

National Film Preservation Problem: Instructor Guide

Title:

National Film Preservation Problem

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Discipline:

English

Target Audience

Advanced, majors

Keywords

English, film studies, film theory, literary theory

Length of Time/Staging

Approximately two weeks of class, three one hour class periods



Abstract

One problem students face when it comes to the moving image—film or television—is the tendency to see those images as pure entertainment and therefore beyond analysis. It isn't unusual to hear students complain that teachers murder their favorite forms of entertainment by dissecting them. This real-world problem puts students in the position of making their own judgments about film and connecting those judgments to a visible purpose. Since citizen nominations for the National Film Registry require judgments of a film's cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance, students will hopefully see that specific films are only worthy of public appreciation after serious study and analysis. Looking at the current list of films in the National Film Registry should prove to students that even such popular films as *Casablanca* and *Psycho* have been recognized by film scholars, film historians, filmmakers, and the average film viewer as important to American culture and history.

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Format of Delivery

Six class periods to give the assignment, discuss strategies for analyzing film, look at sample forms of criticism, and analyze specific films.

Student Learning Objectives

1. To require students to make some cultural, historical, or aesthetic judgments about film
2. To expose students to some important film theories
3. To improve students' ability to recognize important films and qualify why those films are important
4. To teach students some strategies for analyzing and evaluating film
5. To teach students to interrogate forms of media, forms of art, and the culture that produces those forms
6. To teach students to see films not simply as entertainment, but as artistic forms worthy of study
7. To encourage an appreciation of film as an important part of anyone's cultural heritage
8. To encourage civic-mindedness in protecting the arts
9. To teach students to support their claims with both primary evidence and responsible research
10. To teach students higher-order critical thinking skills

Student Resources

In addition to the bibliography in the problem handouts, students need sample reviews and critical analyses of films.



Author's Teaching Notes

Step 1:

I distributed the problem and devoted some class time to discussing the importance of film, both culturally and academically. Even though advanced students of literature are accomplished in analyzing literary texts, they typically have no training in film analysis and even have difficulty making the transition from literature to film. They are conditioned to see the visual arts as entertainment and, therefore, beyond critical analysis. After handing out the problem, I directed the students to look at the list of films in the National Film Registry at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/film/filmnfr.html>.

Step 2:

After handing out the problem, I explained the parameters of the assignment: that it should be five to six pages long, that the primary objective was persuading the Library of Congress that a specific film was worthy of being listed an important American film under the National Film Preservation Act of 1988, and that a secondary objective was learning to evaluate and make critical judgments.

Step 3:

I distributed some examples of good film analysis and discussed how a critical essay might implicitly and explicitly emphasize a film's cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance. Again, it was important to give students some models. All they knew of film criticism was the minute-long film review they see on television. Those reviews tend toward the impressionistic and fail to demonstrate to students the need to establish some tools of evaluation.

Step 4:

Before the next class meeting, students needed to have chosen a film and viewed it. It was important to have them make their choices early because some students chose films without checking the National Film Registry's criteria, or they chose films that could not possibly meet the criteria. In class I asked them to begin writing an introduction that would establish the essay's direction.

Step 5:

Two classes were spent evaluating Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in the context of reading Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," an important article on viewer-response theory. This step was important because it established for students the need to watch films closely, to take notes, and to think critically. I demonstrated for them—by stopping the film at particular points—how an argument could be constructed while watching a film.

Step 6:

After selecting a film, students did preliminary research for film criticism. I anticipated that students would have difficulty locating appropriate film scholarship, so I gave them a substantial bibliography. The Internet is home to the worst of impressionistic film commentary, so it was important to guide them toward appropriate sources both in print and on the Internet.

Step 7:

I held out-of-class conferences with students. They were required to come to their conference with a list of evaluative criteria they intended to apply to their film.

Step 8:

Students submitted the evaluation at the beginning of class.

Step 9:

After grading the essays, I required a revision of the essay in a manilla envelope addressed to:

National Film Registry
Library of Congress, MBRS Division
Washington, D.C. 20540
Attn: Steve Leggett

Assessment Strategies

Students were assessed using the following criteria:

1. The writer has a thesis that is clearly stated and appropriately qualified.
2. The writer has developed and expressed appropriate standards of judgment.
3. The writer provides necessary background information about the film being evaluated and asserts an overall judgment.
4. The writer provides reasons and supporting evidence for the judgment.
5. The writer establishes credibility through the selective use of sources.
6. The writer concentrates on a film's cultural, historical, or aesthetic value.
7. The writer appropriately qualifies the theoretical terms used to evaluate the film.
8. The writer's viewpoint is consistent throughout the essay.
9. The writer uses a lively and appropriate style.
10. The writer follows Modern Language Association guidelines.
11. The writer follows the conventions of Standard Written English.

Solution Notes

Because this assignment established a general set of criteria that needed to be fulfilled, students wrote essays much more attentive to qualifying abstractions. The criteria established by the Library of Congress are general to the point of students still needing to qualify their terms; they cannot simply argue a film's aesthetic value without first doing that.

Because of the abstract nature of the assignment, there is no specific solution. The problems demands a direct engagement with theory, abstraction, and definition, like all real-world problems for the English or film major.