

Michael Vetrie

# Using Film to Increase Literacy Skills

Popular culture is about more than just the current time and place, notes high school teacher Michael Vetrie. Connecting classical Greek and Elizabethan theater to contemporary film, he shows how at-risk students can increase their literacy skills through reading film as text.

**I**n the fifth century BC, a man walked out on a stage with blood pouring from his eyes. He had discovered that, despite his struggles against fate, he had killed his father and married his mother. In the resulting anguish of this terrible recognition, he blinded himself. Even if one's classical education is minimal, the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is probably recognizable.

Jump forward 2,500 years. Two brothers and their friend devise a plan to keep money discovered in a crashed airplane rather than turn it in to the authorities. From this simple but far-reaching decision, a series of violent events begins to unfold with disastrous consequences for all involved.

What do these two dramas, separated by thousands of years, have in common? Both deal with violence in a unique but similar way and both were presented as the most popular culture of the day.

*Oedipus the King* was as popular with Greek audiences as most films are with today's audiences. The Greeks knew the inevitability of the plot. This man was going to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Many other poets had tackled the same story. They knew nothing was going to change in the plot and could recite the lines uttered by Oedipus in his blindness. It was through this familiarity that the concept of pity and fear was invoked: pity for Oedipus and fear that it could happen to them. Knowing the ending to the story also led to a strong sense of irony that destiny could not be avoided no matter how one tried.

The Greek playwrights also recognized that violence in drama had its greatest effect when the play

was concerned with the consequences, not the act of violence itself. The violence usually took place off-stage, and the audience members had to visualize the act in their imaginations. What they did see was the primary concern of the drama: the impact of the violence on the characters' lives.

In the film *A Simple Plan*, the main characters commit an impulsive act of violence to keep the illegal money. Although the act is shown vividly on the screen, the remainder of the film deals with the consequences and ramifications of this terrible act as the characters spin out of control toward a Greek-like inevitability.

## The Popularity of Film

Film is our most popular "popular" culture. It is so admired that we have characters from other media quoting from it. In the popular television series *The Sopranos*, characters in the drama are fond of quoting from *The Godfather* trilogy. "Just when I thought I was out, they drag me back in" mimics one of the characters. The irony of a gangster quoting from a fictional gangster is not lost on the other gangsters or the audience (at another level of irony, we enjoy a *fictional* gangster quoting from another *fictional* gangster).

In an earlier period, the quote might have been from another popular hit: "O limed soul, that struggling to be free, / Art more engag'd!" (*Hamlet* 3.3. 74–75). In *Hamlet*, the king is seeking forgiveness

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for killing Hamlet's father but becomes more and more involved in the resulting intrigue. Most Elizabethans, familiar with the play as popular culture, would have recognized the quotation and appreciated its irony.

In the classical Greek and Elizabethan periods, the audience found its popular culture on the stage. Today, it can be found in film. And just as in the Greek and Elizabethan periods, the world reflected by today's popular culture is a violent world.

### Criticism of the Popular

Greek and Elizabethan academics dismissed the popular stage for playing down to the level of the masses. Sophocles was considered a newcomer and upstart for changing and popularizing the legends, and Shakespeare was criticized for not adhering to the classical unities of time, place, and action. There are modern educators who believe that film does not belong in any educational curriculum. Film is entertainment. It is too violent. It features the language of the street. Nudity is rampant. And the most compelling condemnation: Students should be reading in the language arts classroom, not watching films.

Critics from both the left and right find commonality in attacking the use of any popular culture in the classroom. Those on the right consider any ex-

ample of it "as a form of barbarism," and those on the left believe that those who embrace popular culture are "passive dupes." The right believes it is used to manipulate the masses (Giroux and Simon 4). Conservative critics such as Arnold Toynbee, José Ortega y Gasset, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot

have gone so far as to view any form of popular culture as "a threat to the very existence of civilization as well as an expression of the vulgarization and decadence of the masses" (Giroux and Simon 6).

