honest and stimulating way to high school students. Class, race, and gender issues are emphasized in an attempt to make such courses relevant to students' personal lives and to interrogate larger political questions in American society. Hunt's "inquiry model" approach can be utilized both by those who teach in unique precollege programs like the Ace Plus curriculum she cites and by university professors who hope to develop critical thinking skills in their freshman and sophomore film/media classes.

Diane Carson's article examines a more general strategy for improving teaching effectiveness: understanding the different individual learning "styles" that students (and professors) bring into any classroom situation. Although Carson does not emphasize cinema studies courses in this article, the practical applications of her schema to film classes are wide-ranging—in the types of course assignments, projects, examinations, lectures, and discussions a teacher would devise. Carson's theoretical notion that "we must have a coherent understanding of how people learn" has pragmatic consequences in how we organize our film syllabi, conduct our classes, and stimulate student curiosity.

Peter Lehman's essay deals with the issue of how certain "politically correct" positions that were developed in the scholarly literature and at academic conferences during the 1970s and 1980s influenced pedagogical practice. Lehman ultimately advocates a "complex" (not "mushy") pluralism that compares, contrasts, and questions all scholarly paradigms. Although the main body of the text originally was delivered as a workshop presentation at the 1989 SCS conference, Lehman's 1996 afterword demonstrates the continuing relevance of employing a variety of critical methodologies, rather than sticking to some narrow and doctrinaire "correct position."

In closing, let me encourage *all* SCS members to become actively involved with the ongoing work of the Committee on Teaching, either by participating at our conference workshops, contributing an essay, or proposing an idea on how to realize our goals of encouraging serious discussion about pedagogical philosophy and the exchange of practical teaching advice within the film scholarly community. Just contact me or any of the other members of the SCS Committee on Teaching for further information.

Teaching Mise-en-Scène Analysis as a Critical Tool

by Tricia Welsch

The professor who taught the first and only art history course I took during my undergraduate years instructed the class members one day to observe the circular structure in some important painting. He talked on and on about the circular organization of the painting's plastic materials, and I sat there dumbfounded. To

me, the picture clearly showed a few people seated at a rectangular table. I nudged the student seated next to me to see if he knew what was going on: he didn't. I believed I could differentiate a circle from a rectangle, and right then, that distinguished professor lost credibility, which he never regained.

Today, a teacher myself, I can't believe that I didn't raise my hand and simply ask: what do you see that I don't see? But I didn't quite recognize that afternoon that I was listening to a new language, one for which there were lexicons, dictionaries, all the usual tools for the beginner. Somewhere between my reluctance to show my ignorance and my teacher's failure to see it, a slip occurred, and the means by which one shape can become another as the eye traverses a painted canvas was lost on me for years to come. How to recognize and articulate the aesthetic experience of the eye is a pleasure I would later discover through cinema and project backward toward painting.

In *Thinking in Pictures,* John Sayles remarks, "There's a lot of talk about how visually literate today's kids are, but a lot of that literacy is the equivalent of being able to read *Spider-man,* without the captions, real fast. When you throw any kind of complexity in, visual or verbal, things haven't changed much."[1] It is my experience that students welcome being taught how images are structured and designed, and that we do them a distinct favor by making some compositional principles intelligible and available to them at an early stage in their thinking about motion pictures.

I have developed a writing assignment which begins this process, one that I have used with great regularity and equal success in my film analysis classes. It is derived from the first two chapters of Louis Giannetti's popular textbook, *Understanding Movies,* and can be used in conjunction with that text or as a free-standing assignment. I typically assign this essay as the first project in the term, but it is flexible enough to become a part of another, longer assignment or to be used as a piece of prewriting before a more complex project.

The directions read as follows: "Your assignment is to write a three-page mise-en-scène analysis of a single shot from one of the films listed below, or from any of our course films. You should follow the fifteen steps found at the end of Chapter Two of the Giannetti textbook as a preliminary. Then select a few of these elements to write about. Make a brief but coherent argument about the role these elements play in shaping or intensifying the film's drama. Do not use plot summary." Along with a few notes about writing conventions, like "Underline film titles," or "Use present tense to describe what you see, as though it is still occurring as you write," I give only one further instruction: "Draw the shot on a fourth page for our mutual reference." According to Giannetti, a systematic mise-en-scène analysis of any given shot includes the following fifteen elements:

1. **Dominant.** Where is our eye attracted first? Why?
2. **Lighting key.** High key? Low key? High contrast? Some combination of these?

