

Variations on a theme



This is an activity based on viewing and discussing excerpts (selected, short parts from a film) from a variety of cinema films and other audio-visual products, each time selected as AV representations of a certain common theme (i.e. scenes with people eating, scenes taking place in ports, scenes involving travelling by train, chase scenes, space war battles etc.) aimed at the comparison of types of films and the messages they convey. As a convention, in this activity, the term 'film' refers to all types of AV texts in cinema, TV, You- Tube, and Web texts.

Material needs: hall with video projection and sound facilities, collection of film excerpts (available in You-Tube, or raw files etc.)

What is the purpose? Is there any method we should have in mind?

Viewing and critically analyzing existing audio-visual work is a fundamental activity for familiarizing oneself with audio-visual expression. In fact, regarding the field of audio-visual expression in education, it would be no exaggeration to state that viewing a variety of audio-visual texts can be considered the equivalent of reading/studying literature texts as well as everyday texts in a language lesson. However, the process of viewing audio-visual texts needs to consider certain prerequisites in order to develop the viewer's awareness:

- Audio-visual works are best viewed on a **large screen** and by a broader audience. The invention of film as a medium of projecting moving images to an audience is a fundamental element of audio-visual expression. In the youth center environment, any group of three-ten participants that watch without any distractions a film on a relatively large screen or on a white wall can be considered as a rudimentary audience. A fairly darkened room with clear sound conditions can play quite an important role in screening. The process of watching a film by oneself on a computer screen, pausing it frequently or even searching back and forth for certain scenes, is considered as studying mode rather than viewing a film.
- At the end of the film, it is quite important to provide those who watched/shared the film an opportunity to **talk about the film** with each other. This is because the audio-visual text is still considered to be a stimulus for lively human communication and idea exchange, i.e. we are enthusiastic to talk about films we enjoyed! In addition, we should not forget the fact that -as 21st century human beings- we are the descendants of social groups that spent their nights watching shadows and reflections while sitting together around a fire located in the center of the community.

As far as the very important activities involving the comparative study of audio-visual works are concerned, it should be noted that the participants' age is a determining factor regarding the extent to which they can systematically be introduced to important audio-visual works. Therefore, we recommend that these activities will be used just to gradually familiarize participants with the basic methodology of critically analyzing a work and not to appreciate classical films in depth. For this reason, many of the audio-visual texts that the participants will view should come from the current popular youth culture, and should NOT be chosen because of their cultural value and their potential to be useful in the participants' aesthetic growth. It is the popular stimuli that attract participants' interest that can 'activate' their critical thinking and can be easily integrated in simple, introductory activities of critical analysis.

The main intention of the activity is a lengthy, provoking discussion encouraging critical skills like comparing/organizing/expressing criteria, negotiating terms and personal views etc. The particular activity is also providing to the participants an opportunity to develop a feeling of 'authority-superiority' that any consumer of any type of audio-visual product is entitled to have about the product that he/she consumes.

Step by step procedure:

Step 1: Choose the theme. All excerpts selected should reflect this common theme.

Indicatively: people eating, ports, travelling by train, chase scenes, space war or anything that participants find interesting.

Step 2: Selecting the excerpts (Strictly for educational use: as excerpts may be coming from very different sources, a form of 'editing' may be necessary to put them in order)

Excerpts should represent a wide variety of genres reflecting a wide variety of styles and conventions (*examples below*) including participants' popular culture, classical cinema, TV, advertising etc. Each excerpt should not exceed 5'-7' while the whole lot should not be longer than 50'-55' min. in total.

Step 3: Preparing the questions common to all excerpts.

- Questions common to all excerpts, to be answered after viewing each particular excerpt.
- Questions to be answered after viewing all excerpts

(*examples below*)

Step 4: Viewing and discussing

A context of collective discussion and answers representing the whole group provides opportunities for argumentation and critical thinking.

For example, an activity for the comparative study of 'eating' scenes, taken from films of different genres, may -indicatively- include excerpts like:

- the scene where Charlie Chaplin, being hungry, covertly eats a sandwich stolen from a baby, from the film **'The Circus'**.
- the scene where Chaplin offers his own food to a hungry Myrna, **from the same film**.
- the scene in which a father and his young son eat in a restaurant, **from the film 'Bicycle Thieves'**.
- (or 'eating' scenes with corresponding content from **other classic films**)
- 'eating' scenes from the documentary **'The Story of the Weeping Camel'**.
- 'eating' scenes from the documentary **'Super size me'**.
- (or 'eating' scenes with corresponding content from **other interesting documentaries**)
- 'eating' scenes from a television adventure series, (e.g. 'Hercules', 'Zina', 'Robin Hood', etc.).
- 'eating' scenes from a **popular family serial**.
- 'eating' scenes from a **cartoon series**.
- 'eating' scenes from an **amateur video of a birthday party**.
- 'eating' scenes from a **well-known advertisement**.

