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Currently, good teaching practice has a greater emphasis on explicitness. This is particularly appropriate when teaching literacy skills to students from widely diverse language backgrounds, many of whom do not use standard Australian English at home. These students are entitled to learn about and be upskilled in standard Australian English, but they do not gain such skills and knowledge in the same way as students whose home language is standard Australian English.

Explicit teaching about the structures and features of language is necessary, rather than leaving it to chance. This is also important for students who need greater support.

As I said at the beginning, we have always tried to ensure that teaching is universally available, student-centred, purposeful, interesting and engaging. All students in NSW are now entitled to have access to all the knowledge and skills of at least Standard English. Understanding where we are coming from helps us to help them.

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CS Responding to film

Jane Mills is Head of Screen Studies at the Australian Film, Television & Radio School at North Ryde, NSW. Since May of this year, in association with the English Teachers Association (ETA), she has devised and delivered courses and seminars on screen studies to just over 250 members of the ETA. She has also served as an expert member to the Board of Studies for the screen and drama components of the new English syllabus. Jane is a former documentary filmmaker and an outspoken commentator on issues of censorship and cineliteracy. She is a frequent broadcaster on television and radio.

For some years now the screen education gap in the New South Wales HSC syllabus has been a source of concern to the more thoughtful cultural analysts in the worlds of education, academia, the film and television industries, and those in the political arena responsible for providing funding for both screen production and screen culture programs.

For some others, the whole notion of cineliteracy is alien and therefore suspect. Last September, when it was announced that the English syllabus was to include film, television and interactive media texts, one half of the mass media displayed a contemptuous attitude towards the other half.

“Is this HSC English?” fulminated one radio jock. “Haven’t teachers got enough to do? Teachers must just absolutely shudder, absolutely shudder. Isn’t there enough to be done and isn’t there enough good literature to be studied? Star Wars? I’ve no idea what that has to do with the study of English literature. None, absolutely none.”

Something like this was probably said when the novel emerged in the eighteenth century! But it wasn’t only the scandalmongers of tabloid journalism who were upset. In the *Australian*, Luke Slattery aligned himself with the barbarians:

“You don’t need a lesson in cinema theory to critically appraise a film. Did Graham Greene? Does Clive James? In fact you just need to be literate in conventional terms, alert to the texture and nuance of what’s before you. You want to be wise to the screen? Well, read more books. [Cinema] is all very now. . . the more time spent on what is passing, the less time spent on what has endured...” (The *Australian*, 9.9.98)

For those of us immersed in the academic analysis of the visual media, it is astonishing that a former education editor of the nation’s foremost broadsheet newspaper should reveal such ignorance about a cultural product with a history predating Federation. He appears unaware that, like all education, the point of a rigorous screen education is empowerment. As Emmy-winning children’s TV producer, Cecily Truett, said of the need for cineliteracy in a world where the image increasingly dominates:

“Children need tools with which to contextualise all these images... without these tools our children are going to be at sea in a storm of media images without the critical skills they need to digest, deconstruct and to make judgements about how image experiences are relevant to their own lives.”

The fear expressed by journalists (and others), that the teaching of film and television texts alongside Jane Austen and Shakespeare represents a dumbing down of critical analytic studies, is not one I have had to face before. If anything, I’ve experienced the exact opposite. A significant number of people in the screen industries believe the academic rigours of screen

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theory to be unnecessary to the learning of film-making.

This is waning but it is something the Australian Film, Television and Radio School—with its emphasis on education rather than training—has had to fight against. But whereas the prevailing attitude among film school students and my fellow academics was once that the clever student would find a way to get exemption from screen studies, today those who can't "hack it" at their screen studies are generally deemed to be in need of special help.

Undoubtedly English teachers will have to confront a view that screen studies is a soft option, one less worthy of study than written literature. It is a challenge that many media and cultural studies teachers the world over have to face; a dismissive attitude towards the visual and to all forms of popular culture is a global phenomenon certainly not confined to NSW. The key lies in a raised awareness of screen studies as a discipline with all the rigour and potential empowerment of any other critical discipline.

Perhaps the first question English teachers can ask their students to explore concerns the cultural specificities of taste. When asked to differentiate between what they think is "good" or "bad" and what they like or dislike, students learn that film criticism is both more complex and more rewarding than they previously thought.

I always make a point of refusing to let students get away with simply using the terms *good* or *bad* when discussing a film or television program: they have to be able to explain why, and by what criteria, they make these judgements. In a broader context this can then be applied to films and television programs versus other cultural products.

