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ABSTRACT

The English teacher's broad interdisciplinary awareness and his training in critical analysis and communication through symbols prepare him to develop, with his students, evaluative criteria and analytical techniques for film study. Crucial to teaching film courses or units is his knowledge of how a film achieves its objectives through uniquely expressing the relationship between form and content. Short non-narrative films, imaginatively illustrating basic cinema techniques, can introduce principles of film analysis into the classroom, while eliminating problems of cost, length, and complexity inherent in feature films. Also useful are short films that develop a story line, express social comment, or present the film as a legitimate non-literary art form. More advanced units could take up the styles of individual directors, the transformation of literature into cinema, and the historical development or sociological aspects of films. (MF)

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TO LOOK OR TO SEE: FILM STUDY IN THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Fred Silva

The constant reminder that we are now a media civilization has shifted the once controversial discussion of film study from issues of relevance to questions of materials and personnel. In fact, an ad in a current issue of *The English Record* promotes "16 mm English literature" a catalogue of "movies that matter" and lists the renter's supply of films based on works by writers from Cooper to Crane to Eugene O'Neill. This automatic equating of film and literature, however, creates several unattractive, half-hearted replies to the demand for film study in secondary schools.

That most movies have characters, plot, development, language, and related literary devices not only reinforces the film's parallels to literature, but transforms "16 mm English literature" and "Movies that matter" into an A-V support for literature. The teacher can now relate literature to the students' lives with moving *Classic Comics*, while apparently overlooking the implicit condescension that the masses cannot handle literature without film aid. A variant of this sugar coated solution is the library display of books made into current films. Almost apologetically the library invites its patrons: see the film, read the book. But a subtle shift has occurred: the library is the tie-in to the film. A third possibility of this uneasy connection between film and literature develops when a movie generates a "cultural event." Hamlet, let's say, is rented not only for the English class concerned with Shakespeare's play but for the entire school community—or at least as many as will sit still. Though this may be hopefully a passing phenomenon the A-V cultural treatment can kill film as effectively as literature has been harmed by removing it from its proper setting and separating it from its inherent function.

Aside from these probably baroque fears of conditions from a hopefully passing era, certainly no sensible reason exists why the secondary school should not use the film. Because of the acknowledged similarities between film and fictional literary forms, the English teacher is an obvious candidate to handle a film course or unit. Beyond this simple connection, however, the English teacher is a logical candidate for film teaching by reason of his training and the long range objectives and possibilities of screen education.

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1. The English teacher works daily with a language system which communicates ideas and emotions through symbol. Explaining literary language, the English teacher helps the student understand the effects and goals of a variety of poems, short stories, novels and plays. Because the relationship between symbol and meaning is somewhat similar in literature and film, the English teacher using cinematic vocabulary of shot, angle, sequence, etc., can help the student understand the more visual, more mobile film form. The close analysis of a shot pattern or a montage rhythm calls for as rigorous an effort as does the close reading of prose and poetry. One of the great needs of film study is for students who can carefully and clearly explicate a passage of film as film.

2. The English teacher, acquainted with academic criticism, understands the rigor that must be applied to all critical work, a need particularly important now in film. Up to recently film study has been spotty, too often very enthusiastic gushing or very esoteric or idiosyncratic commentary and theorizing. While some of this has been valuable and necessary, the time has arrived for a more systematic study of film. The new criticism and the broader survey approaches commonly used by the English teacher can be carefully applied to film.

3. The English teacher has a humanities orientation which enables him to employ a variety of information and disciplines to the understanding of an individual film. The synthetic nature of film, which depends for its being on technology, literature, art, and society, requires a unique, broad, interdisciplinary background for its fullest appreciation. The student, once he has a secure grasp of the art form, ideally should be able to comment on a film from as many angles possible. The serious film student or critic needs a truly broad gauge awareness.

4. The English teacher reaches a great bulk of a population who will be increasingly exposed to film and who will need to have some way of absorbing intelligently the variety of films and their techniques. The amount of TV viewing has been extensively publicized and speaks for itself. Not every individual will become a professional critic, but in his everyday contact with film, he should bring with him a practical sense of what film does. This, after all, is the same hope that prompts us to teach students how to read imaginative literature.

