

Focus on Film:

THEY LEARN IT THRU THE MOVIES

BY DAVID M. CONSIDINE & FRANK BAKER

“FILM HAS ITS OWN LANGUAGE, ITS OWN GRAMMAR.”

(Martin Scorsese, Director and Chair of The Film Foundation)

“I NEVER REALIZED HOW INEFFECTIVELY I USED FILM IN MY CLASSROOM UNTIL I CREATED THE MOVIE GUIDE. NOW I SEE WHAT A POWERFUL TEACHING TOOL FILM CAN BE.”

(Braley, North Carolina middle grades teacher)

“...JUST LIKE THE BOOK WITHOUT ANY OF THE INTERESTING PARTS.”

(Review of the movie, *The Da Vinci Code*)

“Kids love movies! This fact is evident when you tell them you’re about to show a clip of a movie, and the noise level in the classroom drops immediately.” That’s Belinha talking. She teaches 8th grade in Branford, CT. She explored the subject of historical perspective with her students using the MGM classic *Gone With the Wind* and the acclaimed Ken Burns documentary *Civil War*. The “students were able to see the burning of Georgia from two different venues and appreciate how movies can impact our thinking of history,” she said.

Belinha’s got that right. In *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Sam Wineburg documented the way movies shaped the way students and their parents perceived eras like the 1960s and events like the Holocaust. As a mass medium that depends on the public, it is inevitable that movies will somehow reflect social attitudes and concerns about

individuals, institutions, and issues. *They Died with Their Boots On*, made during World War II, depicts a somewhat romanticized General George Armstrong Custer. By the time we get to *The Last Samurai* (2003), Custer is described as “a murderer who fell in love with his own legend.” Rather than lamenting the impact of the film industry and other popular culture, Wineburg said, “we might try instead to understand how they might be used... to advance students’ historical understanding.” Such a process would be compatible with many strands described by The National Council for the Social Studies, including those that address institutions, identity, culture, and change.

Unfortunately not everyone looks so favorably upon the idea of film in the classroom. Just ask Melanie. In an attempt to motivate and stimulate her students as they studied meteors and dinosaur extinction theories, Melanie used a clip from the popular movie, *Armageddon*. She was chastised by her department head and told that in the future she should use an episode from the TV documentary series NOVA. However well researched and produced that series may be, in terms of student engagement, (a necessary prerequisite for learning), it loses out to *Armageddon* and other Hollywood fare.

Suspicion about the contribution movies can make to the curriculum is hardly new. It is in fact rooted in the history of educational media and well documented in Paul Saettler’s excellent *History of Instructional Technology*. Almost from its inception, Saettler tells us, film has been recognized as a potentially powerful teaching tool and “a potent medium of education”, at the same time as it has confronted

widespread opposition and a pervasive “notion that entertainment, commercialism, and education do not mix.”

Tellingly, he also documents research from the 1920s that clearly identified the vital role the teacher played as an instructional intermediary, helping students understand key ideas and depictions in movies. “However inherently effective the photoplays may be” researchers wrote some 75 years ago, “it will only attain its highest degree of effectiveness when accompanied by good teaching based on the appreciation of the real goal to be attained and of the capacity of the material to contribute to its attainment.”

THE MOTION PICTURE STUDY GUIDE: A MODEL FROM APPALACHIAN STATE

One teacher training institute that has consistently recognized the potential movies offer as teaching tools, is The College of Education at North Carolina’s Appalachian State University, which houses a graduate and undergraduate middle school program and a masters in media literacy. Drawing upon the model established in the movie study guides developed by Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM), education majors are expected to work in teams to create interdisciplinary motion picture study guides. While the guides are frequently based on books in the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum, such as *The Outsiders*, *Ruby Bridges*, *Holes*, or *Tuck Everlasting*, teachers have also created fascinating guides from movies as different as *Seabiscuit*, *National Treasure*, *Fly Away Home*, *October Sky*, *The Mighty*, *Newsies*, *Remember the Titans*, and *My Dog Skip*.

