

# LEARNING TO READ MOVIES: Integrating National Film Study Standards in the Classroom

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**SPIKE LEE'S 1997 DOCUMENTARY**, *4 Little Girls*, opens with a shot of a cemetery. The visual images are blue-tinted and the gravestones indistinct, intentionally out of focus. The camera movement creates the impression of being on a train and looking out the window at the passing landscape. On the soundtrack, Joan Baez sings—a cappella—"Birmingham Sunday."

*Come 'round by my side and I'll sing you a song*

*I'll sing it so softly it'll do no one wrong . . .*

Suddenly the images change, although the footage is still tinted blue. We see protesters, primarily African Americans. We see police with clubs and dogs. We do not hear shouts or cries of pain or dogs snarling and snapping. We hear only Baez's clear voice singing.

*On Birmingham Sunday the blood ran like wine*

*And the choir kept singing of freedom.*

As Baez begins the second verse, the visuals change once again. We are back in the cemetery. Now the footage is in color, the headstones more distinct. The camera pans downward and focuses on one stone into which the name Addie Mae Collins has been chiseled. Ghostlike, a superimposed image of the 14-year-old girl appears and then fades.

*That cold autumn morning no eyes saw the sun*

*And Addie Mae Collins, her number was one.*

The film cuts again to blue-tinted black and white footage, an exterior shot of a Baptist Church. Hundreds of congregants peacefully walk down the steps and through the street. Some are smiling. They are very much alive.

*In an old Baptist church there was no need  
to run*

*And the choir kept singing of freedom.*

In less than a minute and a half, director Lee has set the somber tone for his film. The soundtrack unifies the contrasting shots of the cemetery and civil rights demonstrations. This parallel editing technique continues for an additional three minutes through the end of the song. And by the end, without voice-over narration or intertitle cards to establish setting, the director has shown us the four young victims of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson. But he has communicated much more. He has created a historical and cultural context for their deaths.

These opening shots are powerfully evocative because of how the images are sequenced, paced, and combined with sound. Questions form in the viewer's mind: Why start the movie in a cemetery? Why juxtapose images of four dead little girls with those of civil rights protesters? What do the lyrics mean relative to the images? What does the director

want us to think or to feel—about the girls? about civil rights? There is no one correct interpretation. The questions themselves are what is important.

In 2017, *4 Little Girls* was named to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, ensuring the documentary will be preserved for future generations as a film of historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance. But what does that mean exactly? And how can we as educators guide students in becoming critical viewers of cinema?

Using film in the classroom is not a new educational practice. Most teachers across the disciplines know the power of movies to engage their students.

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Educators recognize, too, that film is a persuasive language that influences not only how students may perceive themselves but also how they perceive others—other cultures, other races, other genders. The opening shots of *4 Little Girls* illustrate that movies can inform

us about social issues, but so too can they sway or skew our attitude on those issues. Movies are not history. But they certainly shape our comprehension of historical events and people.

Today, when moving images have such a significant influence, it is critical for young people to become cinema literate. To be a critical thinker in the twenty-first century, students must be critical viewers. Simply showing movies in the classroom, however, does not lead to cinema or visual literacy, or even media literacy. Scaffolding is needed, a variety of teaching strategies and practical applications, to guide students beyond the simplistic read-the-book, watch-the-movie approach to a deeper comprehension of movies as works of historical and cultural significance, as well as works of art.

Movies are just one slice of the media literacy pie. But that slice has its own criteria. Cinema literacy requires a knowledge of language and analysis different from that of other visual mediums, such as advertisements and news broadcasts. In 2000, The Film Foundation recognized a need for a film-specific pedagogy to teach cinema literacy in the classroom. In collaboration with educators across the country as well as filmmakers and film historians, the foundation developed National Film Study Standards. The standards have five thematic strands:

film language, historical and cultural contexts, production and creative expression, viewers' response and aesthetic valuing, and cross-curricular connections. These thematic strands provide the foundation for scaffolding meaningful film study lessons.

### **Cinema as Narrative: Watching versus Seeing**

Like all narratives, movies have basic story elements: character, setting, conflict, and plot. Students apply their knowledge of these literary devices to reading the movie. They interpret film depictions to understand character. They use inference skills to interpret the sequencing of scenes, reading between the frames and piecing together the plot. This initial analysis can be called *watching*.