There is little doubt that the feature film is very popular with students. While *The Matrix* was in the theaters, a favorite line was, "Never send a human to do a machine's job." Even though *Scarface* premiered before most of my students were born, they love to quote the lines of Tony Montana: "I always tell the truth. Even when I lie." I usually re-

spond with my favorite line: "Hell of a thing, killin' a man. Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have" (William Munny, *Unforgiven*). Are we to despair because students choose not to remember lines from characters in Shakespeare or Sophocles or modern classics, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Catcher in the Rye*? Of course. But the wise educator does not ignore the popularity of film and instead learns how to use it.

If it is agreed that there is a place for popular culture in the language arts classroom (rap music, for example, as poetry), finding a place for the feature film is the most problematic. After all, don't we partly blame film and television for the low literacy levels in society? And haven't teachers over the years misused film? I am referring to the habit of turning films into a *visual aid*—turning on the projector or VCR and letting the film do the teaching with little comment or questions. Teachers sometimes use the film as a relief or a nonteaching break. The worst application of all is to use a feature film as an entertaining reward between the conclusion of a teaching unit and a holiday, a practice that is unethical as well as illegal. (If you show a film you have rented or purchased as a component of a lesson plan, it is fair use, but that is another discussion.)

Teachers could provide students with simple interactive activities like the double-entry journal while they are viewing the film. We could ask challenging questions (the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy) to check for understanding or interpretation of the film. And we should have students react to the cinematic techniques used to convey information by comparing and contrasting those techniques with similar techniques used in print literature (see fig. 1).

Yet, there are school districts that are so frightened of film in the classroom that permission of administrators is required and parents must sign individual releases each time a film is shown. Some districts, such as the Burbank Unified School District, do not permit the showing of R-rated feature films at all; teachers may use only excerpts.

### Reasons for Teaching Film

If we agree that the responsibility of a language arts educator should be to improve a student's reading, writing, speaking, or critical thinking, how then can I justify the showing of a movie? Am I not talking

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FIGURE 1. A Comparison of Literary and Cinematic Signs

LITERARY SIGNS	CINEMATIC SIGNS
<b>The Word</b> —The word <i>book</i> is a signifier. What it represents is the signified. There can be a great distance between the two.	<b>The Image</b> —A visual representation of a “book” is almost identical to the source. It is much closer to a book, conceptually, than the word. Signifier and signified are almost identical.
“The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not” (Monaco 158).	
<b>Metaphor</b> —a comparison of unlike things in a highly connotative sense	<b>The Index</b> —measures a quality not because it is identical but has inherent relationship to it
<b>The Symbol</b> —convention (in the deployment of speech and writing)	<b>The Symbol</b> —The signifier represents the signified through convention rather than resemblance.
<b>The Picture</b>	<b>The Icon</b> —The signifier represents the signified by its likeness.
“A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand. The image impresses itself on us, blocking everything that is not itself” (Metz 69).	

about two different modes, the literary and the visual? How can a feature film fit within any kind of curriculum emphasizing literacy? These are fair questions and very important ones because schools have been mandated to improve literacy skills through such recent laws as No Child Left Behind.

Film can be used to increase literacy skills if it is taught as *literature*. By that I mean a serious continuation of that form of expression that began when the primitive hunters gathered around the fire to act out and express their struggle and adventures in killing and bringing home the game. At that time, it was an oral tradition, passed down and preserved in the memory of master storytellers. At another time, it was recorded in ink, pressed on parchment, and then printed on a printing press. Today, it is moving from being recorded on celluloid to being processed digitally in the computer language of I's and O's.

I am using literature in the sense defined by Edward Sapir in his chapter, “Language and Literature.” He said that languages “are invisible garments that drape themselves about our spirit and give a pre-

determined form to all its symbolic expression. When the expression is of unusual significance, we call it literature” (236). These “significant” garments that drape themselves about our spirit today are more likely to be found by students in the language of the cinema. We need to understand and appreciate that in order to bring about an improvement in literacy skills.