In addition to including standards-based instructional strategies, these guides typically connect movie content to the developmental dimensions of early adolescence described in National Middle School Association’s (NMSA), *This We Believe* or to curriculum themes described by James Beane in, *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality*.

Themes and concerns related to identity, cultural diversity, class systems, independence, human rights,

and global conflict are evident in numerous study guides. Beyond learning facts and developing students cognitively, adolescent empathy and engagement can also be fostered through movies. The NMSA publication *Promoting Harmony* recognizes that the popularity of S.E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders* is based on the degree to which “it captures the emotional turbulence of adolescence” and the fact that many young readers will have experienced and shared, “the feelings expressed such as confusion, anxiety, excitement, the general sense of searching...”

Many movies can fulfill the same function as young audiences watch the trials and tribulations of people their own age, like PK (*The Power of One*), David (*I am David*), or Peter and Susan (*The Chronicles of Narnia*). Movies like *Big* and *13 Going on 30* allow them to consider what being an adult might be like. *Rebel Without a Cause*, despite the fact that it is now 50 years old, remains one of the quintessential screen representations of adolescent angst. Because it was made in the 1950s it has the added attraction of having no cussing and minimal violence. Teachers who do use this film report that once the kids get over the fact that it looks old, they get into the story about three confused and angry teens.

One of the most recent study guides developed by North Carolina teachers is called *Bridging Continents*. Designed for 7th and 8th grade and based on state standards, it addresses racial prejudice in Africa and Australia by using *Hotel Rwanda* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The interdisciplinary curriculum team was

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made up of one teacher each from Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, and Science.

While the humanities teachers usually respond fairly quickly to their assigned tasks, the connections are not always obvious to teachers in other subject areas. In this case, the Math and Science teachers were more than up to the challenge. The subject matter in *Hotel Rwanda* included genocide, decaying bodies and refugees forced to live in unsanitary conditions that became breeding grounds for infection and disease. The study guide addressed state competencies, including scientific inquiry, water quality standards, and biological hazards such as viruses and bacteria. The subject matter was brought home even further when the teachers connected these issues to conditions faced by victims of Hurricane Katrina, the Indonesian tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan.

A parent, principal, or administrator exposed to one of these movie guides is left with little doubt that teachers have created engaging, challenging resources that include taxonomies, rubrics and activities related to learning styles, multiple intelligences or brain-based learning.

Teachers describe the collaborative process of creating the study guides as “exciting,” “challenging,” and “time consuming.” Invariably they also report a sense of accomplishment and pride in the finished product.

One area that teachers are asked to include in every study guide, steps beyond the traditional subject areas and focuses on Media Literacy. This means addressing some of the central concerns of Media Literacy, which might include an understanding of the audience the film targets, the *values and ideology* in the film, or the way in which people, places, countries, cultures, events, and issues are depicted or *represented* in the movie. It always includes some discussion of the genre, *codes, conventions, and language* of cinema. For the most part, teachers become co-learners with their students, since few of them have had any formal training in the language of motion pictures. As Braley put it, “My students were part of my creative process so they cannot wait to complete some of the activities included in my Movie Guide.”

TEACHING WITH MOVIES: IT'S IN THE STANDARDS

The use of motion pictures in the classroom has been spurred by the endorsement of both major reading/language arts teaching organizations in the United States. In their joint declaration, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and International Reading Association (IRA) declared, “Being literate in contemporary society means being active critical and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television.” This emphasis upon film language is increasingly evident in state standards.

In Texas, an influential state with textbook publishers, Viewing and Representing standards are contained in the ELA curriculum. They make specific reference to “character traits,” dialogue, mood, genre, and film techniques.

