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Page R. Laws

Norfolk State University, prlaws@nsu.edu

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Media Literacy and Liberation: Honors Students as Prophetic Artists and Critics

PAGE R. LAWS

NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY

Prophetic critics and artists of color should be exemplars of what it means to be intellectual freedom fighters, that is, cultural workers who simultaneously position themselves within (or alongside) the mainstream while clearly aligned with groups who vow to keep alive potent traditions of critique and resistance.

—Cornel West

“The New Cultural Politics of Difference”

Kulturkritiker Cornel West focuses on artists and critics of color in the statement above, and his words are therefore particularly pertinent to students at my home institution, Norfolk State University, the fifth-largest historically black university in the U.S. His refreshing radicalism, however, can serve as a universal call to arm *all* students, and especially honors students, with the weapons of media literacy. Empowering students as makers and critics of film and video art serves the most vital interests of interdisciplinary honors education, and this essay explores some ways of training both types of “cultural workers,” i.e. student filmmakers and critics. My assumption is that, far from being adversaries, good artists and good critics share a common skill set and participate in the larger common cause of what West terms “critique and resistance.”

Two particular programs will be discussed: the three-year-old NCHC-sponsored film and video master class (most recently held at the 2002 national conference in Chicago) and the five-year-old Parsons Prize Contest in Performing Arts Criticism, an essay competition *cum* publication sponsored by the Norfolk State University Honors Program. Though presently limited to NSU students, the Parsons Prize contest can easily serve as a model for any other schools interested in similar endeavors. The exact type of arts experiences offered to students—be it a chance for them to make their own films or to write well-considered reviews of others’ films, plays, operas, lectures, exhibitions, etc.—is less important than the attitude and preparation that they bring to the endeavor.

Before turning to these two specific programs, one national and the other local, let us briefly consider a theoretical basis for the type of art and cultural criticism advocated by West as such activities relate to honors education.

Paradigmatic Underpinnings

At least three recent movements within and among traditional university departments can provide models and vocabulary to justify the inclusion of a serious performing arts component in an honors program: the Media Literacy movement, the Critical Thinking movement, and especially the Cultural Studies movement.

Though they don't always identify themselves as advocates of Media Literacy by that name, those who write or have written about semiotics offer particularly useful caveats on how dangerous media illiteracy can be. The problem is that, while Americans, and particularly young Americans, are expert at absorbing media messages and responding appropriately to conventions instilled in us almost from birth (any American child, for instance, knows that a wavering fade-out accompanied by harp music signals that the following shot represents a dream or fantasy), we are less adept at thinking critically (acknowledging the presence, articulating the effects) of such conventions. We respond with Pavlovian precision to learned cues that enable us to follow a plotline but are often barely conscious of blatant stereotyping of, say, minorities and women. We are exquisitely sensitive receptors of signs but all too often oblivious of how or why the *signifier* (in Saussure's terminology) has been chosen, aesthetically and/or politically. We are less aware still of the multiple *signifieds* each signifier can bear along with it. The result is, in worst case scenarios, a world of meaning being docilely absorbed without our even knowing it. There's no need for the trickery of subliminal messages flashed just under our threshold of awareness. The ordinary messages we clearly see and hear gallop like stallions right through Troy's gaping gates, disgorging their ideological contents at will in a slumbering city.

As long ago as World War II, the great leftist cultural critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, appalled by the wholesale media manipulation of German media during the Third Reich, wrote the following:

All the other films and products of the entertainment industry which they [the consumers] have seen have taught them what to expect; they react automatically. The might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds. (Adorno and Horkheimer 35)

Adorno and Horkheimer make a distinction between the "culture industry" and what they call "works of art," though one suspects that their division does not correspond simply to conventional understandings of "low" and "high" art:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises...Works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish. (Adorno and Horkheimer 38)

The unusual oxymoron "pornographic and prudish" points to the hypocrisy inherent in the culture industry's (in short, Hollywood's) efforts at self-censorship, as well as in the efforts of untrained critics (e.g., Jesse Helms) to police real art of any kind.