But plot is not story. Whereas plot has an inciting incident, rising action, a climax, and resolution, story has no such structure per se. Story is not what happens. Rather, story is *how it happens* and what it all means. This type of analysis can be called *seeing*. Watching is non-participatory. It requires some effort, yes, but no real engagement. Seeing, on the other hand, requires interpretation, analysis. It is synonymous with understanding, as in “Ah yes, *now I see!*” Cinema literacy is all about seeing. And it is the filmmakers who create what we see and influence how we see it. Understanding this is an essential cinema literacy and critical thinking skill.

So then, how do we teach students to see?

A fundamental principle established by the National Film Study Standards is that film is more than a commodity, more than an industry. Film is a visual language. In learning to read this language, students develop a film-specific vocabulary. This includes types of shots (high-angle, low-angle, long shot, close-up, etc.), camera movements (pan, zoom, tracking shot, for example), and the use of lighting. Many film study programs provide a neat glossary of such cinematic terms and ask students to identify the devices that are at work in a movie. But identifying is surface learning only. It is watching. To become cinema literate, students must go further. They must interpret.

Close reading of a film often requires multiple screenings. First, students watch. They connect the dots between the shots and the scenes to piece together the narrative. Once they know what happens, they can then rescreen and pay closer attention to how the story is being told using cinematic devices. This second screening challenges them to

think deeper about the film's language and elements of style. The goal of this second screening is not to watch and decode the plot, but rather to see and understand the movie's use of film language.

The opening sequence of Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* is an excellent example of this concept of watching versus seeing. The sequence runs approximately four and a half minutes and so can be easily screened multiple times within a single class period. The "watching versus seeing" activity has four basic steps:

**First, watch.** Screen the selected film segment. Allow time for students to record observations, both the images and the sounds. Relative to *4 Little Girls*, some students may identify the use of parallel editing. They may correctly identify the use of superimposition. Others may notice that the images of the cemetery initially are unfocused but later, the images are more sharply defined so that the girls' names can be read on the gravestones.

**Second, discuss.** Focus discussion on images or sounds that are repeated, associations between people or objects, and other devices of visual and sound emphasis. Not all students will have observed the same details, but by sharing their observations, they help each other to see. Prompt deeper thinking by asking students not only to identify the use of parallel editing but to interpret the relationship implied by this editing technique.

**Third, see.** Screen the selected film segment again, then encourage students to share what they noticed in this second screening that they did not observe the first time they viewed the sequence. For those students who did not necessarily identify the use of parallel editing in their first screening, they can observe closely to do so in this subsequent screening. This is also true of Lee's use of color, movement, and ways in which the soundtrack enhances the images.

**Fourth, analyze.** Students now know what happens and how the story is being told cinematically. In this step, they analyze the director's message—that is, how the use of these cinematic devices advances storyline and creates meaning.

"Eyes and Ears" is another activity that addresses how cinematic devices are used to tell a story. The

focus in this activity is on the visual and sound design of the movie. The process is briefly outlined below:

**Eyes Only.** Screen the selected film segment without the soundtrack. Ask: What did you see? Allow time for students to record observations about the images and the actions and/or emotions the images convey.

**Ears Only.** Rescreen the same film segment without the images and just the soundtrack. Ask: What did you hear? Allow time for students to record the types of sounds they hear—effects, dialogue, and music. Prompt discussion on the volume, pitch, and tone of the sounds.

**Eyes & Ears.** Screen the film segment a third time, with both soundtrack and images.

Ask: How do the visual and sound design work together to create meaning?

In moderating the discussion, educators should keep in mind that each viewer brings to the movie his or her own personal dynamics, perspectives, and past experiences. As a result, students' interpretations will vary. In reading a movie as a narrative, all thoughtful viewer responses should be considered. It is the inquiry, the deep thinking that matters most.

### **Cinema as History and Culture: Time and Interpretations**

Every narrative has a setting. But every movie also has a historical and/or cultural context in which it was made. Knowledge of these contexts is essential for fully comprehending the story. This concept of time and interpretations is another key principle of the National Film Study Standards, which challenges students to analyze social issues presented in a film and form conclusions about the ways in which a film influences and/or is influenced by the society in which it is produced.

Asking what part of history the filmmakers got right or wrong is a simplistic approach that does not encourage deep thinking. A more meaningful approach is to explore *why* the filmmaker may have depicted history in this particular way—for what purpose and with what consequences. This approach engages students in historical inquiry. They might work individually or collaboratively to investigate social issues that may have influenced not only the filmmaker but also the audiences at the time the movie was originally released in theaters. The fact

that students' conclusions are speculative does not lessen the educational value of the activity. Again, it is the inquiry that matters.

