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The use of films in the classroom can help motivate students not only to write but also to consciously employ literary techniques. A film offers visual and audio parallels for conventions traditionally associated with writing, such as metaphor, plot, theme, point-of-view, dialect, satire, and imagery. Since these film conventions can be directly transferred to writing, students who are able to comprehend film composition are better able to understand the techniques involved in skillful literary composition. (A list of films for stimulating written composition is included.) (MP)

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Using Films in Teaching English Composition

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FILM is its own reason for being. It's an art form as much a part of our daily lives as literature, architecture, painting, or sculpture. But, because we are exposed to film in a set of circumstances which exclude distractions--a darkened room--it involves our senses completely. We are focused on a screen . . . and we feel, we hear, we see in an all-encompassing tangle of emotions and senses which no other art form demands.

Just because film is so demanding of us—whether it be the "hotter" version of the local cinema or the "cooler" version of the television screen, it provides a powerful motivational device for the teaching of written composition.

All of the forms of writing—exposition, literary criticism, narration, dialogue, description, even poetry—can be found in parallels in film and provide stimulation for a composition program.

We can say to students just about what we say about books, "What does the film say?" "How is it said?" "Did you like it?" And, most important of all, "Why did you like it?" "Or dislike it?" And they can answer in their writing.

If students learn to look at films, they can criticize validly—react to the characters, understand a metaphor, enjoy or resist a plot, appreciate a theme. The result will be not a book report, but a film review. The review contains references to scenery, character, plot, and action, as well as to theme. It comments on the director's techniques and may make reference to other films by the same director, or other films of the same nature.

I suppose every high school teacher of English, at one time or another, has discussed with a class the theme of a popular movie. Many teachers, in recent years, have been able to bring into the classroom, through rental, such stimulating films as *A Raisin in the Sun, David and Lisa, The Four Hundred Blows, The Red Badge of Courage*. Any one of these, and an infinite number of others, can provide challenging discussion ideas which immediately, or eventually, lead to written composition.

Sometimes students want to talk about a film before they write about it. Sometimes the impact is so dramatic, so personal, that students want time to think

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about what they have seen, to muse on the values they have seen expressed, and with no prior discussion, may wish to express their personal reactions on paper. If the film is exciting and dramatic, if the student has been personally touched by it, it will give him something he needs to say. And the composition will reveal the feelings and emotions of the writer. This is a far cry from the teacher's imposition of a topic, "Discuss the nature of good and evil in *Billy Budd*." Students will find their own theses, and they will use the film, much as they have used the book in the past, to support their contentions.

AFTER having seen *Nobody Waved Good-bye* (the sensitive portrayal of a Canadian teen-ager who rebels against the comfortable middle-class society in which he lives, growing farther and farther away from his bewildered, well-meaning but not understanding parents—until he breaks himself off entirely from respectability, from the teen-age girl friend whom he leaves pregnant, and cuts once and for all time the ties to any constructive future), students have chosen to write their opinions on such varied subjects as *Middle-Class Morality*, *The Generation Gap*, *The Values of Contemporary Society*, *The War in Vietnam*, *Teen-Age Rebellion*—all this, without the teacher's having to propose a list of teacher-made topics.

Because the screen has the power to involve the viewer so completely, students write about what they have seen more effectively than they might write about what they have read in print. No longer is it necessary to say, "This doesn't make sense," when students are trying to write what they think we want them to write. Books are our palaces; films are their pads. Students are far less self-conscious with the movie—more direct, more honest.

Such films as *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *The Hangman*, *The House*, *The Critic*, make comments on the social structure of society, on man in relation to man, on the nature of man. Books do this, too, of course, but if we show a film, we are sure the student has seen the film (How sure are we that he has read the book?), and we can count on a reaction. We have a common reference point. We can write and then compare impressions. Because we are concerned in viewing a film with time and space and the use of both, because we have overcome the impediment of literary vocabulary, we give the students (endowed and deprived) a mutual experience on which they can comment. In their own words, then, they can discuss on paper the impact of the film, its effectiveness, its message (if it has one), its validity.

IN teaching composition, we are concerned with the aspects of form and content. We have, in the past, discussed the styles of writers in relation to the content of a book or an essay. Film provides us with another medium in which to observe the merging of form and content. A film-maker, as does a writer, develops a particular style. He uses the camera and the actors to convey the image and idea. He edits the film and structures the entire work to create the impression he wishes to convey. Careful looking at and educated talking about the film—the director's use of scenery and shots, the transitions, the expression and movement of the actors, the position and use of the camera—will create an awareness in the students of how the artist uses his tools, of the choices he makes to create an effect.

It is relatively simple, then, to transfer from the film to the student's own writing, the use of the specific word, the placement of a phrase, the structure of an essay.