Ask your students why, for instance, some people believe viewing a film is of less value than reading a book, and then ask them to consider Catherine Morland's plight in *Northanger Abbey*. It wasn't necessarily her devotion to the Gothic novel that caused problems, but her inability to distinguish fantasy from reality. If students have any remaining doubts, show them an extract from the video of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, Germany, 1919) or any other Gothic movie influenced by romanticism and German expressionism. That should get them to appreciate the value of taking popular culture seriously and to realize that screen studies is, *sui generis*, a discipline in and of itself.

In some respects, the screen text can be treated in exactly the same way as any other text when it comes to analysis. There are many similarities although, obviously, some differences. One such difference resides in the screen's added visual dimension (which is what makes it impossible to become alert to the nuances of film and television by merely reading more books). But I have found it useful to begin teaching students by drawing out, and building upon, what they already know about film and other texts.

Screen texts are similar to written texts in the sense that each provides an approach to understanding how culture intersects with the social, political and ethical dilemmas of everyday life. And, as media analyst and university media educator Catharine Lumby pointed out in an article applauding the new English curriculum, "Rather than defending one discipline and denigrating the other, the two approaches can be used to enhance the other." (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11.9.89)

Teachers can draw upon their existing knowledge of literature and transfer these skills to their screen teaching. Notions of language, authorship, genre and intergenericity, intertextuality, metaphor and all the other essential elements of literary critical studies are applicable to the study of film and television, just as they are to the novel, the play or poetry.

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977), for example, offers students the opportunity to explore the way in which the Western can provide a narrative source for science fiction as well as how the Promethean hero is represented in popular culture. Just as a novel such as *Northanger Abbey* leads students to a study of romanticism via the Gothic novel, so *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1997) transports us to Jane Austen. *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982; 1992) reaches back to Milton, Blake and Mary Shelley. *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) transports us to the labyrinthine pleasures of the Latin-American fiction of Jorge Borges.

But it's not a one-way thing, and nor should it be. Film, television and interactive media constitute a cultural discourse, the products of which are worthy of study themselves. Screen studies has its own language and discipline independent of (although frequently borrowing from) other textual studies.

A film such as the recent Academy award-winning film *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, Italy, 1998) takes the thoughtful, critical student on a journey from Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (and Spielberg's



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1993 film version) to the novels of Primo Levi, and through fascinating byways such as the Freudian concept of repression and the role of humour as a response to violence and hatred. But how this particular film treats its subject matter is particular to cinema; it invites students to inquire whether the visual representation of evil is at all possible. *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998) delivers the opportunity, not simply to compare and contrast it with Louis Nowra's original play, but to explore how the screen represents ideas about sisterhood and Aboriginal feelings about belonging and exclusion.

Similarly, a prescribed drama text, such as Louis Nowra's *Così*, should enable students to push their imaginations through to the film text version of this play. And both this and some of the screen texts will enable students to think out more fully the implications of Brechtian theory about audience alienation.

Rigorous textual analysis, involving the line-by-line, scene-by-scene, image-by-image and sound-by-sound deconstruction of the visual media texts prescribed for the HSC, will provide students with a unique means of exploring areas of study of the syllabus such as “change” (changing worlds, self, perspectives), “experience through language”, “the institution and personal experience”, “powerplay”, “history and memory” and “the individual and society”. They don't necessarily do this any better—or worse—than the written literary texts, but media texts will certainly do it differently, thereby providing different insights from those gained by studying other types of texts.

But, as I've already said, reading a screen text is not exactly the same as reading a written text. The main difference lies in the use of language. The term “film language” is, to my mind, unfortunate since film is not a language in the sense of English, Latin, or an oral language such as Dharuk of the Eora people. It is impossible, for example, for film to be ungrammatical. Another difference is that, whereas the reader of a written text invents the image, the reader of a film does not (or not necessarily). A word seldom possesses a direct relationship to whatever it is referring to; the relationship between a visual image and what it is signifying is often obvious.

This should not be taken as a reason for dismissing the screen as inferior to the written word. Written and oral languages are just two among many systems of communication. What all have in common is a system of signs. The signs of “film language” take the form of images and sounds. Semiology, the study of

systems of signs, is therefore crucial to an understanding of how we “read” film texts.