The great British thinker Stuart Hall also alludes to media literacy (though, again, not by that name) in his essay on televisual images called "Encoding,

Decoding.” Even before the latest wave of “reality-based” TV (the truly pornographic *Survivor*, *Temptation Island*, etc.), Hall wrote that the “illusion” that TV and film are “real” is a complex phenomenon:

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture and be learned at so early an age that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be ‘naturally’ given... This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present. But we must not be fooled by appearances. (Hall 511)

Although belied as ‘innocent’ by their pseudo-realism, the embedded ideological baggage of each (in the case above, televisual) message is very real indeed. And in a collaborative, multi-level work such as a film, there is also a host of non-representational signs surrounding what we call the ‘real’ (iconic or representational) ones. Richard Dyer lists just a few: “color, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork.” He adds, “We are much less used to talking about them” (Dyer 373-374).

Dyer believes that “entertainment” (what Adorno and Horkheimer term the “culture industry”) “responds to real needs created by society” and is therefore “utopian” in nature. It is a salve to the “social tension, inadequacy and absence” in society. Where there is “scarcity,” TV and filmmakers create “abundance”; where there is “exhaustion,” we are shown “energy”; where there is “fragmentation,” Hollywood gives us “community” (Dyer 376). Though Dyer is by no means as negative about entertainment as Horkheimer and Adorno are, he does worry about those things its utopianism glosses over:

Entertainment...denies the legitimacy of other needs and inadequacies, and especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles.... At our worst sense of it, entertainment provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism. (Dyer 377)

Our only defense is to train good critics who are media literate and semiotics savvy. It does not matter what their academic majors are, nor if they plan to enter the arts. Awareness becomes a basic need of an informed citizenry. Woe to the voter, for example, who has no knowledge of how to deconstruct a campaign ad.

The authors above, as noted, do not use the term “Media Literacy” in their work, though one can usefully bend their ideas to serve that cause. They have all, at any rate, been anthologized in Simon During’s well-known British reader on Cultural Studies, “Media Literacy” in the U.S. is a term more commonly associated with K-12 education than with higher ed.¹ The same cannot be said for the next movement to be considered: Critical Thinking.

¹ See the Media Literacy Review website at <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/home/index.html>. See also the Center for Media Literacy, a source for books and videos on the subject, at <http://www.medialit.org/Catalog/theorypractice.html>.

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‘Develop their critical thinking skills’ has become part of the mantra for all educators, including honors faculty. The ubiquity of this mandate, however, makes it no less relevant to our topic. When you develop good artists and critics of the arts, you are honing students’ critical thinking in perhaps the most efficient way possible.

In their useful booklet *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder (the latter a presenter at a recent NCHC conference) have defined critical thinking as follows:

Critical thinking is that mode of thinking—about any subject, content, or problem—in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them. (Paul and Elder 1)

Proponents of meta-thinking try to codify good intellectual habits and their resulting virtues as Paul and Elder do here:

THE STANDARDS—Clarity, Precision, Accuracy, Significance, Relevance, Completeness, Logicalness, Fairness, Breadth and Depth—must be applied to THE ELEMENTS—Purposes, Inferences, Questions, Concepts, Points of View, Implications, Information, Assumptions—as we learn to develop INTELLECTUAL TRAITS—Intellectual Humility, Intellectual Perseverance, Intellectual Autonomy, Confidence in Reason, Intellectual Integrity, Intellectual Empathy, Intellectual Courage, Fairmindedness. (18)

These are certainly the standards, elements, and desired intellectual traits we would hope to find in both an artist and a critic of the arts. We would also, of course, hope to find them in an aware and informed citizen of any calling. And there is certainly no better way to tackle what Paul and Elder call the “problem of egocentric thinking”—that is, the total reliance on one’s own unexamined opinions and feelings about art and indeed life—than for an artist to have to collaborate with others on, say, a film, or for a critic to have to convince readers, audiences, actors, studio moguls, etc. of the honesty, validity, and earned authority of his or her criticism. There is no shorter shortcut to teaching the difference between naked opinion and valid interpretation supported by textual examples than to have students write reviews of a university drama production in which the actors are their friends. The linkage between abstract critical thinking and performing arts criticism will be further discussed later.