We must teach film as the significant garments of our spirit. We start by choosing the films that *engage* students in creating an environment to think and a desire to communicate. We must use film as other literature is used: as a basis for anchoring most writing and critical-thinking activities.

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Over a decade ago, the National Council of Teachers of English recognized that film had an important role in the classroom. The 1991 Report on Trends and Issues said: “[D]efinitions of contemporary ‘literacy’ must recognize that an understanding of visual, as well as verbal, texts is essential in today’s world. . . . *Inclusion of the study of media certainly should*

*no longer be optional in our schools. . . . We must send students the message that critical thinking extends beyond print*" (Suhor 2; italics in original).

Other educators have suggested that we must classify viewing as the "fifth language art" and include critical-viewing skills across the curriculum in much the same way we use content-area reading and writing activities in all subjects (Teasley and Wilder 117).

My use of the feature film in the classroom is not to create a new and contemporary literacy or a fifth language art, although I am not opposed to such concepts. I have found that the use of film for at-risk students far surpasses literature as facilitation for increasing the literacy and critical-thinking skills of my students, and that includes, surprisingly enough, their reading and writing skills.

Watching my students' reading scores improve as their film work progresses is connected to what Jo Stanchfield, professor emerita of Occidental College, calls the "interrelatedness" of the literacy skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading, I have discovered, cannot be taught in isolation. Stu-

dents who can listen, discuss, and think are going to learn to read more effectively. I can add from my experience in more than ten years of teaching film as literature that students who gain experience in listening, speaking, and writing through interaction with film begin to radically improve their reading and writing proficiency.

The primary purpose of teaching film as literature is to

give the students a reason, need, or strong desire to communicate. That communication usually takes the form of writing, which they do in volumes, especially if the film engages them in an effective manner. But they also begin to improve their reading when film is coupled with a schoolwide emphasis on reading and literacy.

### Film and Schemata

I use film to engage students by tapping into their schemata or background experience. I am using the term *schemata* as it applies in psychology: a pattern imposed on complex reality or experience to assist

in explaining it, mediate perception, or guide response (Stiefenhöfers). We basically see and respond to stimuli through the eyes of our experience.

This connecting to the schemata is probably the most important step in the success of any lesson plan in any subject area. If we expect students to learn and remember, we must discover what they know and have experienced and design our curriculum to tap into or connect to that knowledge. We must spend whatever time is necessary. In many cases, the time connecting to the schemata can involve more time than the actual execution of the day's lesson. The feature film offers a relatively easy way to make the bond between analyzing the schemata and connecting to it.

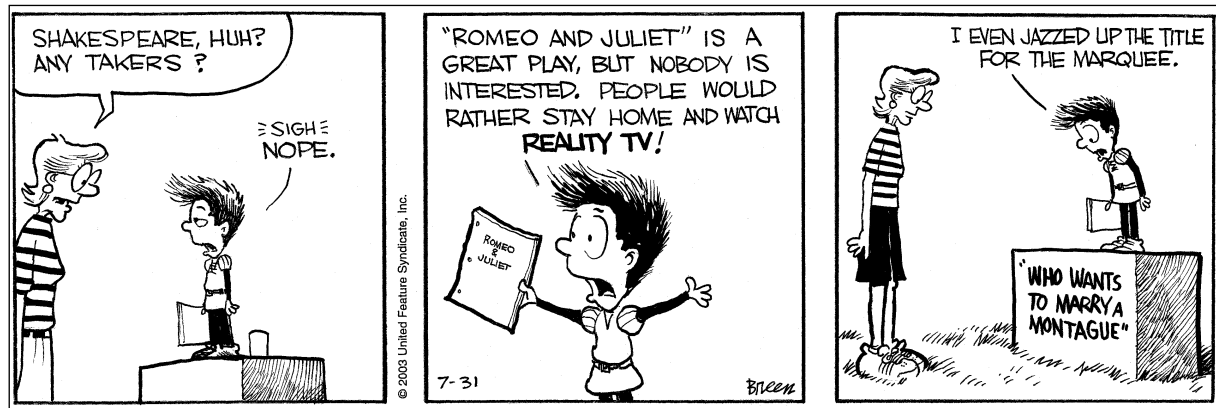
Educational theorists emphasize the importance of connecting student knowledge with school knowledge.

