

# Cinema and the English Teacher

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The English teacher, I believe, is more fitted by his training than most members of the average staff-room, to teach classes in cinema appreciation, whether as an expansion of literary studies, or in lessons designed to prepare students for the H.S.C. General Paper. He is used to teaching literature, a related medium, and if he does his job properly, he is used to teaching discrimination. That discrimination in the art of the cinema should be taught, seems to me very important. Films are usually made for profit, and because of that there is a tendency for producers to encourage the production of films that pander to cheap fantasies. A Western audience watching a Western film has some limited ability to see these

fantasies for what they are, but it is more difficult for a Malaysian audience watching the same film. Because developing countries are trying to emulate the West in some respects, it is easy for people in such countries to mistake the merely fashionable, the trivial, and the silly for things of real value emerging from the West. In free countries, only an education in discrimination can prevent this.

Many English teachers might hesitate to teach classes on cinema, simply because they are uncertain about the terms in which films may be discussed. It is to such teachers I should like to address myself. It is profitable

to divide the criteria by which films may be judged into three groups: criteria that are useful in judging both cinema and literature; criteria that are useful in judging both cinema and theatre; and criteria which are peculiar to the judgment of cinema.

English teachers will be familiar with the criteria useful in judging both cinema and literature. They are primarily those used for drama and fiction, and include language, plot, character, structure, irony and theme. Students may be encouraged to consider these criteria by fairly elementary questions about films they have seen. Was the language plausible, amusing, effective? Was the plot plausible, and was it meant to be? (Some films have deliberately improbable plots: the James Bond films, for instance, and horror films.) Were the characters like real human beings, or were they stereotypes? Was the film balanced in structure, or were certain episodes made too prominent for the sake of spectacular effect? (This often happens in films about war and violence.) Were there any dramatically effective surprises? (Lawrence being asked to execute the man whose life he had saved, in *Lawrence of Arabia*.) Was there more to the film than a good story?

If he's done any acting, or produced a play, the teacher should be familiar with the criteria useful in judging both cinema and theatre. I am thinking of things such as acting, costume, setting and direction. Again, fairly straightforward questions should alert students to these criteria. How did an actor attempt to portray a particular character? Did he overact or underact? What tricks of style did he use? Was he convincing? About costume, in the first place we may ask whether it was good in itself, whether it was right. (Think how effective the authentic period costumes in Visconti's *The Damned* were, in contrast to many films about Nazi Germany showing people wearing tight trousers.) Then we may ask whether the costumes added anything to the film. (Would *Patton* have been as good without George C. Scott's gorgeous uniforms?) Similar questions may be asked about settings. Did they make you feel anything? Were they as they were just for the glamour (as in Hollywood musicals of the 1940s) or did they contribute to the general effectiveness of the film? (Can you imagine *Death in Venice* divorced from the dominating environment of the hotel?) Direction is perhaps more difficult to talk about, but not impossibly so. We may ask whether the director has followed the usual rules for the genre, or whether he has done surprising things, and whether his surprises are effective. (In *Billy Liar*, for instance, the director shows his hero's irritation by having him machine-gun his parents, in a fantasy sequence. Students may be asked whether this is effective, and how. Conversely, they may be asked to consider restraint in

directing, such as we see in the last moments of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Why don't we see Butch and the Kid killed?)

The criteria peculiar to the judgment of cinema are those most likely to puzzle the English teacher, yet they may be fairly easily comprehended. They concern chiefly the special visual and auditory effects that belong to the cinema medium, and include general visual impact and imagery, camera-work, editing, special effects, sound editing, music and credits. Clearly, a good film must have a distinctive, though not necessarily spectacular, visual impact. How important this is may be seen by comparing two rather similar films: *The French Connection* and *The Organization* (the latest film with Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs). *The Organization* was not nearly so memorable as *The French Connection*, primarily because, for all its fashionable location shots, it failed to generate the vivid sense of time and place that *The French Connection* did. The cold, squalid, crowded streets of the latter are imprinted on one's consciousness. Questions about "atmosphere" should direct students' attention to this criterion.

Imagery is as important in films as it is in poetry. Sometimes it is a matter of concentrated visual effect, or visual economy (the Odessa Steps sequences, for instance, in *The Battleship Potemkin*), and sometimes it is more "literary" in effect, an evocation of appropriate associations (the railway lines in *High Noon*, for instance, stretching to the horizon, and evoking the menacing world outside the small-town community). Everyone responds very directly to such images, and students can be made to recognize this, I believe, by intelligent questioning about the way they felt when contemplating them. It's up to the teacher to spot them, of course.

