

**Teaching Leadership with 10,000 Words, Page 2: Cinematic Portrayals**

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**ABSTRACT**

Last year, the authors presented “**Teaching Leadership with 10,000 Words**” a paper about using film as an integral part of to teaching leadership in an Engineering Leadership class.<sup>1</sup> This course was originally developed by the lead author, and has proven itself to be highly successful at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown’s Engineering Technology curriculum. Two years ago, the second author joined in teaching a portion of the course because of his expertise and experience in teaching film as literature. By working together, the authors are continually refining the process by which film as a leadership example is taught.

A new refinement now adds another element to the course, focusing on considering the film as the mediator (the delivery system) of the leadership message and then asking the students, to consider just how the film communicates its messages. When individuals watch a film, what they are observing is the culmination of conscious choices made by a production team of artists and craftsmen. Normally films are identified as the product of the director, i.e. Peter Weir’s Master and Commander, but it is inherently recognized that the finished film represents the product of many contributors, each of whom has processed the message of the film through his/her own consciousness. In short, these artists have “mediated” the message of the film to the viewers. Even if the film has a historical context, that context has been “mediated” through the minds of the contributing artists.

Thus in watching the film, the viewers make a judgment as to the relative success or failure of the various presentational choices made and decide whether or not this is a “good” or “bad” film.

Since the class and the students are specifically interested in “leadership” issues, students are asked to analyze how these choices affect the leadership issues demonstrated in the film. The need exists to go beyond the literal meaning of the film into questions of what the film itself intends to communicate to its audience.

This approach also has a direct impact on developing leaders, and especially leaders in the engineering and engineering technology field. By requiring students to become more aware of the medium, the authors, by default, require them to become more observant and more critically aware of the context in which the message is delivered. Enhanced

observational skills undoubtedly make for more competent leaders (and better engineers). The ability to accurately observe one's environment and to be conscious of what one observes is critical to one's success in the field.

The authors' intention is neither to turn the leadership course into a critical/analytical film studies course nor to create a new course in the curriculum. Instead, the following should be viewed as a "unit" within the larger course. In stressing the methods by which a film communicates with its audience, this paper will present four, easily recognized, choices a director makes in order to communicate the film's primary message and to portray the leadership characteristics and traits of the main character. Included as examples of these techniques are script choices, camera placement, film editing, sound editing, and especially use of music.

Using several brief film clips, the authors will provide a clear, concise demonstration of how film communicates its message to the audience, thereby allowing students to make reasoned judgments about the film's effectiveness and the veracity of its message. This approach will afford students a clearer understanding of what they must look for as they analyze the leadership dimensions of the movie's primary character. Also, it assists any professor who wants to use this concept with developing a deeper understanding of how film is literature expressed in a visual manner. The presentation will include specific examples of how this leadership "unit," or module, can be used in a variety of ways in different engineering or engineering technology courses or curriculum.

## **Introduction**

Using film to teach leadership has proved itself a very successful teaching tool at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. Working in teams of three, the students are asked to watch the film two or three times and then analyze the models of leadership they observe. This has the benefit of teaching them to make observations and then draw conclusions based on those observations. Since feature films have been used for this observation activity, the students see this as an entertaining enterprise and do not feel threatened by text, as they might in a more traditional academic assignment.

The activity of observing films and learning leadership by example can be reinforced by adding one or two extra steps to the process. These steps ask students to expand their level of observation and consider the film itself as a language by which messages (examples of leadership in this case) are conveyed to the audience. It is not our intention to turn our students into film critics or turn the course into an analysis of critical theory, but merely to enhance the observation/conclusion process described above.

That said, there is a peculiar anomaly in contemporary film delivery systems that mandates additional diligence in the teaching of film. This derives from fundamental changes in our culture that contemporary electronic technology has wrought. To explain this briefly: traditionally, film has been viewed as a "hot" (high-definition) medium, whereas television was considered a "cool" (low-definition) medium. These distinctions

were established by Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan in his book Understanding Media (1964).<sup>2</sup> McLuhan's distinctions between these mediums suggested an entirely different audience response to each. Film, as a "hot" medium engages the audience and involves them in deciphering the message of the film. TV, a "cool" medium, allows the audience to experience the message passively. Watching TV allows the images to "wash over the viewer," who may or may not be actively "engaged" in the process of deciphering the message.

If we still "went out" to the movies and our students "participated in the viewing process," there would be no problem for the teacher of film/leadership courses. But since the students inevitably get the film's message passively from their TV sets, and since instructors similarly show films in the classroom electronically (since few institutions have film projection facilities anymore and the films themselves come to us on tape or in DVD format), it is incumbent on us to wrest student attention back to the message, with as little interference from the medium as possible. Thus in teaching leadership using film, and adding the component developed here, students will become more aware of the viewing experience and less likely to miss the message.