Assuming then that the English teacher is as good as, if not better than, most faculty to handle the film course, or unit, what then does he do with it? First, and most important, he must carefully locate the area of his study. In addition to the literary connections film has equally valid associations with history, sociology, or psychology. The seemingly objective and realistic

photographic characteristics of film make it particularly useful for revealing contemporary life or encouraging the study of various human relationships. But one must resist the attraction to use film as an easy way to discuss what we are, where we have been, or why we are what we seem to be. The art of the film is the only sensible material at the core of any beginning cinema study.

In order to prepare a film course the English teacher does not have to know or present everything about movies. He need not know the history of the film—the growth of the Hollywood industry, the rise of the star system, the general development of directorial style, the rise and fall of German, Swedish or French film industries. He can do without lists of great films, commentaries on film as mass media, and considerations of censorship and morality. There are other matters beyond the English teachers' immediate concern, but he must know how a film achieves its objectives.

Considering the nature of film, we conclude that it depends like literature upon the familiar form and content interrelationship. We see further that technique shapes the form: shots build into sequences which combine into the overall shape of the film, a process often called montage. To illustrate briefly the nature of cinematic analysis we note that a shot (one interrupted lens opening) consists of subject, composition, angle, duration, and movement. Content can be pure (abstract light and shape), realistic (documentary), fictional, (staged), or naturally a combination of these. Obviously the student being introduced to the complexity of film should not be distracted by films used as versions of great literature or as legitimate supplements for other disciplines but should concentrate on the basic artistic techniques of film.

An initial and somewhat unique problem in film teaching is materials. The writing teacher has his grammar book and essay reader; the literature instructor has his anthology or vast selection of paperbacks; but the film teacher can logically work only with films which are neither readily available nor cheaply rented. The problem of low cost film availability will probably prove to be one of the central limitations of solid film study until a satisfactory system is worked out by the rental agencies, the school administrators, and the teachers, each of whom will have to surrender part of his self interest. But that is not our concern here.

One easily available but ultimately unsatisfactory solution to the materials problem is the published film script, of which presently about three dozen are in print, ranging from James Agee pre-shooting scripts of *African Queen* and others to well-

illustrated scripts of such modern and classic films as *Tom Jones, Last Year at Marienbad, Alphaville, Grand Illusion,* and *Potemkin* produced by Grove Press and Simon and Schuster. Undoubtedly other titles are imminent. The temptation to use these film substitutes is particularly strong if the script is of a literary work translated to the screen as in the case of Agee's translation of Stephen Crane's *The Blue Hotel* and *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.* The printed script's inadequacy becomes apparent when one recognizes that film is not, after all, a literary expression. Even the most complete script barely suggests the importance of the purely visual elements of film: movement, angle, composition. The script is even less satisfactory as a representation of the film than a printed play is a suggestion of a theater performance largely because the play uses language much more extensively than the film, whose dialogue is often cryptic without the accompanying picture. The film, dependent for its various effects on the moving image, gets lost on the page. Scripts, however, are extremely useful as a post-screening device, particularly if they are well illustrated and have some cinematic detail. Since the film's visuals tend to fade quickly after a viewing, a good script enables the students to recall more easily what they have seen.

The feature film, usually a more mature and complex expression than the short film, should ideally be the basic viewing experience in film teaching. But the ideal situation may be difficult to obtain because the 90-120 minute feature film is simply too cumbersome a form to be used effectively in the prescribed time periods of the normal class. To show a feature in widely spaced sessions is not recommended because unlike a novel a film is designed to be taken in at one sitting, the recent two part *War and Peace* not withstanding. Ways probably could be developed to circumvent this. Double (or triple) periods or after school/evening screenings are possible. But even so, in a three or four week unit, which is more likely to exist in a school situation, much more can be done with a variety of short films. In addition to the growing variety of forms and subjects another advantage of the short film is that that a class can see it at least twice in a normal class period. The value of a film increases if a class sees the film, discusses its cinematic values, then sees it again. The short film also moves the student away from the idea that film is only photographed literature since he can view a number of types: animation, experimental, underground, and documentary. Also, frequently the short film contains good imaginative examples of film technique, which can be studied more easily here than in a feature. The quick cut style of editing, for example, which can be somewhat disturbing in a feature such