A short film such as *Glass*, which compares the artistic production of the glass blowers with the commercial manufacture of factory glass, presents a series

of choices to determine what the director is saying about individual artistic endeavor as compared with factory line production. From this, it is a short step to the teaching of comparison and contrast in writing.

Levels of fantasy, dream, and reality are exposed in *No Reason To Stay* which is about a school dropout, a film which also develops a character by choices of examples: an incident in a history class, an experience with a girl in a car, the talk with a guidance counselor, the visit to his mother's office, an impulsive dash to the principal's office—all of these are used to build the frustration of the boy who is looking for a reason to stay in school but cannot find one. Isn't this exactly what we tell our students in teaching them to write a character sketch? "Show the person in action. Don't tell about him. Let your reader see him react to an experience."

The House, another short film, and *The Pawnbroker*, a long one, make use of the flashback in the narration. Students should look carefully at the points at which the transitions are made, so in their own writing they can insert the flashback where it most validly belongs.

WE teach students that every writer assumes a "speaking voice," and we attempt to discover that "voice" in a book. The film director assumes a "voice" as well, and the choices of detail are determined by the nature of that voice. In *The House*, which is based on a series of flashbacks in the experience of an old house about to be demolished, the point of view is that of the house; it is the house that has experienced all of the incidents which determined the development of the life of the family that inhabited it. Only those things which "the house" could know could be shown on the screen. The student's own writing must adhere consistently to the "speaking voice" of the piece. And the film has given him an object lesson.

In a book, a student can "see" dialect. Only if he reads it aloud can he *hear* it. An interesting exercise is to have students see and hear a film such as *Huckleberry Finn* or *Hud* or *On the Waterfront*, then write down some of the dialogue as he has heard it. Thus, he develops an awareness of the nature of dialect: which syllables are emphasized or deleted or inflected. Writers of dialect pieces have often said that they spoke the dialogue aloud before they wrote it down. Film does this for our students.

While the satirical tone might be difficult to pick up in a novel, even a poorly language oriented student can easily distinguish satire in a film. For one thing, the music frequently gives it away. Animated cartoons, *The Critic*, *The Life of an Asterisk*, *The Hand*, *Unicorn in the Garden*, are satires on things many people take seriously: abstract art, invasion of privacy, the secret life. "What do you see that makes you know the film-maker is being critical?" "Again, what details in your own theme imply satire?"

And, now, poetry. We use the word *image*. This is the heart of the poem. It implies a use of the senses, mainly of sight and sound. The screen offers us a plethora of images which we can use to form metaphor. *The Leaf* and *Very Nice, Very Nice*, two short films, very different from each other, offer a contrast in tone, in feeling, and suggest many possibilities for the teaching of metaphor. The film, being a very personal thing, presenting one image after another, can evoke an emotional response which might lead to a young poet's muse... that is, if the teacher is willing to offer the film and let the muse do its work.

Film has enormous possibilities for the teacher of written composition. All he has to do is look and give his students a chance to look and he will see writing skills visually delineated and an infinite number of topics which are relevant to the student's own experience.

SUGGESTED FILMS FOR STIMULATING WRITTEN COMPOSITION

TITLE	TIME	DISTRIBUTOR
A Raisin in the Sun	128 minutes	Audio Film Center, 10 Fiske Ave., Mount Vernon, New York 10550
David and Lisa	90 minutes	Continental Film Productions, 2330 Rossville Blvd., Chattanooga, Tenn.
400 Blows	98 minutes	Janus, 267 West 25th Street, New York City 10009
Red Badge of Courage	69 minutes	Films, Inc., 425 No. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60611
Nobody Waved Good-bye	80 minutes	National Film Board of Canada, 680 Fifth Ave., New York City 10019
Ox-Bow Incident	75 minutes	Films, Inc.
Hangman	12 minutes	Contemporary Films, 267 West 25th Street, New York City 10001
The House	32 minutes	Contemporary Films
No Reason To Stay	28 minutes	Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, 425 No. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611
Glass	11 minutes	Films, Inc.
The Pawnbroker	(Still in theatrical release)	
Huckleberry Finn	71 minutes	United World Films, Inc., 221 Park Ave., New York City 10003
Hud	112 minutes	Films, Inc.
On the Waterfront	108 minutes	Audio Film Center
The Critic	5 minutes	Brandon Films, Inc., 221 West 57th St., New York City 10019
*Adventures of an **	10 minutes	Contemporary Films
The Hand	19 minutes	Contemporary Films
A Unicorn in the Garden	10 minutes	Audio Film Center
Last Leaf	20 minutes	Contemporary Films
Very Nice, Very Nice	7 minutes	Contemporary Films
The String Bean	17 minutes	Contemporary Films