A final theoretical underpinning for an interdisciplinary arts and art criticism-based honors program can be found in the politically-aware potpourri movement Cultural Studies, now widespread in the U.S. as well as in its home base, Britain. At its best, e.g. in the work of Black critics such as Stuart Hall or Cornel West, Cultural Studies is carefully eclectic and draws from many strains of Marxism, feminism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, film theory, semiotics/structuralism, and poststructuralism. What unites these disparate approaches into one movement—Cultural Studies or, sometimes, Multicultural Studies—is what West calls the “prophetic” or “demystificatory” intent:

I call desmystificatory criticism ‘prophetic criticism’—the approach appropriate for the new cultural politics of difference—because while it begins with social structural analyses, it also makes explicit its moral and political aims. It is partisan, partial, engaged, and crisis-centered, yet it always keeps open a skeptical eye to avoid dogmatic traps, premature closures, formulaic formulations, or rigid conclusions. (West 264)

Granted that West’s polemical vocabulary might seem excessively leftist and/or arcane to nonacademics, his point can still be appreciated by anyone who appreciates the freedom of flexibility—from liberals to libertarians. And West is quite on guard against what he calls the “reductionism” of “one-factor analyses (i.e., crude Marxisms, feminisms, racialisms, etc.) that yield one-dimensional functionalism or a hypersubtle analytical perspective that loses touch with the specificity of an art work’s form and the context of its reception” (West 264-265).

In sum, the beauty of the Cultural Studies model as a paradigm for honors arts education is that it is engaged; it openly acknowledges high versus low culture issues; it is friendly to minority perspectives; and it ‘follows the money,’ i.e., stays tuned in to the power behind every scene. What’s more, the Cultural Studies approach is already well embedded in the honors ethos in the form of each City as Text® project undertaken. The “prophetic” culture critic sees and can articulate the ‘strangeness’ in the everyday—e.g., a trip to a glitzy mall or an ethnic neighborhood—just as readily as he or she can “demystify” a great opera or a trashy made-for-TV film. The prophetic honors student critic can learn to be an acutely aware urban *flâneur* (stroller) from the likes of Michel de Certeau (“Walking in the City”), Roland Barthes, or Walter Benjamin—all pioneers in both Cultural Studies (they are included in Simon During’s reader) and City as Text® writing.

The NCHC Film/Video Master Class: Shoulder Your Sony!

Although it is quite possible that NCHC sessions devoted to critiquing student films predate my awareness, I shall speak only of those from the last three national conventions. Some institutionally-ancient NCHC griot such as Earl Brown can perhaps supplement my short memory.

My first involvement with an NCHC student film/video event was at the 1999 NCHC convention in Orlando, Florida. Organizer and founding mother Joan Digby collected three student films for the students and me to view and discuss. I frantically jotted down notes as I saw the films for the first time, right along with the student/faculty audience, there on site. As the only so-called “professional” film critic on tap (a bit of a résumé stretch since I write more often about theater), I happily pontificated on demand. Fortunately, the students managed a good discussion anyway. Unfortunately, the films we saw were not archived for posterity or for future *JNCHC* articles such as this.

