

The Children are Watching
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Presentation by Cary Bazalgette
Head of Education Development, British Film Institute

I want to tell you about my grandson, Morgan. He's just two, and he's growing up in Italy, with an English father and an Italian mother, so he's starting to learn two languages. It's fascinating to hear him negotiate this. For example he's invented a word, "beebo", which means, "book". You might think this is a typical toddler 's alliterative sound, but actually when you think about it carefully it is made up of two words, "book" and "libro". But he is also beginning to recognise that things have two different names. He will be listening to his parents talking and his mother will be, for example, looking for the house key and she'll say to my son "dove hai lasciato il chiave?" and Morgan will suddenly say "key!"

I'm not telling you about this in order to let you know that Morgan is a genius, which almost goes without saying, but to get you thinking about bilingualism. As anyone who knows who is familiar with bilingualism, to understand more than one language affects one's awareness of language itself, and how it is used in a social context. Morgan has to learn more than that everything has two names. He will also have to learn that you can choose which word to use, and to whom, and why: for example, when do you say "key", and when do you say "chiave"? In learning the answer to that, Morgan will begin to learn more than the "right answer". He will begin to learn that languages are both analogous and different; that they are systematic and rule-bound. He will start to learn to look out for those analogies and those rules. Let's not forget what relentless, obsessive learners two-year-olds are! They are learning more in those few months than they will ever learn again: they have to learn how everything works. I watched Morgan playing with a fan heater and trying to work out what combination of factors made the fan go round. He'd got the plug and the socket, and the switch on the heater. Sometimes the fan went round when he put the plug in the socket, and sometimes it didn't. Sometimes it

went round when he turned the switch, and sometimes it didn't. What he hadn't got clear was the relationship between the functions of the socket and the switch, and watching him try out all the permutations was to watch a scientist's total focus on a series of experiments, to the exclusion of everything else. And of course this is what makes toddlers so exasperating. They simply cannot believe that it can be more important to have your nappy changed or to eat your porridge than it is to finish the series of experiments.

So of course one of the things their exhausted parents do is to encourage their toddlers to watch television. I'm not going into the debate about whether some of them watch too much television, although in my experience a toddler will watch exactly as much television as he wants to watch, in between working out the relationship between the buttons on the vcr and what appears on the screen. He's not all that bothered about what's actually on the screen, unless it is a work of obvious genius, like *Teletubbies*.

I want to stay focused on the fact that toddlers are still learning when they watch tv, because you can't stop a toddler learning: they just will do it! And the major thing they are learning when they watch tv is how to watch tv, how to make sense of it. They learn the rules of another system. They learn that sequences of images and combinations of images and sounds can be purposeful, and even predictable. They see some things that look and sound like real people, and places, and things, and animals, and some that don't, but that still have a relationship to the world they know, like animated films. They hear voices that seem to speak directly to them, and others that don't. They start to piece this together and make sense of its rules and conventions, and by the time they get to school they are pretty good at it. And what do we do with them when they get to school? We characterise them as having an enormous lack, which must be remedied as soon as possible: they can't read and write. Everything is focused on this.

But children learning to read print are actually becoming, in a sense, bilingual, because they are also already readers of television and film – not necessarily fully skilled readers, but more skilled than they are with print. My big question is this. What if, as well as teaching children to read and write, teachers also encouraged pupils to recognise and articulate their existing knowledge of the way moving image media communicate? Perhaps more pupils would find it easier to address the systems and rules of verbal communication (oral or print) because, crucially, they could see that such systems are necessary, and interesting. For a lot of people that clearly goes against common sense. It's "obvious" that TV is more likely to stop you learning to read, because we think it's easier to understand than print, and we assume, from our lazy adult perspective, that any sensible person will always duck out of the harder task. We forget, of course, that even five-year-olds are still relentless learners. Well, let's look at some research evidence on this.