3. **Shot and camera proxemics.** What type of shot? How far away is the camera from the action?
4. **Angle.** Are we (and the camera) looking up or down on the subject? Or is the camera neutral (eye level)?
5. **Color values.** What is the dominant color? Are there contrasting foils? Is there color symbolism?
6. **Lens/filter/stock.** How do these distort or comment on the photographed materials?
7. **Subsidiary contrasts.** What are the main eye-stops after taking in the dominant?
8. **Density.** How much visual information is packed into the image? Is the texture stark, moderate, or highly detailed?
9. **Composition.** How is the two-dimensional space segmented and organized? What is the underlying design?
10. **Form.** Open or closed? Does the image suggest a window that arbitrarily isolates a fragment of the scene? Or a proscenium arch, in which the visual elements are carefully arranged and held in balance?
11. **Framing.** Tight or loose? Do the characters have no room to move around, or can they move freely without impediments?
12. **Depth.** On how many planes is the image composed? Does the background or foreground comment in any way on the midground?
13. **Character placement.** What part of the framed space do the characters occupy? Center? Top? Bottom? Edges? Why?
14. **Staging positions.** Which way do the characters look vis-à-vis the camera?
15. **Character proxemics.** How much space is there between the characters?[2]

This assignment works because it does a number of things and does them simply: first, it requires that the beginning student recognize a shot, distinguishing it from the sequence in which it appears. Second, it allows the student to select a shot that appeals to him or her, and the student thereby becomes the apologist for or curator of that shot's significance. When and if that film comes up for class discussion, there is a resident expert in the group on some aspect of its visual style, and he/she holds forth with confidence. In this analytic process, however, all shots are equal: I tell class members that the shot that has struck them most forcibly is probably the one they'll be best qualified to write about, thus reinforcing their instinctual responses and encouraging them to develop and acknowledge their own aesthetic. Although I have occasionally steered students away from closeups, which often lack detail and depth, they can't make a mistake in their choice of shot.

I generally list about a dozen films as possibilities, in addition to the course films we are studying, so there is a wide range of possible shots from which to choose. Since every student selects his or her shot independently, only seldom do two members of the class select the same shot. This makes reading the assignments easier as well, since each paper treats a fresh new topic, which is especially important when grading essays in a large class.

After a student has chosen his or her shot for analysis, Giannetti's fifteen steps offer a coherent, straightforward means by which he/she can gather information about that shot. Giannetti's questions are admirably self-explanatory: whether or not I have explicitly taught this material in the classroom, it is possible for students to learn key introductory concepts from the questions themselves. They go down the list, collecting data as though for an experiment. I often make the analogy with a scientific investigation, partly to suggest that the most important thing at this stage is simply for students to identify and record what they see. Anything that demystifies the often-new requirement of visual analysis is useful.

For some students the requirement that they draw the shot is upsetting, but for others it is liberating. They can literally trace the shot's contours, and learn kinesthetically through the movement of the hand whether there are more curving lines, say, than straight ones, or whether there are lots of small blocks within the frame. I make it a distinct point to tell students that they will not be judged, either negatively or positively, by the quality of their drawings, but that I will not accept computer-generated images or xeroxed photos. I hand around some exemplary storyboards which range from the simple and functional to the elaborate and whimsical, but assuaging some terror about the drawing component of the assignment is inevitable.

Selecting the items for emphasis predictably turns out to be the easiest part, because each shot tends to exploit a few of the mise-en-scène elements more creatively or intriguingly than others, and those dominant elements emerge readily from the fifteen-step process. Connecting the shot to the film's overall project is also surprisingly simple, given that here students must generate a thesis, often an extremely difficult part of the writing process, but here again students have already selected their shot because it spoke to them in some fashion. Having gathered a lot of information about its structure, they often begin to realize and articulate why they were drawn to this particular shot initially. Often their chosen shot represents a turning point or key moment in the film, possibly when an important new element of the plot is explored or when a character has a crucial revelation; sometimes they have chosen a shot that contradicts what a character is saying or that appears different from the overall look of the film. No matter how weak the student writer may be, he/she consistently has at least as many insights about the film as are necessary to prove the shot's relevance for the purposes of this short assignment. I inform the class that their essays will be judged on their argumentative skill as well as on their insights, but the design of this assignment seems to lead them to construct logical and cohesive arguments with relative ease.

