's** (p. 40) offers a probe into a phenomenon probably familiar to most of your (male) students: "Playboy." **Doing Real English** (p. 38) discusses a way of, well, doing real English: publishing a magazine.

Bibliotherapy, by Frank Ross (p. 34), takes paperbacks off the shelf and puts them on the couch, where they can be used to compensate for a raft of teenage disorders. William Sloan, editor of "Film Library Quarterly," reviews the best of recent short films (p. 50). Because his reviews appear regularly and are generally of short breath, they gravitate toward the back of the magazine where they may escape notice. That's unfortunate. If you think that "stuff" in the back of the book is there to fill up space, we urge you to take a good look at it. **Short Films** provides a topical and accurate guide to the best in that format. A new column appears this month. **Theatrical Films** (p. 56) comments on the current movie scene. It will appear as often as good films appear.



Film Study Hang Ups

My heart leaps up when I behold
An image on the screen
So was it when my life began
So is it now I am a man
Or take away my dexedrine!

BY CHARLES F. GRENIER. That sound you just heard was not a projector gone awry. It was Mr. Wordsworth spinning in his grave. Rest easy, William, I'm on your side. As a lifetime member of SPEAR, *The Society for the Prevention of Explaining Away Rainbows,* my plea is to those teachers who have discovered or are about to discover that movies are, to use John Culkin's phrase, "a way to help kids learn stuff." It is directed especially to those of us who were raised according to the doctors Brooks and Warren, we who addressed our fan mail to the "how does a poem mean" people, and founded our *modus operandi* on the principle that you can't really appreciate your watch, or your Wildcat, or your wife until you know how the engine works. I take my stand beside the little girl who upon being asked to criticize a book she'd been sent remarked, "This book tells me more about penguins than I care to know." The "what does it mean and how does it work" principle forces kids to search out the symbols, to seek various levels of interpretation, to study the parts, memorize the connections, and analyse the structure—there is a place for everything and everything in its place. But what happens to feelings? What happens to imaginations? "Hey, where did the SOUL get to? The SOUL is where it's at, man, and the SOUL fell through the grate!"

How many of you have led kids along John Ciardi's "The Way to the Poem"? Worse yet, how many of you have handed them the programmed learning books which turn the whole experience of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" into setting the gap, changing the plugs, and cleaning the points—a tune-up instead of a tune-in. Mr. Ciardi goes to work on "Stopping By Woods" with the smug assurance of a master mechanic who also happens to be the shop steward. A few squirts of *Slipeeze,* three lights taps with the hammer, some dazzling twists and turns of screwdriver and wrench and Mr. Frost's poem is reduced to a pile of nuts and bolts which lie strewn all over the classroom floor. Its SOUL, whatever that is, seems to have fallen through the grate but, by God, we know now and forever exactly what Mr. Ciardi thinks Frost's poem means. Never mind that "HOW" does a poem mean jazz; it's just another way of telling us WHAT the poem means. And we listen. Ciardi's voice rings with authority; his explaination is logical; he lays the facts on us; the meaning is as clear as the blueprints for our breadboard.

So, the moon isn't made of green cheese after all, and rainbows are simply the refraction of light rays passing through water vapor, and, "See, you dummy, Peter Pan can't really fly; them are wires holding him up!" I'm reminded, rather sadly, of a line from Antoine de Saint-Exupery's remarkable story, *The Little Prince:* "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

* * *

What has seeing with the heart to do with teaching kids stuff via the film? Well, just about everything. Films are still fun for kids; poetry, before teachery teachers blindfolded our hearts, used to be fun. "Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall" and so did we, holding our sides with laughter. Remember the *Jabberwock* with all those goofy words like "brillig" and "slithy toves"? And what about the landlord's black-eyed daughter who stood up in the moonlight and shot off her tit—wow, right there on page 52 of the old English book! And the poem about "flying

on laughter-silvered wings" and, later, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." Really, some of it wasn't bad. In fact, some of it was OK. That is if you didn't thump out all the accented syllables; if you didn't underline and label the similes and metaphors, and mark down the rhyme patterns. It could be good if you let it have its way with you without all that tinkering and testing. Talk about it, sure, find out what other kids felt about it and thought about it, and maybe even make a poem of your own. But don't see it only with your eyes. Don't turn it into a "subject." Don't teach the fun out of it. Don't let its soul slip away between the lines on the answer sheet.

Films, especially short modern films, are in many ways like poems. If we teachers do to these films what we've done to poetry, if we turn birch trees into metaphysical Christ figures and put dreams of wild horses into objective correlatives, the kids will switch us off entirely. There's always the sugar cube route to a home-blown movie of your very, very own.

