



新维度外语系列教程



英语电影文学与批评理论

English Film Literature and Critical Theory

丛书主编 谢群 陈立华

主编 蔡圣勤

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Preface: Culture from Films

The research shows that young adults spend nearly 50% of their leisure time watching films and videos. In the past one hundred years the film has become a vitally important part of contemporary culture, which is becoming increasingly saturated by visual media today. We are called to acknowledge and analyze our greatest sources of entertainment and information as they influence the warp and woof of our lives.

The analysis of media arts is essential to the health of democratic society. Our culture depends on literacy of the electorate, which gleans its information largely from visual media. We must hone our skills as critical viewers by being knowledgeable in the most popular art form of our time and possessing the analytical skills to understand and interpret films.

A film consists of codes, images, and messages, just as traditional literature does, and we develop our means to make meaning when we study this form of expression.

Films and literature share similarities and differences that can be compared and contrasted, illuminating both forms. For example, symbolism and setting in a literary text are analogous to each other and may be demonstrated by color and lighting in a cinematic work. From this point of view, another key element of literature is affected in films by camera angle. It is no surprise that many filmmakers in recent years as well as in the early days of cinema have turned to classic literature and reinterpret their plots on the silver screen.

One aim of film analysis is to help us gain a better understanding of the director's intentions. By examining camera movement, camera angle, sound, editing, time manipulation and other aspects, and by discussing and writing about these elements, we consider the narrative and the choices the director made in a critical way that leads to his purpose. Further we can consider how well the elements



work to the director's end.

Because a film is in an immediacy and all-encompassing manner, it is all too often passively viewed. As the audience we need to develop not only an appreciation for it to move us but realize how and why it does so.

Finally, it is important for us to view films that require more from viewers than simply watch the picture play. As a foreign language learner, art and independent films could increase the audience interests to feel in English speaking countries circumstance. A new culture is a rendered culture by which we may be inspired, challenged, enriched, and delighted.

As the major art form of the twentieth century, the film is at the center of a liberal arts education. Much of what we know about our modern world comes from films or related media—video and television. Our ideas about the past, the present and the future and about the differences between here and there are often cinematic. One of the best ways to understand the world and better prepare ourselves to cope with its complexities is through the study of films.

Film is an art. Like music, theatre, painting, and literature, a film can be studied for its own sake. But it is more inclusive than its sister arts. It is a visual medium, like painting, for instance, but its images move; it uses music but in a complex web of imagery and sound; it focuses on characters in dramatic confrontations, but it is not stage bound like the theatre. So film studies can be as richly challenging as any other art form.

The film is also a social, cultural and historical document. Because of this, film studies require that a student participate in most of the great debates of the past one hundred years. Thus it shares the concerns and approaches of courses of study as diverse as history, finance, women's studies, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and political studies. It is at the center of a truly liberal education, posing all the aesthetic, moral, ideological, perceptual and epistemological concepts which a graduate should expect to be good at.

Storytelling is a basic human activity. From ancient time to the modern, from oral to literal, from monologue to multi-media, it has passed a long historical period, but we are still doing it. The urge to tell stories and the desire to hear them are so primal that it is difficult to imagine a time in human existence without them. The twenty-first century has been called the information era, in which electronic applies and visual narratives are gradually more and more popular. The gift of narrative—



whether in the myth, parable, epic, novel, drama, film or short story, even in the narrative electronic game—is so deep and universal that it seems to be one of the attributes that most clearly separate humanity from other species.

The film, one of the most popular forms of art, becomes the center of literature and other kinds of aesthetics, from which we can see different points of view of the others, especially different cultures of the other parts of the world. We should not only appreciate and enjoy the story, but also understand and learn the critical points as an intellectual student. That is why both the film itself and criticism methodology are important for us to know.

As an English language learner, you need to know more than the language itself. Even though after spending many years learning English, some college students in China cannot yet answer the following questions:

Do you exactly know about British modern currency?

As for the British royal family: Who is the King or Queen of the UK?

Yes, these are easy to answer. You may immediately say English Pound for the first one, and Queen Elizabeth II for the latter. Actually, for the first question, what the quizzier really wants to know is: How many shillings make one pound? And, how many pennies make one shilling? If it is about Chinese currency, three-year-old kids will find no difficulty to do it. How many college students can definitely tell you the currency has been changed since 1971? Before 1971, £1. 00 = 20 shillings = 240 pennies, i. e. 1 shilling = 12 pennies. After 1971, £1. 00 = 100 pennies, for the easier calculating purpose, British currency changed into a more common system just like most international currency.

