Quoting Films in English Class

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I have long been an advocate of using commercial films in English classes, not only because they represent high-interest, contemporary texts which can be studied to enhance critical thinking skills, but also because they can be used to reinforce and motivate basic reading and writing skills. Now that so many good titles are available on videotape, I am even more an advocate.

But often my colleagues balk at using films in their classes, not only because they generally question the validity of film as a learning text-and-tool but, more specifically, because they are hesitant to experiment with a text and a tool in the use of which they are not expert. Often they ask: How can I fit a film in a curriculum filled with other, more basic activities? How do I incorporate film study into my normal teaching methodology? And what about the rating issue in contemporary films? and the legal ramifications?

Quoting feature films may help to solve some or all of these problems:

1. Depending on the length of segment or segments you use (and you can use more than one), you can easily fit film into a forty or forty-five minute class period.
2. If the segment is chosen for its own complexity and insight (an artistic *text*), it can easily be used during the study of literary texts to reinforce skill in aesthetic evaluation and to motivate critical thinking skills, ones which are similar in all forms of textual analysis.
3. If the segment is chosen (as *textbook*) for its relationship to other materials you are presenting in class, it can serve as a tool to generate writing or to illustrate literary terminology.
4. You can avoid problems of censorship by utilizing only those sections which are not likely to be objectional to students, parents, and administrators, and you can avoid legal problems by footnoting the film as you would any literary quote which you use for educational purposes.
5. If you do all of this, you will become familiar with the machinery involved, just as English teachers are becoming more and more familiar with computer technology and thus less intimidated by it. You will then see how to teach-with-video as you teach-with-print.

General Uses

Film quotes can be used, then as *text* and *textbook*. First, they can be studied in themselves, as a *text*, especially narrative ones. Here they lead to discussion and, used properly, they foster careful viewing and reading practices. And what is marvelous is that students are familiar enough with these texts and their language that they are often eager to talk and think intelligently about the text. Even more, they are often pleasantly impressed with how rich the film text can be, how it opens up to interpretation through discussion. I am convinced also, that one can transfer these feelings as well as these skills from film text to the printed text.

Second, films can be used as *textbooks*, texts which supplement the teaching of certain English skills. Most all literary terminology is applicable to film, so narrative terms like "setting" and "conflict," along with more poetic terms like "imagery" and "figures of speech," can be identified, defined within a film segment, either directly or as an offshoot of the discussion of the film as text itself. Also, the text may be used to stimulate many writing activities; in fact, any mode of writing (extensive or reflexive, personal or impersonal, essay or

narrative) may be produced in response to the film text.

Themes

Often units of study are organized around themes; for example, *self-awareness* is a common theme in literature. Now consider, along with those poems and stories students are reading, introducing a segment from *Rocky*. At the beginning of the film, just after the credits, Rocky comes home to his apartment. That scene (no longer than five minutes) lends itself to some interesting observations about Rocky's attitude toward self. Students will especially notice mirrors, pictures, and posters as suggestive of his inner struggle: what he was, what he wants to be, and what he is now. They will see that he is not as confident in private as he is in public. I have seen this carry into lively discussions, for example, of professional athletes or the difference between "confidence" and "conceit."

These discussions may lead into journal writing, too: How does someone achieve a positive self image? a negative self image? Describe someone you know who is a "wimp" or a "stud." Tell about a time when you were most alone or a time when you had to hide your feelings. Of course, these questions may also lead to expository or descriptive pieces, for which the film text as the literary text serves as supportive detail. Thus, the thematic approach can be applied in writing classes.

Other examples may better clarify how useful a text film can be. Take another common theme, such as *child/parent relationships*, then consider the following suggestions:

1. View a segment from *Tender Mercies*, the one in which Mac returns home to discover that Sue Ann, his daughter, has come to visit; he hasn't seen her since she was a child, and she has come to renew her relationship with her father. This scene (ten minutes long) can be used for discussion: How is the awkwardness of their meeting reflected in their gestures, placement, conversation? How does Mac try carefully to bridge the gap in their relationship? Why does Mac lie about the hymn he knows? How do birds and "white" enter into the scene as subtle motifs? Why do we cut away to that short scene when Rosa Lee talks to her son Sonny about the "earth's crust" and "core"? Students can even speculate about what happens as a result of this father/daughter reunion.
2. Viewing comparable or contrasting segments from the same or different movies can lead to interesting essays. For example, show a segment of *Ordinary People* which demonstrates the strained relationship between Conrad and his mother (maybe the four-minute scene in the backyard) and another segment (the last scene of the film, lasting eight minutes) which demonstrates the closeness of Conrad's relationship with his father. A discussion of these scenes may lead to a comparison/contrast essay dealing with the specifics of this relationship as they perceive and interpret it.