I've been showing lots of films in my classes for the past three years. The difficulties arising out of extensive film use go far beyond burned out projector bulbs and erratic window shades. If you opt for films, not the least of your problems will be the universal administrator with his egg crate way of looking at things. "A two period block of time to see movies? You must be out of your mind! What do you suppose an arrangement like that will do to the lunch program? And think of the bus schedule! And how are you going to evaluate? Films are expensive. We'll need something on paper and objective measurements! Maybe the state department distributes standardized tests: Film Appreciation, Movie Comprehension, Image Recognition, Visual-Media Vocabulary. Surely they have something. Write and see what's available." It is almost impossible for adults, particularly those who've been duped into assuming positions of authority, to understand what is important. When you say to them that you've found a film that will help suburban white kids get the *feel* of what it is to grow up black in Watts, they just want to know how much it costs, and will it run longer than fifty minutes, and are there any four-letter words in it. They have gotten in the habit of looking straight ahead and "straight ahead of him, nobody can go very far. . . ."

In working with films, however, the teacher is usually his own worst enemy. He's as locked into the system as the administrator. It's most difficult for him to change his way of doing things, his way of looking straight ahead. After all, once you've learned the lines, acting God is the best part in the play. It's a hard role to give up. It's only natural to want to stand majestically in the center of the "See MY film syndrome." "I've sat through *Mosaic* eight times and I know what it means and I'm going to tell you so that you will know what it means and perhaps finally realize how intelligent I am!"

Many of us, unfortunately, never get off our Brooks and Warren bidet. We operate out of the safe and sanitary water closets we prefabricated during "Literary Criticism II" at old Siwash U. "Ladies and gentlemen, let us isolate each part, each part, as it were, *in isolato*. Row one take TONE, row two IMAGERY, row three THEME, row four RHYTHM, row five (the dum-dums) you take PLOT, that's pLot, not pot, ha, ha. Now what is it we're studying: a film, a poem, a play, a political speech? No matter. Just so we get at what is elementary, and that often takes a good deal of grunting and sweating. Now, break down each isolated part to its component parts, word by word or shot by shot, and reduce each part to its lowest common denominator, to its essence. That done, let us see how many of you come up with the right interpretation—MY INTERPRETATION!" Fundamental fundament!

Film is as susceptible to distortion and ultimate destruction as poetry. The Ciardis, the Brooks and Warrens of film are beginning to rear their polished heads.

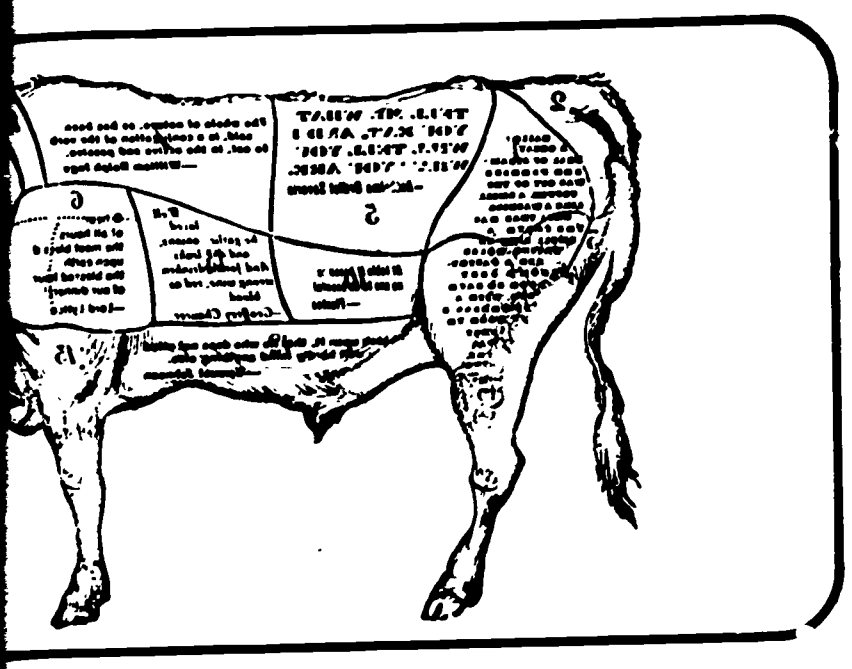
Then there's the guilt. You can't help feeling guilty about showing movies. "But gee, they're interesting and fun, what are they doing here in a classroom?" So we reach for a ditto master. "Just a quiz, a tiny ten point quiz. Got to keep them awake. Got to keep them honest. Maybe at the end of the month a unit test to see how much they remember."

Too often a teacher's enthusiasm for movies is based on a quick survey of *The Filmviewer's Handbook* and his shooting of a fifty-foot roll at his sister's kid's birthday party. Instant expert! "Oh, the jump-cuts, the terrific jump-cuts! No one does jump-cuts like the Perrys. You boys and girls should be able to write at least a few paragraphs about the meaningful use of jump-cuts in *David and Lisa*. And how would you feel about a research paper on polarization systems, wouldn't that be interesting?" If you wish to use rather than misuse films you must first either climb down from your pedestal or arise from your chamber-pot, and, when you get started don't look straight ahead and don't try to see only with your eyes.