As for the second question, Queen Elizabeth II is the very correct answer. About the British royal family, people know a lot from most popular media, such as newspapers, broadcast, and Internet web sites. They are also familiar with the names such as Diana, Charles, and William. The further question would be: What is the royal family name? Many students will make faces, lower their heads and crouch to the desks. If the question is about China's ancient dynasties, Qin, Han, or Tang, Song, even Qing, young kids with no hesitation will bolt out Ying, Liu, or Li, Zhao, and Aisin Gioro for Qing dynasty. Why does this happen? Language and culture exist everywhere. Now see another example of a dialogue in a Chinese film:



(In 1940s, a bareheaded man to another guy with a wool-hat)

It is Lao Tou Zi (the old man) who sent me here.

Most Chinese, older or younger, will easily understand that the “Lao Tou Zi” (or Xiao Zhang) is Chiang Kai-Shek, the former leader of Kuomintang Party. “The Old Man” (or Xiao Zhang) does not literally mean Chiang Kai-Shek in any dictionary. But they just know that.

So in order to make us familiar with the British and American intonation and pronunciation, to understand the inter-culture between China and Western countries, and to be able to communicate with English native speakers on normal topics, as we know most famous stars from films and tele-programs, we have to watch enough English movies, as well as practising the text materials—intensive listening, by words, by sentences, or by paragraphs, and by listening to VOA special English or BBC programs, since we are in the situation of Chinese language circumstances.

To understand the background and culture, to get sensibility of native speaking, to know the way in which the main media impact our modern social life, to be ware of the schools of literature and its effect on the Motion Picture industry, there are enough reasons to see English language films and read this book.

The Author

January 2012, New York



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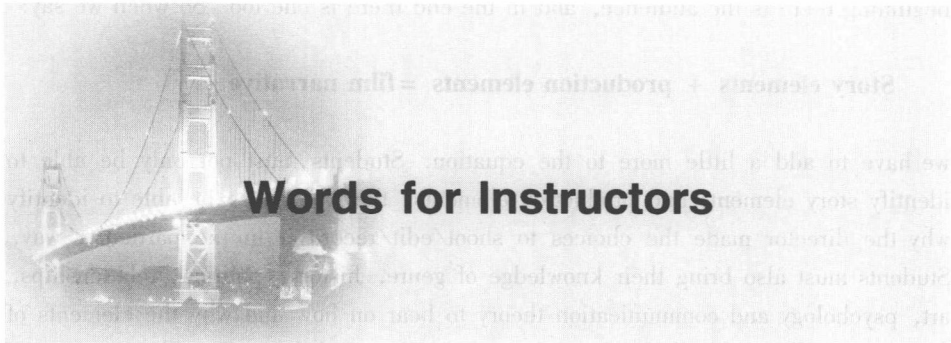
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Words for Instructors



1. What Do Our Students Need to Know?

Students need to know that films are more than a story with pictures. Yes, we have to do character analysis. We must look at the philosophic and cultural basis upon which the text is based. The theme is important as the message of the text but what is vital and so often sadly missing in the study of film is an understanding of the particular way in which a story is told in a film. Every year examiners' reports lament the lack of skills in this area. We must address our own knowledge base if we are to truly help our students.

So, what is it that makes a film narrative different from a print narrative? In short, it is this: **Story elements + production elements = film narrative.** Students are often very good at analyzing story elements and can be trained to identify production elements. They are also good at writing long lists detailing how they combine in a particular text. Understanding film narrative, however, is quite a different matter. Let's use an example to explain this.

A key scene in *Blade Runner* (1982) is the one where Rachael undertakes the test to see if she is a replicant. An enormous amount of information is conveyed in words, so much that we might miss the even greater body conveyed visually. Watching the scene and listing the information conveyed under these two headings, students will typically describe this scene in terms of the script only. It is easier to make a point about the combination of story and production elements using an excerpt with no dialogue. There are several excellent examples in *Proof* (2005), either at the vet or in the park.

