



## The Media Studies Conference 2006

### How to teach...

These sessions are aimed at those new to Film and Media Studies but could also provide a useful refresher for more experienced teachers.

1. How to teach Genre (Carol Allison)
2. How to teach Audience (Valentine McCarthy\*)
3. How to teach Representation (Wendy Helsby)
4. How to teach Narrative (Julian McDougall)
5. How to teach Institution (Sue Powell)

#### 1. How to teach Genre

**Carol Allison**

*Head of Media Studies, The Chauncy School, Ware, Herts.*

Genre analysis is my tool of choice as a starting point teaching any type of media text. 'Genre' is a French term meaning "type" or "kind". Putting things into categories is useful in any form of study; it's a way of establishing some kind of control over an amorphous mass of information. Each medium in the mass media has its own kinds of language, characteristic signs and sign systems. Making a list of media texts and their shared characteristics helps establish what students already know and provides reassurance to them that what they are going to study can be organised and categorised. Genre theory, therefore, allows media students to consider reading any film, television programme, magazine, advert, in relation to one or more categories. Teaching genre enables students to move gradually from the safe shallows of lists of texts and their shared genre characteristics into the deeper but more interesting waters of real exploration of what genre is all about. This would lead into discussion of:

- the importance of expectation and audience pleasure;
- the fluidity of genres and the constant renegotiation between industry and audience through the combination of the familiar and the unexpected;
- the relationship between audiences and producers to minimise financial risk;
- the cultural dimension; myths and fears played out through repetition, innovation and resolution;
- the ideological level: genres offering reassurance and closure on the complexities of life.

The standard approach to teaching genre in film and television is to focus on the common codes and conventions. Looking at film posters, trailers or short scene extracts will quickly enable students to identify similarities and differences in characters, location, stories and familiar objects (the iconography). Repeated narrative patterns can be observed and beyond this the recurring themes which leads to exploration of shared ideological messages. For the study of magazines the categorisation might be based on definitions of target audiences – age, gender, ethnicity, class etc. This

approach lets students see how representational issues drive the way the industry segments the magazine market.

The most useful aspect of teaching genre is the way it enables teachers to make effortless connections with the other parts of the Media Studies conceptual framework. You can't discuss film genres without thinking about audience pleasure and this leads inevitably to discussion of institutional questions about how texts are produced and distributed.

In this workshop I will offer examples of starting points and teaching strategies that I have used in teaching genre across a range of texts. We will start with a sorting exercise which will demonstrate the important message that genres are fluid and not fixed. I will use a range of material including crime and horror films, TV soaps, newspapers, women's magazines and advertising campaigns. I will also be differentiating the approach at GCSE and A level and providing samples of assignments targeted at different levels. I will reference different theoretical perspectives on genre but really only to provide signposts to follow up after the session, so that the main focus will be on dealing with the subject at classroom level.

## **2. How to teach Audience**

***Valentine McCarthy\****

*Film and Media Teacher, St Francis Xavier, London*

The study of audience is essential for all media students if they are to make sense of the media. It is integral to all courses of study. This session will focus on how to teach audience from a basic level through to theoretical thinking on audience. It will address why audiences are important; how audiences change in terms of consumption and, hopefully, how to make the subject of audience interesting and relevant. The workshop will focus on the practical side of teaching audience exploring audience ratings and their importance; influences on the audience; how audiences read texts and basic audience theories. There are many different types of audiences who receive, consume and utilise media texts in very different ways. We will investigate why and how this takes place.

## **3. How to teach Representation**

***Wendy Helsby***

*Film & Media Tutor, Queen Mary's College, Hants.*

The media constructs views of the real world for us to read and interpret. These views having been mediated provide filtered and partial meanings. However we mostly ignore this selection and often fail to question the language and images that are used. Like wallpaper they are just there; as Athusser suggested ideologies happen behind our backs. In order for our students to begin to see behind their backs we need to show them how such meanings are constructed to appear 'natural'. The issue of realism therefore is linked to representation. Do we accept the producers' views of reality? Can audiences read in differentiated ways to judge realism? Can discourses around representations change? Representations of others can have a fundamental effect not only on personal behaviour but also on political and global events. Terrorism and immigration continue to be huge issues. What images do these words raise and more importantly why? This session will address theoretical debates briefly with the main focus on how representation links to knowledge, values, beliefs and thus to power. Changing representations and continuity of types of representation will be explored. The key questions will be applied. Who is in control of representation? Who has

