

How to Read Film

JULY 3, 2002

Class — 10th grade American Literature Class

Objective — Students will learn how to ‘read’ films in the same manner that they learned how to read literature. Much of the knowledge used is review from previous lessons, but applied to a different genre. The students will also be required to utilize their skills of persuasion to convince the public of their interpretation of the film.

Length — This unit will last two weeks.

Materials — Portions of a wide variety of films, proxima projector, and access to a computer lab

Activities — The students will be broken up into groups from the inception of the unit. Much of the activities are group based. This unit involves a large amount of group discussions, viewing films, and note taking.

The students will be learning three ways of interpreting films. These three ways were developed from the lesson plans in Alan Teasley and Ann Wilder’s book *Reel Conversations*. The students will learn how to see dramatic aspects, literary aspects, and cinematic aspects in films.

The final project is also a group project. The group can choose the format for their final project. They will be responsible for watching a film and using the three methods of interpretation to write a critique of the film. The critique can be either written in paper form or the students can chose to develop a Hyperstudio project.

Task One

At the beginning of the unit the class will break up into new groups. There are three people per group. Before they leave their previous groups they will evaluate how well their previous group worked and how well they individually worked. The students will be working in this group for the entire unit. The unit will be broken into the three elements outlined in *Reel Conversations*. The first activity is that I will have the class brainstorm films that they like in groups. For every film that they like they have to give at least three reasons why they liked the film. Every group must agree on three films and the three reasons for each film. After the groups have a chance to brainstorm why they liked the film, they will write their choices on an overhead along with the reasons that they chose those particular films. Each group will share their films with the rest of the class. After each group has a chance to present, I will point out many of the similarities between films and literature. Many of the students will say that they enjoyed the film because of the actor, director, setting, characterization, violence, etc. It is important to look at these elements individually and as a whole when analyzing a film. I will tell the class that we will be studying three aspects of film; literary, dramatic, and cinematic. The students will have a project at the end that requires them to utilize these three elements.

Task Two

Previously we have looked at stories throughout the year and studied many literary elements. I will ask the groups to brainstorm all of the elements that we have studied. I will list them on the board as they are shouting them out. Possible topics that will be included are plot, characters, narrator, setting, theme,

mood, etc. I will explain that just as these elements are found in literature, they can and will be found in films.

We will begin looking at these literary elements in films by first viewing those concerning narration. I will show two film clips. The class will take notes on the film clips and then we will discuss what they have noticed. *LA Confidential* - This the first film that we will watch a clip from. The students will watch the first five minutes in which the narrator, Danny DeVito, explains the setting of the film. The students will take notes on what interests them about the narrator, what information the narrator tells, and what it adds to the story. *Raising Arizona* - The students will also watch the first five minutes of this film. Again the character played by Nicholas Cage outlines his past through narration. Again the students will think about what the narration adds to the film.

After viewing the two film clips, the students will talk in their groups about the advantages and disadvantages of a narrator. After the students have a chance to share in their small group, we will share examples in the large group. I will make a list on the white board so that people can visually see the lists that are generated in class. The second literary element the class will look at is setting. The students will question how much setting adds to the films. I will have students analyze two films that have different settings. How does the appearance of setting change the appearance of the film? Does the setting change the audience who attends? *Romeo and Juliet* - The students are going to look at the first five minutes of two versions of this film. The first version is a classic version. How does the setting promote the film? The second version is the most recent version of the film. Does the change of setting promote more interest in the film? Does it appeal to different audiences? How important is setting in the film?

After we have viewed both versions of the film we will discuss the classes findings on settings. The students will then look at the list we had generated on the board at the beginning with literary elements. Each group will take one of the elements that we have mentioned and we explain how that element is used in films. If the students need help understanding the element they can use the literature books in the classroom. The groups must also correlate films to go with their elements. They will then share these elements with the rest of the class.

Task Three

The second element that we will be discussing in films is the dramatic elements. The first part that we will be discussing is what makes people view films. Often times people go to films because of the actor/actress, its a blockbuster, topic, etc. During this segment of the unit we will be looking at comic book films, and fantasy films.

Dick Tracy - The first film clip we will view is *Dick Tracy*. The students will look at the first fifteen minutes of the film. They will note the elements that make this film appear different from other films that they have seen. The students will look at the actors and judge the quality of the film based upon the comparisons of comic books.