In 2004, the College Board included more than 30 contemporary films in SpringBoard, a new middle school language arts curriculum. The curriculum infused film around three themes: choice, changes and challenges all of which resonate with both middle school teachers and students. Students read novels and poems in addition to learning to critically view films. SpringBoard wisely encourages the use of film clips, rather than showing an entire film, so that student may focus on a specific topic.

This is pedagogically sound and invites an instructional strategy that Gavriel Salomon in *The Interaction of Media Cognition and Learning* described as AIME. The acronym stands for the Amount of Invested Mental Energy. When students are not cued and prepped prior to viewing media, Salomon argued, they frequently engage in “cognitive economy” or “shallow processing.” On the other hand, when teachers give them directions prior to screening and allow time for discussion and feedback after the screening, the students are more mentally alert, as result of which they comprehend and retain more ideas than students who received little guidance or direction from their teachers. *In short, for learning to occur the focus has to shift from what they watch to how they watch.*

SpringBoard provides numerous examples of this type of approach. Using the film *The Mighty*, based on the novel *Freak The Mighty*, student attention is called to the camerawork and editing used in the opening sequence, in which the larger than life Max walks through his middle school hallway, where he receives incredulous stares from his smaller peers. The camera perspective shifts from the objective (what Max sees) to the subjective (how others see him).

In the work based on Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, students study tone and are guided in their viewing of the film's opening sequence, in which E.T. is abandoned on Earth by the mother ship. Students are assigned to groups and directed to pay careful attention to elements, including camera framing, camera angles, lighting, music, and sound.

Another cinematic device students learn to recognize, appreciate and identify is the flashback, which is often accompanied by the narrator's voice-over. Leonardo Di Caprio's voice over provides background information and character motivation at the beginning of the coming-of-age classic *This Boy's Life*: "It was 1957. We were driving from Florida to Utah. After my mother was beaten up by her boyfriend, we got in the Nash and high-tailed it for the uranium fields." In the Disney version of *Holes*, young Stanley Yelnats is being bussed to court-ordered detention at Camp Green Lake when he recalls both his family curse and the incident that sent him digging up holes. *The Sandlot*, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *The Outsiders*, *The Education of Little Tree*, *Clueless*, and *Spanglish* all use voiceover at the opening of the film. Perhaps one of the most compelling flashbacks is found at the start of *Stand By Me*, based on the Stephen King story. We see Richard Dreyfuss sitting in his car and his voice takes us back to his adolescence: "I was 12 going on 13 the first time I saw a dead human being. It happened in the summer of 1959; a long time ago, but only if you measure it in terms of years."

In the fall of 2005, the Film Foundation, unveiled a new middle school film curriculum, "The Story of Movies," designed to educate students about the language and preservation of motion picture classics. FF also has drafted National Film Study Standards for Middle Schools emphasizing not only the

language of film but also the historical and cultural contexts, production and creative expression, audience response, and aesthetic values. Similarly, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards expects students to be "intelligent readers of texts in different media," including film.

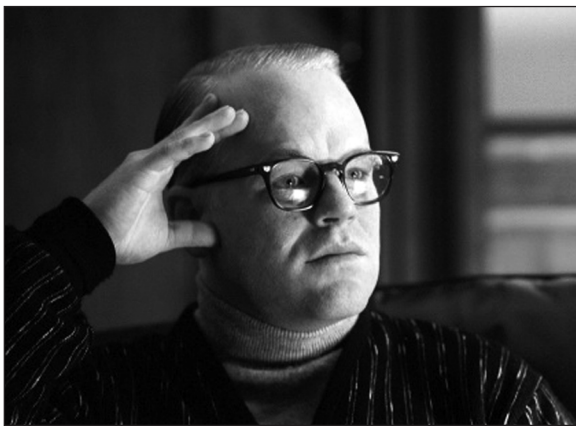
The first film examined in *The Story of Movies* is the 1963 classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* (www.storyofmovies.org). It provides an excellent example of an interdisciplinary approach to film. While most teachers are familiar with the novel and the movie, it is for the most part studied in English as a literary text. It obviously can also be examined from the context of history and social studies. For example, its representation of the South in the 1930s can be analyzed for accuracy and authenticity. It also can be viewed as a social-cultural artifact that tells us something about the era in which it was both created and consumed, which is to say America in the early 1960s. In what way was the production and marketing of this film a reflection of the Kennedy years and the Civil Rights movement? Finally, this film might well be compared to another product of that era, *Raisin in the Sun*, which depicted the Black experience not through the eyes and words of a White writer, but rather through the words of a Black woman, Lorraine Hansberry. Teachers looking for different approaches to teaching with and about *To Kill a Mockingbird* will find many useful activities at (<http://www.frankwbaker.com/tkam.htm>)



THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE Photo courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures



CAPOTE Photos courtesy Sony Pictures Classic



Of course the study of film, if it is to have meaning for young people, should not be relegated to so-called classics. Contemporary movies, including controversial ones like *The Da Vinci Code*, can stimulate vigorous debate about the role of film in society, including issues of media *representations*, media *values*, and media *effects*.

Two notable films from 2005 are worthy of teacher consideration here. Both *Capote* and *Good Night and Good Luck* were recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Both films focus on journalists as individuals and journalism as a process and profession. Both films document the powerful storytelling capability of their central characters, author Truman Capote and veteran newsman Edward R. Murrow, who skillfully utilize words and images to get their messages across.

For English teachers, *Capote* has the bonus of featuring author Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) as

a secondary character in the story. Much of this film raises questions about professional integrity, journalistic exploitation, and the public's right to know—questions that are not locked in the historical past, but are as timely and relevant today as the nation struggles with issues of government surveillance and the right of the press to protect their sources.

A less controversial but equally engaging movie from 2005 was *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Based on the children's book by C.S. Lewis, the story has the universal appeal of other fantasies (Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, The Matrix) that include the struggle between good and evil, and it provides an excellent opportunity to explore the archetypes, rites of passage, genre conventions, and themes and motifs described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. The use of *Narnia* in the classroom could also be facilitated by screening relevant segments from *Shadowlands*, the 1993 biopic of author C.S. Lewis (Anthony Hopkins) and his relationship with the American poet, Joy Gresham.

LEARNING TO LOOK AND LISTEN: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Although many teachers are initially nervous about teaching a new language, our experiences with students and teachers in classroom, libraries, workshops, and conferences across the country is that they become quite comfortable quite quickly to the extent that they report noticing film style and techniques even when they thought they were viewing recreationally. This new attention or awareness in turn generates new opportunities for them to develop a list of titles and scenes they can use in their own classrooms.

Once students have been introduced to these concepts, their parents report that their children are now actively reading film and pointing things out to them that they themselves were not aware of. In turn the students share the new examples they have discovered with their teachers thus adding to the repertoire of potential clips the teachers have to utilize.

Rather than jumping headlong into visual analysis, a useful transitional exercise is to have students consider the way images and sound contribute to mood. Anyone who has ever seen *Jaws* is well aware, for example, of the powerful stimulus/response conditioning created by a few simple bars of music early in the film. Selecting a few brief scenes that are emotionally powerful can serve as a motivator to get students talking about and thinking about the discrete contributions sound and visuals make to a film and the way these in turn influence our feelings during the screening. It is also a good idea to show the scenes once without sound and then later with sound. An interesting variation on this is to break the class in two with one group focusing on sound (they cannot look at the screen during the time the scene is playing) and another group concentrating on only the visuals.

The very opening scene of *Jurassic Park* lends itself very well to such an exercise. The accident that involves the teenage girls, the truck, and the horse in *The Horse Whisperer*, is another very strong scene where editing, flashback, sound effects, camera angles, and music all contribute to the total impact. An emotional scene (without dialogue) that works well in both Language Arts and Social Studies can be found in *Snow Falling on Cedars* (DVD chapter, The Camps). It depicts the forced removal of the Japanese-Americans from their small town to internment camps during World War II. *Apollo 13* has useful applications in Social Studies, History and Science. It also has strong sequences to analyze in terms of mood, editing, and character development (see DVD chapter, Fall to Earth).

