University of St Andrews

Learning & Teaching Case Study

Department of Film Studies: Film Programme Assessment [FM4104]

The Film and History honours course, which focuses on the cinema of the British Empire has, as its corpus, thousands of short, instructional ‘non-theatrical’ films. The course helps students to examine, historicise and contextualise rarely-seen films and, with the film programme assessment, highlights how our understanding and readings of film can be shaped by the context in which they are presented.

For the first assessment, students are required to devise and introduce (in no more than 1000 words) a film programme. The document should include a title for the programme, a brief sentence explaining its intended audience, an introduction essay, and a full list of the films that are included in the screening. The exercise has two main aims. Firstly, it encourages students to apply the knowledge learnt on the course for different audiences, in the process developing curatorial skills and adapting their writing on film beyond the traditional confines of the academic essay. Secondly, the exercise teaches students to contextualise a disparate group of films, to draw out connections across a wide range of materials or to make relevant for a particular audience an apparently disparate set of films. The exercise combines very close textual analysis with rigorous historical research. And all within 1000 words!

Benefits/impact on students/staff: The students produced work on a wide range of topics. These ranged from the origins of the British Documentary movement, to the use of rail travel in early film, Cannibalism in colonial cinema, and the shifting representation of Anglo-Arab relations. One particularly strong programme was tailored for 8-11 year old schoolchildren. The assignment helps students think through and develop areas of interest at an early stage of the course, which helps as they progress towards the final major research essay. The external examiner described the assignment as ‘fantastic’ and ‘exemplary’ and singled it out as an example of good teaching practice, while nearly all student feedback mentioned the assignment as one of the strengths of the course. This is just one example of innovative teaching assessments in film studies (others includes research journals and star case studies) and we are increasingly looking to extend these into our sub honours teaching.

Student feedback:

‘The Film and History programme assignment was a refreshing opportunity to integrate archival knowledge with practical application. I rather enjoyed an assignment that was not another standard essay. Designing a Colonial film
programme required me to think critically about my audience, style my writing to be both informative and accessible, and creatively present classroom knowledge to cater for a public interest. This upcoming autumn I will be assisting with the development of a Classic and Art House film series, and I will be better prepared to cultivate the line-up as a result of this classroom experience.

‘The film programme assessment differed from the usual research essay, and I feel that this helped me to consider not only how to write for different audiences, but also how to deliver concise but well informed pieces of writing. The assessment highlights the benefits of encouraging students to bring their own ideas and interests to the course. I loved the freedom here as I was able to develop my own areas of study whilst also working within the guidelines of the assignment.’

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Date submitted: June 2013