

Instructor Observed: **Jesse James Stommel**

Date of Observation: April 22, 2009

Course: WRTG 1150

Location: McKenna 204

Observer: Lynn Gingrass

Classroom Environment: McKenna 204 is a small, low-ceilinged room in the corner of the building, barely large enough for a small class. The room is overheated and has considerable claustrophobia potential, but the class felt intimate and cozy, if overheated. Students were seated around the four walls, and the last to arrive sat on the floor. There is a TV monitor in one corner of the room, and the instructor sat near it, so that both he and the movie images were not competing for attention.

Evidence of Purpose: The plan for the class was evident from the outset. A single frame from the movie *Donnie Darko* (hereafter DD) was paused on the TV monitor, and the class was encouraged to conduct an analysis of the elements of the picture, refining their ability to close-analyze visual media. Once the class was assembled, students were told to get out a sheet of paper and freewrite their associations about that frame for 4-5 minutes. The instructions were brief, basically that they deconstruct the picture and reflect on its meaning.

The lesson plan advised that the materials for this class were a continuation of work begun in the preceding class, which focused on visual rhetoric and the intersection between words and images. The current topic was the students' final paper, an Illustrated Argumentative Essay incorporating an analytical paper with reference to outside sources and a visual/creative element. The instructor had previously introduced the concept of punctum, and students were reminded that they could use this concept as a way of approaching the frame they were viewing on this occasion.

The instructor did the freewriting assignment as well, and after all of them had written for five minutes, began by sharing his own reflections. He focused on the mood of the frame, a combination of technology and a natural landscape. The students then volunteered their impressions, quite willingly and enthusiastically, ranging from observations about how dark and light were distributed in the frame to discussions of focal point and how the viewer's eye was directed around the picture. The students did a good job of reflecting on a variety of the possibilities available to them, and with a fair amount of nuance. Clearly the instructor's plan was to begin by provoking a free-ranging discussion exploring a number of possibilities, and by this point in the class that objective was accomplished. The students were stimulated and receptive; though it surely would have been a poorer class if the instructor had chosen that moment to walk out, the students probably would have been happy to stick around and continue the conversation.

The instructor reminded the class that these topics had the potential to be useful for their papers, then turned the focus to larger issues related to the film. Since it could be argued that the frame discussed at the beginning of the class had highlighted binary oppositions, could it be argued that DD itself was deconstructing such oppositions? These questions launched another animated and wide-ranging discussion of a variety of possibilities, many of them binary oppositions: fate/faith, science/religion, technology/nature, fear/love, mental illness, society, dying alone, et al.

In the last part of the class, the final scene of the movie was shown. Afterward, students were asked, "What caught your eye?" Silence. The instructor responded by complimenting the students on their reticence; he said that they were right not to jump in on that question because there was "almost too much—so much information." It was a fine moment in the class; it demonstrated that these students could distinguish between the invitation to discuss a number of issues like a free-writing exercise, and simplistic summaries of complex material.

The instructor closed the class by pointing out that the frame-by-frame analysis that they had done that day was remarkably like a word-by-word, line-by-line deconstruction of a written text.

Participant Relationships: Students were engaged and cheerfully enthusiastic. It surely didn't hurt that DD is a huge favorite among their generation, but their evident involvement was clearly due to more than subject matter. Although the class felt fairly informal, what took place there was obviously well orchestrated. Students had received an email before class with three questions designed to shape their participation, the image that they were discussing was both ambiguous and evocative, and they identified with the subject matter. They were primed to respond keenly, and they did. The instructor did a fine job directing that readiness, and was equally expert at not imposing his own views on the discussion.

Use of Pedagogical Materials/Pedagogical Approach: Syllabus, brief lecture, an in-class writing, an email with questions sent to all students prior to class, a major visual aid, Q and A. These elements were combined in an artful way to produce a class that was vital and highly animated. I arrived early and watched the students congregate outside the door, and it seemed clear that they were looking forward to the class. The class they attended was intelligent and thoughtful, and those involved contributed to that high level of productivity. The students' interest in the film was used to produce insightful, detailed commentary.

Strengths and Suggestions: This class really worked. Participation was high, and it was spirited. It's easy to observe that it might have been somewhat less so if the subject matter had been less attractive to the audience, but these students were urged to take their pre-existing engagement much deeper, and they were clearly responding to that prompt. To an observer it was hard to know how well the enthusiasm would transfer to the page, but the class certainly met its own goals, and ended with a definite sense of momentum.