SPOT THE SHOT: GETTING STARTED

The growth of DVD technology, SmartBoards, LCD projectors, Smart Rooms, and other technology now permit large-screen, clear freeze frame images that greatly enhance the opportunity teachers have to foster visual discrimination skills.

One of the most successful exercises we have experienced with students and teachers alike is examining the director's design decisions in *A Beautiful*



GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK Photos courtesy of Warner Brothers



Mind, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Using only the first 4–5 minutes of the film's opening sequence, cue your own class by asking them to pay careful attention to the following two questions:

1. What do we learn about John Nash in this scene and how do we learn it? What does Russell Crowe do in the classroom sequence to let us know the way his character thinks and feels? He does not speak in this interior scene.
2. What design decisions has the director made in the classroom scene and the exterior courtyard scene that helps us learn more about John Nash? What does he show us, how and why?

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Invariably, without having introduced the definition of *mise en scene* or explained key elements such as Posture, Position, Point of View (POV), and Props, teachers and students alike begin to discuss Crowe's body language and director Ron Howard's close-ups of various objects seen through Nash's eyes. Although some people worry that such an exercise reads too much into movies, in reality, it fosters a deep appreciation of the art of film and recognizes the directors design contributions. The marketing poster for *A Beautiful Mind* reinforces our interpretation of the opening scene by saying, "He saw the world in ways no one could have imagined."

For those who wonder about the ability of students to grasp these concepts, listen to Stephen, a lateral entry teacher in Durham, North Carolina, who teaches both media analysis and media production: "I've used this with my kids and it has worked out well. *October Sky* has a great introduction that can be read visually to introduce the audience to the story, from the color palette of the shots to the miner's radio signal disappearing as they descend into the mine."

Stephen is the face of the future. A young media savvy teacher, he is aware of how turned on the kids are by media and he has the opportunity to bring the new technology into his teaching style. Not content to have his students read and comprehend other people's media, he teaches them to create their own media productions. In this he is greatly aided by a supportive administrator and new tools. IMac's movie editing system makes student production more attainable. Software including MovieMaker, Final Cut Pro, and Pinnacle Studio is increasingly becoming available in schools.

Now, today, like no other time in our past, we have the opportunity, tools, strategies, techniques, resources, and standards to make film, the powerful teaching tool Thomas Edison once thought it would be. Reviewing The Star Wars—Where Science Meets the Imagination exhibit at Boston's

Museum of Science, the Boston Globe proclaimed it "hugely enjoyable...eye-popping...breathtaking." "It's fun," they said. "You learn something. Best of all, the fun is in the learning." We couldn't agree more. When our students are having fun, they are engaged and they are being educated. Now in their second century, movies deserve a legitimate place in the classroom and the curriculum, with creative teachers skillfully employing them to both reach and teach their students. *

All teachers quoted in this article gave permission for the quotes to be used. Some names have been changed at the request of these teachers.

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RESOURCES

- Cinemateque film study guides
http://www.cinemateque.bc.ca/education/film_study_guides_intro.htm
- Secondary Study Guides
<http://www.filmeducation.org/secondary/StudyGuides/index.html>
- Scanning the Movies Study Guides
<http://www.chumlimited.com/mediaed/studyguides.asp>
- Walden Media Film Study Guides
<http://www.walden.com/>
- ATOM's The Education Shop
<http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

- Considine, David M. and Gail E. Haley (1999) *Visual messages: Integrating imagery into instruction*. Teacher Ideas Press: Englewood, CO.
- Costanzo, Bill (2004) *Great films and how to teach them*. NCTE Books: Urbana, Illinois.
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