The Necessary Balance in the Teaching of Film
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The bi-plane sputters over the jungle. Tarzan looks up and says, “Big bird in the sky.”

“No, Tarzan,” says Jane. “It’s not a bird, it’s a plane.”

“Plane?” queries Tarzan. “Plane,” he says again, repeating the word over and over until suddenly he breaks into a broad smile of understanding.

Sounds of an engine in trouble and a few strains of ominous music.

“I fear it’s out of fuel,” says Jane. “We must help.”


Cut to a deserted jungle clearing where the bi-plane has obviously made a safe landing. Tarzan enters the clearing alone and chanting his newly acquired words assuredly, “Plane . . . plane . . . fuel . . . fuel . . . ,” he proceeds to fill the gas tank with birdseed.

Of course, Tarzan on screen never did seem very bright. But before we allow ourselves to feel too superior to him, we might consider just how often we teachers are found doing very much the same kind of thing—imposing old perceptual patterns on new experiences—and in particular, those of us who are so very caught up in the tradition of the new that we would seem, if not the last people on earth, at least the last people in the teaching profession, to treat airplanes as if they were birds: that is, we contemporary teachers of film.

We are—those of us at any rate who perceive ourselves as members of the very first generation of teachers to take movies seriously—not only people with a new area of study: movies, and a new name for it: film, but people in fact with a new perception of their newly named field. For to us, unlike our predecessors who played with motion pictures in the classrooms of the 30’s, movies are not simply craft, not simply sociology, not simply one of the modern media, not simply entertainment, but above all, art. And as teachers, we see this art as one with very special advantages for aesthetic education.

Most obviously, our students seem to connect with films and bring to them, even if gleaned second-hand from television, a strong visual orientation and at least a rudimentary visual literacy. Students come to us even in the primary school able to organize the patterns of light and dark and sound projected before them and to connect these patterns to the world-out-there. As teachers of film then, whatever the level on which we are operating, we find ourselves largely released from the problems of motivation or of having to offer instruction in basic skills and we are enabled, one would assume, to concentrate on what we might call the ultimate aims of all education in art: critical insight, imaginative growth, sensitivity to aesthetic values, enlargement of emotion and sympathy, and perhaps chiefly, consciousness of the human significance of aesthetic experience. But film liberates us in other, perhaps more important ways. Through its own freedom from tradition and orthodoxy, it delivers us from expert opinion, from established criteria and rigid methodology or, in other words, from the critical heritage that so frequently inhibits teachers of literature, fine arts, and music to the point that both they and their.

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students become divorced from personal and direct experience of works of art.

How many of us in English, for example, bowing to authority and insecure about our own insights and abilities have allowed Brooks and Warren to read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" for us and then offered these experts' perception of the poem to our students rather than eliciting their own, sometimes going so far as to use the critics' rhetorical questions to fill in the Socratic design of our lessons? We are not trying to suggest that these experts may not in fact read more perceptively than many of the rest of us or that used wisely and sensitively, they cannot help instruct us in the aesthetic transaction. What we are concerned about is the extent to which—whatever the reasons—we have made the critics' responses stand in for our own and those of our students and worse, the extent to which we have mistaken well-reasoned and well-educated explication for the experience of art.

Film's special quality is that there still exists no well-established community of experts in the field to stand between ourselves and our feelings, no one to whom we can turn for the right answers. It's true that we are presently on the way to creating such a community: turning "reviewers" into "critics" and "critics" themselves into "superstars." Nevertheless, there is so much concentration on current releases which necessarily remain more open to evaluation than older works and so little unanimity in any case in this emphatically present tense world, that even if we try to make the primary criterion of our responses the degree to which they match with those of the critics, we still must exercise judgment. On the most basic level, we must decide which of these critics has criticized most wisely.

In a very real sense then, the presentness and flux that characterize film and its environment coerce us as teachers into an on-going engagement with the problems of criticism, into a continuous effort to order and clarify the film experience. And it is more than likely that our own struggle will make us more sensitive to the struggles of our students. Asking questions which are real, which cannot be resolved by a single answer, forces us to listen attentively to all answers, forces us to test them for relevance and insight. Such an open atmosphere provided by film should both inspire our teaching efforts and relax our self-consciousness and our fears of being "wrong." And schooled by John Dewey, and possibly by I. A. Richards as well, how can we but delight in this opportunity to at last truly make education discovery, criticism practical, art experience.