The second (by my count) NCHC student film/video competition took place in Washington, DC in 2000, courtesy of grand organizer Hew Joiner. We received twice as many entries—this time, mercifully, in advance of their screening. Though these

films, too, were returned to their young *auteurs* and are therefore not available to discuss in detail here, one unsurprising trend that I had noted in the Florida session seemed to hold true in D.C. as well, namely that students like to make films about themselves. Just as beginning writers tend to keep journals about their own lives, having been exhorted by someone to write what they know, beginning filmmakers seem most likely to round up their friends and hang a “QUIET: FILMING IN PROGRESS” sign on their own dormitory room doors. The results can be surprisingly interesting and diverse. A couple of the DC conference filmmakers—we might categorize them as Honors Indoctrinators—played it straight, earnestly informing future honors students of their opportunities for special programs or recounting honors trips. At least one lengthy, very ambitious effort was a full-fledged fictional student drama presenting painful themes such as child molestation and a young lesbian coming out of the closet. A couple of others were hilarious, self-deprecating spoofs of the noble “Honors” life. In one of the latter parodies, male honors peer advisors ignored the piteous cries of their advisees, preferring to guzzle beer and ogle porno magazines instead. (It really was very funny.) And still another student effort, by a young deaf director from Gallaudet University, recounted an alleyway student encounter using experimental visuals.

Not every film was based on student life *per se*. One was an analysis of poet Sylvia Plath’s life and work that grew from a course taught by University of Massachusetts professor Richard Larschan. The purpose of this film was clearly twofold: to teach the students involved in making it and to teach those students and others who would eventually see it. There is value in such a double endeavor, though this particular product bore too well the stamp of its faculty co-creator.

The 2001 edition of the NCHC film/video session, this time called a master class rather than a competition at organizer Rosalie Otero’s fine suggestion, featured another doubly didactic (teach-yourself-while-you-teach-others) video on poet Henry David Thoreau. It was a co-production of Dr. Sheila D. Willard of Middlesex Community College in Lowell, MA, and her honors humanities students. It was clear from the film that Willard’s students had not entirely mastered their medium. They relied too heavily on static outdoor shots of Walden Pond to convey the grandeur of Thoreau’s thoughts. But their technical and formal struggles were engagingly educational, both to themselves and to the others on hand who offered criticism.

Another entry, presented by Jennifer Mason of the University of New Mexico, was an earnest analysis of the issue of date rape. Mason’s choice to focus on a sexual encounter initiated by a female student in her male date’s room offered a chance for an intensely ideological critical debate among those attending the master class. Some in the room, most notably a male faculty member, found Mason’s female character dangerously weak in her efforts to forestall the sex act she had herself, perhaps unwittingly, set into motion. As the male date went further than she had intended him to go, she protested, but rather mildly. The sexual act was tastefully shot with the director herself playing the female “victim.” But instead of a rape, some critics in the class saw an act of consensual intercourse merely tinged with regret on the part of the woman. Sometimes sex is not wonderful for both partners. The debate focused on classic issues associated with rape—“No” surely does mean “no,” even if said

weakly in a prone position—but it was especially charged and focused by the viewers' examination of Mason's aesthetic choices in conveying her intentions. Though no minds were definitely changed in the discussion, all minds, male and female, were definitely expanded. Had he been there, Cornel West would have been proud, especially at the recognition and articulation of one post-September 11 subtext: the young actor playing the male date happened to be of Arab descent and was decidedly darker in skin color than his white female "victim," the ideological impact of which (despite the film's having been made before September 11) was lost on no one in that post-9/11 audience. Talking out loud about the young male actor's race and its current connotations "demystified" the uneasy feelings each of us had had while voyeuristically engaged in watching the couple.