A few years ago, researchers at the University of Minnesota (Kremer et al 2002) ⁱ wanted to find out if they could better identify those children entering school (which in the US is at age 6) who were likely to do well at reading later on, and those who were not likely to do so well. So they needed to find some reliable indicators that they could apply to pre-readers. The traditional assumption, which of course they tested by tracking children over three years, was that if the six year olds had some familiarity with basic skills like letter and word recognition, phoneme awareness, and a good vocabulary, then that would be a good predictor of their reading ability later on. This was true to some extent: the profile of six year olds who had those basic skills correlated fairly well with that of the good readers at age eight. But the researchers tested something else as well. They looked at the six year olds' comprehension of non-written texts: the television animation *Rugrats*, and an audio version of a folk tale, *The Cat's Purr*. They tested the children's recall of what happened in the story, their understanding of character motivation, causal connections in the narrative, and so on. It turned out that **those** skills at age six were a far better predictor of reading ability at eight, than were basic reading skills. The better you are at understanding *Rugrats* (or presumably any other stories) in

audio-visual media when you're six, the better you will be at reading stories in books when you're eight. And what's more, if you're good at understanding audio-visual media when you're eight, you're likely to be a good reader of print as well: they found a strong continuing correlation in comprehension skills across different media. What this research suggests is that there are "text level" concepts, like genre and narrative structure, which are not medium specific: in other words they can be developed through engagement with moving image media and transferred later to print. If this finding can be reliably confirmed (and the Minnesota sample was quite small – only 30 children) it blows out of the water the "commonsense" assumption that watching television somehow damages children's reading capability.

At the BFI we've been working for a while on this idea of the permeability of the print/moving image boundary. For example, we have been working with the Literacy Strategy in England to develop film-based resources for literacy in key stages 1-3. We've published one so far and three more will follow by the end of this year: *Starting Stories* for 4-7's, *Story Shorts* for 7-11's and *Screening Shorts* for 11-14's. All these resources use complete short films, not film clips, in order to develop understanding of text level concepts like narrative, character, genre, timescale and setting. So the films aren't meant to be used as motivation or illustration, or as a trigger for writing: we offer them for study in their own right as texts. The approach is based on a similar principle to the Minnesota research: that these text level concepts are not medium specific. But at the same time, our work is also based on the proposition that moving image media do have their own distinctive and complex "grammar", which new viewers have to learn in order to make sense of these media. It is too often assumed that all children are somehow "naturally" able to understand television easily and quickly, and that they all attain the same level of competence, because the meaning of moving image media is "obvious". But the Minnesota research demonstrates that television comprehension is a learned skill, in which children show different levels of attainment: these different levels can then be shown to correlate with differences in later reading

competence. The fact that children do not all learn to “read” moving images with the same ease and speed serves to demonstrate that there is something to learn. Is calling it a “grammar” too large a claim?

It is true that moving image media do make use of instinctive human behaviour in relation to the visual in such conventions as eye line matching, following movement, etc (Messaris 1994)ⁱⁱ, but it is also true that they have developed codes and conventions which, like linguistic grammars, are rule-bound and which we have to learn in order to understand the medium. In moving image media, the codes and conventions through which time is managed in narratives, characters are presented, generic categories are signalled, analogies expressed, mood and atmosphere are indicated, and different modalities in the relationship between text and reality are established, are all distinctive and medium-specific. Furthermore, moving image media are multi-modal. Labelling them as “visual media” overlooks the important functions of aural modes such as voice, music and sound design, and even visual analyses tend miss out many important visual modes in moving image texts, such as gesture, dress and the choreography of both camera and performer.ⁱⁱⁱ This complexity is in itself a justification for trying to ensure that schools pay particular attention to moving image media, although the same arguments do apply to other complex, distinctive, and even more rarely-taught media forms such as radio, computer games and websites.

As in other major art forms, the codes and conventions of moving image media have evolved within different traditions, and are constantly broken and redeveloped. In order to become “good readers of television”, the Minnesota researchers’ six-year-olds who were destined to become good readers of print had in fact already mastered a remarkable array of basic skills in reading the codes and conventions of moving image media. They had also found out what basic skills are actually for: to be deployed usefully in the interpretation of real texts – something that some struggling early readers never discover!^{iv}

The Minnesota findings are therefore completely unsurprising to us, however much they may amaze literacy traditionalists. Disregarding the fact that the skills the researchers were looking at applied to different media, they were effectively comparing skilled readers with beginning readers. It is not surprising that the children who had done well in mastering one rule-bound system had less difficulty in mastering a second. We think that there are two corollaries to this finding. The first is that, to teach effectively about any kind of text, teachers must recognise the interpretative skills that children already have, and encourage them through talk. Secondly, that if they continue to foster these skills throughout schooling, they are likely to benefit not only the children who are going to become good readers of print media, but also those who are not – and we must acknowledge that reading moving image media is not a universal skill: some children coming into school at four and five years old who are less good at it than others.