as Richard Lester's *Petulia* has an almost immediate acceptance and can be more readily analyzed in the brief documentary or social comment film. Visual collage effects created by editing pieces of film from documentaries, cartoons, or other short films seem more digestible in the brief effort than in the longer work. One notes in passing the ease with which viewers have come to accept the jarring visual juxtapositions within TV commercials with little qualm—probably because of brevity and lack of narrative.

Whether film study is to be a full term course or a unit within a course, a worthwhile instructional pattern could take the following more or less sequential shape: introduction to film as a visual, non-literary art form; establishment of a basic film vocabulary; development of an awareness of film style; consideration of similarities and differences between film and older analogous literary forms. This movement clearly avoids the history, sociology, psychology, economics and archeology of the films. This course plan removes the film from literary comparison to a consideration of the film's own composition/grammar/syntax areas and then returns it to literature but with new awareness of the basic aesthetic issues involved.

The student should first see films which have no literal meaning whatever or films whose narrative content is presented in uniquely cinematic ways. A number of short films are essentially explorations of the basic properties of film: the way to use space, the way to convey movement without shifting the camera, the way to explore the unique possibilities of light and form. These are short enough so that several can be shown in a class period to indicate the visual excitement of non-narrative film. The impressive variety of approach in these films could be demonstrated by the abstract animations of Norman McLaren, the computer based films of Stan Vanderbeek, and the collage films of Bruce Connor among others. The student could also view films that express either storyline or social comment in uniquely film ways. Roman Polanski's *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, an enigmatic absurd parable of modern man, and Carter Davidson's *Help! My Snowman's Burning*, a surrealistic comment on modern lack of privacy, are examples of expression that could be done only on film. A fair number of short more explicit social comment films use cinematic techniques effectively: jump cuts, zooms into and out of details, juxtapositions. Two excellent examples are *Very Nice* and *12-12-42*. In this last a girl's voice speaks meanderingly about the first twenty years of her life as pictures, film clips, and art representations of the world in the years 1942-1965 are flashed on the screen. The film excites visual interest in the cuts and apparently random selection of pictures

and expresses a social point of view in the contrast between those and the girl's often cruelly vapid comments.

As a student is being introduced to these film genre, he can be taught the vocabulary and fundamental characteristics of film, including both nomenclature and more elaborate considerations such as film's time and space capabilities. More than lists of terminology—shot, sequence, angle, fade out, dissolve, cut, montage—need to be considered: the frame and its possibilities; lens and focal problems; camera point of view and movement within the frame, color vs. black and white; editing for rhythm and shape. The effects achieved by each of these techniques should be imaginatively explored so that watching films doesn't become as sterile a practice as scanning verse lines can be. The question should always be why this angle, this cut, this movement. Not that such questions can or should always be answered, but at least they are raised. An awareness of technique, including its difficulties, enhances appreciation of a performance be it a ballet or TV commercial. If a sentence means more to a student who comprehends its structure, so a film yields more to a student who transcends content. The overriding objective is to teach the student to see more clearly than he has before, to see at least partially without reference to content or intention, to admire a well-executed shot or well-planned sequence for its own sake and not necessarily as a vehicle for any kind of message. This naturally is not to say that this is the only end, but before meaning can be fully appreciated, the medium must be understood.

The student can next begin to apply this awareness of visual effects to developing a sense of an individual director's visual style, that combination of angles, lighting, film stock, and so forth that clearly indicate an individual cinematic vision. What makes a Bergman, a Godard, a Welles, or a Fellini movie exciting and unique simply to look at, even before one considers the themes or subjects of the films? Or to put it another way: what makes a Godard film as easy to spot as a Hemingway short story? Here, of course, where taste becomes the paramount issue and real sophistication is required, the task of the individual student to perceive and distinguish among visual patterns sharpens his understanding of film vocabulary.

