

Notes on Experience and Teaching of Film

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In the classroom, students are attentive to an instructor's manner as much as they are to the ostensible material being taught. This situation can be turned to the instructor's advantage, particularly in the teaching of film, which is already problematic due to the usual lack of a text in the classroom. However, film, by its very nature as a medium, depends upon the experience of the viewer. This experience is defined as the working with the cinematic text, in the contextualistic sense as defined by Dewey and Pepper. Two detailed examples from popular American films, as they might be approached in class, show how the common experience of the instructor and the student, based on the perception of the images, might illuminate the nature of film in spite of the absence of the text.

One of the primary issues in the teaching of any subject is, as Fiedler (1968) says, "What can, and what should be, taught?" And whether one considers Fiedler's ruminations on that question to be somewhat cynical—he insists that because teaching is "a passion, not a science . . . methods therefore are meaningless in the classroom"—his conclusion remains fundamentally true: "Once we have realized that the teacher is not just a guide, much less a substitute parent or a charming entertainer (though he can be all of these things as well), but a model, we will understand that what is learned in the classroom is him, the teacher" (Fiedler, 1968, pp. 273, 275). From personal experience I would agree that what is not necessarily taught but nevertheless inevitably learned by students—especially lower-level students—is the teacher him or herself, as role-model either positive or negative.

Freshman are in the process of entering a new environment, one of living as well as learning, one which grants them more freedom, space and responsibility than they have known previously. This situation is likely to seem to them alternatively attractive and threatening. And it is also likely that in such circumstances (not the classic therapy situation) they will not only consider the teacher they respect as an authority but seek to identify with and emulate the teacher. In the highly charged dynamic of the classroom students are easily able to spot the teacher who is indifferent or hostile to the subject. This is the kind of teacher students can never respect; in such instances their tendency is simply to respond to the material in a similar uninspired fashion. Conversely, a teacher truly excited by and interested in what he or she is teaching is more apt to have animated and interested students in the class. If they respect the

instructor, students are inclined to respect the object of instruction.

There have been times when I have been aware, as I was lecturing to my "Introduction to Film Criticism" class (usually about 50-60 students) that they were paying the slightest attention to *what* I was saying; rather, they were studying *me* and the *manner* in which I rambled on about the semiotic codes in *Stagecoach* or the forces which converged to form the style of *film noir*. Certainly, it is possible to view this state of affairs, like cinema's *auteur* theory itself, as nothing more than an cult of personality. However, I would like to suggest that the most effective teacher, particularly at the first level, is the one who accepts this situation as a given and, further, is willing to exploit it by incorporating it into his or her teaching style. In its simplest form what I'm suggesting amounts to little more than saying that if the teacher does not demonstrate an enthusiasm for the subject, obviously the students won't either. No one, I think, would disagree with that. But I mean to imply something more: that if a teacher reveals to the students what the material has *meant* for himself or herself—an aesthetic biography, so to speak—then students are more apt to see the relevance of the material and hence become more genuinely interested in studying it. What I would like to do now, then, is explain how I have tried to combine these observations with both my aesthetic ideas and pedagogical practice concerning film.

Much academic suspicion about the teaching of film is based on the ephemeral nature of the cinematic text. How, it is asked, can rigorous analytical discussion of film take place in the classroom, when in most cases neither teachers nor students are able to have the text in front of them? Except in cases where special equipment is available, students are forced to rely on memory; moreover, it is more likely that they will have seen the film to be discussed only once, which means they will not have been able to divorce themselves completely from emotional involvement with the narrative and characters. Such discussion, it would seem, must therefore degenerate into mere impressionism and subjective assertion.

It is true that students will tend to respond to films in basic emotional ways, even the films by Eisenstein, Rossellini and other formal innovators outside the Hollywood mainstream they are likely to encounter in an introductory course. Yet this is only congruent with their experience of film *outside* the classroom. More than with literature or with the theatre the visual media today constitute an aesthetic tradition which is truly *lived* by the majority of people. Both TV and film are commonly and above all else social events, like the drama used to be. People gather around the family TV set, prominently placed in the "living" room, as if it were a technological hearth; they are mutually suckled by the warm glow of the appropriately named boob tube, whether at home or in a tavern. The Academy Awards ceremony is an annual ritual watched and discussed by millions, while the National Book Awards receive hardly the same degree of media coverage. This is not to imply the

superiority of cinema to literature, but simply to state the manner in which the two forms function in our society. Few couples go out on dates to the local library, after all. Whether it is true or not, one periodically hears arguments about the death of the novel or of the theatre. The visual media, by contrast, are anything but dead, and no one with the possible exception of pessimistic Hollywood producers and optimistic video disc technocrats has announced the passing of the movies as a major cultural force.

