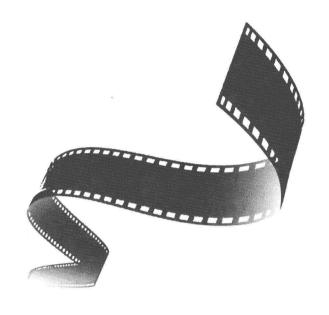# English Films and Western Critical Approaches

By Cai Shengqin

英语电影与西方文化批评流派

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Preface

Story telling is a basic human activity. From the ancient time to the modern, from oral to written, 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 of 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 myth, parable, epic, novel, drama, film or short story, even in narrative electronic game—is so deep and universal that it seems to be one of the attributes that most clearly separates humanity from other species.

A 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 views of the others, especially different cultures of the other parts of the world. We should not only appreciate and enjoy story, but also understand and learn the critical points as intellectual students. That is why both the film itself and criticism methodology are important for us to know.

1. Why We Study Film in English Language Arts?

The research shows that young adults spend nearly 50% of their leisure time watching films and videos. In the past one hundred years, films have become a vitally important part of the 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 the democratic society. Our culture depends on literacy of the electorate, which gleans its information largely from the visual media. We must hone our skills as critical viewers by being

knowledgeable in the most popular art form of our time and possess the analytical skills to understand and interpret films.

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

Films and literature share similarities and differences that can be compared and contrasted. For example, symbolism and setting in a literary text are analogous to and may be demonstrated by color and lighting in a cinematic work. The point of view, another key element of literature, is effected in film by the camera angle. And so on. It is no surprise that many film-makers in recent years as well as in the early days have turned to the classic literature and reinterpret their plots on the silver screen.

One aim of the 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, as well as the discussion and interpretation of these elements, we consider the narrative and the choices the director made in a critical way that leads to his purpose. Afterwards we can consider how well these elements work to the director's end.

Because the 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 the appreciation for it to move us but realize how and why it does so.

Finally, it is important for us to view films in a way that requires 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 the English speaking countries and a new culture is the rendered culture by which we may be inspired, challenged, enriched, and delighted.

As the major art form of the twentieth century, environment of the film is at the center of liberal arts education. Much of what we know about our modern world comes from films or the 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.

The film is an art. Like music, theatre, painting, and literature, 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 confrontation, but it is not stage bound like the theatre. So film studies can be as richly challenging as any other art forms.

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 he or she 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 with which a graduate should expect to be conservative.

2. Why We Need to See Films and Read This Book?

As an English learner, you need to know more than the language itself. Some college students in China even cannot answer the following questions:

Do you know exactly about British modern currency? As for the British royal family: Who is the King or Queen of UK?

Yes, these are easy to answer. You may immediately say that English Pound for the first one, and Queen Elizabeth II for the latter. Actually, for the first question what the quizzer really wants to know is, how many shillings make one pound? How many pennies make one shilling? If it is about the Chinese currency, three-year-old kids will find no difficulty to answer it. How many college students can definitely tell that the currency have 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 easier calculation, British currency was changed into a more common system just like most other international currencies.

As for the second question, Queen Elizabeth II is the correct answer. About the British royal family, people know a lot most from popular media, such as papers, 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's surname? 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* 1940*s, 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" is Chiang Kai-Shek, the former leader of Kuomintang party. "The Old Man" does not literally mean Chiang Kai-Shek in any dictionary. But they just know it.

Therefore, in order to make us familiar with the British and American intonation and pronunciation, understand the inter-culture between China and Western countries, be able to communicate with the native speakers of English speaking countries on normal topics, we have to watch enough English movies, as well as practice of the text material—intensive listening, by words, by sentences, or by paragraph, and listen to VOA special English or BBC program, since we are in the situation of Chinese language circumstances.

To understand the background and culture, to get sensibility of native speakers, to know the way in which main media impacts our modern social life, to be aware 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.

3. Languages and Cultures Reflected from Film

A language is part of culture and plays a very important role in it. Some social scientists consider it as the keystone of culture. Without language, they maintain, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture①(Deng Yanchang, 1995). In the film or the other broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their

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① Deng Yanchang. *Language and Culture*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1995.

approaches to life and their ways of living and thinking.

Culture consists of all the shared products of human society. It not only refers to such material things as schools, cities, and organizations, but also refers to the non-material things such as ideas, customs, family patterns, slang and other formal or informal languages. To put it simply, a culture refers to the entire way of life of a society, and "the way of a people. " And all of these could only be found in films.

1) Different Culture with Different Values

Culture refers to the state of intellectual development of a society and the customs, arts, social institutions, of a particular group or people. Once human beings began to change the world, culture appeared. Different peoples have different cultures. Every nation has its own culture, which is the record of the history of their lives. Each kind of culture is the symbol of a country's civilization. It presents the extractive of each civilization.

As everybody knows, the essence of culture is the values. Two kinds of people with different values will not behave and think in the same way. For example, most eastern people believe that dogs are humble and foolish animals, and look down upon them. However, dogs are considered as good friends of western people and nobody defames them. That is because these two kinds of people have different impressions on dogs. In their opinions, dogs have different positions and are not at the same level of their own concepts of value.

Culture not only refers to what have been mentioned but also closely related to the cultural background and psychology. In fact, culture is made up of these three basic elements. They are the basic points of culture-researching approaches.