Yet given our excitement about film's potential to expand vision, understanding, and emotional capabilities and to awaken through its own vigor and sense of possibility, vigor and independence in aesthetic education at large, what has actually happened to film as it has been brought into the classroom? What kinds of film courses are we offering? Paradoxically, the very same kind of courses that have traditionally been offered in literature and the other arts: survey courses in the history of film (instead of "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf," it's "The Birth of a Nation to Breathless") or specialized courses in film's major artists (instead of authors like Joyce, it's auteurs like Bresson), in film's major periods (instead of "Romanticism in English Poetry," it's "Expressionism in German Cinema"), in film's relationships with the other arts (instead of "Modern Literature and the Allied Arts," it's "Contemporary Cinema and the Liberal Arts"), or in film's
techniques and structures (instead of dealing with iambic pentameter and synecdoche, the student puts his mind to montage, mise-en-scène, and deep-focus). And if this isn’t quite filling gas tanks with birdseed, it certainly is depriving the art of film of the only kind of energy that ultimately matters: immediate and personal response.¹

The problem that must be emphasized here is that such courses, by their very nature, tend to focus much more on the teaching of film facts than on the encouraging of film experience. And while some justify such practice by proclaiming that knowledge of such facts is indispensable to rounding out aesthetic transactions, there is a very real question as to the degree to which they actually do enhance and enrich aesthetic experience. Take these remarks of Francois Truffaut on his experiences with Alfred Hitchcock’s The Lady Vanishes:

¹What we are describing, we should make clear, is based on studies of how film is being taught in institutions of higher education, the place where scholars are traditionally trained. [See, for example, David C. Stuart, Film Study in Higher Education (Washington: American Council on Education, 1966)] But the university is also where film teachers are created and our experience has made clear that methods courses notwithstanding, teachers tend to teach others as they themselves have been taught. Further, it is apparent in many secondary schools that film courses are already following traditional programs of explication and analysis, perhaps because that’s the only kind of experience most teachers have had with any form of art, whether literature, painting, music, or film.

They show it very often in Paris; sometimes I see it twice in one week. Since I know it by heart, I tell myself each time that I’m going to ignore the plot, to examine the train and see if it’s moving, or to look at the transparencies, or to study the camera movements inside the compartments. But each time I become so absorbed by the characters and the story that I’ve yet to figure out the mechanics of that film.²

The implication here is, of course, that attention to “facts”—in this instance, film technique—would make for something very different from the kind of human involvement that film at its finest spontaneously invites. And the question that forces itself upon us is whether it is attention to “transparencies” or attention to “characters and the story” that we wish to inspire. It is simple to say both, but Truffaut’s and our own experiences make this answer facile.

The approach we are advocating for the teaching of film is one which has as its primary goal encouraging the kind of engagement which “characters and story” invite and which takes as its starting point and retains as its focus the unique and genuine response of the particular student. And while this approach is one clearly fraught with many dangers, not the least of which its resistance to set formulas and/or prescribed curricula, it is finally the only appropriate approach for aesthetic education. What might help in the articulation of such response–based teaching is a model of the transactional process, as we offer in Figure 1. Here we’ve attempted to conceptualize the teaching of film as striking a necessary balance between what the viewer brings to the film and what the film, as a particular mode of organizing experience, brings to the viewer. Favoring “viewers” over “film” or “film” over “viewers” leads either to mere exposure to film and the piling up of unexamined responses or to the mere cataloguing of technical and historical paraphernalia.

Of course, model and sensitivity notwithstanding, there is a very real question as to whether or not a teacher can add to a student’s knowledge of film without violating the integrity of the student’s response. But we can work toward lessening this violation and bettering the response through a careful examination of the choosing and sequencing of teaching strategies. And to this end we might look at several actual

lessons prepared and taught by some teachers who were graduate students in a recent course we conducted on "Film in the Classroom."

One teacher working with a community college class saw as his objective, "arousing interest in looking at films from a structural rather than a narrative point of view." To accomplish this he planned to "acquaint students with some of the major strides that have taken place in the development of film and film language," to be illustrated by some Lumiere films and the Odessa Steps sequence from Potemkin. Each screening was preceded by an historical introduction followed by a series of questions centering, in the case of Lumiere, around how his films differed from current films in structure and intention, and, in the case of Eisenstein, around how his film differed in structure from those of Lumiere. The teacher hoped his students would perceive, in the first instance, the lack of editing, and, in the second, the effect of montage.