Enough of what not to do. Let's get positive. So there are problems; how about some answers? How do you cope with the neanderthal administrator? First sell him on films. If he can read, give him a copy of David Mallory's *The School and the Art of Motion Pictures* or John M. Culkin's *Film Study in the High School*. If you really want to make waves, have the library order him George B. Leonard's book, *Education and Ecstasy*. After he OK's the requisitions and the films have begun to arrive, invite him in to see them with the kids and get him involved in the post-viewing discussion. But be careful. Don't let him take over. It's best to keep him in his seat. Remember, he was once a God too. He probably taught hundreds of kids how to make tourniquets and how to play kick-ball. So, with the slightest bit of encouragement he'll go into his act and your discussion will become a monologue. But show him you're not stealing the taxpayers' money. Let him see that things are happening, important things.

When school board members and administrators begin to fret over the cost of film rental, you might ask about last season's cleaning bill for football uniforms. And if *Education and Ecstasy* along with personal observations have not moved the establishment off their tests and measurements hang-up, don't give in. Tell them some lies.

In my own district I've found the board and the administration if not exactly aflame with pioneer spirit at least



courageous enough to take a few steps in new directions. We are introducing, this year, a one-semester senior elective in film study. It's expensive, but so are clean football jerseys; it causes scheduling problems, but so do driver ed., biology lab and the marching band. Film study is new and doesn't fit comfortably into the old teacher-centered-lecture-method-daily-assignment-weekly-quiz-unit-test-operation. But then neither do the other courses. We've pushed and shoved, and squeezed, and trimmed, and cut in order to make them fit—a place for everything and everything in its place—law and order, order and law. Well, something there is that doesn't love neat little formulas or tidy little cubicles, and that something is film study. It might just turn out to be the crowbar needed to pry apart the whole damn egg crate.

How do you teach film? You don't. You sit in the back of the darkened room and watch *Harlem Crusader* and when Dan Morrow says goodbye to his friends on 111th Street you cry right along with the kids (how emotionally antiseptic we've become). You feel the knots form in your stomach when you switch on *Night and Fog* and you bite down hard when the camera probes into the concrete corners of the gas chambers at Auschwitz. And next week you give yourself and your students over to the balloons—to all those balloons that converge on the broken-hearted boy and carry him up into the blue Paris sky in *Red Balloon*. Well, to see it right, you have to look with more than your eyes. Balloons aren't ever quite the same again and, unless you were searching for hidden wires, neither are you. And before a holiday you show *Moonbird* for whimsy and *The Critic* for laughs. After sharing a film, you talk with the kids, but, more important, you listen to them. Listen to them discuss their feelings, their thoughts, themselves. Don't worry about your questions. Listen for theirs. Lead them back to the film when they get too far astray; move them, without pushing, toward making connections, toward seeing relationships; but don't belabor the old kinds of relationships: setting to theme, mood to plot, character to language. Explore relationships that are relevant to the kids, to their own lives. Let them free-wheel with their imaginations. How very little attention we've paid to the inward eye, the vision, the "stuff that dreams are made on." Encourage discussion which is honest and free. Above all, don't force them to see the film your way. Don't, in your infinite wisdom, tell them how and what it means. Don't intellectualize it to death.

There is more in the world than the laws of probability. There are feelings. But we don't like to admit to these. We slam the door and hang out the "Do Not Disturb" sign. We fool ourselves with objective measurements, percentages, and with wars of attrition and body counts, with *numbers*. Haven't most of us become too scientific, too academic, too sterile, too too cool? If someone wants to grab us where we live, he must first remove our hats. When Zorba wanders into our classroom, we get Guidance to assign him to the work-study program so he can stock shelves at the A.&P. all afternoon. If he should burst into the faculty room complete with a B.A. and a certificate to teach English, we crawl into our Saran-Wrap baggies and huddle together saying *Hail Curriculums* until he strides off to join the Peace Corps or a Central Park Love-In.

* * *

We confuse the art of teaching with the business of explaining. Explanation has to be a part of it, of course, but it isn't the whole of it. There are some things that don't want explaining. There are deep mysteries and dreams, and rainbows that make our hearts leap up, and a man in the moon, and maybe Peter Pan *can* fly and if we think pleasant thoughts maybe we can too. Perhaps films and a more earthy approach to studying them might lead some of us and our students back to Whitman's child who went forth everyday and became whatever he saw. We seem to have robbed kids of their ability to do this. We help to cram them so tightly into tiny boxes of themselves that they can't get out to be anybody else and neither can we. When we've lost the capacity to *be* someone else, to think with his head, to feel with his heart, we've lost whatever it means to be alive in the world.

Charles Grenier teaches at Patchogue (N.Y.) High School. His essay, "A Composition Course that Sends Them Up the Walls," appeared in M&M, April, 1968.