Of course, not all the above examples can be included in one collection at the same time. The whole lot of excerpts should not be longer than 50'-55' of screening in total. Since after each excerpt some questions are to be discussed, for practical reasons, screening may take place in two separate days.

Preparing and discussing the questions: Immediately after watching **each excerpt** the participants, either separated into smaller groups or as a whole group, will attempt -with the help of the educator- to give group answers to questions which, in the case of an 'eating' selection, would be like:

PART ONE (after each excerpt):

1. How many people were pictured as eating?
2. Do any of the heroes looked like they were very hungry?
3. In the place where the scene took place, did the people who were eating appear to belong to one group or to separate, smaller groups?
4. Were any other people, who were not eating, pictured in the scene? What were they doing?
5. During the meal, were any characters pictured as talking to each other? What were they talking about?
6. Which person/people cooked the food that the characters were eating?
7. **What type of sounds did we hear during the meal?**
8. **In this particular excerpt, did we have the impression that we were watching the characters from far away, from quite near, or from very near? (If the students have completed the activities involving narratives with photographs or recording of a place and are familiar with the scale of frames, this question could be phrased as: In this particular excerpt, which type of frame (shot) was dominant: the medium to close-up framing or the medium to general framing?)**
9. Apart from the theme of 'eating' does this particular excerpt seem to focus on some other specific theme? What title would you give to this excerpt?

(Questions in bold refer to film language)

Anyone who might characterize these questions as naive and obvious, should consider them as key starting points for the aesthetic and social comparisons between, for example, a food scene from the classical film 'Bicycle Thieves' and a corresponding one from a popular television serial. Participants do realize that they are very different! But how do they differ? Apart from the opportunities such questions provide for categorization and classification -without the necessity of right or wrong answers- they provide a framework for productive social and aesthetic reflection. Comparing films that share one major common characteristic (e.g. theme) made by different directors and representing a variety of film aesthetics (not only European) can reveal issues of film aesthetics beyond the common remarks of "what the story was about" to which the participants usually focus. Do they tell similar stories? How do they differ? Can we describe our different impression for each one of them?

Further discussion:

A short reference to personal feelings, would imply the subjective reactions that can often emerge between individuals of an audience that have all experienced the same AV text.

In your opinion, which emotions were most dominant in the excerpt you just watched?

- Humor and irony
- Anger and indignation
- Suspense and mystery
- Surprise and anxiety
- Tenderness and love
- Sorrow and despair
- Uncertainty and pessimism
- Trust and optimism

PART TWO (comparison of all the excerpts):

The educator may give the following instructions to the participants:

Can you group the excerpts that you have watched, in some kind of categories?

Do any excerpts share some common characteristics, such as:

- color - black and white
- sound - silent
- **documentary - fiction**
- simple film technology - extravagant film technology etc

The groups may need to watch the excerpts being discussed several times during the process of comparisons. This means that some basic viewing equipment will be needed.

Primitive and crude (often simplistic) categorizations of films by the participants trying to support their choice with an example, can be a powerful educational tool enhancing their argumentation and negotiation skills, essential for the development of critical thinking. In the example presented above, although the theme of 'eating' and its social dimensions comprise the main focus of the activity, the complexity of cinematographic expression is always present and subconsciously becomes part of the participants' culture. In this activity, the theme of 'eating' is not designed to achieve a cognitive goal such as the presentation of some information either in biology or in nutrition context. Rather, it focuses on the **ways of presenting scenes** of 'eating' and on experiencing different audio-visual works suggesting completely different visual and social contexts. The excerpts can be regarded as evidence of ways of living and ways of thinking, evidence of cultural particularities that invite us to confront them critically by formulating questions and collectively drawn conclusions. At the same time, the observation of excerpts from existing audio-visual works familiarizes participants with a variety of aesthetic styles, which illustrate the various idiosyncrasies of the creators, the different ideological choices they have made and the different frame of reference they have used, so that participants will gradually develop their own personal understanding of the styles met in cinema.

PART THREE:

Can you think of similar food scenes from your own daily life? Could you shoot a series of photographs of a food scene that you choose?

The reflection and discussion in the group based on the questions posed by the educator in relation to the themes, will frequently lead to the development of the participants' attitude about those themes. Disagreements or different interpretations relating to the way in which the creator of a film handles a theme may arise. Participants may realize that the way of presenting a theme reflects a different society and different historical conditions. Finally, participants may recognize similarities or analogies with their own culture, which can lead to suggestions for similar handling and representations of themes drawn from their own surroundings. All of these possible reactions provide an opportunity for creative activity designed so that participants **will express their own opinions by using their own, simple, audio-visual tools**. A simple camera or a mobile can be excellent tools for activities which call for participants to **record their own social and cultural environment** which contrasts with those experienced in the audio-visual account of the films they have watched. In fact, by looking back at the corresponding scenes of the films, participants will have an ideal guideline for their suggestions or counter suggestions. As a result, the initial activity involving the study and analysis of an existing audio-visual product will evolve into an activity involving the production of an original audio-visual product.

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