

April, 1993 - Steven Rosen, English

I am scheduled to teach a course on *Crowds in Film* (cross listed Honors, English, and Sociology) next fall. I have not taught film previously; furthermore, the course's curriculum and perspective are new to the college and possibly to the world. Naturally, I am feeling refreshed by this innovative prospect (and grateful to the department chairs--Cannon, Walsh, and Donnelly--for letting me try a different kind of teaching). My teaching tips concern not what specific methods might develop in the still forthcoming *Crowds in Film* course, but how I got the encouragement I needed to initiate it.

Last June, I enjoyed a Faculty Resource Network grant at NYU, where I studied *Crowds in Film*, not in a seminar but independently. I had no intention of turning this study to pedagogical account. I merely intended to write some studies applying to film analysis the crowd psychology of the Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti, which I had previously employed in literary studies of Swift, Blake, Wordsworth, and Kafka. Canetti postulates a human instinct to identify with crowds--growing, equal, dense, and commonly directed aggregations, such as Christians hoping to join the heavenly host or Communists expecting the world to unite. While originally reading Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, I had found myself most frequently reminded of crowd scenes in movies. Last summer at NYU, when I began to approach the subject systematically, I found that I would be able to write about films from a Canettian standpoint. For instance, the reprehensibly thrilling rescue ride of the Ku Klux Klan in D. W. Griffiths's controversial *The Birth of a Nation* can be analyzed as the realization of a growing, equal, dense, coherently directed crowd. Still, I had no plans to teach this subject.

What got me to that point was the unexpectedly stimulating encouragement I received while discussing crowds in film with other NYU Faculty Resource Network Scholars. None were specialists in film nor even in my usual field, English literature. Indeed, it seems that we were able to have such amiable, unguarded, and earnest discourse just because our studies were diverse. Neither competitors nor one another's judges, we hardly knew one another, and all pursued independent projects. This situation proved ideal for exchanging ideas.

One of the program's administrators (Sidney Borowitz) prodded faculty fellows to discuss their work at lunch. Luckily, mine was one of the most accessible topics--everyone remembers powerful crowd scenes in films--so I was frequently called upon. Our discussions soon ranged beyond film. I explained how I had previously applied Canettian crowd psychology to analyze Gulliver's experience among the Lilliputians and Wordsworth's descriptions of natural phenomena, e.g. "A host of golden daffodils." Some of us began to analyze current events, such as Clinton's and Perot's campaign rhetoric, the LA riots, and the unfolding disasters in former Yugoslavia--all from a Canettian perspective. I found the

apparent communicability of my concerns quite encouraging--but still had no plans to teach them

However, when I got back to Saint Peter's, another Faculty Resource Network administrator (Jackie Goldenberg) called to ask if I were going to teach a course on Crowds in Film and encouraged me to do so. When it soon came time to submit Honors course proposals, I presented this to Don Cannon, who, as always, proved very obliging and interested. Indeed, my Deans and department chairs, beginning with Jim Pegolotti and Loren Schmidtberger and extending to Peter Alexander and John Walsh, have always encouraged me to do new, independent, and unusual work at Saint Peter's. Then why do I cite the Faculty Resource Network for the encouragement I needed to propose this innovative course?

One would risk seeming even more pompous and egocentric than one already does if one ventured to talk regularly about one's own (or a Nobel Laureate's) ideas in the Chetwood Room. I don't blame Saint Peter's for that. I suspect that professors repress expressing intellectual enthusiasms among their colleagues at even the greatest universities, for fear of seeming insufferably uncool and unprofessional. For intellectual encouragement, I have always depended upon the enthusiasm of strangers. And that is my teaching tip: to seek the environment needed to stimulate one's confidence to teach one's truest and newest interests. That will probably entail contacts off campus, such as the Faculty Resource Network provides.