NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND NARRATOLOGY IN CINEMA

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The writing intensive course which I began to prepare in this workshop is a course on narrative strategies and narratology in cinema. This course will explore foundational writing on storytelling structures from Aristotle to Propp and then continue with a more detailed analysis of cinematic narrative utilizing further insights from cognitive psychology-based film theorists. The course will function, hopefully, to heighten students' awareness of the psychological and ideological function of this powerful and popular medium. (Although the course will also explore non-traditional cinematic structures from experimental and "post-modernist" narrative strategies.) Those of us in Film Studies realize that ten years from now students may not remember too much about Godard's editing techniques, Kieslowski's symbolic relationships to freedom or the history of the poetic mode of documentary from Berlin: Symphony of a City to Koyaanisquatsi, but they will remember how to glean argument, idea, and ideology from the visual elements of the motion picture—a skill that will serve them well and deeply into the 21st century.

In this Core course, as in those that we offer to our majors, the writing process is at its heart. Indeed, the Core/Writing Center's charge to those of us who teach in the Writing Intensive Series is that writing, indeed, be a process initiated and activated throughout the quarter. Rather than assigning one, large, looming writing project completed by quarter's end, faculty are encouraged to engage with students' process throughout the quarter—intervening, guiding, interjecting and instructing throughout. In my own experience teaching writing over the past fourteen years, I've discovered that this kind of process-based instruction is key to students' growth as writers, and also key to student development as thinkers and creators. To me, a twenty-page paper assignment due at the end of the term, with some brief comments and a grade attached during Finals Week, isn't really a writing assignment. It's more likely a research project, a fact-processing assignment, perhaps even an analysis or interpretation assignment. But without the multiple drafts, without the shorter assignments building up to that tome, very little writing education can occur.

Thus my newly developed core class is filled with a series of small writing assignments, progressively more complex, and many of them proceeding from and building upon the ones prior. I also offer many points of intercession in their writing—the shorter, more frequent assignments will be quickly commented upon and returned to the student. I will engage with students during class meeting sessions about writing strategies and writing assignment results. The longer, progressive series of assignments will also include in that process a one-on-one conference with myself in order to get to what students are "really trying to say". These sessions will help students to clarify their thinking process, identify a compelling thesis, discover a means of organization. I've discovered that when composing argumentative or interpretive essays, most students are unable to develop a thesis, to discover what it is they are trying to say without a lot of prodding, freewriting, modeling and discussing. Mostly, I hope these individual sessions will encourage students to speak from their unique, buried, creative and intelligent selves. My experience (and our Writing Center colleagues concur with this) is that for students to have worthwhile writing experiences, my job is to immerse myself in the process of writing right along with them. They need that much encouragement to discover something worthwhile for themselves.

In the early 1990s, novelist Don DeLillo declared during an interview with the Paris Review that "we're all one beat away from

becoming elevator music." His statement is in the context of the "fate of the novel" question, but I take his comment much more broadly. Recently, while reading about the fate of reading in Sven Birkerts' The Gutenberg Elegies, I came across some rumination from Lionel Trillings The Liberal Imagination. Written in 1950 when, according to Birkerts, "literary and intellectual culture had reached its apogee," Trilling anticipated DeLillo. "For all our supposed riches, our culture feels impoverished; it lacks the kinds of animation that regular exposure to ideas and works of imagination supplies; and it is without an affirmative circulation of mental and spiritual energies." Now, whether one supposes that it has always felt this way to writers, intellectuals, artists and academics, one cannot deny that a University might function to alleviate this sense of dearth somewhat. Birkerts' specific complaint is about "the fate of reading in an electronic age." But one could argue that the same fate has befallen writing, our students' writing especially (if not our own of the "publish-or-perish" genre.) While we know how to communicate via liquid crystal display units, wires and satellites, Birkerts attests, along with Trilling, that we have much more trouble doing so with any verve, depth or intellect. Writing matters and writers matter. If there's no other function of a university, it is to explore and "draw out" (*educare*) the thinker, hence writer, in each individual student.