Educators who refuse to acknowledge popular culture as a significant basis of knowledge often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have and so eliminate the possibility of developing a pedagogy that links school knowledge to the differing subject relations that help to constitute their everyday lives. (Giroux and Simon 3)

Recent brain research supports this pedagogical approach. For information to move from short-term memory to long-term storage, the learner must have two questions answered. First, "Does this make sense?" In other words, can the learner understand the item based on experience? Does it fit into what the learner knows about the world (the schemata)? And second, "Does it have meaning?" Is the item relevant to the learner? For what purpose should the learner bother to remember it?

Selecting a film that relates to the students, connects to their schemata, and engages them with its story (by answering the questions of experience and relevance) provides the teacher opportunities to improve students' communication. Aronowitz underscores the importance of such teaching: "[B]eginning from student experience, validating what students already know, is just good pedagogy that can influence the process of language acquisition, written expression, in short, the learnings that are currently grouped under the rubric of literacy" (216–17). In other words, choosing a film that strongly fits within the experiences of the students and has relevancy for their lives

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creates a dynamic environment in which the students think about the film critically, express their opinions orally, and write profusely.

*A Bronx Tale*, directed by Robert DeNiro, is one film that my students find engaging. This is the story of a young boy who is befriended by a local Mafia chieftain and struggles as a young adult to reconcile the differences in lifestyles of his working-class father and the mafioso, both of whom he loves and admires.

Most of my students are Hispanic and many have had experiences with gangs at one time or another. The Italian American lifestyle films dealing with gangsters, such as *A Bronx Tale* and *Goodfellas*, have a great appeal to them. But they also find *American Beauty* and *The Cider House Rules* engaging. The angst of the young people seeking meaning in their lives and the question of abortion are themes that engage my students regardless of ethnicity.

Presenting films around which students have already built strong interconnected structures is much easier than trying to build a new knowledge base or schemata from scratch. But a goal of the film-as-literature teacher should be to undertake increasingly complex projects as the students' sophistication and knowledge base increase.

To fully appreciate the film *Schindler's List*, it is important to spend time building the students' background on the Holocaust, especially the unique relationship and history of the pogroms against the Jews among the Middle European states long before the rise of Hitler. They need to understand how a basically good man, Schindler, could, without a second

thought, enter into an agreement to exploit the Jews for building his factory. The teacher can use popular graphic organizers that have been prepared for literature and adapt them to the film. Another approach to the preparation of the showing of *Schindler's List* is to employ the KWL (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned) or KWLW (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned, Where It Was Learned) chart as a previewing activity.

One of the most dramatic additions to my students' schemata occurred during a visit to the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance, where I had taken them to prepare for the showing of *Schindler's List*. A survivor of the Holocaust stood before them and talked of his experiences. As a conclusion to his talk, he reached down and pulled up his shirtsleeve to show his concentration camp tattoo. At that moment, his wife, who had accompanied him throughout the tour, pulled her sleeve aside and placed her arm next to his to show their tattoos side by side. One can imagine the impact this had on even the toughest of the young people in the class. *Schindler's List* engaged the students in part because of this experience.

*Casablanca* is another film that students may have difficulty connecting to at first. The film-as-literature teacher could concentrate on teaching the early years of World War II; the unique position of Vichy, France, in North Africa; and the plight of the many refugees. This preparation could take as much

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or more time than the actual showing of the film and the completing of the study guides.