This is a highly directed and restrictively focused assignment. One of my goals with this project, which I generally assign at the beginning of a term, is to identify students with writing or analytical problems early. It also serves to build confidence within the class, as most people do very well on this essay. Furthermore, it creates a shared vocabulary of basic concepts, whether I teach them or not. With upper-level classes where students may not have taken a lower-level offering that teaches

mise-en-scène and related processes (like editing, movement, sound, and so forth), it evens the level between advanced students and first-timers.

Usually I do a few mise-en-scène analyses in class a week or two before the assignment is due. I freeze-frame an image, preferably from a film no one will recognize, and tell class members nothing about the film itself. We ask the fifteen Giannetti questions, drawing tentative conclusions as we go. After the students are done, I tell them very briefly what the dramatic situation within the film is. Every time, without exception, the class members have accurately understood the basics of the situation, usually with a pretty fair understanding of the power dynamics among characters and the relation of the characters to the environment. This builds the assignment's credibility, as students realize quickly that they learned all this simply by looking closely at a single shot's visual organization and design. These early classes are usually among the most exciting of the semester.

Although I offer advanced students a chance to do another kind of short essay, because they have done this type of work with me before, they generally elect to do another mise-en-scène analysis, but will typically look for shots that go against the film's grain, thus complicating their project a bit. I have had advanced students teach this method to beginning students, or lead smaller groups within a large class meeting, in which the entire group is looking at the same projected image. This encourages collaborative learning and helps the advanced students toward an understanding of effective pedagogy: they must allow the new students to figure out for themselves what is going on if the process is to generate enthusiastic, creative responses.

The mise-en-scène analysis gives students a chance to learn basic skills of visual analysis through careful, steady observation of the image. It opens their eyes to the complexity of visual design and gives them practice at incorporating visual analysis into argumentation. For production students, it provides a sense of intentionality to shot set-ups. Later in the term, assignments may put more emphasis on narrative structure and other topics, but students with this assignment under their belts tend to try to fit at least some thoughts about a film's visual style into their work.

The worst problem I typically have with this assignment is hearing students lament that they can never watch films the same way again, that they have been spoiled for passive viewing. Sometimes I ask students to look at television programs or commercials for practice—but half the time, I forget to suggest this and they come back a few days later and tell me that they have been doing it anyway. Sometimes an unexpected side effect of the wide range of possible shot choices is that students end up watching extra films, looking around for that perfect shot, yet I have never heard a complaint about this "unassigned" additional work.

In another context, André Bazin noted, "It is always a good method to presuppose that a . . . weakness in a work of art is nothing other than a beauty that one has not yet managed to understand."[3] If we give our students the tools to help them appreciate a film's visual design, they may learn to appreciate and revere those beauties they as yet only dimly perceive.

Notes

1. John Sayles, *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie "Matewan"* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 7–8.
2. Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies,* 7th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 83–84.
3. André Bazin, "On the *politique des auteurs,*" in *Cahiers du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave,* ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 256.

Film and Media Education, K–12

by Susan Hunt

As a new member of the SCS Committee on Teaching I bring to the organization the perspective of an adjunct community college instructor. This precarious position inspires its share of anxiety, but it also grants me a certain creativity in my stubborn attempts to make a living in media studies without a doctorate.

I have managed to teach introductory and contemporary cinema classes for a number of years at Glendale Community College (GCC) in the Phoenix area and am now infiltrating the K–12 domain by teaching with the ACE Plus (Achieving a College Education Plus) program at GCC. The latter program is designed to prepare high school students for college. Many of these students have life factors that jeopardize their success in higher education. Nearly all of them will be the first in their families to attend college. They are in honors programs at their high schools, but placement exams show they're not ready for community college work.

I taught "Media and Society" to twenty high school juniors during the fall semester 1995 and again in fall 1996. I came to the ACE Plus program with the assumption that if students understand the role media play in shaping the positions from which they see themselves and their possibilities, they can then gain some control over their lives instead of succumbing to external circumstances. The challenge for me was to structure the course in a way that was meaningful to the students given their life experiences. I also wanted to address issues of concern to them as young people on the prickly edge of adulthood.

To begin, I had them write a "Miracle Life" essay: If a miracle happened and they could immediately have the life they wanted, what would it be? Not surprisingly, many of them saw themselves living in big homes in cosmopolitan settings, surrounded by expensive material goods. Their careers were prestigious as well: writer, filmmaker, pro basketball player, model, actor, rich business tycoon. At the same time, a sizable percentage of the students expressed a disdain for work. They wanted to work part time, do volunteer work, be so rich they didn't have to work, or marry a lawyer. A large gap therefore existed between the students' current lives and their dreams. I thought about how media studies could help them enhance