

Focus on Film: Learning It Through the Movies

By David M. Considine and Frank Baker

"Kids love movies! When you tell them you're about to show a clip of a movie, the noise level in the classroom drops immediately." That's Belinha talking. She teaches eighth grade in Branford, Connecticut. She explored the subject of historical perspective with her students using the MGM classic *Gone with the Wind* and Ken Burns' acclaimed documentary *Civil War*. The "students were able to see the burning of Georgia from two different perspectives and appreciate how movies can have an impact on our thinking of history," she says.

In *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Sam Wineburg suggests that rather than lamenting the affect of the film industry on our young people, we should recognize how films may advance students' historical understanding, as Belinha does. Unfortunately not everyone looks so favorably upon the idea of film in the classroom. Just ask Melanie. To motivate and stimulate her students as they studied meteors and dinosaur extinction theories, Melanie used a clip from the popular movie, *Armageddon*. Her department head chastised her for not using an episode from the TV documentary series *NOVA* instead. 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.

It's in the Standards

Incorporating motion pictures as part of classroom instruction has been spurred by the endorsement of both of the major reading and language arts organizations in the United States. In a joint statement in 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association declared that "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."

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

In fall 2005, the Film Foundation unveiled a new middle school film curriculum, *The Story of Movies* (www.storyofmovies.org), designed to educate students about the language of film and the preservation of motion picture classics. The Film Foundation also 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.

The first film examined in *The Story of Movies* is the 1963 classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The movie is an excellent example of a film that provides an interdisciplinary approach. Although the novel commonly is studied in English as a literary text, it also can be examined from the context of history and social studies. For example it illustrates the south in the 1930s and can be studied as a social-cultural artifact that tells us something about the era in which it was created: America in the early 1960s.

The Language of Film

Gavriel Salomon, author of *The Interaction of Media Cognition and Learning*, argues that when students receive little guidance or direction prior to viewing films, they frequently engage in “cognitive economy” or “shallow processing.” On the other hand, when teachers give students directions prior to screening and allow time for discussion and feedback afterward, the students are more mentally alert and therefore comprehend and retain more ideas. In short, for learning to occur, the focus has to shift from *what* students watch to *how* they watch.

Many teachers are nervous about teaching a new language—which is what film is. Yet in our experience, teachers become quite comfortable quite quickly and become more aware of how they can use films to supplement classroom instruction. The key is looking at specific aspects of the film—not expecting students to take in the whole experience at once.

For example, rather than jumping headlong into visual analysis of a film, teachers can ask students to consider the way images and sound contribute to mood. Anyone who has seen *Jaws* is well aware 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 motivate students to talk about and think about the discrete contributions sound and visuals make to a film and the way these in turn influence our feelings during the screening.

Show the scenes once without sound and then later with sound. An interesting variation on this is to break the class into two groups; one group focuses on sound (they cannot look at the screen while the scene is playing) and another group concentrates on only the visuals.

The opening scene of *Jurassic Park* lends itself very well to such an exercise. Another emotional scene (without dialogue) that works well for both language arts and social studies is the chapter in *Snow Falling on Cedars* that depicts the forced removal of the Japanese-Americans from their small town to internment camps during World War II.

Spot the Shot: Getting Started

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

One of the most effective exercises we have experienced with students and teachers is examining the director's design decisions in *A Beautiful Mind*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2001. Using only the first four or five minutes of the film's opening sequence, cue your own class by asking them to pay careful attention to the following 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 help us learn more about John Nash? What does he show us? How? Why?



Rebel Without a Cause

James Dean holds the milk bottle to his face. The prop has symbolic meaning. By using a close-up, the director draws our attention to the object and its importance.

Invariably, without having introduced the definition of *mise-en-scène* or explained key elements such as posture, position, point of view, and props, teachers and students 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, it fosters a deep appreciation of the art of film and recognizes the director's design contributions.

Studying the Elements

The French concept of *mise-en-scène* refers to the organization of a frame or scene and addresses the contribution separate elements cumulatively make to the meaning of a scene. The elements include posture, position, point of view, and props. More than an exercise in spot the shot, this technique helps students recognize, read, and appreciate the deliberate design decisions involved in making a film.



Forrest Gump opens and closes with a feather. The theme or motif of flight, running, and destiny pervade the film.

We encourage teachers to use short segments from film to provide students with a wide number of examples of each main element, allowing time for discussion and feedback. The selection of clips described here is intended to utilize films that clearly demonstrate key elements of film language rather than to view entire films.

Once students and teachers learn to recognize these elements they will have little trouble finding other examples.

The Face of the Future

Today, like no other time in our past, we have the opportunity, the 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..breathhtaking." "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 Motion Picture Study Guide

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 degree in media literacy. Drawing upon the model established in the movie study guides developed by Australian Teachers of Media, 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 ELA curriculum such as *The Outsiders*, *Ruby Bridges*, *Holes*, and *Tuck Everlasting*, teachers also have 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 *This We Believe* or to curriculum themes described by James Beane in *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality*, both published by NMSA.

One of the most recent study guides developed by North Carolina teachers is called *Bridging Continents*. Designed for seventh and eighth 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 that developed the guide was made up of one teacher each from language arts, social studies, math, and science.

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.

Teachers create engaging, challenging resources that include taxonomies, rubrics, and activities related to learning styles, multiple intelligences, and 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.



Mission Impossible

The frame combines point of view with position and prop. The high angle shot stresses the vulnerability of the man on the spiral staircase. The choice of a spiral staircase also functions symbolically and creates a greater sense of confusion than a traditional staircase would. As such, it reinforces the character's state of mind.

the classroom and the curriculum with creative middle grade teachers using them to both reach and teach young adolescents.

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Resources

Cinematique Film Study Guides
www.cinematique.bc.ca/education/film_study_guides_intro.htm

Secondary Study Guides
www.filmeducation.org/secondary/StudyGuides/index.html

Scanning the Movies Study Guides
www.chumlimited.com/mediaed/studyguides.asp

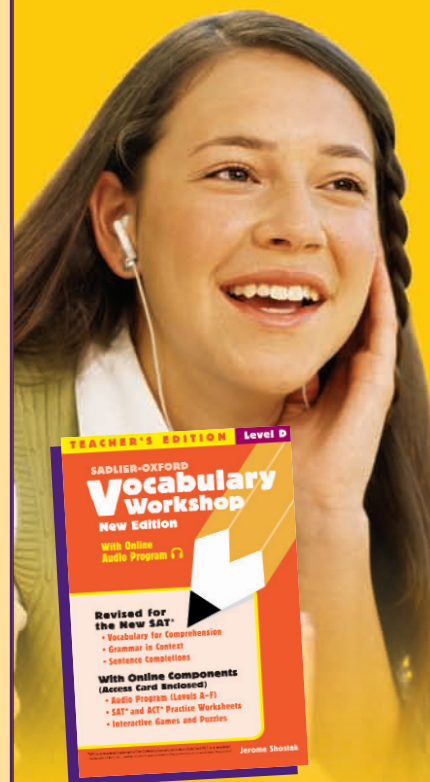
Teach with Movies
www.teachwithmovies.com

Walden Media Film Study Guides
www.walden.com

The illustrations included in this article are by Caldecott medal winner Gail E. Haley. Visit www.gailhaley.com. Teachers are encouraged to cut and paste these images on worksheets as they introduce their students to each element or to the relevant clips from each movie.

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