Equally revelatory, and aesthetically more successful in its humanistic message, was the amazing student film submitted by Brendan Gill of Loyola Marymount University. Gill, unlike the other young artists, majors in filmmaking and also works off campus in a special effects shop. His professional expertise showed in every facet of his film "Blueberry Hill." Though modest in length—about a dozen minutes—Gill's film is rich enough to warrant its own article-length analysis. Suffice it to say here that it concerns a personalized iMac computer (blueberry blue in color, though this is not stated explicitly) who is about to be removed from his computer network and consigned to the oblivion of obsolescence. This computer talks with a female-voiced server named Ruby who comforts him on his imminent demise. A cocky new, much faster, male-voiced computer is meanwhile being installed on the network, which creates a potential love triangle. There are three distinct worlds skillfully intercut with one another in the film. First we have a Natural World depicted at the start of the film with close-ups on the hands of a humming girl who is picking—you guessed it—blueberries. The song she hums is, of course, "Blueberry Hill," a musical icon of early romantic rock. We are introduced to the second world—an actual computer lab room—by a close-up on some whirring bit of mechanical "life" (perhaps a processor or fan?) within the motherboard-innards of a computer. Most other shots within the Computer Lab World are rendered from the POV (point of view) of a desktop computer's monitor. All humans, for instance, are shot at the mid-trunk level, never above the neck. The third world represents the soul life of the computers, rarely seen or heard by humankind. This is Cyber World, an all-white landscape filled only with the brightly colored computer "actors" themselves: our hero, Blueberry; the new-guy-on-the-block, Indigo; and the female server, Ruby. In this world the computers chat with one another using the stilted, mechanical-sounding voices that we conventionally associate with robots and automatons, based on a hundred years of film history. Blueberry's many cinematic forebears include mechanical men ranging from Fritz Lang's groundbreaking *Metropolis* to the Tin Man of Oz to Stanley Kubrick's Hal of *2001, A Space Odyssey*. Blueberry's voice also reminds us of every cheesy-FX Saturday cyborg on the large or small screen from Buck Rogers to animated *Star Trek*. In post-film discussions, the master class critics readily recognized this family tree. Gill, the young filmmaker, likewise acknowledged that he was standing, both consciously and unconsciously, on the shoulders of...well, droids. The delightful

quality of Gill's film stems from his playfully parodic use of conventions and even clichés in the service of his multi-faceted message. One part of his message is that we humans tend to personify our machines to a ludicrous degree, making and comprehending them in our own image. That much is forgivable; Pinocchio surely would rather be flesh than wood, wouldn't he? More problematic is the corollary message: humans treat all their "servants"—mechanical and human—with questionable humanity. The life-affirming, warmly humanistic voice of a singer long victimized on account of his race—Louis Armstrong—conveys Gill's insight with every word he sings. The film ends with "dead" computers being piled atop dead computers—echoes of Auschwitz—to the strains of Armstrong singing "Blueberry Hill."

Tanner J. McFadden of Davidson Honors College, U. of Montana, had planned to show "a man-walks-into-bar, man-meets-woman story told through a constellation narrative technique using montage-edited footage." Now there is "demystificatory" vocabulary—provided one has had a chance to learn it. Mr. McFadden's proposal was accompanied by a statement of justification that is well worth quoting at length:

Why you should let me show you my film: an argument, sort of.

Film is, among other things, the inanimate object which comes closest to consciousness. Yes, some films entertain us, and nothing more. Even...[this kind of] film has a certain power of drawing the viewer into its world and thumbing its nose at the idea of a reality which simply happens to people. But great films do much more than entertain us, and I hope that everyone who makes films strives, as I do, to make great ones.

My training in film consists of precisely one fifteen-week film production class, supplemented by working as an informal teaching assistant in two film production workshops and the many hours I have spent working on and experimenting with my own film projects. I have made only a couple of films in my short career, but considering that each minute of finished film I have produced represents roughly three hours of invested time, I cannot complain about this output. I am presently teaching a film theory and interpretation class as well; I have great interest in film not only as a producer but as a critical viewer, one who like to see good films and who finds in them inspirations for his own work.