Narrative on its own, however, is nothing without the whole reason while films are made in the first place for the audience. Film making is a very expensive collaborative business. No one makes a film without an audience in mind. In the



beginning there is the audience, and in the end there is one too. So when we say:

Story elements + production elements = film narrative

we have to add a little more to the equation. Students must not only be able to identify story elements and production elements, they must also be able to identify why the director made the choices to shoot/edit/record it in the particular way. Students must also bring their knowledge of genre, history, politics, relationships, art, psychology and communication theory to bear on how and why the elements of film individually and collectively work on them or around them. The film is a form of mass communication which is usually consumed in groups and the group can influence our understanding and interpretation.

So, let's get down to the practicalities of how to teach films and the first question to be dealt with.



2. How Should the Film Be Viewed?

The general rule of thumb is that if a film is made for the big screen, then that is where it should be seen. *Blade Runner* is a very good example of this where on TV we sometimes wait for a character to move to the centre of the shot necessarily altering, albeit subtly, our interpretation of the "mise-en-scène."^① Such viewings are not always possible but if you get the chance, go for it.

Now to the tricky matter of length, *Blade Runner* is 112 minutes long, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) is 113 minutes and *Schindler's List* (1993) is 3 hours. *Proof* is around 90 minutes, perfect for a double lesson. Length should not be a primary criterion for choosing a film to study. Films should be chosen because they are accessible, containing materials which can be interpreted in the interesting and challenging ways to balance the remainder of the curriculum.



3. How to Break up a Film?

It is better to divide a film into 2 or 3 viewings which will allow for substantial

① *Mise-en-scène* (French word, "placing on stage") is an expression used to describe the design aspects of a theatre or film production, which essentially means "visual theme" or "telling a story"—both in visually artful ways through storyboarding, cinematography and stage design, and in poetically artful ways through direction. *Mise-en-scène* has been called film criticism's "grand undefined term." Brian Henderson, "The Long Take," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 315.

discussion at the end of the third session. It is not our preference to conduct discussion in the middle of the first viewing of any film, even if the whole class has seen it before. If you would like students to reflect on their viewing, and this really only has validity as a memory jogger to get students back into the frame of mind where they left off at the end of the previous session, a few notes in their journal are the best way to go. These notes might include reflections on character, theme, plot, etc., and perhaps go on to make some predictions about where they think the film might go from there. The aim is to simulate a real film viewing as much as possible.



4. Teaching Films Pre-Screening

There is enormous debate about the value of pre-viewing activities. Whether you choose to do so will be dependent upon a number of factors including:

What is the primary aim of teaching the film?

Does the film deal with historical, political or social situations which are unfamiliar to students?

Are there particular things you want students to notice?

Is the time you can devote to the text very short?

If you are teaching a film text for a specific purpose and do not intend to deal with the text primarily as a visual text, then it may be OK to undertake a lot of pre-viewing activities. We would argue, however, that by taking this tack you are doing a grave disservice to the medium and the possibilities of teaching in an empowering manner.

Sometimes we want to use a film which deals with places, times or issues with which students are completely unfamiliar or about which it is likely that their knowledge is incomplete, incorrect or biased. *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Shindler's List* would be two such films. In these cases some background materials which will add to the students' knowledge base are called for. The rule of thumb is that if such information will contribute to students' reading of the film without biasing their interpretation in a particular direction, then it is generally OK to do so.

Very rarely will there be things you want students to see in the first viewing of a film. Be very wary about this. It is not our job to lead students to a preferred understanding by skewing their viewing. The only time that we would guide students' first viewing is when time is very short.



5. The Best Way to Screen a Film

In the dark on the screen and with the sound system the director intended, the film should be screened in its entirety without prior comment. Students should have an opportunity to reflect, respond verbally and listen to the views of others before any written work is undertaken.

A second guided viewing is needed. It takes many hours to read a novel and only a couple to view a film. They are equally weighted in the English exam so it stands to reason that of course you have the time to view it a second and third time. When reading, we can and often do go back and reread sections, words, chapters and paragraphs. It destroys the narrative structure to do this with a film, hence the need for several viewings.