By way of explaining why semiotics is crucial for an analysis of how and why both the screen product and its audiences participate in the creation of meaning, John Locke's definition of semiotics may prove helpful:

“semiotike, or the doctrine of signs...the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others.” (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690)

Film language is best understood as a metaphor for language. A more appropriate term is “code and convention”; it is certainly more helpful when it comes to analysing how, why, and by whom meaning is made in an analysis of so-called screen language. These codes and conventions cover the visual and aural signs as well as film syntax, or the systematic arrangement of these images and sounds as are to be found in the narrative structure and editing techniques.

Over the last hundred years, these cinematic, televisual and new media codes have developed to the point where the process of “reading” the screen text has become normalised. When we see an editing technique such as a slow dissolve and the screen goes wavy, we “know” a dream sequence is coming up. When we see Julia Roberts enter the frame, we “know” the lead male is going to fall in love with her. Without critical analysis, however, ideological meaning is hidden by the process of normalisation.

This, I find, is one of the keys to teaching screen studies to students who, as cinemagoers or, more probably, regular TV viewers, are already engaged in critical screen analysis but are unaware of it. In order to liberate the meaning of a film text, students need to turn what to them feels simply like something they do in their leisure time into something that can be (enjoyably) studied.

This might sound like a recipe for turning pleasure into pedagogical pain, but it needn't be. Firstly, break the class into groups, inviting each group to consider how a different aspect of the visual and the aural contributes to the meaning of the scene you then show them. These different aspects might be those of sound, editing and the visual elements of mise-en-scene (lighting, costume and makeup, camera movement, actor movement, set design, props).

After screening the scene, you invite each group to discuss the particular aspect of the screen language

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they are focusing on and then report back to the whole class. This process “makes strange”, or isolates, a particular screen convention and enables students to see more clearly how they “read” the screen text. Such an exercise is particularly valuable when applied to a film that they all love, particularly one which has earned parental or critical disapproval!

Difficult to explain, easy to understand

The above exercise addresses something all teachers of screen studies face: how to explain, analyse and criticise something that is apparently so obvious. The problem was aptly described by the French film theorist, Christian Metz, who wrote: “A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand”.

The solution lies in the process of screen textual analysis which, as I’ve explained above, serves to “make strange” the codes and conventions by isolating the various elements of film technique. Although films are viewed and heard, the concept of “reading” a film implies an active process of making sense of what we are experiencing. The reason why it is so important to learn to read images and screen techniques is that this empowers the audience, turning them from uncritical consumers into analysts who can use the screen to help them make sense of their culture and social environment. And, as with any written literary text, the more work they do, the more vital and resonant the work of art.

Knowledge, understanding and critical analysis

A common experience in teaching screen studies is discovering that our students see infinitely more films and watch more television than we do. This doesn’t, however, mean they are more cineliterate: this has to be taught. Perhaps this is explained by a recent personal cinematic experience.

Filled with suspense, I was sitting on the edge of my seat, (half) covering my eyes, as one does at an action movie, when it seemed the main character was about to die. “Don’t worry,” whispered my 14-year-old companion comfortingly, “they can’t kill off John Travolta half-way through.”

In saying this she revealed a basic grasp of screen semiotics and an ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The codes and conventions she had absorbed include: star theory (why Travolta was cast);

narrative closure (the necessary happy ending of dominant cinema); representation theory (the masculinity of the Travolta character); narrative structure (at which point in the movie the hero is tested); realism (the illusion of reality); genre (expectations generated by a particular screen form and/or style); auteur theory (the screenwriter and director were unknown to her); spectatorship theory (why Travolta’s biceps afforded so much pleasure); dominant cinema theory (Hollywood’s tendency to deliver audiences’ expectations); reception theory (why we were enjoying the movie but the guy in front was yawning.)

Only, like most aspects of screen analysis, nothing is absolute or fixed. As it happens (although not often in a Hollywood action movie), a few seconds later we were both confounded as the John Travolta character was killed off.

While my young friend’s knowledge of the codes and conventions was sophisticated, her critical and analytical skills were undeveloped. Nor was she aware of the codes and conventions of any cinema other than those of dominant or classic Hollywood cinema. What was so pleasurable at dinner afterwards was to build upon her existing knowledge and widen her understanding of not just how the screen works but why it works as it does. And then to relate all of this to her own experience and perceptions of ideas about gender, violence, good and evil, and reinforce her (quite strong) grasp of the distinction between fantasy and reality. We made a date to watch a Japanese action movie the next week (subtitles and all!).