We talked about this necessity in our Writing Intensive Faculty Workshop, although the passion around this discussion did not emerge until the last several minutes of the many hours' of meeting and workshopping we had done together. Perhaps this was due to our acquired comfort-level with each other. Perhaps we had avoided discussing our passion for teaching writing for so many days and hours that the dam had to burst, finally, at the end. "The structures of language represent a doorway back into duration" says Birkerts. Shall we allow these structures to crumble?

But I have an addendum (and perhaps, as Thoreau would assert, a pettiness to expiate). The subject-based knowledge from a core class may not endure. But the knowing won't pass quite so easily or quickly. Writing, to me, is a means to explore the interior and while making connections to the exterior. Writing is a means of navigating between the two. So let the writing come out before trying to control it. (This is Natalie Goldberg's idea.) The control comes later. A student needs to engage in writing first for themselves as process, rather than product. The structure of the Core Writing Intensive classes rather insists upon that process. Those requirements are not subtle. But perhaps, at this point in our cultural literacy skills, they can no longer afford to be.

So I take this as far as I can in the current iteration of my Core syllabus. I insist upon several steps to the process: freewriting, discovery, evidentiary construction and from there, thesis assertion, organization, presteps, draft and revision. I may also have to take some time to differentiate for the text-message generation the difference between "there" and "their". This low-level of language literacy illustrate s a deeper, systemic problem with our students—their generally inadequate preparation for college-level writing. Doubtless, many hours have been spent in many Writing Intensive Faculty Workshops lamenting this fact, and, as Birkerts does, lamenting its supposed causes. But the "no child left behind" version of writing here at DU would be, I feel, assigning a project or even a process about which the student can find no sense of interior. So in addition to above process-oriented writing exercises, I will also assign weekly writing that's informal, expressive, exploratory by way of in-class freewriting exercises, group work and journal writing. What I've discovered in previous classes in which students write freely and constantly is that, surprisingly, students develop more formal writing skills simply by doing writing. In this informal context students don't worry about thesis statements and organization. (They often don't worry about "their" nor "there" either). But in these contexts I encourage students to start where they are and see what happens. In classes in which I've assigned 2-page weekly informal responses (while concurrently sneaking in an increasingly more formal component to the assignment as the quarter progresses), I've discovered that by the end of ten weeks, students are writing cogent, cohesive and rather densely packed essays with an insightful and creative interpretive stance towards cinema and some naturally organized paragraphs. Not bad for informal writing exercises.

So the true blessing of these writing-intensive core courses is that writing doesn't have to be the subject. The "Subject" is the subject and writing is the process within it. As we discovered in our workshop together, while the subject is knowledge, writing is the knowing. And yet writing is even more than this kind of subject intimacy acquisition.

Our first exercise in the Writing Intensive Faculty Workshop was to talk about a passage by Kenneth Burke in which one enters a Victorian parlor. This parlor bears an appropriately heavy analogy to students' experience of a "writing class." It's indoors. It's stuffy, as parlors tend to be. You have arrived late. Essentially it has very little to do with you as an individual. No one tells you why it's important to be there. No one else seems very happy or relaxed in this place either. If I were a student, my mind would wander from this room towards something more invigorating: learning to body surf or working on my Frisbee skills, for example. But what if the room were of the students' own design—what if the challenge were for the students to paint and furnish the room themselves, to knock out a wall in order to add a window? Or what if the option was given for students, simply, to move out of doors? The analogy doesn't perfectly extend this far. But the idea is that, through writing, students could discover some refreshment of their own in the writing process, at least as much refreshment as oppression. Perhaps that kind of liberation within syntactical and compositional traditions is more to the purpose of the liberal arts education and more what a university can offer its students. We can offer them themselves, their own minds, a future embodied and inhabited by free thinkers. Their thinking, their freedom will serve them well—educators, writers, historians, wisdom seekers, gardeners, Animal Planet editors, cinema curators, performance artists, Industrial Light and Magic processors, child-raisers, filmmakers, performance artists, activists, physicians, researchers, legislator, lawyers, stockbrokers, captains of industry or they may be.