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One of the things I aim for in the course, is to try to show students, in ways as concrete and rich as I can, what the authority, or power, of movies in a cultural moment might be. And I try to give them some examples of that.

THORBURN:

In my first lecture, I sometimes read to them from a passage from James Agee's novel, *A Death in the Family*. In the very beginning of the novel he describes, beautifully, an excursion between a father and son, going to see a Chaplin comedy in 1915 in some southern city. And what he describes is what a social occasion it was, what a moment of bonding it was for father and son, what a cultural moment it was more broadly for the whole of the population that went into the theater to laugh uproariously at Charlie's shenanigans.

"And then the screen was filled with a city, and with a sidewalk of a side street of a city, and a long line of palms. And there was Charlie. Everyone laughed the minute they saw him squattily walking, with his toes out and his knees apart, as if he were chafed. Rufus's father laughed, and Rufus laughed, too. This time, Charlie stole a whole bag." This time. What does that imply about the audience? An intimate familiarity with the previous adventures of this character, right? An ongoing, routine connection. "This time he caught a sight of-- this time Charlie stole a whole bag of eggs. And when a cop came along, he hid them in the seat of his pants."

What it showed was the cultural embeddedness of movies, even in their earliest days, in the society, and in the life of individuals. So, part of what I mean by the power of movies, and what I try to encourage the students to see, is something of this anthropological energy, as well as its artistic power as a representation of human experience.

That the way these kinds of stories permeated the society helped to shape America's-- Americans understanding of their natures. Of what the social fabric was like. Of what masculinity was. Of what femininity was. Of what families were. Of what the relations among the races were. Of what American history was. About what the founding story of America is. About what the central, organizing values of our culture are. All of those things are dramatized, either explicitly or implicitly, in movies. And because the movies were so central through the 20th century, they were one of the central ways in which the belief system, the values, of American society were promulgated, dramatized, rehearsed, and in some ways, altered and changed.

A related matter that connected again to film, in part as an anthropological or sociological phenomenon, not simply an artistic one, as a social practice in a way, has to do with the power and role of genre in movies, which is a recurring theme in my course. Because we use genre in American society. I think all cultures do this, but we've made particularly rich and cunning use of genre in American society. In many media, but especially in film. And if you look at particular long live genre, like the Western, or the detective story, or the domestic melodrama, over time what you of course can recognize are changing cultural and social attitudes.

So, the Western has become a screen on which America's anxieties about the Vietnam War have been projected. Why would the Western work so well for this? One answer is what I've been saying all along about the power of genre, and the power of repetition. Look if a thing is repeated again, and again, and again, it looks familiar. When it's so familiar, what happens? It licenses something disturbing. Because the genre, it seems on the surface, to contain so many familiar, reassuring elements, those very elements of reassurance enable the exploration of disturbing, or uncertain, or problematic materials. And of course, because-- not any one of these films would have nothing like the power they actually have if they existed individually. But it's because they're part of this long conversation that goes back to the earliest days of movies, that they have the power that they have.

One of the functions of genre is one of the deep subjects of my course. And I want students to see how centrally variations in genre forms can reflect social and historical realities. And you can feel this in every film. You can feel this in every television program. If you look at American television from the 1950s to the 1990s, let's say you've restricted yourself to situation comedy, what do you think you would see? You would see a drama in which the American family undergoes profound change. What happens? Women become more important. Patriarchal values become less, and less powerful. Children become more respected-- are treated less like appendages to the family. And in some-- by the '80s and '90s, sometimes the children have more dominant roles than the adults, and are often even shown to be wiser than their parents. Right? Something that would have been impossible in the early 1950s, a more patriarchal era, when the classic television program about families was called, *Father Knows Best*.