Let's look at an example of how we might explore this moving image – verbal language relationship at a deeper level than merely identifying differences in plot. I've brought along one of the films from our resource for 11-14 year olds. It's a film that packs a very powerful emotional charge and it's worth exploring how it does that, but I want to concentrate today simply on how it manages its narrative and its very long timescale.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

By Michael Dudok de Wit

8 minutes

(followed by a task: imagine you are going to re-tell the story as a piece of literature or an oral tale, and to draft the first sentence)

So far we've looked at the skills of "reading" and interpreting moving image texts. What about "writing"? For about five years our research officer, David Parker, has been studying the relationship between creative work with moving images, mainly animation, and children's writing. One study (it's written up in *English in Education*) took two primary classes who were both working on Roald Dahl's story *Fantastic Mr Fox*. One class made simple animations of parts of the book, and the other

didn't. David then compared the kinds of writing done by the filmmaking class, with that done by the non-filmmaking class. What he found was that the written work from the filmmaking class seemed to have more depth and detail:

1) Extracts from the Non-Moving Image Class written work

"I'm hungry and we thirsty down. Tomorrow I can try. I want water and chickens and sider from that nasty bean. Can we do something. I am cold." (Dominic, 7 years)

"I feel cold and afraid. My tail is gone forever. It won't grow back and I'm sad. The small foxes ask me what can we do dad and I tell them I am thinking in the corner." (Max, 8 years)

"I was knocked out. The gun got my tail and I suppose I was lucky that's all. I'm feeling pretty bad down here and so y family is to. I mad a big mistake and we might die from starvation." (Nadia, 8 years)

2) Extracts from the Moving Image Class written work

"I feel so stupid for what I did. I feel weak. What would happen to Mrs Fox and my little foxes if I got killed by the farmers. How would they eat. And who would protect them. I should of looked carefully I thought I saw some metal in the moonlight night." (Merkala, 7 years)

"My ears hurt the same as my tail. That was the loudist bang I heard ever. Now I cant even speak to anyone because I feel very sad for wha I did. My wife says my tail will grow back but I don't care. I was care less that night. Now we might starve to death and its my fault. All I can see is the 4 walls. Brown dim and muddy like a pison." (Charlotte, 8 years)

"I can see the opening to our den. It's daytime the light is coming in. Blood is on my fur. My tail is ruend. My children are fritend and my wife is hungry. I been down here for days and days. I wont go out so they can shot me again. It is dark down here and it smells. If I keep thinking I might come up with a plan." (Gavin, 8 years).

David draws attention to three examples of the visual emphasis employed by the moving image class children:

- *"I saw some metal in the moonlight night."*
- *"All I can see is four walls. Brown, dim and muddy like a prison."*
- *"I can see the opening to our den. Its daylight light is coming in."*

He suggests that the children here are using a device common in moving image media "to predicate an audience towards a particular character and thereby create empathy. It is the use of point-of-view - seeing something through the eyes of another. What is interesting about these examples is ... that in a piece of writing

which aimed to establish the feelings or state of mind of a character, the class which was in the process of producing an animation understood that by spatially repositioning the reader inside the character **you could access feelings without necessarily describing them.**" (Parker 1999) ^v

This is a big discovery for 8-year-olds, and it was the creative activity with moving image media – you have to select a camera position – that generated this development in their writing. But to spot this requires a confidence with both moving image media and literary conventions that most teachers do not have. And here is our big problem. Teachers and advisers are seizing upon our resources with enormous enthusiasm, but at the same time they don't seem to recognise their full implications.