2) Connection Between Culture and Film

The film is the product of art, and its basic function of film is to exhibit all the aspects of the objective world and to entertain the audience. Culture is the most important part of spiritual civilization. Human cannot produce film without the objective world, and culture as well. As the values determine the thoughts of people, and cultural background and social psychology can also influence a lot. These elements certainly are the standard rules of producing and appreciating movies. A film is actually a manner of cultural displaying, drawing people's attention to the society.

When films get achievement at a certain height in the field of art, there would be a new branch of culture, film culture. In one sentence, culture is the foundation of film while film enriches culture.

Young students learn foreign cultures a lot through films and television programs, especially in the after 20th century when the new media became one of the main source of information, and the audio-visual educational material became more and more popular. Therefore, literature researchers should not ignore the film culture field from the canon and classics.

4. The Important Impact of Films on Daily Life

Among this 100 years, film has become an important part of our life, Which has the closest relationship with people. The motion pictures were invented at the end of 19th century by Edison. At the beginning, it was just used to record some important activities or events. Gradually, film had sustained rapid technologic progress and it became an attractive art for the daily life of common people.

Films can give people beautiful scenes and moving feelings, especially when Montage was invented and made good use of by artists. From then on, it became a new kind of entertainment and a new kind of industry. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the cinematographic art presented audiences its most charms. From the 1980s to nowadays, the films have developed to another climax.

More and more good films and film stars are showing up, shining on the stage. Going to the cinema becomes a very important part in people's daily life again. Film is just a piece of mirror, and people can find various phenomena of society in it. People can always find what they want in film—happiness, sadness, how to be a man, how to get along with others, how to develop oneself mentally and physically, etc. The films can even fulfill the fancy dreams, which are logically unrealistic in the past or the future.

5. Differences Between a Book and a Film

Novels are beautiful things. They are beautiful to hold, to smell and to read. They can weave worlds for us about which we can only dream, or which we are only likely to see in nightmare. They teach us about ourselves, others and the human condition. They do this through story, metaphor, allegory, and image.

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Primarily they do it with words. It is the particular combination of words that allows a novel to do to us what it does. The words act upon our existing understandings and experiences to weave new or deeper understandings. We have to use our imagination for them to work their magic.

And so do films. Films seem, because of the nature of the medium, more ephemeral. We could not hold them like a book before, but now we can play it on our cell phone, ipad, or other electronic note book. Yet film is a very powerful medium, perhaps more powerful than the written texts because, as we all know, seeing is believing. Films also weave images, stories, metaphors and allegories. They show us things using the words with which we are so familiar, combining these with visual and auditory cues which can enhance our lives, yet these things would mean nothing if it wasn't for the understanding, experience and imagination we bring to the viewing experience. This brings us to a primary need for audiences to experience a film at its best.

6. Words for Instructors

1) What do Our Students Need to Know?

Students need to know that films are more than stories with pictures. Yet we have to do character analysis. We must look at the philosophic and cultural basis upon which the text is based. Themes are important as the messages of the text but what is vital but so often sadly missing in the study of film is an understanding of the particular way in which a story is told in film. Every year, examiner's 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 text narrative? In short, it is: **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* 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 visual information. 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*, 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, and no one makes a film without an audience in mind. At 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 a particular way he or she did. 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. Film is a form of mass communication which is usually consumed in groups that can influence our understanding and interpretation.

So, let's get down to the practicalities of how to teach film 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 as on TV we sometimes wait for a character to move to the centre of the shot necessarily altering, albeit subtly, which is our interpretation of the "mise en scene"①. Such

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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.

viewings are not always possible, so if you get the chance, go for it.

Now for the tricky matter of length, *Blade Runner* is 112 minutes long, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* is 113 minutes and *Schindler's List* is 3 hours. *Proof* is around 90 minutes, perfect for a double lesson. Length should not be the primary criterion for choosing a film to study. Films should be chosen because they are accessible, containing materials which can be interpreted in 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 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, taking a few notes in their journal is 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 dependant 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 any 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* 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 situation 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 comments. 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 but 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 or third time. When reading we can and often go back and reread sections, words, chapters and paragraphs, which destroys the narrative structure of film, hence we need several viewings.

Our preferred way of teaching a film is to view the film once, to brainstorm students' opinion 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 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, so it is possible to skip the third screening and suggest strongly that students complete this at home in their own time or in the library viewing room at lunchtime. At *Swinburne* 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 to make students be able to fully understand a film.

Key Scenes

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

Titles sequence and opening scene—established 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 plots and oppositional forces come together for the ultimate fight between the good and the evil.

Closure or denouement—a time of resolution and reflection for characters, plots and for us. As cinema goers, 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 the opening scene. Have a look at the opening sequences of *Blade Runner* and *Proof*, both are wonderfully different films yet with many similarities in terms of theme. See what you can identify 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 title 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's expectation in the viewing experience. 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 is that a film chosen as an English text means for many students that it can't be fun. There must be deep and meaningful to be unearthed.

The difference between a earlier reading of a text and how it might have been read at the time it was first screened.

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 introduce at this point may include:

Shot types

Shot length

Camera angles

Lighting

Colour

Framing

Editing

Mise en scene

Soundtrack

Imagery

Point of view

The Gaze

Time manipulation