I hope that the NCHC will allow me to show this film, first, because it will be my best work and, second, because the opportunity to show it will drive me to complete it. Perhaps it would be safer to submit a film for the master class which I have finished, but I hope to show my best work to the world rather than something I feel I have moved past; besides, as I understand them, master classes attempt to focus on work still in progress rather than showcase finished pieces. As an applicant to this master class, I hope, on the one hand, to gain insight into and critical perspective on my own work and, on the

other hand, to offer my critique and encouragement to others in hopes that through this process everyone involved can finally make better films, that being, it seems, the point.

While McFadden ended up not finishing his film and therefore having nothing to present, he did participate in the master class as a critic and as an implicit example of how difficult yet necessary it is to “get it in the can.” As Jean-Luc Godard once said, film is “truth, twenty-four times a second” (qtd. in Abbas 147). No film, no truth—at least not as a filmmaker. There is and was value in McFadden’s role as a critic, however, helping challenge, deepen, and articulate veracity for his fellow students. The critics’ story follows.

The Parsons Prize in Performing Arts Criticism: Unsheathe Your Prophetic Pens!

At the NCHC national conference in Atlanta some years back, I offered a session called “Everyone’s a Critic,” which was designed to proselytize for this same cause of empowering students as critics. Then, as now, attendance at certain arts events is a requirement of participation in the Norfolk State University Honors program. We have been mandating six such events per semester. We are dropping the requirements to five for this current semester, but at the same time cracking down on some students’ shaky attendance habits by distributing proof-of-attendance slips at the end of each required event. Five such vouchers must be turned in for a student to receive his or her \$250-per-semester honors stipend, the only monetary reward for students in our program, also new this semester courtesy of a grant from the Norfolk Foundation. Tickets to all arts events, lectures, etc. will continue to be paid for by our program, again thanks to outside foundation grant support from local founding sponsor the Parsons Foundation, plus the Landmark, Batten, and Beazley Foundations—all of Hampton Roads, Virginia.

The proof-of-attendance slips may sound like a draconian measure—after all, we have done without them for a long time, and honors program students should act honorably without external “proof.” The new policy is experimental and will be accompanied by a flexible event-substitution policy. As in the past, the more gung-ho students may choose to go to many optional events we sponsor both on and off campus. We shall see how it goes. The previous inducement—the possibility of winning the Parsons Prize in Performing Arts Criticism for written critiques of honors events—has worked well for some (predictably those in the humanities) but not others. The Parsons Prize contest and publication (which also serves as an announcement of our sister Parsons Prize in Public Speaking Contest and contains a program description, greetings from the university president, activity photos, etc.) will continue to showcase the best of student-produced critical writing, with the first place winner receiving \$300, the second place winner \$150, and the third place winner \$50. One or two honorably-mentioned essayists receive no monetary prize but are also included in the publication. The contest, importantly, is open to *all* NSU students, not just honors program participants, and so serves as a university community outreach/PR vehicle. Students

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may review any arts event, lecture, or exhibition they wish, using the following very general guidelines, which may be easily adaptable to any honors program:

****Guidelines for Submission****

The Parsons Prize in Criticism will be awarded to the best review of a performing arts event written by an NSU student during the academic year 2001-2002. Students do not necessarily have to be Parsons Honors Program Participants to enter. Entries must be typed (double-spaced) and shall not exceed 6 pages in length. Students may submit only one review for consideration. There is no minimum length, but a review of less than 3 pages is not likely to be thorough enough to be competitive. Performing arts events might include films, dance concerts, theater, opera, lectures, or music concerts. Book reviews should not be submitted. Entries will be screened by the University Honors Program Committee. Finalists' essays will be judged by one or more community arts representatives. Copies of the guide sheet "How to Plan and Write A Review" are available upon request in the Honors Program Office (LBB 106). For further information, contact Dr. Laws at 823-8208/2303. (Rosenman and Laws, Vol. 5, inside front cover)

A copy of "How to Plan and Write a Review" is also here included, with the thought that it might be adapted to other programs' needs:

How to Plan and Write a Review

As you view a performance, take notes with the following questions in mind. The "bottom-line" question you must answer for your readers is the obvious one: "Is this play/opera/film/ballet, etc. worth seeing?" A related, but slightly different, question you must answer is, "Was it a good decision for this particular arts organization to attempt this particular work?" A good reviewer will always answer these two questions, but most often he or she will do so indirectly or implicitly. If you, the reviewer, answer all or most of the questions below, you will probably find that your overall evaluation of the performance becomes clear.

