Teaching & Technology in Media Studies
"Teaching Videographic Criticism"
Drew Morton, *Texas A&M University-Texarkana*

I've spilled a lot of ink in the past couple years in short pedagogical columns about teaching videographic criticism. In an issue of *Flow*, I outlined some of the problems I encountered when first teaching the class. The first time I taught my upper division course on videographic criticism, my syllabus was centered on New Media theory. Students were assigned to write short response papers to the readings and, in the final weeks of the course, use one response paper as a spring board for a five minute video. The first time around, I found that the students were grasping about half the reading. Because of this, I staggered the timeline the second time to provide some assistance. However, fifteen weeks are fifteen weeks and staggering the reading took a couple days out of their video production schedule. After a heart to heart with my students and some colleagues, I realized I was simply trying to do too much. In short, I was teaching a class that was designed more for me and less for them.

I sat down with my *[in]Transition* co-editor – Christian Keathley – and asked for his advice. He said he had found a great deal of success treating the syllabus as a draft and the course was more like a collaborative workshop. I revised the syllabus accordingly and outlined the assignments in the newest version. Opposed to the first incarnation, this class would be solely constructed around videographic "responses." There would be little to no actual paper writing (I believe I assigned them a short response on a videographic work of their choosing). Students would be asked to pick a film from *Sight & Sound*'s Best Of list, research it, and make a series of pieces about it.

The first video assignment prompt asked students to take one film term and illustrate it with a clip from the chosen film (a video dictionary entry, if you will). For example, how would a student illustrate a "long-take"? We were still in the introductory stages when it comes to the theoretical side of the course, but we paired it with application on the practice side. I also pushed the assignment a bit further by prohibiting the use of voice-over. How does one illustrate the concept of "long-take" purely from a visual standpoint? All of a sudden, it is not as easy as putting up a shot from *Touch of Evil* or *Children of Men*. After all, someone might confuse "moving camera" and "long-take"!

The second assignment asked students to produce a videographic summary of a scholarly article about the chosen film (they must submit the reading to me in advance for approval) and to rebut it. How would a student summarize Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in a four minute video (I tend to allow voice over or on screen text with this assignment!). This assignment challenged the students to analyze the article indirectly. After all, two minutes does not allow the student to engage in bulk quotation (as many are apt to do with sophisticated readings!). The scripts for their videos have to be extremely concise – without becoming an overly dense lecture – due to the constant balance between visual and aural elements.

The final project was a five minute analysis that could either be argumentative or poetic in its form. Both required an artist statement, similar to those published at *[in]Transition*. The prompt for the former assignment looked a lot like the video version of a research paper – I expected a

thesis, research, and textual analysis. In this case, the artist statement simply shows the work, explains the rationale for the construction of the piece, and/or perhaps explores avenues that may have been omitted for time. In the case of the latter, the statement becomes much more significant because the two pieces must work in tandem.

Now that I've taught the second version of the syllabus, I can come back to you with a status report. In general, the collaborative workshop concept worked extremely well. There were so many unforeseen obstacles that I had not encountered the first time around – ranging from required software updates that I did not have permission to install and the imperfections of *HandBrake* (it seems to work for fewer and fewer new releases) to the problems encountered by students who had to migrate between computers. The less rigid structure and philosophy really set the students' minds at ease.   Two ideas, however, did not work as well. Given that half the students were familiar with theory and the other half were not, bridging the divide for the second assignment was incredibly difficult. I'll reiterate what I said in *Cinema Journal*'s latest Teaching Dossier: "Bringing history and theory into a production course (or vice versa) ultimately involves a degree of horse trading." In a broader, non-CMS exclusive department like mine? There was going to be a certain shagginess to my compromise. As a result, the final assignment prompt resulted almost exclusively in poetic mash-ups (some incredibly artfully done). However, almost all the students left the statements for last and it clearly showed in the writing. Next time I teach the class, I'm going to put a bit more emphasis on writing, introduce the final assignment earlier on the schedule, and build in some smaller deadlines to force them to manage their time.