Brock University, located in Ontario's Niagara Peninsula, is not much different from most smaller North American universities: its 3000 students have gravitated toward the sciences and Business Administration, while Humanities enrollments have slowly but steadily declined; most first-year Humanities courses are now taken to fulfill the University's degree requirements. Each year, more than half the students who enroll in the "Introduction to Film Criticism" course admit or inadvertently betray that they did so initially because they thought it would be an easy credit. Cultural experience has taught them that whereas literature is Art to be analyzed, movies are entertainment to be enjoyed. Consequently, students are consistently more defensive and resistant in beginning film courses than they are in literature courses. Always I am asked, often with great urgency, if the course will destroy their enjoyment of (that is to say, their ability to passively escape into) movies. Yet in a fundamental way this predictable response can be exploited, and can become an asset to the teacher of film. Simply to say *anything* intelligent about a commercial movie beyond the personal response of "I liked it" or "I didn't" is likely to amaze many students. And amazement, like the "sense of wonder" so dear to the defenders of science fiction, can act as a psychic crowbar to prise open new avenues of inquiry for even moderately receptive minds.

For some years now I have been interested in the aesthetic approach termed contextualism by Stephen C. Pepper, an aesthetic grounded in the notion of art as experience. For the contextualist the aesthetic experience is comprised of the vital interaction between the physical work of art and the spectator. In this sense, the phrase "work of art" implies an action rather than an object; as Dewey puts it in *Art as Experience* (for Pepper the central work of contextualistic aesthetics): "Art is the quality of doing and of what is done. Only outwardly, then, can it be designated by a noun substantive The *product* of art—temple, painting, statue, poem—is not the *work* of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties" (Dewey, 1958, p. 214). The specific nature or "quality" of this experience—"the character, the mood, and you might almost say, the personality" (Pepper, 1965, p. 59) of the event—becomes the central subject of inquiry for the contextualist who, therefore, ultimately must consider both the physical work of art and his or her own responses in making aesthetic judgements.

Contextualism clearly offers a particularly relevant approach to the teaching

of film at the introductory level. As the semiotician Christian Metz has remarked, the cinema is "the 'phenomenological' art *par excellence*" (Metz, 1974, p. 43); and while phenomenological criticism tends to treat consciousness more discretely than contextualism, Metz's assertion suggests the extent to which film *engages* the viewer. This engagement is basically two-fold. Firstly, cinema by its very nature is more than any other medium an art of illusion, for the very perception of a motion picture begins with the "synthesis" by the spectator's eye of the individual still-frames; and secondly, the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief is particularly strong in the cinema, where it is encouraged by images and sounds larger and louder than life. (Thus, film's apparent affinity for the melodramatic, the fantastic, and the spectacular—narrative modes which tend to magnify or exaggerate reality—does not necessarily constitute "inferior" cinema and is actually quite natural.) It is no accident that the cinema's greatest artists consistently have been concerned with this central fact of the film experience. The films of primarily "emotional" directors such as Hitchcock, Chabrol, or Truffaut, for example, depend upon audience expectations, identification and involvement, just as more intellectual filmmakers such as Eisenstein, Godard, and Fassbinder structure their work according to their respective theories of audience involvement and its implications. Even the so-called "closed" cinema of a Fritz Lang derives both its power and meaning from audience involvement as much as the "open" cinema of a Renoir (see Braudy, 1977)—the former by encouraging judgments in the viewer subsequently exposed as obsessive; the latter, oppositely, by inviting suspension of judgement. Still other directors—Bunuel, Fellini, Cocteau—exploit the cinema's special contiguity with various levels of experience (dreams, fantasy). Their film practice is in agreement with Langer's observation that "Cinema is 'like' dream in the mode of its presentation: it creates a virtual present, an order of direct apparition" (Langer, 1953, p. 412). Yet whether these directors consider emotional or intellectual involvement of paramount importance, they all begin with the basic and necessary fact of viewer interaction.