To connect to a student's schemata, teachers should (1) present information that builds background ideas, concepts, and principles; (2) show (don't tell) through demonstrations, multimedia, and graphics; (3) use outside resources, trips, and speakers; and/or (4) tell about the topic from personal experience.

Building a new knowledge base around challenging and complex films that do not initially engage the students is a long-term goal of the film-as-literature teacher. The first step is to find engaging films.

### Engagement, Literacy, and Critical Thinking

Once students are engaged, either through the selection of an interesting and entertaining film or through the work of the instructor at building background knowledge, the challenge then is to transfer their interest in the film to a need to listen, write, discuss, and utilize critical-thinking skills. The instructor does this by creating challenging writing and discussion prompts. The intensity of the students' need to communicate seems to depend on the intensity of the students' interests and involvement.

I have found in my class that when the students are caught up in a film (I observe them responding at the proper moments with reactions and interactions), they are more successful with their writing and discussion prompts. They write more and express themselves better. The discussions are heated and intense. My task then is simply to focus this urge or need to communicate by carefully guiding them into the writing and discussion prompts. Whatever students gain in understanding about film genres, film

history, and cinematic techniques is incidental and a welcome addition to that goal.

Some of the films I show are rated R and some are violent. The language of R-rated films is the language that my

students experience today. The literature they find appropriate and engaging is full of violent words about a world that is threatening and dangerous, a violent R-rated world (which is consistent with their personal inner-city experiences). I try to avoid R-rated films whenever I can, but if I omitted a film from my

class just because it is rated R, I would not be able to give my students the experience of *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, *A Bronx Tale*, or *Glory*, to name only a few. In order to be able to show R-rated films in my district, I am required to have the parents of every student in my film class sign a waiver that gives me permission to show these films.

The Greeks recognized that violence was a popular subject for the stage because it was a common occurrence in life. Today, it is a popular subject for film for the same reason (although there are those who would argue which came first). The Greeks took violence, focused on the effects on the lives of the characters, and turned it into a moral force. The better films that feature violence, those that are sometimes the most engaging to my students, are the ones that neither romanticize nor glamorize it. They focus on the effects of violence on the lives of the characters.

We must remember that our purpose in bringing film into the classroom is to utilize it as literature. Sometimes, like the Greeks, we cannot keep the violence offstage (off the screen). When we choose films that feature violence, we must deal realistically with it, focusing our discussion and writing prompts on the awful consequences of the violent acts. When we do this while in the process of challenging students to improve their literacy skills, we can at the same time teach a critical awareness of the impact of violence in our popular culture.

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**The Greeks took violence, focused on the effects on the lives of the characters, and turned it into a moral force.**

Although **Michael Vetrie** has taught in several universities, he finds his most challenging assignment teaching in an alternative high school in inner-city Los Angeles. The California Continuation Education Association named him California Teacher of the Year in 2000. *email:* mvetrie@lausd.k12.ca.us.

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The Holland & Knight Charitable Foundation Inc. and Holland & Knight LLP invite high school students across the United States to enter the 2004 Holocaust Remembrance Project, a national essay contest for high school students that is designed to encourage and promote the study of the Holocaust. To enter the 2004 writing contest, students must submit a documented essay of no more than 1,200 words analyzing why it is so vital that the remembrance, history, and lessons of the Holocaust be passed to a new generation; and suggest what they, as students, can do to combat and prevent prejudice, discrimination, and violence in our world today. Scholarships up to \$5,000 and other prizes will be awarded to students, and the ten first-place winners will participate in an all-expense-paid trip to Washington DC to visit the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and other historic sites. High school teachers are invited to apply to be one of a select group of educators who will participate in this year's trip to Washington DC. Teachers will experience an inspiring week, receive valuable Holocaust-related teaching resources, and participate in special training sessions. The entry deadline for this year's contest is April 30, 2004. Complete contest rules, guidelines, and entry forms are available online at <http://holocaust.hklaw.com>. Teachers can visit the Web site or call toll free 1-866-452-2737 to receive an application form.