- In what context does this work belong?
- How does it relate to works by the same artist (author, composer)?
- How does it compare to works on similar themes by other artists?

If your reader needs certain basic facts about the artist's life and work in order to appreciate the work, it is up to you to pass on those facts. Also consider the following questions:

- If the work is an adaptation, is it a successful one?
- How does this production compare to past productions you may know?
- Does the performance have "unity of effect"? Has the director seen to it that the sets, costumes, music, acting, etc. work in harmony to create an impression? Is it clear to you which particular themes or aspects of the work

particularly interested the director of this production? Do you agree with her/his emphasis on those particular themes?

- How do individual performances affect the whole? Which actors (singers, dancer, etc.) were standouts and why? Which actors let you down and why? You must be specific in your remarks and cover every performance of an important character.
- Did this performance fulfill your expectations? Did it disturb you or make you think? How long did its impact last? Did this performance make you see something new about a familiar text? Did it make you understand something about life in a new way?

OTHER HINTS: Write down anything you find “striking” or unusual during the performance, even if it’s a brief line of dialogue or a gesture. If the curtain is raised (assuming there’s a curtain at all), use the time before the performance begins to write a description of the set. Note set changes and how they are done. Note lighting changes and the use of music before and/or during the performance. Note the physical qualities of the theater itself, especially if the stage is anything other than a proscenium.

When you write your final draft, avoid first person; this is important for creating and maintaining an authoritative tone.

EAVESDROP ON CONVERSATIONS AROUND YOU before, during, and after the performance. It’s very important to get a feeling for how other people are reacting, whether you agree with their reactions or not.²

Although the above is by no means an exhaustive or complete guide sheet, students who more or less follow its advice have produced an admirable assortment of critiques quite worthy of publication over the years. The booklet itself (which costs about \$3500 if we print 300-500 copies) has served to showcase students’ critical skills and acumen and of course to showcase the NSU Honors Program, which is always well represented among the winners.

Entries are judged, as noted, in a two-tier system. The University Honors Program Committee (actually a subcommittee thereof composed mostly of English professors) selects 8 to 10 ‘blind’-numbered essays to send to the final judges who are the theater/film critic (35-year veteran Mal Vincent) and the arts beat writer (15-plus-year veteran Teresa Annas) from our local paper, *The Virginian-Pilot*. The participation of these outside journalists is very valuable in increasing the contest’s overall credibility.

The winning essays are generally longer than the average newspaper review. They are, in fact, hybridized pieces both academic and journalistic in nature. Students are encouraged to be more thorough than newspaper space limitations would allow. Students must also properly document any outside sources they might use, although it is rare that they use them.

² This “How to” sheet appears in every volume of the Parsons Prize publication and as an appendix in Laws 131-143.

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The resulting Parsons Prize publication is distributed for free and can be used to provide model essays for future contestants and/or anyone else interested in criticism. An unanticipated bonus has been born of chance. At least two of the winners in each of the five years of publication have chosen to write on the same play, opera, film, etc. They frequently disagree. This gives students a chance to see how responsible people thinking critically and providing good textual examples can come to different, but still valid, conclusions. Seeing two or more award-winning critiques that disagree on the basic value of a work of art goes a long way towards explaining and combating what the Critical Thinkers (see above) call “egocentric thinking.” Skill in marshaling evidence is seen to be much more important than a student’s insistence on his or her own personal feelings.