We know that many teachers would like to find a good rationale for acknowledging and using children's media experience. But they don't feel confident about how to do this, and, more importantly perhaps, they don't feel they "have permission" – from head teachers or the inspectorate – to attempt it. What our resources seem to offer is some skills in using, discussing and making film in the classroom, and they appear to sanction this kind of activity. Teachers are immediately enthusiastic, but only because they feel that this is helping them to do what they know they are supposed to do: give more children access to the printed word and raise standards in reading and writing. They can also see that children's speaking and listening can improve if they have opportunities to talk about television and other media, because they're confident about them and they feel motivated. In this scenario then, moving image media actually enter the classroom under a very limited set of terms: they are welcomed by English and literacy teachers precisely because they seem to be unthreatening to the integrity of the subject, not because they are of real value in their own right. The existing hierarchy of texts and practices, with verbal language and printed texts still at the top of the pile, remains undisturbed.

As I understand it, the situation in Ireland is effectively very similar to that in England, despite the differences in our curricula: that most study of film within English is almost always in support of literary study, i.e. the “film of the book”. (Kirwan et al 2003) ^{vi} Despite the encouragement that is given in the Leaving Certificate English syllabus to “view films as complex amalgams of images and words”, the emphasis when it comes to the actual examinations is on comparative study of films and literacy texts, and what teachers will inevitably concentrate on is a comparison at the relatively superficial level of plot and theme, because they have got the message that it’s the book that really matters.

When we evaluate the use of our resources by teachers, we are often saddened by the kinds of task that tend to be set in relation to moving image media. Pupils will be asked (as the ones in David’s study were) to imagine themselves inside a character’s mind, or to write an extension to the story. They are unlikely to be asked, as they probably would be in relation to a print text, to pay close attention to the text itself in order to figure out how they knew what the character’s state of mind was in the first place (by looking, for example, for close-up reaction shots, or listening to the music). In other words, few if any of the tasks set are film-specific, or designed to develop and refine pupils’ understanding of moving image texts. We find that teachers will often be explicitly resistant to such an approach, dismissing it as “film studies” and therefore by implication “not English”. We are beginning to realise how enormous a change of practice we are demanding of teachers. It is not only English as a subject, but our entire culture, that downgrades the status of moving images as a distinctive, complex and valuable language. There is almost a moral fervour in our conviction, as a culture, that the meaning of moving images is obvious and consensual. What hope is there for arguing that it is not?

As long as the relationship between English and media is described in terms of subject boundaries, departmental loyalties and career prospects, we provide politicians and the press with ready-made scare stories. In this context, “English” acquires the symbolic value of a totem: something that cannot be debated. Rather

than arguing about what teachers teach, we could address the question of what children learn – and what they need to learn. We should start by paying more attention to the lived experience of children in our schools. Moving image media are important to all of us, and they are especially important to children because they constitute their first experience of acquiring cultural and communicative competence through a shared and public form. If we do not understand that competence, work with it, and develop it, our hopes of enabling children to develop other such competences are fatally limited. We need to reassess what young people are entitled to learn about the communicative forms of their culture, past, present and future. If this were really recognised at government level, perhaps we could then get the kind of investment that's needed to provide enough resources and training for teachers to recognise the real richness and vitality of the moving image.

NOTES

ⁱ “Role of Early Narrative Understanding in Predicting Future Reading Comprehension” by Kathleen E. Kremer, Julia S. Lynch, Panayiota Kendeou, Jason Butler and Paul van den Broek, University of Minnesota, and Elizabeth Puzles Lorch, University of Kentucky, paper presented at AERA Conference 2002, and available at www.ciera.org.

ⁱⁱ Paul Messaris (1994), *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind and Reality*, Westview Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Burn (2003) *English in Education* vol 37 no 3. I am grateful to Mark Reid for drawing my attention to the concept of “multimodality” in moving image media.

^{iv} N. Yuill and J. Oakhill (1991), *Children's Problems in Text Comprehension: An Experimental Investigation*, Cambridge University Press.

^v David Parker, “Moving Image Media, Print Literacy and Narrative”, *English in Education*, Summer 1999. For further research on these lines by David Parker and by Andrew Burn at the Institute of Education, London University, see www.bfi.org.uk/education/research.

^{vi} Tony Kirwan, James Learmonth, Mollie Sayer and Roger Williams (2003), *Mapping Media Literacy*, British Film Institute/Independent Television Commission/Broadcasting Standards Commission.