It is true that important perceptual points were being made here to an audience for the most part uncritical in the viewing of film and largely innocent of film history. The students, however, were bored by the Lumiere works and even more put off by the historical introductions. Directing his primary concern toward the film, this teacher had ignored the viewer. Furthermore, his aims themselves were confused in relation to this group. Without sensitivity to editing itself, the historical sequence was quite meaningless. Thus the first alteration we advised was to emphasize the editing alone, free of the historical trappings. In the case of the Lumiere films he could have begun by fixing in the students’ minds a recent commercial film before showing the clips and discussing how the class’s response to them contrasted with their experiences with contemporary films. And, if necessary, the clips could be rerun to reinforce, for instance, that they consist of one shot only, before going on to discuss the implications this has on the students’ reactions to the subject matter. All this could then be followed by the Odessa Steps sequence and a discussion establishing the illusions of time and action which exist in each student’s mind and how the film has created this illusion. What we are emphasizing here is the continual dialectic between the student’s expression of his perception of a film and his increasing awareness of what shaped that perception. In working on this teacher’s lesson, we were helping him to distinguish priorities among learning sequences by reminding him that his focus was on editing and its effect on the viewer and not on film history which when introduced in this context served no purpose other than diffusion.

While this lesson ignored the “viewers,” another lesson ignored the “film.” Phoebe was chosen by a second teacher for use with an eighth grade class. After having her students respond freely to the film, she planned a series

![Diagram](attachment:image_url)

**Figure 1**
of questions designed to explore their feelings about isolation and loneliness. She hoped to have the class write either an anecdote from their own lives illustrating this theme or an interior monologue in which they imagined themselves as Phoebe. Given this sequence of activities, the film itself—its manipulation of time and levels of reality and the students’ responses to it—drifted into the background. We recommended that in discussing isolation, the teacher keep at the forefront the film experience and its particular means of communicating the emotional content. Thus talk about the students’ personal perspectives would be balanced by talk about the film’s attitude. In this instance, the teacher had merely used Phoebe as a motivational devise for discussion, and Phoebe might as well have been a poem, an essay, or an actual person’s account.

Achieving this balance between viewer and film is crucial, but also central is a balance in method. The straight lecture having been discredited, we seem to have discovered “discussion” as a sole replacement. Again, the teaching of film is education in aesthetic perception and judgment; it is education in seeing, hearing, and feeling, and we must bring strategies appropriate to the development of these sensitivities into the classroom.

We stressed this in the case of a teacher who intended to use City of Gold with a ninth grade class. Her objective for this short film, which tells the story of the Yukon Gold Rush of the 1890’s, was to have the students figure out that the film is comprised almost entirely of still photographs. Her chief strategy was a teacher-led discussion which would point the students to this perception. In this instance we felt it might be more effective to use alternative strategies for increasing the students’ critical sensibilities, so we suggested a series of possible activities that might precede the showing of the film. For instance, each student or group of students could be given a large busy picture and a 2½ inch square frame. The problem for the students to solve would involve finding the most effective way of making a story out of this photograph by cutting it up into sections and presenting these sections in serial form. Other activities might include creating narratives out of a number of separate photographs or examining sequences as they appear in comic strips, paying particular attention to how the illusion of motion is created. Any or all of these activities might just as well be used as follow-up to the viewing of the film; what is important is getting the students to participate directly in the aesthetic of a particular film.

There is, of course, the danger once again of losing the film in the wash of all these activities, and we see this happening in a lesson developed by an eighth grade teacher for use with Two Men and a Wardrobe. In preparation for the students’ viewing of the film, she staged an argument in front of the class with another teacher over a film strip projector. Immediately following the argument, she had her students write a description of what they had just observed in order to illustrate for them, after the fact, their perceptual inadequacies. Building on the gaps and discrepancies in their observations, she showed the film and then had the students list what they remembered seeing in it. Further work included writing down at least five questions the students would like to ask the two men carrying the wardrobe and role-playing some of the scenes. As a finale, groups of students went on to develop their own short scripts. With all this hustle and bustle the film vanished. In working with this teacher on her plan, we advised her to maintain a central focus so that all the talk and action converged on the key questions: What is the film all about and how do you know? And in the revision, the teacher began to see that she must not simply flood the class with busy activities, but rather, offer a range of points of entry to heighten the students’ experience with Two Men and a Wardrobe.