Students who write about film or TV should be especially encouraged to arm themselves with proper terminology, in that knowing just a bit of the jargon opens up a whole new awareness of *how* filmmakers make choices. No critic is expected to mull over every shot, but knowing how to articulate the conventions on which film depends creates a media-literate mindset. The following guide sheet (again, quite available for the taking) is distributed at Honors Program-sponsored NSU film viewings:

Film Terminology

Here are some film terms useful for training the eye and guiding the speech of analysis:

Shot – the length of film created by a single running of the camera. It may entail hundreds of frames (the ‘motion’ of a motion picture being an optical illusion created by discreet still frames run swiftly past a strong light source and projected two-dimensionally) or many thousands.

Long shot – the camera is placed a considerable distance from the object or person being photographed. This may convey a feeling of emotional distance from the object or the grandeur of its surroundings.

Medium shot – the camera is placed so that the object fills the screen in an expected (i.e. conventionally neutral) manner.

Close-up – the camera is placed so that the object fills more of the screen than expected. There is an emotional charge to any close-up.

Pan – the camera sweeps across our field of vision, creating a sense of ordinary and expected movement or extraordinarily charged movement.

Edit – the joining of two shots together. Editing creates the structure of a film and can be intended to be either noticed (as with film makers fond of the *montage* technique) or not. Editing that does not force the viewer to make aesthetic judgments is sometimes called ‘invisible.’ *All* editing, however, creates meanings because our minds must connect separate shots to follow a storyline mentally.

Low angle shot – camera placement below eye-level. This tends to make us (the viewers) ‘look up to’ the subject being photographed.

High angle shot – camera placement above eye-level. This tends to make us ‘look down on’ the subject being photographed, i.e. to see it (or him or her) as if we were superior in understanding or knowledge. This effect is similar to irony in literature.

POV shot – point of view shot. The things seen in a film are sometimes supposed to seem as if they are being seen through a certain character’s eyes. Since the camera is the organ of vision, the pure POV shot would be made by placing the camera exactly on top of the character whose view we are supposedly getting. Since this is impractical, and since it is jarring for actors to look directly into the lens of the camera because that makes them seem to talk directly to the audience, various conventions exist to simulate and suggest that we are seeing something from a certain character’s point of view. The most common convention of this sort is the establishing shot (which locates the character whom the camera is impersonating within the room) followed by a shot from the position where this character would be—i.e., from the established position.³

Even a rudimentary knowledge of how films are made, beginning with the jargon of camera placement above, can awaken students to the problems of subtext, stereotyping, and the myriad power relationships that underlie works of art, be they “high” or “low,” Shakespeare or Spielberg, *The Song of Bernadette* or *Sex in the City*.

Conclusion: Who Creates a Prophetic Artist or Critic? Answer — Organic Intellectuals (A.K.A. Honors Educators)

Cornel West’s call to educate “prophetic” critics who can then “demystify” the various media and defend themselves against hegemonic corporate culture corresponds nicely with British critic Stuart Hall’s call for “organic intellectuals” whose job it is to pass on the prophetic orb to students. Hall’s vision, borrowed here to describe the ideal honors educator, sets high standards indeed:

It is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly.... But the second aspect is just as crucial: that the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function to those who do not belong professionally in the intellectual class. (Hall 103)⁴

³ Also appears as an appendix Laws.

⁴ Hall says that he borrows the term from Antonio Gramsci

The great strength of the honors education movement has always been its democratic, even altruistic, bent. Honors teachers, without benefit of overtime pay, often share what they know with students outside a normal classroom context. Many of these students come from class origins and economic circumstances that might have placed Ivy League-quality education and arts enrichment forever out of their reach were it not for honors opportunities. Such students fill our honors programs and honors colleges, and very deservedly so. When honors education works, it truly can turn them into “prophets” for their people, newly armed cultural critics in the war against hegemony. Each one teach one indeed!

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The author may be contacted at:

Honors Program
Norfolk State University
700 Park Avenue
Norfolk, VA 23504
e-mail: prlaws@nsu.edu