produced the representation and why? Who is being represented? What languages have been used? Who is reading the text? And finally what are the meanings and messages conveyed? Thus the session will focus on the three areas of producers, texts and audiences. The practical aim of the session will be to provide ways into this area through issues such as disability, institutions, work, nationality, ethnicity, and age as well as the areas of race, gender and class. A range of media resources will be used: print, audio, and audio-visual. Work sheets exploring some of the areas and sample texts will be suggested to provide a coherent and flexible scheme for teachers to use in the classroom.

Wendy Helsby is the editor of *Understanding Representation* (bfi, 2005)

#### 4. **How to teach Narrative**

**Julian McDougall**

*Programme Leader, Newman College of Higher Education, Birmingham*

There are layers to narratives, to be sure, and they inevitably revolve around a mix of the present and the future, between what's happening now and the tantalising question of where it's all headed.

*Everything Bad is Good for you: how Popular Culture is making us smarter*, S. Johnson, London: Penguin, 2005

As one of the long-standing 'key concepts' applied to media texts by A Level students, narrative theory is an essential part of the media teacher's toolkit. Although narrative tends not to appear discretely as a topic for A Level students, all 'micro' textual analysis requires the analysis of narrative at the level of the text, and many of the broader topic areas relate genre and audience to questions of narrative. Furthermore, all production work is informed by a range of creative decisions about storytelling, and the current assessment conventions require students to write reflectively about such narrative construction.

Narrative is also a relatively easy concept for the English teacher to apply to media, but there are pros and cons that come with such ease of transition. Are media texts and literature interchangeable in narrative terms, or do moving image and digital forms require a new critical lens?

There are a variety of ways in to working on narrative with students, and this workshop will offer a range of strategies that reflect this. First, the more straightforward deconstruction of texts according to 'classic' narrative principles (how space and time are manipulated in storytelling across a range of media), and second, a way of 'doing narrative' that challenges the more orthodox approach and asks whether reading media texts is really more complex. In order to raise such questions, this workshop will focus, amongst other media, on computer/ video games as texts which potentially transgress conventional notions of media reading and writing. The objective of the workshop, then, is first to familiarise participants with the 'typical' approach to narrative work in Media Studies, and also to challenge the concept itself.

Julian McDougall is the author of *The Media Teacher's Book* (Hodder, 2006) and co-author of *A2 Media Studies for OCR* (Hodder, 2002).

#### 5. **How to teach Institution**

**Sue Powell**

*Lecturer in English, Media Studies & Film Studies, Hertford Regional College, Herts.*

“Institution” need not be regarded as the spectre at the feast and using a range of activities and games this workshop will provide a stimulating, thought-provoking and enabling session. It will be an exploration of terminology and a sharing of ideas, with suggested approaches and supportive resources. However, it will not offer a set of answers, but rather aim to provide a context for debate.

I shall begin with terminology, addressing the elusiveness of definition in relation to courses of study and examination expectations. Delegates will be asked to identify, from a given list, candidates for the label “Institution” and justify their assertion. Time will be given to case studies such as Institution Under Attack (the Government vs. the BBC/ Gilligan, Kelly and Hutton, the purpose here being to establish or confirm examples for teachers/ tutors and their students. Following this, attention will be given to ‘When is an Institution not an Institution? Taking in Murdoch, and building, through discussion, on the definitions of terms established at the outset. At an appropriate point, the relationship between institution, establishment and industry will also be considered.

Using the company briefs on six actual institutions groups will compete for a new and very large investment sum.

The accompanying pack will offer a biography; suggestions for other purposeful games to establish and reinforce knowledge and understanding of the topic in an enjoyable and dynamic way, as well as appropriate resources that could translate into useful handouts for students.

If there is time we may also consider watchdog/ monitoring bodies and regulation.

*\* indicates change of speaker*