1-1-1996

Workshop Report Using Film/TV in the Classroom

Barbara Roos
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

WORKSHOP REPORT
USING FILM/TV IN THE CLASSROOM

Barbara Roos

"Maybe next semester I'll find enough time to really lick this one," I encourage myself—semester after semester—as I struggle under an avalanche of new media technologies. I love to engage technologies, but have found repeatedly over the years that it takes a lot of effort to use them well. Our August, 1995 workshop about using films and television programs in the classroom reaffirmed that even a venerable technology such as the movies offers ever-expanding possibilities for teaching and learning, as well as retains the potential for misuse in the classroom.

Faculty participated from the Divisions of Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities. We shared with each other some of the ways films can deepen and broaden class discussions:

- Films distill content ("A picture is worth....").

- The showing itself enhances community within the classroom.

- Films elicit attention, often "suturing" viewers into the screened situation. Films do this reliably and powerfully, because enormous amounts of time, craft, and money have been poured into their production.

- Films abolish time and space. The classroom becomes an archaeological dig or an event in 1896.

- They serve as projective tools when students talk about their observations of film content, ostensibly, while projecting their own experiences.

One lovely thing about discussions (as versus, for example, essays) is that the unexpected happens, predictably. Thus, the subject of using audio tape popped up in the middle of our discussion of film. We were reminded of how well audio materials elicit richly imaginative responses from students.

Discussion turned to some problems with using film in the classroom. One is caused by underestimating the transformative nature of the medium. The filmmaker's goal is to heighten reality, not reproduce it; filmed reality is a manufactured illusion. In most cases, the manufacturing process aims to disguise the transformation. Classical film technique is "transparent"; viewers look past the screen into another world. Classical technique enhances the realistic effects of the multi-sensory output of film and television and the inherent realism of their moving images. But filmed realities

must not be allowed to substitute uncritically for real-world issues, characters, and events. *Do the Right Thing* is not sociology and *Nixon* is not history, Even documentaries, from *Nanook of the North* to *The Civil War* do not simply mirror their real-world referents.

Therefore, every film showing ought to help students think critically about the medium as well as its content. There is a creative tension between the world experienced directly and its screened version. Class discussion of this tension—of the ways a specific film heightens and distills, or limits and distorts—repeatedly redirects attention back to the construction of a detailed description of the real world situation or character.

Students easily come to appreciate the manufactured nature of film once the subject is brought to their attention. Here are some questions that have proven useful in this regard:

- In transforming real-world space, what do you think was left outside the edges of the images, or the "frame," in this movie?

- In the filmmaker's transforming of real-world time, what do you think was eliminated from the story or the documentary?

- How was this movie designed to attract a mass audience? For example, are there stars, music, action sequences, or special effects?

- How are important points emphasized? For example, are there zooms, close-up shots, or places in the film where the pace of the action speeds up a lot?

On another matter, the usefulness of a film showing is weakened unless students write immediately after the film ends. They need to catch hold of what is potentially an emphemeral experience, for as the real world of the classroom claims their attention, they cannot help but give up much of the world in the film. The time spent writing need not be long, and the writing need not be shared. It can be guided by such questions as

- What did you relate to personally in this film?

- What was the outstanding image this film left in your mind? Why do you think this image was so powerful?

A bit of information about the film itself will also help students comprehend its manufactured nature. Again, time spent talking about the film need not be long, and because of the popularity of film and television over the years, information is readily available. The instructor can do the work or assign students to do it themselves.

Information Sources about Film/TV

There are abundant print sources on the library's reference shelf under call numbers PN1993-98. In the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature,* reviews and production notes are listed by the year of the film's release, under "moving pictures" through Volume 36; after that, information is listed under the heading "motion pictures."

Internet sources come and go, and some sites promise more than they deliver. Here are a few that seem both stable and useful:

- H-film discussion group on e-mail Subscribe to LISTSERVE@uicvm.uic.edu

  Scholarly, archived. Digest available. Moderated by professional historians with assistance of scholarly advisory board.

- SCREENsite Film and TV Studies on Netscape
  http://www.sa.ua.edu/TCF/welcome.htm

  Both scholarly and general audiences. CineMedia list of print and electronic journals on film and TV, and a frequently updated list of scholarly conferences about film and television are especially valuable.

- Guide to Film and Video sources on the Internet
  http://http2.sils.umich.edu/Public/fvl/film.html

  Both scholarly and general audiences. Annotated reviews, filmographies, bibliographies, databases. Materials more uneven in quality than other sites mentioned here.

- Global List of Film Magazines http://gewi.kfunigraz.ac.at/~puntigam/FFF/

  European, but branching eastward at the present time.

Back in August, we started a mailing list so that we can continue to share ideas about using films and television programs in our teaching. Join us by communicating with me.