Resources

There are many resources for NSW English teachers, both urban and rural. After initial fears, a lack of resources is no longer perceived as a problem in Victoria, where film as part of the English syllabus and the Media Studies course (the latter is something of which NSW students remain deprived) has been a highly successful part of the final year exam syllabus since the early 1990s.

- **Cinemedia** runs the National Film and Video Lending Service and the Cinemedia Access Collection (a total of more than 24,000 titles, both video and film). For information about Cinemedia and all other media information and lending services and organisations contact

<http://www.cinemedia.net/cac>.



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The Cinemedia web site will put you in touch with most other Australian screen-related web sites.

- **The Australian Film Institute (AFI)** has wonderful screen culture and education programs. It also has an excellent screen research web site: <http://www.cinemedia.net/afi>.
- **The Australian Film Commission** with its user-friendly information service is an excellent research resource: <http://www.afc.net.au>
- **The National Film and Sound Archive** (regional offices and centres in all main cities) has a film lending program which can be searched on the following web site: www.archivenet.gov.au/nfsa.htm
- The biannual journal **Metro Education** (published by Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM): <http://www.cinemedia.net/ATOM>
- The highly motivated and pro-active **English Teachers' Association** extends its commitment to the new English syllabus to non-members and recently published the excellent edition of *Metaphor: Special Film Issue* (ETA NSW, March 1999, Issue 1).

Contact: bsimon@nhspa.nsw.edu.au

- The **Australian Film, Television & Radio School web site** will put you in touch with its library and the comprehensive HSC screen education program which the Screen Studies Department proposes to offer teachers and students in NSW. Organisations (and individuals) may join the AFTRS library for a nominal fee. Lending is restricted to written texts but members may view videos in situ: <http://www.aftrs.edu.au>.

The library page on this web site also provides information about all other key screen education and screen culture web sites.

- Local **video stores** can be persuaded to be more adventurous in their acquisition policy
- Local **film societies** have a vast knowledge of film hire and exhibition. Many are happy to collaborate with local teacher programs.

Written texts

A list of print references for teaching films can be found at the end of this article on the New HSC web site: www.newhsc.schools.nsw.edu.au

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CS The Area of Study

The Area of Study is a major, mandatory and central element of four of the courses in the Stage 6 syllabus. It represents 40% of the Standard and Advanced courses in both years of study, 60% of ESL English in the Preliminary year and 50% of ESL in the HSC year and is a compulsory module of work for those students taking Fundamentals of English. It is the basis of common assessment of students taking the Standard and Advanced courses.

What is the purpose of this part of the course?

The purpose is to provide students with the opportunity to explore, analyse and experiment with the ways in which perceptions of a concept are shaped in and through a variety of texts. In other words, this is the study of how different perceptions are expressed in different ways using different types of texts. It is a study of how language is used to shape meaning and is closely related to the study of teacher-developed electives or the HSC module electives. It represents all the approaches to teaching English which are articulated in the syllabus.

“An Area of Study is the exploration of a concept that affects our perceptions of ourselves and our world.” (Syllabus, pages 26 and 44) The “concept” becomes the organiser or the focus for the choice of texts. For example, in the Preliminary year, teachers and students could choose a concept such as “time”, “diversity”, “confrontation”, “love” or “heroism” and then choose a range of texts which provide different points of view of the concept. These texts and the way they are shaped are the objects of study. The concept “change” has been prescribed for the HSC year in 2001.

“Students explore, analyse, question and articulate the ways in which perceptions of this concept are shaped in and through a variety of texts.”

(Syllabus, pages 26 and 44).

However, the phrase “through ... texts” alerts us to a further dimension of this study. Writers use language to shape their point of view or attitude in the text they compose, but different readers may “read” the text in different ways, so meaning is conveyed through the text in various ways. All writers/creators (composers) and readers/viewers (responders) compose and respond according to their particular context, and this could take into account personal, social, historical,

Print References for Teaching Films

David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson: *Film Art: An Introduction*. McGraw-Hill Inc. NY. 1993

Susan Hayward: *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*. Routledge, London. 1996

James Monaco: *The Art, Technology, History, and Theory of Film and Media*. Revised edition. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 1998

Jill Nelmes: *An Introduction to Film Studies*. Routledge, London. 1996

<http://www.aftrs.edu.au>

<http://www.cinemedi.net/afi>

<http://www.afc.net.au>

<http://www.archivenet.gov.au/nfsa.htm>

<http://www.archivenet.gov.au/nfsa.htm>

<http://www.cinemedi.net/cac/>

<http://www.cinemedi.net/ATOM/start.html>