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Course File: Teaching Alternative Film to Liberal Studies Freshmen

Deborah Tudor

DePaul University's Liberal Arts and Sciences College runs a first-year program for all students which features several course options including an immersion course called Discover Chicago, and Explore Chicago, in-depth topic courses that utilize resources in the Chicago area. These courses may be taken to fulfill Liberal Arts Freshman year requirements. For the past two years I have taught an Explore Chicago course on the topic of Alternative Film in the Chicago area.

I began this course as part of an effort to overcome student apathy toward non-Hollywood fare. My course is one of several Explore Chicago sections, each on a different topic, offered in the autumn quarter. Many of the freshmen who pick my course express interest in an eventual film career, although some take it only to fulfill a Liberal Arts requirement. I have taught two sections of this course, with a total enrollment of 60. Except for about 10 students, most admitted to no experience with films other than Hollywood features. I'd like to explain the course a bit and discuss some of the good and not-so-good outcomes of the experience.

This course combines introductory lectures with field trips to films, and classroom visits by people involved in local film culture. During the past two years, freshmen have enjoyed films at the Music Box, a local art house; Facets Multimedia; and the Chicago International Film Festival. Classroom visits have included renowned Chicago Reader critic and author Jonathan Rosenbaum, film scholar Dr. Michael deAngelis, a representative of the Women in the Director's Chair organization, independent producer Gregg Elder, Chicago filmmaker Matt Irvine, and Music Box programmer Brian Andreotti.

The course gives students a very basic introduction to the ways that critics have categorized films: Hollywood style, independent, art house, foreign, documentary, experimental and avant-garde. The class reads articles and screens short examples of these categories during class time. We usually watch some films, such as *Chien Andalou*, *Rhythmus 21*, *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*, and *She's Gotta Have It*, in class. This gives the students a sense of historical consciousness and context for non-mainstream fare. The readings and screenings let students begin to make connections between theoretical constructs and actual film practice. The field trips allow students to familiarize themselves with opportunities for experiencing film culture outside mainstream Hollywood, and to deepen their understanding of the differences and similarities among these common critical categories. I don't prescreen the films we see on outings, because the nature of this course requires collaboration with the students. I emphasize that from the beginning. We are exploring local film culture together.

While not every student responded to all these films enthusiastically, everybody in the class liked at least one film we saw during the quarter, and approximately half the students (two year total: 60) express a desire to see more foreign and independent films. A very small number of students (fewer than 10 of the 60) wish to see more purely experimental films.

Most of the class admits to being surprised pleasantly by foreign films. A common remark is: "It's not so hard to read subtitles after all"! Classes have seen films like the German

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Tubali, Solas (Spain) and Paulina (US-Mexico). Probably the most popular excursion is the Music Box visit. The Music Box is a restored 1920s theatre and is only a short El ride away from DePaul's Lincoln Park Campus. Even students who didn't like the films we saw there loved the building, with its projected cloudscape on the main auditorium ceiling.

The guest speakers have also been very popular. Having an actual filmmaker bring examples of his work, listening to a producer explain the process of putting a film together, and arguing with a critic about the use and value of film criticism have all been stimulating for them. They love the "inside" look at film art, film business, and film writing that they get through contact with these speakers.

The benefits include the fun and intellectual stimulation these students receive from challenging and unusual films. Students must write a screening report for each film that we see, and even the negative responses tend to be well-thought out. Few students simply reject the films out of hand. Many report that their prejudices against alternative fare have greatly lessened or vanished due to their experiences.

The class makeup can pose a problem. Some students are taking the course only because the time fits their schedule, and some of these have little or no interest in film period, much less in alternative films! So far, there has only been one student whose negativity caused a problem in class discussions. He kept insisting that all the films we saw were "crap", films that were losers because they couldn't make money. I dealt with this problem by inviting the class to respond to his remarks. They did, some passionately. So instead of being a problem, his negative attitude became a real discussion prompt.

Money is a problem. Students have to pay for their own tickets, with some occasional exceptions when organizations like Facets Multimedia donate tickets, or when the Chicago Film Festival holds a free student screening. DePaul has many working class, first-generation college students. The First Year Program doesn't have the funds to pay for class outings, so I end up paying for a few student tickets during the course. Right now, I don't see a way around this. I restrict the number of screenings because of this, and try to bring in as many

speakers as possible. Program funds do fund speakers, all of whom graciously reduced their usual fees for this course.

I realize that I am ideally situated to teach this type of course. Chicago has a vibrant alternative film scene, lots of local festivals, and local filmmakers who are eager to share their experiences with students.

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