These illustrations, of course, encompass only a narrow range of classroom situations. The stress on personal experience, however, has wider implications, especially as it relates to the development of the power of discrimination. Such aims as these—if we only pay attention to them—point unequivocally to a sequence of study in which students are first invited to respond to film as freely and as intensely as possible, to share their responses and to test them in relation to the film that stimulated them, and to see how their perceptions and feelings parallel or diverge from the perceptions and feelings of others. In this way, it is hoped that students will become aware of the preconceptions and the perceptual constructs they bring with them to film and the degree to which these expectations and criteria and beliefs aid in the creation of their experience of a film or the degree to which they in fact interfere. It is in the context of this kind of discussion that knowledge of film language and film strategies is acquired by students who are genuinely concerned with understanding how an
image or way of arranging space or the progression of a series of shots managed to affect them in a particular way. And as the sophistication of the students' responses to film grows, so should the complexity and variety of their transactions with films in order that they may have opportunities to explore as wide a range of cinematic constructs and strategies as possible.

Such a course, or better, such a sequence of courses seems to be the core of all work in film and an absolute prerequisite for anyone who intends to teach film. Even if an individual brings with him considerable self-awareness and critical acumen, he will be bound to gain insight into the kinds of difficulties which confront others and which in turn are likely to confront his own students.

The problem is where—if anywhere—the student goes from here, for what we surely want to follow from heightened perception is a refinement of taste. Yet unfortunately this is not the inevitable consequence of our current practices in the teaching of film where many highly questionable films are given the status of great art.

Once again we are confronted with evidence of the film teacher's insecurity. To justify his field, he seeks to persuade others that film is art and is therefore a bonafide member of the humanities curriculum. But to be an art, film needs its masterworks and masters. If all we had in literature were the likes of William Blatty's *The Exorcist* or Ernest Haycox's *Stage to Lordsburg*, we hardly could argue very effectively for teaching literature as a humanity. And we wouldn't solve the problem by claiming that books like these were great art. To do so would be to risk making ourselves look fools. To put the issue quite bluntly and to risk being called elitist or blind (or worse, being trampled to death in a stampede of John Ford's great herd of admirers), we categorically refuse to call such works as *Stagecoach* art, especially on the basis of arguments that contend a film becomes art solely by virtue of its skillful articulation, its technical brilliance; or that a film becomes art because it's the work of an artist, because it reveals the artist's personality; or that the ideas, feelings, characterizations, and story of a film like *Stagecoach* add up to anything resembling the emotional intensity, thematic complexity, and human significance that qualify, let's say, Renoir's *The Grand Illusion* as great art. Such assertions, we are convinced, do a disservice to language, to art, to film, and above all, to the discriminatory powers of our students.

This is not at all to suggest that such films as *Stagecoach* should be excluded from the film curriculum. Of course, such examples of masterful film craft deserve to be seen, thought about, criticized, evaluated, analyzed for their formulas and rhetorical effects, even enjoyed. To enjoy slick entertainment isn't to have bad taste; but to call it fine art is.

So where does the student go after his beginning studies? The tendency at this point is to send all students indiscriminately into such courses as were described at the outset: into courses in history, in genre, in auteurs, and the like. But keeping in mind our view of art as experience and, in turn, of film as art, such courses in history and genre present risks to film education even potentially more devastating than those they present to education in the other arts. In music or literary or art education, a concentration on history may serve to separate listener or reader or viewer from the experience of the work of art. But only in film, do such courses represent a possible threat to that art's very status. *The Great Train Robbery*—art? *Little Caesar*—art? Historical documents in the evolution of a complex technology, perhaps; sociological artifacts revealing a particular society's changing image of itself, maybe; studied, in the context of media and communication for what they tell us about ourselves and the society we live in, possibly; but art? And to be brought into the classroom as essential to aesthetic education? What seems much more relevant to the fostering of critical insight is a consideration of film theory. At its best—in André Bazin's work, let's say—film theory serves to clarify what actually happens when viewer and film transact. It seems important, too, at some point to set this theory in relation to aesthetic theory in general, to examine, for example, the extent to which Siegfried Kracauer's view of film as the redemption of physical reality draws on Aristotle's concept of mimesis, and in connection with such study, to consider film's relations with the other arts. In this context, the student can not only be led to see the similarities and differences between film and other aesthetic experiences but can also be protected from the kind of narrowness that continues to plague scholars in the other arts, that frequently diminishes their critical sensibility and, even more often, incapacitates them as teachers.

Our proposals may or may not produce experts in film facts; but, they will, we are convinced, contribute to the development of self-aware sensibilities intensely awake to immediate experience.