



# Materials Review

## TEACHING WITH FILM

by Hart Wegner

Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1977. 42 pages. One of 104 NDK Fastback titles available as of 1977. Single copies are 75c (60c to members). Quantity discounts are available for any title or combination of titles.

The audio-visual media—television and film—have a tremendous impact on our lives. It has been shown that children spend more time with television than they do with parents, teachers, or books. The most immediate response of parents and teachers to this phenomenon, which seemed to threaten the primacy of their values, was a complete indictment and banishment of the media. More recently, having discovered, like King Canute, that the tide obeys no person, scholars have begun to study the media as such, and educators have begun to exploit its affective qualities for didactic purposes. Particularly in the major universities, film is both widely used and the object of rigorous study. Very often, however, the high school or college teacher who has had no formal training in film studies and is either vaguely curious about the potential uses of the medium, or would definitely like to use film as a supplement in his classes doesn't really know where to turn.

There are any number of introductions to cinema studies. The greater majority are impressionistic surveys of what purports to be the history of the cinema. Of those which try to offer a systematic introduction to film studies, James Monaco's **How to Read a Film** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) is by far the best. Divided into six chapters (1. Films as Art; 2. Technology: Image and Sound; 3. The Language of Film: Signs and Syntax; 4. The Shape of Film History; 5. Film Theory: Form and Function; 6. Media) and three appendices (1. A Standard Glossary for Film and Media Criticism; 2. Reading about Film and Media; 3. Film and Media: A Chronology), this is an ideal, if not perfect, point of departure for serious film studies. However, for the teacher who knows virtually nothing about the potential of film in the classroom and wants a telegraphic overview, Hart Wegner's **Teaching with Film** is the ideal text. In less than 40 pages Professor Wegner compresses under fourteen categories the results of his many years of teaching film at the University of Utah, at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and in the Summer Program for Teachers at the University of California at Berkeley.

While the debate over the meaning of "visual literacy" still rages, Wegner argues that the term "film generation" is a misnomer, and that, in fact, students know very little about serious cinema, and understand even less. He goes on to suggest that film should not be perceived as competing with literature, but rather as a complex art form which deserves to be studied seriously. The author feels, however, that teachers in the past have been frightened by the seductiveness and power of film; in particular they have been afraid of being replaced by a machine. And while he acknowledges that the impact of film can be much stronger and possibly more pernicious than that of the written word, Wegner argues that it is precisely for this reason that film must be studied. Students, he argues, must be taught the "greatness" of film. By extension, presumably, filmic literacy will help viewers defend themselves from the all-pervasive impact of the audio-visual media.

The greatness of film, however, as Wegner and anyone who has ever used film in a classroom has discovered, is not taught with educational films. By and large, the author points out, they are poorly produced and at best boring, particularly when compared with feature films and even with commercials. Griffith, we are told, said that film would be educational only if it "didn't lose the power of entertainment." This observation is valid as far as it goes. Unfortunately it is not at all clear that entertainment is necessary or even conducive to learning. Furthermore, given the current trend toward a return to basics, this argument may bring back to the surface many of the old antagonisms directed against film studies and against the use of film in the classroom. Still, Wegner's essential argument is valid. The task of the teacher is to encourage the student, not simply to consume films and audio-visual products but to view them critically, analytically, much as the student is not taught merely to read, but also to analyze and criticize written texts.

This task, the author suggests, is best carried out with narrative feature films. Unfortunately, the more recent feature films can be rather expensive (\$100 to \$500 per screening), while the "classics," which often are quite reasonable (occasionally as little as \$25), equally often lack the intrinsically affective qualities which film is purported to have. Still, these problems can be overcome. Home video recording systems, Home Box Office, and the plethora of films on commercial television and PBS place literally hundreds of films at the disposal of the would-be film teacher. The author also recommends James L. Limbacher's **Feature Film on 8mm and 16mm: A Directory of Feature Films Available for Rental, Sale, and Lease in the United States**. Once a fascinating, inexpensive feature film has been obtained, another problem crops up: the typical 90 minute feature film does not fit in a normal class schedule. Wegner recommends either the adoption of block scheduling or the screening of the film in segments. He warns, correctly, that if the latter system is adopted some arrangement must be made with the distributor.

In addition to feature film, Wegner recommends the use of cartoons, documentaries, and experimental and personal films. He points out that cartoons are both the oldest and the freest form of filmmaking, and can be found in all lengths and deal with different subjects. The major obstacle in the use of cartoons, according to Wegner, is that they may seem too entertaining to be educational, a view this author does not share. Documentaries also come in different lengths and deal with different subjects. The author warns that, inevitably, they reflect the subjective biases of a given time and place, and thus the teacher should be extremely careful to explain the perspective of the filmmakers. Experimental and personal films, Wegner writes, are a heterogeneous group. They are closer to painting and music in their emphasis in editing and pictorial composition than they are to the narrative structures of prose literature. These films, he warns, are extremely "honest" in dealing with subjects such as love and death. For this reason he strongly advises the instructor to preview them.

The use of a film in a class involves more than a simple screening. The appreciation of a film, Wegner argues, will depend both on the quality of the physical facilities (the author recommends the use of two projectors in a soundproofed booth, an idea which is not available to everyone), and the preparation of the student by the teacher. The students, according to him, will be more receptive if the instructor has discussed the historical setting of the film's narrative, any anecdotal information relative to the making of the film, and if he prepares the students for the stylistic and rhetorical devices which appear in the given film. He urges students to take notes and to prepare written and oral reports on the films seen. He also strongly recommends the reading of books on film and the viewing of as many films as possible. Wegner also suggests that a comparison of the original literary source, if any, of the script, and of the film can be extremely useful in literature courses, which a study of a foreign language script followed by a screening of the film can be extremely useful in second language teaching. While the author does not mention it, "Feature Films in Second Language Instruction," by Hart Wegner (CAL ERIC/CLL Series on Language and Linguistics, 47) suggests how to use films and scripts in foreign language classes and contains a filmography and bibliography which should be ample as a point of departure.

In a Supplement which closes the booklet, the author suggests numerous possible approaches to the study of narrative feature films. Among others he mentioned groupings by genres, by themes, by national origins, and by historical periods. Elsewhere he suggests that the history of the cinema can be approached from several different perspectives which include national histories, the history of technological developments, and surveys of major directors.

In his last chapter Wegner argues that film is an important field of study which is receiving greater emphasis in Europe than in the United States. He contends that film studies should be separate from mass media courses, and that they belong in the curricula of American high schools and colleges. He feels that the United States government should establish special programs for gifted students, that teacher training programs should be established, that guidelines are needed for film programs, and that libraries at all levels should improve their holdings. While the problem areas identified by Wegner do exist, the situation is not nearly so bleak as it was only a few years ago. The Government does make research funds available through NEH and NEA, and through the American Film Institute (AFI) information and advice is available to teachers and students. The AFI also has special programs for gifted young filmmakers, and the NEH has made funds available for summer teacher training programs. Finally, basic bibliographical research is going on at a number of universities. Still, these programs have only begun to scratch the surface. The merit of *Teaching with Film* is that it takes the interested person on a readable Cook's tour of the excavations.

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