Now, aside from their naive propensity for amazement, the main thing beginning students in film bring to class is their experience of the film they have seen that week. Despite their resistance to analyzing films, they tend to be more willing to discuss their responses since film has that relatively lowbrow cultural status as compared to literature. What I try to do is, first, get the students to articulate what their responses were; and then go back to the film in their memory and try to decide whether the film was working in such a way so as to elicit this response, or if their experience was brought to the film by stock responses or personal connotations on their part. If we agree that a particular instance falls into the latter category, I explain why it is irrelevant to an understanding of the film itself; if, on the other hand, their response seems an example of the former, the next question we consider is whether or not the

film had created that experience or response in them as part of a larger design or thematic structure. This seems to me a practical way of demonstrating the separate but not necessarily mutually exclusive realms of taste and criticism.

A couple of examples will serve to make this procedure clear. The first film I usually screen in the introductory course is Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). I choose this film to begin the course because it was and still is a popular film which also has some quite serious things to say; in other words, it is accessible and artistic. And, of course, it always produces strong responses in its audience. I use the film first to provide at the outset a general procedural model for the rest of the course by doing a shot analysis in which I discuss camera movement, movement within the frame, lighting, editing, and so on, showing how to discern these elements and then to consider how they function meaningfully in context. Secondly, it provides a useful example for pointing out the difference between exploitation horror films and aesthetically valid ones. Students assume it is their strong reaction to a horror film that makes it good, but this is not necessarily the case. I explain that it is actually not very difficult for a film to scare us: I point out such worn devices as a hand suddenly appearing in the frame in a tight close-up, for example—a technique which is usually as effective as it is common, yet as creaky as the old house in which it often occurs. The good film, however, will elicit fear (or whatever the emotion may be) in a meaningful way—say, to *clarify* the experience of fear. Pepper goes so far as to declare that from the contextualist point of view the best works are those that intensify and clarify experience, either of the work itself or beyond it. The pleasure of experience, while not disregarded, is secondary to its force: "*The more vivid the aesthetic experience and the more extensive and rich its quality,*" he states, "*the greater its aesthetic value*" (Pepper, 1967, p. 57; italics in the original). And as a genre the horror film lends itself readily to contextualist analysis, for the *raison d'être* of these films is, if nothing else, to elicit vivid aesthetic response.

What makes *Psycho* a work of some profundity and depth and not merely a cheap shocker is that what Hitchcock manages to do in his stylistic treatment of the narrative is to implicate the viewer morally in the events he or she is watching on the screen, thus connecting the experience of viewing the film with the actions of the characters in the film. As a result, we are forced to confront the characters' impurities as our own. Or so the argument goes. This is not the place to elaborate upon this fundamental thrust of Hitchcock criticism—the best place to begin is with Wood's (1965) *Hitchcock's Films*—but rather, to illustrate how such ideas may be incorporated into the practice of teaching. For me, one of the most significant moments in the film comes when Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) sinks the automobile with the body of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in the trunk into the swamp behind the motel: the car stops for a moment, as if the swamp is too shallow to accommodate it and then, after this slight pause, it abruptly bubbles and continues to sink as

suddenly as it stopped. This scene occurs after Norman's elaborate clean-up of his mother's mess in Marion's room (Hitchcock pans to the newspaper with the money folded within, a fact we know but Norman doesn't), a sequence which encourages the viewer to switch identification to and sympathy for Norman from the now-dead Marion. Every time I see the car-sinking scene I notice an audible, almost palpable sigh of relief in the audience as the car renews its watery descent. After discussion concerning how they felt at this moment in the film, students remember that sigh of relief or an equivalent feeling. Because they have experienced it rather than simply being told about it, they understand more fully the critical argument concerning Hitchcock advanced by Wood and others. They know that because they responded that way they have been implicated in the fantasy of the perfect crime—a fantasy which in part drives Marion to her crime in the first place. It is the difference between a thesis and a demonstration, in Dewey's terms between product of art and work of art.