Our preferred way of teaching a film is to view the film once, to brainstorm students' opinions to see what they have picked up (so that you know where to begin), to introduce a few key concepts—cinematic, thematic and in terms of character analysis and then to look at a few key scenes before proceeding to a second viewing. Students are guided about what to look for and how to watch second time around. After this second viewing comes the time for intensive discussion and workbook tasks leading up to a third viewing and then the completion of the major piece of work on the text. Naturally this is very time-consuming. It is possible to skip the third screening and to suggest strongly that students complete this at home in their own time or in the library viewing room at lunchtime. At classroom we make a tape of key scenes for any text to help us in our teaching and for students to use in their study of the film.



6. Technical Aspects of Film Study

Let us now turn to those aspects of film which differentiate it from print texts and which you need to teach in order for students to be able to fully understand a film.

Key Scenes

We have mentioned these several times and for most film narratives these are predictable.

Titles sequence and opening scene—establishes genre, style, time, location and main characters. We are invited by the film maker into the film and into the narrative.

Establishment of the conflict—narrative needs a set of oppositional forces to survive.

Establishment of sub plots—we are sophisticated and experienced viewers.



We need more than the basics to maintain our interest.

Climax—usually after a series of smaller climaxes, the plot, sub plot and oppositional forces come together for the ultimate fight between good and evil.

Closure or denouement— a time of resolution and reflection for characters, plots and for us. As cinema goes, we need to be helped to extract ourselves from the narrative and from the film experience in a way that satisfies our curiosity and emotional ties to that narrative.

It is generally best to begin with the titles sequence and opening scene. Have a look at the opening sequences of *Blade Runner* and *Proof*, both wonderfully different films yet with many similarities in terms of theme. See what you can identify about each.

Here are some questions you might like to ask your class to provoke a response to the opening scenes:

What did you see?

What did you hear?

Where and when is this film set? How do you know?

What do you know about this period?

Who are the main characters? How do you know?

What is this film going to be about? How do you know?

What do the titles and theme music contribute to our understanding of the text?

What is the difference between viewing on a big screen and on a TV?

Students should note their answers in a viewing diary.

Some additional points you might like to raise at this point include: The importance of publicity and audience expectation in the viewing experience; the difference between the earlier reading of a text and how it might have been read at the time it was first screened. No one ever views a film at random. It is always a conscious act and we bring to that experience a range of understandings and expectations. The very fact that a film is chosen as an English text means for many students that it can't be fun. There must be deep and meaningful things to be unearthed.

Now it is also the time to introduce some basic film concepts. These might include: **Genre, Construction, Representation, Dominant reading, Opposition.**

Some technical concepts to be introduced at this point may include: **Shot types, Shot length, Camera angles, Lighting, Colour, Framing, Editing, Mise-en-scène, Soundtrack, Imagery, Point of view, The Gaze, Time manipulation.**



Some story elements to be introduced: **Plot, Script, Theme, Issues, Symbolism, Metaphor and Allegory.**

Students must become familiar with the equation:

Story elements + production elements = film narrative

It is very important to help them to understand that it is not only how these elements combine, but how we as viewers read them that make up the narrative and that each person's understanding of the narrative may be different and equally valid. If a film is screened in the forest and no one is watching a story that has not been told, you may ask students questions like:

- Why did the director choose this shot?
- How do we know what he meant us to think?
- How did you interpret the sound in that scene?
- What did it make you feel?

Time spent on questions like these will repay you a thousand fold in not having to read endless lifeless lists of production and story elements which display very little of the student's understanding of the narrative and how it is conveyed.

Clearly you can't and shouldn't deal with all of these at once. Remember: Our primary aim is to empower and enhance, not to drown students. So what can you do to make a start?

Try showing a key scene, perhaps one suggested by students, and calling the shots or the editing or the lighting for them. Ask them to do the same for the next key scene. Our students always end up laughing that for us every scene is a key scene!

- Show a scene with the sound turned off.
- Ask students to listen to the same scene with their eyes closed.
- Get students to identify films where the same techniques have been used. Is this a function of genre, time, culture, style, homage or rip off? Ask them to identify how they used this prior experience to understand the narrative of the film being studied.

- Spend a whole lesson on visual imagery.
- Spend a whole lesson on symbolism—visual, character, story, sound. In films like *Blade Runner*, it is possible to find all four in one short scene.
- Ask students to consider the differences between the novel, story, plot and script.

The next stage in teaching film as text is treading a fine line between your