

## **Reframing Literacy – Film Education for all?**

Between 2000 and 2008 one of the main priorities of the Education department of the BFI has been promoting film within the formal, mandatory curricula across the UK. Tactically, this has meant working within the curriculum structures that are given highest priority, and the debates most salient in education policy: the literacy curriculum, and the emphasis on ‘standards’. Why have we been doing this? How? And with what impact? This paper answers those questions.

In 1999, John Stannard, the head of the National Literacy Strategy in England, approached us and asked us for help in addressing a key dimension of its work. Teachers were becoming increasingly comfortable with the word and sentence level work of the Strategy, but less so with text level work. The NLS wondered whether work with film might help accelerate teachers’ – and pupils’ – understanding of how texts work on a macro-level.

We ran a seminar for senior NLS staff using a short film called *The Sandman*: an 8-minute model animation which uses sound effects and music but no dialogue, and which features a nasty twist in the tale of a small boy sent to bed in fear of being visited by ‘the Sandman.’ The work we did was fairly revelatory on both sides: short films, which constitute whole narratives, can be watched many times over in a literacy lesson. They will typically be films children won’t have seen before, and the element of surprise, delight, and novelty is a useful pedagogic lever. Because short films are produced for international distribution markets, they will often not feature dialogue, but will tell their stories using purely cinematic means. All these characteristics made short films, we realised, a useful alternative to the ways in which film had been and can be used in classrooms.

So, we had government support for bringing film right into the heart of the curriculum for primary children in England – but why would we want to do this, when our emphasis in the past had variously been on supporting specialist Film Studies (in FE and HE), or media education? For two reasons: the establishment of film studies as a discipline by the late 1990s had been successfully achieved (by a number of parties; BFI had led this movement at times in its history, at other times just contributed). And media education, according to one BFI Head of Education writing in these pages before, had usefully established a field of study and a method, but had undersold the distinctiveness of film as a language and a medium (Bazalgette, 2000). The BFI, after all, is constituted by Royal Charter to ‘promote understanding and appreciation of the arts of film and television’, rather than of media in general.

So by 2000, the BFI turned towards an attempt to gain status for film distinctively in the mandatory curriculum: that part of formal education that everyone has to study, before choices and options are made. Even now, and even given the exponential increase in take up of A level Film and Media Studies and equivalents in Scotland, fewer than 10% of 17 and 18 year olds formally study film and media every year. Wasn't it time in 2000 for an attempt to offer *all* children access to the language, cultures, and rich heritage that cinema and TV have to offer?

A significant step was taken in 1999 with the setting up of the Film Education Working Group. The FEWG was set up by DCMS, before government was devolved, with the aim of establishing new structures and opportunities for studying film. It led to a change in the National Curriculum in England, where for the first time moving images and sounds were compulsory study material for 11-16 year olds. It also led to changes in Northern Ireland, through its own review process, and a new dedicated post-16 subject called Moving Image Arts.

The BFI, under its then Director John Woodward, had been asked to move away from a perceived 'super-serving' of the academic film studies community and to engage its publics more broadly in learning about film, in line with the Royal Charter. This was, to my knowledge, the only recent example of government having a decisive influence on BFI's education activity – and it is arguable whether the BFI as a whole made any such change. Nevertheless, along with *Making Movies Matter* (the report of FEWG), it gave the BFI Education department a mandate for working with younger children in formal education, and the new relationship with the National Literacy Strategy opened a space for reaching all children (in England) at the heart of the curriculum.

Our first thought in 2000 was to create learning and teaching resources that presented short films for use in literacy teaching, and this we did, in 2001 publishing *Story Shorts* – a video and book featuring 6 short films, selected after consultation and workshops with a number of teachers, and with explicit teacher- guidance for working them into literacy work. The pack was welcomed by many teachers – but didn't sell well. (Not that our aim is to make money – except to reduce our subsidy from the taxpayer – it is rather that sales are an indication of how far an idea has been taken up). So we began to think about supporting and broadcasting the material via in-service training, typically day-long sessions offered in our cinema on London's South Bank, and in partner cinemas across the UK. The sessions were successful in their own terms – reasonably well attended, and with high degrees of satisfaction – but the reach of the materials (by now we had *Starting Stories* for younger primary and

Screening *Shorts* for lower secondary) was still limited. We needed a way of presenting film-as-literacy to the widest possible group of teachers, in order to have any hope of reaching every child.

