

Strategies for teaching film as text

Film as text requires the same level of rigour in preparing lesson materials and teaching methods as novel, poetry or drama. The dynamic nature of film text requires some minor changes to teaching practices to facilitate close analysis.

Some tips for teaching film techniques

- **Cinema conditions.** The environment for viewing has a dramatic impact on the emotional and psychological impact of a movie. Attempt to create as close to a cinema-like experience for the first uninterrupted viewing of a film.
- **Journal writing** is a valuable strategy for capturing emotional responses, questions, assertions, disappointments and first opinions immediately after the first viewing. Journal responses can be returned to later in the teaching process, when students are directed to explain what the filmmaker did to make them feel or react in the way they did. These initial responses are often very different from the considered and informed responses that follow the study and close analysis of film.
- **Isolated scenes.** Not all scenes merit close analysis of cinematic technique. In preparing to teach a film, time should be taken to identify those scenes where cinematic technique has created, changed or added meaning to the narrative. An analysis of these scenes and the cinematic techniques at work is most effective when viewed in isolation from the rest of the film. Once students have a good knowledge of the film as a whole and understand its plot, themes, characters and discourses then it is time to move to a close study of the language and style of the filmmaker (i.e. the cinematic techniques).
- **Examining mise en scene.** Mise en scene is literally what the filmmaker has chosen to put in the scene, including the set, props, actors, camera framing, the choice of lenses, camera angles and lighting. At times teachers need to pause the action and have students analyse the elements of a scene. For example, the rooftop dancing scene in *Strictly Ballroom* unfolds as a metaphoric and symbolic masterpiece when time is taken to give it close analysis. The juxtaposition of the sequined Coca-Cola sign against the Hills hoist complete with socks is a strong statement, requiring close study and discussion.
- **Isolating layers.** Close study of very complex scenes can be broken down to isolate various elements. For example, close study of the bathroom scene in *Shine* may involve breaking the class into groups, with each group assigned a different element of the film to record and report observations to the class. Lighting, colour, shot selection, pace of editing, sound, music are examples of elements for a group to observe within this scene. Directing students to close study of the sound track is as simple as playing the videotape with the television or monitor switched off, to focus attention on the soundtrack, or conversely, playing the vision with the sound switched off.
- **Establishing shots.** Establishing shots often include relational, spatial and background detail as well as clues to plot, theme and character. Students need to look at establishing shots closely, with a view to identifying narrative expectations and ambiguities or contradictions. These opening sequences are of particular importance, as they can indicate intention, narrative structure, genre, style, and point of view and give early indications regarding the filmmaker's philosophies.
- **Simple technology.** DVD players allow instant progression to the start of a scene and

give crystal clear pauses to analyse elements of the mise en scene. If you have access to a DVD, then all that is required is cataloguing of scenes to be closely studied and the elements for attention. When working with VCR machines, a little more preparation will speed up the interminable fast forwarding and rewinding of tapes. Use 4- or 6-head VCRs as these give a nice clear pause. Prepare a study tape by recording just the segments of the video that you wish to study onto one tape. This can be simply accomplished with two VCR machines, an A/V cable and quick fingers on the play and record buttons. For example, for *Strictly Ballroom* you could make a tape that included all the scenes where colour is highlighted; another tape may have all the power-play scenes between Barry Fife and Scott Hastings etc.

- **Practical workshops.** Students learning to *read* film will benefit from opportunities to *write* film. Scripting, storyboarding and camera exercises can illustrate process and technique in very powerful ways. Worksheets and activities have been included in *Take One!*
- **Know your film in detail before you show it to the students.** Prepare questions for students, identify areas of text that require close study, find related materials and research critics. If film is to be studied as a serious text, then it is incumbent upon teachers to approach the study of film with the same rigour as written text. Buy at least one copy of the screenplay. The screenplay can be invaluable for close study of film.

Tips from teachers.

We asked a number of teachers how they went about teaching film. Listed below is a compilation of teaching strategies being used successfully by teachers.

- Watch the film as a whole without any attempt to stop and analyse.
- Isolate a scene. Watch it again with varying focus on particular parts.
- Isolating a technique (lighting, sound, camera movement etc).
- Look at overriding ideas or thoughts in related material and contrast them i.e. A- B-grade Sci-fi film with *Blade Runner*, *Brave New World* and examples of modernism.
- Identify the various genres used or hinted at in the film.
- Identify narrative questions that the students have before they view the scene.
- Interrogating the scene. What are your expectations? What surprises you in the scene? What disappoints you?
- Question the students about the specific use of props etc. Why focus on it?
- Look for symbols or visual metaphors within the mise en scene and discuss their relevance.
- Focus on the three layers of sound individually. Why a particular sound effect? Why the use of particular music? Is there repetition of sound or noise?
- Turn the sound down and watch.
- Turn the vision off and focus on the sound.
- Students prepare an alternative approach to a specific scene.
- Students present a tutorial that explains significant scenes in detail.
- Use a wide variety of film resources for comparison, contrast and alternative approaches.
- Work from the glossary to analyse and understand specific scenes and techniques.