We are so used to the conventions of camera-work (long-shots, close-ups, shots from unusual angles, etc.) that we tend not to notice them, unless we turn our attention to them deliberately. Yet they dictate the point of view of the audience, both literally and metaphorically. (They are comparable to the different narrative forms used by the novelist, to control the reader's "point of view.") Close-ups usually invite intimate contemplation of the character's feelings, whereas long-shots encourage us to get things in proportion. In a very real way, the camera can make us look up to or look down at a character. These techniques are the more effective in combination. Consider, for instance, the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech in the Brando-Mason version of *Julius Caesar*. Close-ups, impressive shots of Antony from lower down the Capitol steps, and shots from above of the milling mob, rapidly alternated, make a memorable scene, dramatically illustrating the release of

mob-rule by rhetoric. One other thing we might consider under camera-work is the spectacular effects sometimes achieved simply by placing the most advanced equipment in an environment where no one has thought of placing it before. I am thinking of such achievements as the scenes in *Lawrence of Arabia* shot against a background of mirages. The problem in the classroom is to awaken students' awareness of these techniques. Perhaps that may best be done by concentrating on the literal "point of view". Students may be asked where the position and use of the camera made them feel they were standing, how the camera related them, as observers, to the events observed.

Editing in cinema consists in pruning and splicing together bits of film shot by different cameras and at different times, in order to make up the various scenes of the film, and the complete film itself. It may affect our perception of cause and effect (cutting from the hero agreeing to try one little drink, to the hero very drunk); it may affect the way we conceive time (flashbacks do that, and those shots alternating between the approaching train and the pinioned heroine); it may be used to give us an impressionistic picture of an event (snippets of different conversations, for instance, at a party); and it may be used to direct our attention to whatever detail of a situation the director thinks most significant, at any given time (during a conversation, we may be made to concentrate on the speaker, the listener, or both). The attention of students may be drawn to the more pronounced techniques of editing by questions about its effects. How are we made to relate this cause to that effect? How are we made to feel the passage of time?

Special effects is a term covering a multitude of techniques that cannot be thought of as straightforward cinematography. They include slow-motion shots (the death of Bonny and Clyde), fast-motion ones (the seduction of Mrs Waters in *Tom Jones*), tricks like cartoon sequences (as in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*), sequences incorporating bits of old newsreels (did you notice the one in *Patton*?), episodes that feature gigantic monsters stalking down Fifth Avenue, and rarer techniques such as the micro-cinematography in *The Andromeda Strain*. Students will invariably notice the most important special effects. The important thing is that they should be made to judge them in the context of the whole film. They should be asked why it was that the director felt it necessary to use unusual techniques.

Sound editing is more important than is often realized. For dramatic purposes, certain sounds are emphasized in the sound-track of a film (primarily dialogue of course), while others are muted. Sometimes this process (or the

refusal to employ it orthodoxly) can be used to achieve striking effects. Consider the terrific explosions made by the pistols in *Shane*, for instance, or the importance of background noise in Antonioni's films (jet-planes, footsteps, slamming doors). Music may be used to enhance good cinema (the music of Shostakovich in the Russian *Hamlet*, for instance), but it may also be used to compensate for dramatic and visual poverty. Who has not seen films in which a few score extras in period costume are made to represent an army or a nation on the march, simply by limping past the camera to the accompaniment of tumultuous music? Credits may be witty and effective, or they may be dull, pretentious and silly. We've all seen films about, say, Egypt, with credits in pseudo-hiero-glyphics against a background of pseudo-tomb murals. These matters are rarely of major importance, but they may be worthy of attention. Direct questions are perhaps best for focussing students' attention on them. Did you notice anything unusual about the sound? What did you think of the music? Of the credits?

Most readers are probably better qualified to conduct the overall planning of classes on cinema than I am, but I don't mind venturing a few suggestions. Before attempting to discuss a film, I think it a good idea that students be given some idea of the criteria that may be used, the criteria I have been describing. These may be taught in a separate lesson, perhaps a general discussion of cinema, or a discussion of a review of a popular film. When you decide to hold a class on a particular film, the first job, of course, is to make sure that your students see it. You might try to get concessions from the local cinema manager; you might discuss a film shown on television; you might discuss a film shown at school (it's often instructive to compare a book and the film of the book); and you might offer students the choice of seeing the film or doing some disagreeable drudgery for homework.

A good way of discussing a particular film is to approach it via the genre, of which there are many in cinema: the Western, the detective thriller, the court-room drama, the war film, the historical film, the domestic comedy, the character study, and so on. You can't be too pedantic about genres, of course. Some films belong to more than one (*A Man for All Seasons* was both a historical film and a court-room drama), and some are unique (What was *Woodstock*?). Even so, it's a good practical approach. Students may be asked what sort of film they have seen, or asked to name others it resembles, and thus the genre may be established. If it's a good class, it might be prepared to reason out, with some assistance, the normal assumptions of the genre.

(Westerns tend to assume that value arises out of heroic individualism; war films tend to suggest that war is horrible but manly; domestic comedies tend to suggest you're okay so long as you're ordinary.) If that can be done, you may then ask students how typical the film is of its genre; otherwise, you will have to ask them to assess it in comparison to specific examples of other films within the genre. Either way, its relative value

should begin to emerge, particularly if you encourage piecemeal comparison of the treatment of similar themes and episodes. In this way, the basis of the students' own taste may be revealed to them, and this taste may be developed or modified by discussion, and by the introduction of more searching criteria than they have hitherto made use of.