   You can organize a similar assignment around either parallel or antithetical scenes from films of different eras: such as Jim, Plato, and Judy's discussion of parents in the mansion in *Rebel Without A Cause* (a five-minute scene), with Andrew and Brian's description of parental pressure in one of the final scenes in *Breakfast Club* (fifteen minutes).
3. Viewing the basement scene in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (fifteen minutes) may be used as stimulus for a discussion or paper on visual symbols developed by specific examples. Watch the scene twice: first, to get the gist of Big Daddy and Brick's relationship; then again, to note all the visual objects (like the clock, spinning bike tire, trophy, cigar, and so forth) which might symbolize some aspect of this relationship. Have students freely speculate on paper (or in a journal), and then develop their ideas in a formal paper. You will find these symbolic connections varied and rich.
4. Finally, film quotes may also be used to contemporize literary classics by demonstrating similarities in themes, especially those expressed in parallel scenes from book to film. For example, after my class reads Conrad's "The Secret Sharer," I have used a scene from Hitchcock's *Strangers On A Train*, in which Bruno first announces to Guy that they share the guilt of Miriam's death. Both narratives deal with shared identities; thus, they can be discussed together, one helping to clarify or verify the message in the other. Also *Psycho* and *A Rose for Emily* hinge on the

keeping of dead bodies, and *Alien* and *Jaws* might be used in relation to *Moby Dick*. And John Ford's opening in *Stagecoach* is comparable to our meeting of the journeying pilgrims in the prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*. We often talk about how universal art is; this technique demonstrates the recurrence of theme and motif in both classics and popular art.

Literary Terms

As the earlier example from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* suggests, film quotes can be used to reinforce literary terms, such as symbol, which we at one time or another are asked to teach. There is no doubt that almost any narrative term, from "plot" to "point of view," from "characterization" to "setting," can be reinforced through film segments. Any of the films mentioned up to this point can be incorporated in a unit dealing with narrative terms: For example, how does the *Rocky* segment revolve around a conflict? How is Rocky's character developed, in terms of action, dress, dialogue/monologue? Although Rocky's dialect and speech mannerism make him sound dumb, what does he say that implies he's smart? How is the apartment a factor in defining his character? Does the atmosphere parallel the mood? Who is the narrator? What items has the narrator-as-camera picked for us to notice? Get the idea?

But a film segment can be used to reinforce specifically literary terms, too. The term dialect can be defined in terms of Rocky's speech; the 'irony' of the dialogue ("I done pretty good tonight" when it's obvious he was hurt and depressed); the 'allusion' to *Moby Dick;* the picture and poster 'motif.' One might even want to show the famous montage scene where Rocky works himself into shape as a 'poetic' vs. 'narrative' image. If the issue of the Christ figure comes up, many films may be quoted, such as the very first scene in *Rocky*, the end of the egg eating scene in *Cool Hand Luke*, or Ben's attempt to stop Elaine's wedding in *The Graduate*.

Adaptations

Many Hollywood films are adaptations of popular novels or plays taught in English class. Teachers often show these adaptations after their classes have read the original texts. Often the film is shown without explanation (a mere "treat," to see an audio visual representation of what was written). The follow-up to viewing consists of criticizing the film for not being faithful to the original. Quoting segments from an adapted film can alleviate these problems, either by using only those segments which *do* closely parallel the original or by using additions to or alterations of the original, which in some valuable way comment thematically on issues similar to those of the original.

Consider *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example of both procedures:

1. There are a number of scenes in the film which closely parallel the original, such as Atticus' summation to the jury or Bob Ewell's attack on the children. Why not show these segments to help students visualize their dramatic moments? In fact, the reading could be segmented over a number of days—and the filmed scenes introduced as this reading process continues; thus both processes, reading and viewing, are segmented.
2. As a normal, necessary part of any adaptation, changes have to be made from print to film. Some of these, rather than undercutting the original, expand ideas inherent in it. I would suggest with *Mockingbird*, especially after the entire book has been read and discussed, playing the title scene from the film (maybe even twice), so that students can list the items the young girl has in the old cigar box; then have students speculate about their symbolic value. In this way, one may not only reinforce themes within the novel, such as the racial issue represented in film through the black and white marbles colliding, the Lincoln penny, and the broken glasses, but also recognize other important themes (for example, time passing through the ticking clock or the beauty of innocence in the harmonica), themes suggested through the film itself.

Where We Get the Texts

The availability of videotapes at retail and rental outlets can make film usage in English classes a practical reality, given the access to playback units which, fortunately, are finding their way into our classrooms. Films can be rented from any number of sources (this, of course, means you pay); films can be purchased from any number of sources (here your building or system might invest). Once you have the film, it is a matter of viewing the film

and locating the right segment or segments; counters on VCR's have made this an easy task.

You can also depend on many features being shown on television, either on national channels or cable channels (even the pay channels like HBO). These also can be taped; or if you are familiar with the film, you can tape *only* the segment you need. However, because there is a legal issue involved, you must check with your media consultant before resorting to this form of taping. I would suggest that quoting or copying only a segment, for the purpose of study, would fall under the same category as quoting a passage from a novel or play, as long as one gives reference to the original source.

Final Thought

I must confess that I have an ulterior motive in suggesting that you quote commercial movies in your English class. My initial hope is that you would become more comfortable with the medium and the machinery. But my ultimate expectation is that you will see film, not only as a legitimate tool in English study, but also as a legitimate source for study as a language art. If you come to this realization, you will soon see the value of using an entire film text in your classes, hopefully using the quoting procedure as a means to analyze this complete text.

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