One successful way to develop the idea of a director's style is to present a series of significant films representing various directors, periods, and even nationalities. Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928) shows a silent film master using one type of montage to describe the Russian Revolution; Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) records the great director expanding film's visual and audio possibilities to dissect an American publisher's career;

Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) documents a contemporary director's successful exploration of the cinematic expression of psychological nuance among a group of bored Italians, Jean-Luc Godard's *Masculine Feminine* illustrates a New Wave Director's use of a modern elliptical film style to evoke the ambience of Paris of 1965. Films of this quality combined with the short films similar to the ones mentioned above should provide a solid basis for establishing the student's sense of visuals and visual style as applied to narrative features.

Quite naturally the student could now investigate the area of literature into cinema transformation. What happens when a serious director becomes involved with the transfer of say an O'Neill play to the screen? Does it become the well-scrubbed empty *Desire Under the Elms*, or does it become the rich and powerful *Long Day's Journey Into Night?* Does the difference between these two films grow only out of the sensibilities of two different directors, or is there something inherent in film and drama that accounts for the differences? This question defines the important area of relationships between literature and film and raises a host of issues in fiction as well as drama. What happens to point of view in a film based on a first person story or novel? Can one really express cinematically the internal psychological conditions found in fiction? Are there certain kinds of novels better suited to film adaptation than others? How much of the original dialogue of a play needs to be retained? How much should a play be "opened up?" Does the mobility of the camera affect the playwright's work? All these questions, and many others, are complicated once again by the impact of the director's style, but then style may be the key to successful transformation of literature into cinema.

Some excellent examples of strongly directed literature-based films would be very appropriate here and could include Roberto Enrico's adaptation of the Ambrose Bierce short stories "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," "The Mockingbird," and "Chickamaugua;" Tony Richardson's version of Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner;* Charles Laughton's presentation of Davis Grubb's *The Night of the Hunter;* John Huston's reworking of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage;* William Wyler's film of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes;* or Orson Welles' experiments with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or *Othello.* These are only a few of the possibilities; enough important films are available that a teacher need never resort to second rate films. In no sense are these films to be treated as A-V supplements but rather as serious works of film art whose origins happen to be literary, a factor which enables serious comparative discussion. Although these issues may never be touched in

the secondary school course, here, as in the section on directorial style, the student undertakes some of the most stimulating investigation of cinema, for what is required is a solid sense of both literature and film.

Once the student develops this general grounding in film as an art form, he can move more confidently in the direction of history, sociology or whatever else may catch his now opened eye. Toward this end some attention could be directed in a fully developed program to matters other than strictly visual. The student, for example, should be aware of such matters as key works in cinema theory, history, and biography, various landmark films, as well as the work of contemporary film critics. In addition, the student might supplement his viewing experience by keeping screen diaries, preparing scenarios, or composing short critical review articles.

Something should be said about production which has become a very publicized feature of film study. The chief argument in favor of production is almost irresistible: one learns about an art by working with its materials. Add to that a general fascination with gadgetry as institutionalized in the do-it-yourself movement as well as published statements about film production as panacea and one easily understands the popularity of the idea. To me the argument against production is more convincing. Film-making is so complex and time consuming an undertaking that to provide an experience which leads a person to believe that a loaded Super 8 transforms anyone into a "film maker" is to do the art and the individual an ultimate disservice. If there is time for shooting and editing and money for the proper equipment in a full semester course or a strong extracurricular program, then by all means production deserves support. If the student can spend a number of periods on camera operation and script development, this is fine. But anything less than that is very misleading. In addition to which few non-trained people have sufficient understanding of such technology as filters, lens, film stock, to be of much use to the true novice. Additionally, if current trends continue, well-equipped colleges and universities will provide a meaningful instruction in film production.

The chief purpose of film study—no matter who presents it—should be to enhance the student's visual experience by showing him *what* is there. The general suggestions in this essay are directed largely toward that end, but also partly to prevent a condition ruefully predicted by Pauline Kael closing a lecture about the power of film among modern youth: "If you think you can't kill movies, you underestimate the power of education." I know Miss Kael would like us to prove her inaccurate.