



Introduction

by Brigitte M. Peucker, Professor of Germanic Languages and Literature and of Film Studies

We were all in agreement that, more than ever before, it is essential to teach our students how to analyze images. The title of our seminar suggests the double focus of its concern. It began with a number of sessions in which we discussed formal aspects of the film medium—color and the composition of the frame, sound and music, lighting, and editing, among others—using carefully chosen films viewed outside the seminar and analyzed with the help of clips. Film tells stories by means of images, camera work, and editing procedures; color, sound, and music are also central to narration. The formal procedures of the film medium convey information, but they also produce emotion in the spectator. A film sequence may be long or short, for example, thus creating suspense, anxiety—or boredom. It may be shot with a mobile camera or a stationary one, from above or below, prompting us to ask whose eye is looking. Is it a character that looks; is it a narrator? A garish color scheme may set the tone for violence, or it may simply be theatrical or suggest gaiety. Music can be part of the story—as, for example, when a character sings or plays the piano—or it can be superimposed on the images, as in the scary music that accompanies a horror film. All of these devices shape the way we read films. In the seminar, we analyzed films from these formal points of view in order to answer the following questions: How is a story told? How does it color our emotions? What is its aim in doing so?

Our goal was also to analyze a wide range of films. To this end, we included a Disney film and a well-known documentary, *The Thin Blue Line*, among other canonical works. The strategy of “close looking” was central to our study of these films; our guiding principle was to watch our chosen films as many times as possible. Three of the films we discussed were adaptations of literary texts: *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In the case of these films, too, we examined film form closely. With respect to film adaptations, we began by asking whether they tell the same story as the literary text. If the film tells a different story, we asked how and why it might do so. Again the strategy of “close looking” and close analysis was central to our discussions. The range of film genres we included made it possible for teachers of elementary school students to engage as naturally with the materials as the teachers of older students did. The range of topics addressed in the thought-provoking curriculum units that follow makes this evident.

Meg **Deweese**’s curriculum unit centers on the subject of suspense in a Poe short story, its film adaptation, as well as in Hitchcock’s *Strangers On a Train*—a perfect topic for the integrated American Studies course that she teaches to eighth graders. Her course focuses on character point of view and mood with respect to the Poe tale, and editing, lighting, and the camera with respect to Hitchcock, all with the goal of asking how our emotions are engaged by these texts. Each student creates Poe “foldables” to expand their knowledge of Poe and his time and place, a film storyboard to help them understand how film narratives work, and participates in the making of a class film. Shannon **Foster-Williams**, who teaches art to third graders, has developed a

unit designed to increase her students ability to “see” and understand images. The Disney film *Mulan* is used to fulfill both the art requirement and the mandate that students learn about ancient cultures, specifically Chinese culture. Her imaginative teaching techniques include looking at examples of Chinese art, acting out the narrative of the Mulan legend, and designing a storyboard of three panels to illustrate the film.

Miles **Greene**’s curriculum unit is designed for 12th grade English students who are visual learners. It uses *The Great Gatsby*—both novel and its film adaptation—to teach reading and analytical skills in both media, as well as to teach the history and culture of the Jazz Age. Literary and film character will be analyzed using the “psychoanalytical critical lens” approach, thus introducing another area of concern into this rich offering. Molly **Myers**’ curriculum unit, likewise for the upper grades, examines *To Kill a Mockingbird* in both its novelistic and filmic form in order to lay bare the gender relations in these texts and to discuss their cultural formation, using the concept of intersectionality as a method of approach. Here, too, text and image relations are a concern and lead to fascinating observations about how ideology is produced in both novel and film. Eric **Maroney**’s course, also for high school students, uses three films about surveillance to discuss changes in the technology of surveillance and the equally changing ideological and political implications this practice produces. This timely subject is used as a springboard for speaking and writing practice, as well as for the analysis of images. Barbara **Prillaman**’s curriculum unit makes use of fiction films about depression and schizophrenia to give psychology students a means of speaking about these disorders that is more immediate than the clinical essays they will read to accompany the films. The tools for analysis that the clinical essays provide are used in discussing the films, which will also be analyzed as visual texts. Kathleen **Radebaugh**’s middle school students will have the privilege of discussing immigration and citizenship through the lens of *Hester Street* and *West Side Story*, rather different films that will also provoke a discussion of film genre. Her curriculum unit describes a course that will also rely upon present-day campaign speeches to supplement film analysis and connect the subject of immigration to contemporary debates.

Sobeyda **Rivera** has devised a course for second-grade students of Spanish that uses the Disney film *Mulan* as a vehicle for comparing family structures in several cultures—in the students’ own, in Spanish culture, and in the Chinese culture that the film evokes. The aim is to teach Spanish while also teaching the concept of diversity to students with little knowledge of the world outside their neighborhood. Jolene **Smith**’s curriculum unit also has cultural aims: to use two children’s books and their film adaptations to discuss misrepresentations of Native American Indian culture. She will also instruct them about how film techniques color our understanding of the story a film tells. Finally, Arcadia **Teel**’s unit, designed for high school students learning German through the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) method, uses the film *Goodbye Lenin!* as a means of teaching the history and culture of the former East Germany. Her innovative method involves watching the film first without sound in order to generate class discussion. This approach also allows for the close analysis of the film’s formal components, which underscore its ideological message. In all of these units, the study of film form is used to underscore film’s cultural concerns.

Brigitte Peucker

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use