My second example concerns *Written on the Wind* (1956), directed by Douglas Sirk, also a maker of popular Hollywood films but one who worked in a more subtle manner than Hitchcock. I tend to show one of Sirk's melodramas—*Imitation of Life*, *All That Heaven Allows*, *Magnificent Obsession* or *Written on the Wind*—about half way through the course, when the students have begun to understand what films mean, and have had some practice searching for and talking about that meaning. On the surface Sirk's films often seem so obviously "bad," primarily because they do not conform to Hollywood's dominant codes of realism; their color, for instance, often seems unduly garish, character motivations implausible, and so on. "Heavy-handed," "unbelievable" and "excessive" are adjectives the students invariably use to describe these films. They seem so inferior to the artsy films of Eisenstein, Renoir, and others we had screened earlier, inferior even to the hollywood realism of Ford and Hawks, that the students inevitably assume a superior relationship to Sirk's work. Such an attitude implies a position of some comfort on the part of the students: they have learned something about film analysis and many become content to rest on that bit of knowledge. But "Habit," says Pepper, "simply dulls experience and reduces it to routine" (Pepper, 1965, p. 65). Clearly this is not conducive to that open attitude upon which both aesthetic and analytical reasoning is predicated.

In the last decade critics have discovered (and if Sirk hadn't been discovered it would have been necessary for film criticism to invent him) that Sirk was indulging in irony, consciously exaggerating elements of melodrama, a genre popular at the time, so that he could be critical of American values and mores and remain commercially viable at the same time. I ask students to be specific, to tell me exactly what is "heavy-handed" or "phoney" about *Written on the Wind*. Often they stop here, resorting not to evidence which, in a case such as this, is deceptively difficult and slippery to grasp, but appealing instead to "the

feeling they got" from the film. However, they know by this time that this constitutes an insufficient answer, and their classmates remind them of this fact. At this point, happily, it is usually not necessary for me to point this out to them. If they do provide a concrete example, it is often the scene in which Dorothy Malone (with the collar of her blouse provocatively up, of course) sits by an obvious studio lake and remembers in voice-over her adolescent romantic daydream involving Rock Hudson. They assume that the lake was meant, as in most Hollywood films, to be taken as real, and that the rules of the game require the viewer to suspend this belief and pretend that it is real. But this lake looks so artificial that suspension of disbelief is much more difficult, if not impossible. In further discussion I suggest that the phoney lake might serve as a metaphor for the false romanticism, the fantasy, of Malone's daydreams (for Hudson had never felt the same way, we find out later) and moreover, that many of the characters' problems in the film stem from the fact that they rely on surface appearances. When, for example, Robert Stack knocks on Lauren Bacall's door and asks, "Are you decent?" before entering, and then discovers that she has gone, we understand what Stack meant by that question, but we can also see that the question has deeper, moral implications which Bacall also understood, which is why she has chosen to leave. Thus, in their experience of the film the class has been trapped into responding to it with the same surface criteria the characters in the film have responded to each other. They have reacted to the surface of the images instead of examining their implications. This may be an appropriate time to introduce the question of authorial *intention*, although it isn't necessary; whether Sirk constructed the scene by the lake this way on purpose is, after all, irrelevant to our ability to explicate the *work* of art.

Both of my examples employ a contextualistic approach and, I think, both nicely exploit the relationship of the students to film at this point in their aesthetic growth. I believe that this method neither intimidates nor alienates students by introducing them to film through a barrage of facts and terms isolated from their experience. With such an approach as I have outlined here, a conceptual space is established where the teacher and student may meet. For while my responses now are aesthetically more refined, I too at one time had breathed a sigh of relief when the roof of Marion's car disappeared under the brackish water and had sneered at the artificiality of a Sirkian melodrama. I don't hide this from students; rather, with the benefit of my greater experience in studying film, they see that from once having been in the place they are at now I've gone on to develop my awareness of how films work. My experience, in other words, becomes positive evidence and encouragement for them. Hence, while they may be learning about me, as Fiedler says, they also learn about the material and, what is just as important, they learn an enthusiasm for it.

It seems to me only logical to introduce students to film in this way, because

that is where the meaning of any film begins, with ourselves seated in a theatre. Pepper says of subjective experience that "it is ignored, disparaged, or explained away . . . called merely subjective, a result of insufficient analysis, mere vagueness, or nothing but a lot of undiscriminated elements." But, he notes, for the contextualist "it cannot be explained away because it is something in terms of which he explains other things. And for that very reason it cannot be explained. One cannot explain an ultimate fact" (Pepper, 1965, p. 63). Teaching an introduction to film in this way offers the students an opportunity not to attempt the futile task of divorcing themselves from the ultimate fact of their responses but instead, to feel comfortable with their responses and also with the business of thinking about texts analytically. With this kind of atmosphere in the classroom, where students are encouraged to corroborate and explore their responses to images, the common absence of the primary text is minimized as a problem. The foundation for analytical thinking, equally the goal of the introductory literature class, may in this way successfully be achieved.

References

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