



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1988 Volume IV: Responding to American Words and Images

America in Film and Fiction

Guide for Curriculum Unit 88.04.04
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“America in Film and Fiction” is designed to fit into a course I teach at the Co-op called “Visual Art and Literature.” This course enables students to see the many similarities between visual and written art. It includes comparative studies of painting and poetry, photography and poetry, and painting and the short story. Students are taught a method of analysis—appropriate for use with the visual and written—which in turn facilitates cultural discovery. Students seem to emerge from this comparative study with a truer appreciation of all art-forms as well as a newly-found awareness of history and its significance.

Last summer I worked on a unit which attempted to uncover the social concerns of 1930s Britain as delineated in two initially regarded disparate novels, “The ABC Murders” by Agatha Christie and “Down and Out in Paris and London” by George Orwell. Two-thirds of the way through the work on this unit I decided to include two examples of film produced in 1930s Britain. This visual study served to underscore and further explicate our thematic discoveries. Moreover, I quickly realized that film study could and should be a component of the course, “Visual Art and Literature.”

This year I plan to tie all of the threads together, as it were, in order to devise a unit which will include an adaptation of the method of analysis for film study—as well as a comparative study of a variety of fiction. This unit will be a natural sequel to last year’s work, for we will consider pre-World War II American works which might then be compared with the previously studied British works. Yet, this unit will take film study a step further. Film will not be seen as part of a culminating activity, but rather will be seen up-front as the primary focus.

The first section of this unit comprises a mini-course in film study. Sobochack and Sobochack’s excellent book, “An Introduction to Film,” provides an impressive blue-print from the study of the architecture of film. We will deal with two broad topics: film space and film sound. These topics encompass such elements of film as composition, movement, viewpoints, and background music. An awareness of these devices will prompt student appreciation of the twentieth century art-form, the modern film.

“Citizen Kane” has long been regarded as a technically superior film. I have chosen “Kane” as the subject for film analysis, and thus the focus of the second section of the unit, for two reasons: 1) it was produced prior to World War II and thus fits the historical specifications mentioned earlier; and 2) it is an artistically rich film which provides many examples of a variety of film devices and elements recognized by its astute creator, Orson Welles.

The final section of the unit encourages students to engage in a comparative study of “Citizen Kane” and a variety of short fiction. I believe that we will discover a similarity of theme among these works which might

serve to indicate pre-World War II American concerns. Thus we will approach film and fiction with a historical bent. Yet, it is likely as well that this comparative study will enable us to discover various transformations of theme; these transformations in turn might serve to indicate the individual insight (and genius) of each of the creators. Thus we will also approach film and fiction with a critical bent.

Teachers of this unit are provided with: 1) a summary of several chapters of “An Introduction to Film” which includes in-depth explanations of a variety of film elements; 2) an analysis of “Citizen Kane”—complete with examples of film elements at work; 3) short story synopses and analyses which serve to promote a comparison of cinematic and literary techniques as well as a comparison of theme.

(Recommended for English classes, grades 11 and 12)

Key Words

Film American Art American Fiction

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