We went back to the National Literacy Strategy (now called the Primary National Strategy) and they took copies of *Story Shorts* for each of their 400 most senior consultants; then we devised a plan for engaging those consultants directly through a training initiative called Lead Practitioners. We piloted a residential seminar in early 2005, then wrote to all Local Education Authorities in England inviting them to express an interest in signing up for more. Nearly half of all LEAs replied positively. The terms of their engagement were rigorous: we weren't going to give away training or resources for nothing. We asked them if they would be happy to absorb residential training costs (about £300 per head), and to submit a costed two-year action plan for developing the literacy work with film in their authority. They said yes to both, and over the following two years we trained 200 lead literacy teachers, literacy advisors, and consultants, from 61 local authorities. The LAs (the renamed LEAs) between them committed a spend of £850,000 over the two years of their involvement. The BFI investment amounted to about £50,000 over the two years in staff time – more than recouped by the £450,000 income we generated from sales of the short films resources (of which there are now 7).

#### **Reframing Literacy in numbers**

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| 7         | teaching resources published           |
| 55        | short films collected in the resources |
| 61        | local authorities involved             |
| 200       | lead professionals trained             |
| 2000      | teachers doing developmental work      |
| 5000      | schools reached with resources         |
| 1200      | schools doing developmental work       |
| £450,000  | revenue to BFI on sale of resources    |
| £850,000  | spent by local authorities on training |
| 1,000,000 | estimated no of children reached       |
| £0        | cost to BFI in addition to staff time  |

The programme was evaluated by Jackie Marsh of Sheffield University, and Eve Bearne, then of UK Literacy Association, and published in October 2007 as *Moving Literacy On* (2007). They found from a sample of 27 of the LAs involved, that over a thousand teachers and 600 schools had been directly involved in intensive work using short films in literacy. Many teachers found positive impacts on children's engagement and achievement in literacy which they felt were attributable to their work with film. And similarly many teachers felt that they had significantly developed both their own

understanding of film, and their broader understanding of literacy and creative practice.

There were issues for further development, of course: teachers felt that having been introduced to the basics of film, they really needed that knowledge deepening and developing. We have a tendency to work always with novice-level knowledge in this area and offer little for developing expertise. Teachers also felt they needed support in developing their understanding of how children's learning progresses in this area: how do we pitch activity with film for different ages and levels and types of ability? With Cary Bazalgette, Jackie Marsh, and Christine Hall of Nottingham University, we are working with 15 teachers to begin to answer this question.

This is the why and the how; but more important is the 'what': what were we promoting beyond films and film resources? What were we trying to persuade teachers of? What arguments did we use?

### **Media literacy and traditional literacy**

Concurrent with the *Reframing Literacy* initiative has been a growth in interest in 'media literacy' – specifically in the policy arena with OfCom, DCMS, and parallel government departments in the devolved nations. A commonly cited expression of what media literacy looks like has been published in a Charter for Media Literacy (2005), published in late 2005, which currently has over 300 signatories, from more than 20 European countries. The Charter identifies the constituent parts of media literacy being to 'choose, access, understand, analyse, and create' media content. Even with a specific rubric like this, it is open to varying degrees of inflection and interpretation: in a regulatory context it tends to be about access to digital technology; in media industries it can come out of a corporate social responsibility model. Policy makers in formal education are wary of it lest it become another requirement for inclusion in already over-crowded curricula.

The one aspect of the Charter that people seem to be able to hang onto is the '3Cs' rubric: the notion that to be media literate is to be able to operate culturally, critically, and creatively with media, to the same degree and at the same time. It has helped policy formulation (in relation for example to the latest UK Film Education Strategy), and helped developed pedagogy for educators new to film or other media. It is not without complexities - as Andrew Burn and others have addressed – in particular 'cultural access' doesn't only mean 'breadth and diversity' of culture beyond people's habitual viewing, but also the importance of popular cultural forms, and the media cultures that people (including children) already inhabit (Burn and Durran, 2007).