Another spine question, or organizing key question in the course, is deeply literary for me. In other words, what I try to do here, is encourage the students to develop what I'll call an aesthetic sense. To begin to have confidence when they say, that's a good film, or that's a bad

film. I think that's a good movie. I think that's a bad movie. I think that's a good-- and what I try to tell them is that that judgment, good or bad, isn't merely subjective. It isn't just what you feel, right? That there may be potentially objective standards, by which we can judge the excellence of texts. Part of it may remain subjective, but we can still judge excellence when we see acting. We can judge excellence when we ask how well the film is edited. We can judge the excellence of various aspects of the film. And teaching students how to do that, and to distinguish between effective and ineffective uses of the medium, turns out to be not simply a skill that you give to students who are watching movies, it's a skill you can give to students who read poems, who read books, who go to plays.

So one of the central principles I try to teach them about this, how they can distinguish what I call a work of art from a mere entertainment, is what I call the multiplicity principle. And what I mean by the multiplicity principle is fairly clear. And I give many examples in the course. Essentially, it's the idea that what happens in a particular moment will have multiple functions. You won't just look at the scene in order to have the plot extended. The scene will also dramatize character. It will also tell you something about the atmosphere in which the character lives.

Do you remember the moment in the passage I showed you, from the De Sica movie, *Umberto D.*? That very brief moment, where we see a man get on a tram, a bus, and sit next to someone on the bus and the bus moves. It's a completely wordless sequence. And there's a character we've never seen in the field before, who sits down next to the protagonist. No words exchanged. When our protagonist gets up, and gets off the bus, the camera lingers briefly on the man he left behind. And we see that men go like this. And what I suggested to you, again, I suggested that this was a moment of richness and complexity of multiplicity, in a way, because one implication of that scene was that the man, this stranger that we'll never meet again, that we only saw for one brief instant in the course of the film, might have concealed a story as deep, as rich, and as moving, as that of our hero, Humberto D.

When a text contains-- when a moment contains multiplicity, when it many things simultaneously, you're in the presence of a kind of excellence. That's only one principle, but it's a very valuable principle. And you can see it's worth if you compare, let's say, a trivial or relatively banal form of action entertainment, on the one hand, with a movie that has complex characters in it. And you could see the different kinds of demands. Or, even that a serious action adventure film, a film that incorporates action adventure elements in it, but also has a

serious subject matter, to ones that don't. Let's say, Kurosawa's samurai movies, against the trivial, merely entertaining samurai movies that weren't interested in history or character. What you try to do is give the students a greater and greater sensitivity, not just to the particular text that exhibits such excellence, but you want to arm them, so that when they encounter things on their own, they'll be able to make this judgment.

A second aspect of this excellence, what I call artistic quality, is the quality of organic form. I talk about this again, and again in the course, and try to show them instances of it. At its simplest level, the term, of course, derives from Coleridge, who borrowed it from the German romantics. But essentially, it's the idea that every text should generate a form that is unique to its needs. Form should be-- in other words, you should not have a prior form into which content is poured, right? The form of the text, the shape of the text, should take its nature from the meaning of the text. From what the text is saying.

And if you think about the structure of modern times, you'll see that it's a marvelously distilled instance-- a marvelously clear instance of the principle of organic form. What happens to Charlie serially is more meaningful, in a way, than what happens to him in a single episode. And the fact that this-- that we have this sense that things are repeating, that Charlie is on a treadmill, that he lives a cyclical life, that he'll always have moments of hope and hopelessness, that he'll have momentary times when he's free of-- when he finds a place to live, or finds sufficient food, but that it will always be temporary. That his life is always on the road. That his life is always in process. And, that at the same time, he never lets himself completely despair. There's always a moment where his resilience reasserts itself. Well, those elements are embedded, in some sense, in the very structure, the very organization, of the film.

There should be a symbiotic relationship, a marriage, a linkage, between form and content. Between the way, the shape of the text. Between the strategies and techniques that are used to embody the story, and what the story says. There should be a marriage between form and content. That's what organic form is. If you can show students moments of organic form, and if they can really recognize it, they are proofed for life against banal art.