The obvious benefit here is to encourage and expand the students' experience by asking them to consider the medium (film) and how it communicates its message to its audience. As a tool for teaching leadership, this is a beneficial outcome since, the more careful the observation, the more opportunity for the observer to detect nuance. Certainly discernment is a desirable quality in a leader and as a result of this experience, the student learns to become more discerning and this leads to better observation in the future.

For our purposes in this course, we will ask students to look at only three aspects of the film as "messenger." These are camera placement, film and sound editing and the use of music, and script choices, especially what is commonly called, the "back story."

### **The camera:**

In film, the camera is the "eye" through which we see the action of the film. The camera can distance us from the film; it can show us the sweeping panorama of event, or it can bring us into close, intimate, sometimes even claustrophobic proximity to the film's action. Our relation to the characters is entirely controlled by the camera's placement. The camera's position influences our emotional relationship to the characters.<sup>3</sup>

Skillful use of the camera is a prerequisite for successful film-making, but rather than try to teach the entire range of camera techniques, we suggest using one fairly easy observation for students to make while watching a film. This is a camera movement using the "tilt" function. Cameras can look up or look down. If the camera is set above the acting plane and it looks (tilts) down on the actor, the character is reduced in stature and looks less significant or even weak to the audience. If, on the other hand, the camera is set low, and looks up at the actor, that actor looks imposing to the audience. With a camera looking up, an actor can dominate the screen and appear either godlike or threatening, depending on the intention of the director. In either position, the camera's

placement is a conscious decision by the director and cinematographer and it effects the audience perception of the message of the film.

Examples of camera angles are readily obvious in selected scenes from Orson Welles' Citizen Kane,<sup>4</sup> in which low camera angles were used to the extent that the camera tilted up so far that the sets required ceilings to be built onto them. The effect is obvious and dramatic and students can readily recognize the main character in terms of both his menace and his isolation. Once students see selected clips from this film, they can easily recognize this technique as it is used by other directors. A selected overhead shot from the same film shows the camera's ability to reduce a character's stature so that he appears weak and vulnerable, as Kane does at the end of his life, isolated and alone in his mansion.

### **Editing and Music:**

Editing and music also affect the audience response to the film. Like camera placement, editing and music operate on almost subliminal levels; we don't see it or hear it consciously unless we learn to do so, yet both editing and music have a direct effect on how we receive the message of the film. There may be a slight problem with asking students to talk about editing and music in their papers since they often do not have the vocabulary to talk about these effects and it is, again, not our intention to teach a music appreciation course. That said, we believe that a few simple examples of this kind of analysis will prepare students to talk about the effect editing and music have on the film.

Specific examples of use of editing and music in film can extend from Steven Spielberg's Jaws, with which the students will be familiar, to an earlier and more esoteric example of Sergi Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky,<sup>5</sup> in which specially composed music, coupled with Eisenstein's signature montage editing style, create the famous "Battle on the Ice" scene, a scene justly famous for having the physiological effect of elevating the viewer's heart rate and thus involving the viewer in the action of the film.

### **The Script:**

Lastly, script, and more significantly back story analysis is the most literary portion of this unit but can again be introduced into the course with a minimal level of preparation. At this level, we simply want the students to ask what the overall purpose of the film is. What point do the writer and the director want to make? And how does this point effect our perception of the film?

An obvious example of how the back story functions in film and one which provides a clear explanation of how purpose informs a film's message, can be drawn from an overtly propagandistic film such as Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will,<sup>6</sup> an obvious propaganda effort designed to promote Hitler's consolidation of power in Germany in 1933. The film combines accessible examples of use of camera angles, music, and an obvious back story and allows students to read a film without the added complication of a sympathetic leader figure. Hitler being so obviously despicable that no one can sympathize with him, the students can focus on the specifics of "reading" the film.

### **Conclusion:**

Once the students are prepared to perform rudimentary film analysis (and we suggest this can be done in a single class period, using examples for the films listed above, all of which should be readily available in an average college library), they can be turned loose on their own analysis of films selected for the course, but by providing this extra layer of analysis, we believe students will more ably analyze the films assigned, with more perspicacity and with increased appreciation. Subtly, they will also hone their own leadership skills by learning to observe more closely and ultimately make better decisions because they have more information on which to act.

### Sources:

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4. *Citizen Kane.* RKO, 1940.
5. *Alexander Nevsky.* Russia, 1938.
6. *Triumph of the Will.* Germany, 1935.

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