Faced in the early days with the opportunity to bring film into literacy, we had to negotiate how far film would be absorbed into wider literacy (and the compromises that that would involve) and how separate and distinctive it could remain (with all of the alienating jargon and concepts that *that* entails). We found that film was becoming increasingly popular in primary classrooms for two reasons: to stimulate writing – especially boys’ writing – and as an example of creativity, most often through animation. With the growing visibility of ‘media literacy’ we also had to negotiate film’s role in its definition.

### **Wringing it dry**

The instrumental use of film can prove prey to what Cary Bazalgette has called ‘wringing film dry’ – using it to serve purposes which are often very far away from film. A balance needed to be struck, we felt, between looking *at*, and looking *through* film. We felt that in any case, maintaining the integrity of the film itself – never losing sight of its particularity – would serve film education, and students, best. Our publications *Moving Images in the Classroom* (2002) and *Look Again* (2005) try to do this: exemplifying activity where film or television texts can support learning in ways that no other medium could. Filming science experiments for demonstration purposes (as James Durran has done: Burn and Durran, 2007) is in many ways a prime example: film, being time-based, can show scientific processes more completely than photographs, and doesn’t need to resort to the ‘telling’ protocols of writing. Similarly film can ‘show’ foreign language cultures in action – those combinations of place, human gesture, voice, habitus – again, that print can’t reproduce.

At the same time, from our earliest shorts resource, we wanted to present film as living within the ‘text family’ – partly as a tactic for working with literacy teachers familiar and comfortable with print, but also because of course there are shared features – character, narrative, setting, structure, symbol – across the media of print and film. Our heuristic for this was called the Cs and Ss, following early INSET work which listed those features common to both media (character, setting, story), as well as those (sound, colour, camera) peculiar to film. Since then we’ve added, alliteratively, ‘sequence’, ‘cutting’, ‘category’, ‘symbol’, and ‘composition’.

The field of literacies has been multiplying for a decade so that now we occupy a field of multiple literacies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) and occasionally, for nuance, of ‘modalities.’ (A mode being a language system, where a medium is essentially a delivery vehicle). Writers associated with UKLA like Eve Bearne (2004; see also QCA 2004) as well as Andrew Burn and David Parker (2003) have presented textual models of multimodality – in Burn and Parker’s case making a case for the moving image being itself a synthesised language made up of the

modes of music, spoken language, dress, set design and proxemics, and the time-based system of film itself, which they called the 'kineikonic mode'.

So where in this panoply of categorised literacies, modes, and media, would film be most usefully, and tactically, placed? Our answer, following Bazalgette's formulation that 'to be literate is to participate fully in a culture', was that film, and media literacy, should properly, and powerfully, occupy a specific part of a wider definition of literacy. The film education strategy for Northern Ireland (2004) was called just this. The social participatory definition of literacy has many parents but one source I would pick out is James Gee (1996). Gee's notion of literacy, based on our access to discourses (or what he calls 'saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations', 1996, p 127), is one of the most persuasive formulations of literacy as something in excess of and beyond the functional control of mere languages and media, touching as it does on the full range of interactions a literacy event might mobilise, as well as the hidden icebergs of ideology, belief and assumption.

So we felt that if to be literate is to participate fully in culture, or cultures, then to be literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is surely to have access to all of those dimensions – the critical, the cultural, and the creative – of film, amongst other media and modes, including print.

In June 2008, a group of film education organisations funded by the UK Film Council took this literacy literally in naming their strategy for promoting film education. *Film:21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy* (<http://www.21stcenturyliteracy.org.uk/>) proposes a coming together of these agencies in order to stop duplicating their activity and resource, and enable them to join across the UK with the rest of the education system, where after all the greater half of film and media education currently happens.

And this is where the story ends, so far...

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