Judge Dredd - The students will watch this adaptation of a comic book. Many people have strongly disliked this movie because of its 'bad' acting. Again they will write their observations about the film. They will look at the setting, actors, etc. The students will watch this movie and judge for themselves whether or not it is quality entertainment. They will fill out a sheet that has suggestions about what to watch for during the film. Following the viewing of the movie, the students will explain what they found in their small groups. Then we will have a large circle discussion of the importance of dramatic aspects of the film.

Task Four

The final aspect that the students will be learning about is cinematic aspects of film. The first part that I will do is hand out a sheet that explains the different types of aspects (from *Reel Conversations*). I will discuss with the students what each of the types means and how it relates to the films. After that, we will watch short clips of three films so that students can attempt to read the films using the terms that have been handed out. The students will work in their groups. After they are done watching the brief clip they will fill out a form that tells what they have noticed about the film. They will then share their findings with the large class.

The Mummy - In the original movie, when the main character enters the temple he is engulfed with lighting. It is the combination of shots, lightening, and music that makes this scene seem really frightening. Because this is a popular movie, the students should be able to focus more on the cinematic aspects, rather than the content of the film.

The Program - This movie is about college football. I will have the students watch a scene of the game. There are many interesting camera shots that suggest actions and excitement. Also, the director knows just when to cut away from a scene to leave the viewer on the edge of their seat.

Star Wars - Again, I chose this classic film because many of the students will have seen it. How are the special effects put into the film? What makes the film different from other films? Why is such a popular movie? Are there special types of camera shots and editing shots used.

Task Five

The final project of this unit will require that the students watch a full length movie and write a movie review on that movie. There are three people in a group so that everyone can participate in the viewing. One group member will be responsible for writing about the literary aspects, one the dramatic, and the final one the cinematic elements. The group will have to combine their notes together to form a cohesive paper. They will then have to share their findings with the class and submit their paper. An alternative assignment is that the students can make a Hyperstudio stack explaining why people should view or not view the movie. The students will make links about each of the elements that have been discussed in class.

The Birds - I chose to view this classic Alfred Hitchcock film because the class had been studying the fifties and popular culture. The class should be well adjusted to what is going on during the time period. I also chose this movie because I believe that many of the students will not have seen it. Thus, they will not be biased about the film. Each member in the group will be given only one opportunity to view the film.

Narration

What does the narrator tell about the film?

How is the narrator portrayed in the film? Do you see the narrator or is it just voice over? Does this make a difference? Why/Why not?

How is narration similar in films and literature?

Setting

What are the items that you notice about the setting? (look at costume, makeup, hairstyle, language, props, etc.)

How does the setting influence you?

Dramatic Aspects in the film

Describe the actor. Is he believable? How does he act? What is his personality?

Describe the sets. How can you tell this movie is based upon comic books? How would you describe the color scheme in the movie?

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(Reel Conversations page 22)

Movie Angles

Long shot - a shot taken for a long distance that shows landscape, other people, or a building.

Medium shot - this is a shot between a long shot and a close-up. It usually shows several people from the waist up.

Close-up - a shot of one face or object that fills the screen completely.

Extreme Close-up - a shot of a small object or part of the face that fills the screen.

Camera Angles

High Angle - the camera looks down at what is being photographed

Eye Level - a shot that approximates human vision

Low Angle - the camera look up at what is being photographed

Camera Movement

Pan - the camera moves horizontally on a fixed base

Tilt - the camera points up or down from a fixed base

Tracking Shot (Dolly) - the camera moves through space on a dolly but stays in the same plane

Boom - the camera moves up or down through space

Zoom - not a camera movement, but a shift in the focus and depth of a camera shot

Duration of Shots

Look at the length of the shot. Shots vary in length from being quick (less than an eye blink), to an average shot, to a long shot (more than a minute)

Editing

Cut - the most common type of transition - one scene ends and a new scene immediately begins

Fade out/Fade in - one scene gradually goes dark and the new scene gradually emerges.

Dissolve - a gradual transition in which the end of one scene is superimposed over the beginning of a new one.

Cinematic Aspects

Camera Angles

Film 1 -

Film 2 -

Film 3 -

Editing

Film 1 -

Film 2 -

Film 3 -

Camera shots

Film 1 -

Film 2 -

Film 3 -