

Chapter 20

Stylized Moments: Creating Student Engagement and Participation in an Asynchronous Online University Film Course

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides academic researchers and teachers with access to a unique pedagogical approach to teaching film online with a detailed exhibition of strategies and technological tools that have proven to encourage and ensure interaction, presence, and participation in an asynchronous online setting. With a persistent comparative eye toward both F2F and asynchronous online versions of the course, the chapter reveals both the content and the infrastructure as it is currently delivered to 100 students, detailing how each component works, and the advantages and disadvantages of delivering such a course online.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides academic researchers and teachers with access to a unique pedagogical approach to teaching film style 100% online along with a detailed exhibition of the strategies and technological tools that have proven to encourage and ensure interaction, presence, and participation in an asynchronous online setting. It is drawn from twenty years of experience teaching face-to-face (f2f) various iterations of the author's English Department film course in both small and large lecture classroom settings as well as five subsequent years of teaching an online version. What

follows is, first, a general introduction to the field of cinema studies entitled "Background," then a zeroing in on the course's unique approach to film style and its hermeneutic project in "What is a Stylized Moment." Then "Turning Film Style Into Meaning" shares with readers the infrastructure of the course as currently delivered with a class size of 100 students with the collaboration of two graduate student Teaching Assistants (TAs), detailing how each component works, with a perusal of the required eTextbook and syllabus. The "Nuts & Bolts" section details the day-to-day operation of the course arguing for the effectiveness of Discussion Forum groupings. With a persistent

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comparative eye toward the traditional and electronic versions of the course, readers follow a discussion of the quantity and quality of learning, how instructor and student interaction, presence, and participation can be guaranteed, and the advantages and disadvantages of delivering such a course 100% online. The chapter openly confronts questions of online classroom instructional quality, academic rigor, and parity with f2f instruction, and concludes with an assessment of how each of its components potentially contributes to an enjoyable yet rigorous pedagogical experience.

BACKGROUND

Pundits of the post-MTV/Internet generation(s) are fond of claiming how a new visual acuity in young people is replacing the literary-based knowledge systems of yore, often citing the massive hours spent in front of TV and computer/device screens rather than between the pages of books. However, most of us are “babes in the woods” when it comes to acknowledging and articulately responding to this more visual way of knowing. In fact as a human enterprise, we have yet to quite recover from the astounding invention of the photograph over 150 years ago. Anthropological reports abound documenting first nation and aboriginal tribal suspicion over having one’s picture taken, based on the belief that part of one’s soul or spirit is also taken when “captured” on film: “There was never a photograph taken or a likeness made from first hand witness of Crazy Horse;” so claims Mari Sandoz in the 1942 biography, *Crazy Horse the Strange Man of the Oglala* (p. 424). The Oglala Lakota leader allegedly resisted being photographed as defense from “shadow catching” or soul stealing. In his illuminating and challenging book, *La Chambre claire* (1980), translated into English as *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes calls photography “unclassifiable,” a “disturbance (to civilization)” and a “wound” (pp. 6, 13, 26). This last characterization

bears witness to the inherent violence embedded in the filmic language of “aiming,” “shooting” and “taking” of photographs and movies. In fact early cameras were often mounted on the stocks of modified rifles. The pioneering photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), quoted by Michael Kimmelman in the *New York Times* 2004 obituary, once remarked: “I adore shooting photographs. It’s like being a hunter.” In his introduction to a rare interview granted to Charlie Rose for PBS (7/6/00), Rose described Cartier-Bresson as both a “sharpshooter” and a “marksman.” Weaponry metaphors prevailed throughout the interview by both interlocutor and subject. Students read in my eTextbook, *Stylized Moments. Turning Film Style Into Meaning* (2013), how this violence of looking, gazing, photographing, and filming, as well as its penetrative logic, are thematized by several American films, most notably under discussion in the course are Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), and as a sort of progressive antidote, Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999).

Students are immediately attracted to the University film course because they have a lifetime of experience watching and analyzing films. A big part of film’s uncanny power over humans, and one must include recorded sound, is undoubtedly due to the spectacular realism it captures, what Barthes calls photography’s “ethnological knowledge,” and the cognitive illusion of life-like movement achieved by the technology of the movie camera and projector. (*Camera Lucida*, p.12) As rehearsed in Martin Scorsese’s recent love letter to early cinema (and excellent condensed history of film origins), *Hugo* (2011), when the Lumière brothers first publically screened *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), some audience members ducked their heads while others ran from the screen hysterically. We at times still duck from oncoming objects or involuntarily cry out warnings to on-screen characters despite our sophisticated, jaded cinematic palates. Students are introduced to the proposition that cinema not only does a

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