Spike Lee was six years old in 1963 when a fire-bomb killed Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robinson, and Cynthia Wesley. Decades later while a film student, he read an article about the murders and its galvanizing effect on the civil rights movement across the country. The enormity of the crime struck him, but he felt he wasn't ready yet to make a movie about the event. Another decade later, he returned to the story and traveled to Birmingham to interview the parents of the children, allowing them to tell the story in their own words.

*4 Little Girls* has three historical contexts. The first is the period in which the movie is set, 1963. Across the country a controversial social issue was segregation of the races. The civil rights movement of the mid-1950s and early 1960s was a mass protest to end racial segregation and discrimination. The second historical context is the period in which the movie was made, 1997. This was decades after the 16th Street church bombing and after civil rights legislation had been passed into law in Congress. Lee understood that audiences of the 1990s might not be aware of this important historical tragedy and the galvanizing effect it had on the movement. He had to establish the historical and cultural context for his viewers. He achieved this by using archival photographs and footage of televised news broadcasts that captured the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s.

This context was necessary background information—the canvas—on which to tell the story of the four girls. Rather than make them a statistic, he personalized the political. The girls were the heart of the movie, not the civil rights movement. Lee made this clear in an interview with television commentator Charlie Rose. When Rose asked if the documentary was intended to stimulate people to continue the investigation into the perpetrators of the bombing, Lee answered without hesitation, “No, not at all . . . After seeing this film, we want them [audiences] to know these four girls whose lives were cut short.” He added, “For me . . . one of the most amazing things in making this film is interviewing the parents and the relatives and knowing the loss they suffered for 34 years, but had the courage to go on and keep living, still knowing every night they had to go to bed with this nightmare of knowing that their child had been murdered.”

To capture the spirit of the girls and the pain, but also the courage, of the families, Lee used family photographs and home movies. When interviewing each family member, he positioned his camera very close, making it impossible for a viewer to look at anything else but into the eyes of these individuals.

But there is still a third historical period to consider when reading a movie—and that is the present time. Lee made his documentary decades after the event. Decades have also passed since the movie was first released. A new generation of viewers watching this film will do so through twenty-first-century eyes and sensibilities. As Martin Scorsese has stated, “You can only see the world through your own time, which means that some values disappear, and some values come into closer focus.” A key critical thinking question to pose to students is how their present-day experiences affect how they read and react to the movie.

A far different movie with significantly different themes is Scorsese's 1993 historical drama, *The Age of Innocence*. When Scorsese read Edith Wharton's novel, he felt at once an attraction to the characters who are trapped within a tribal society. The world Wharton had created on the page was “unique,” he said. “Violence and hostility... expressed through very elaborate etiquette and ritual—for me, was fascinating.”

Adapting the novel for the screen posed multiple challenges, one of which was recreating the past. New York City in the 1870s no longer existed. While a novelist uses literary devices to recreate history, a filmmaker's tools are cinematic: framing and composition, lighting and color, pacing and musical composition. Scorsese had to create everything—from city streetscapes to ballrooms and opera houses. Research on the movie took more than two years. This included studying the architecture and interior design of the homes as well as the fashions of the time. Research also included books of etiquette, Victorian floral arrangements, works of fine art, and music. Scorsese needed to know not just how society dressed, but how it behaved. Most important, he had to understand the nuance of innocence—the passions and loss the characters experienced but could not express openly in this gilded society.

Neither Wharton's novel nor Scorsese's film are history. Using movies to teach history is not the objective of cinema literacy. Rather, students tap their knowledge of other disciplines, including

history and social studies, to read the movie. To fully appreciate *The Age of Innocence*, for example, students need some knowledge of nineteenth-century society and its prejudices respective to social class. They need to understand the morality of the times, the social values and accepted norms of behavior for both men and women. This interdisciplinary approach aligns with the National Film Study Standards for cross-curricular connections. More important, it allows teachers of different disciplines to incorporate cinema into their classrooms in a meaningful way, not only to meet film study standards but also standards in English and literature, history and social sciences, and the arts.

One example of a “time and interpretations” historical inquiry project follows:

**Research.** Students work with a partner or in small groups to create a historical and cultural timeline for a specific film. They first identify historical events and people relative to the film’s setting and/or the period in which the film was made. They next identify cultural events that likewise relate to the film’s setting and/or the period in which the film was made.

**Infer.** Students analyze the film’s overall themes and depictions to determine how, if at all, the filmmaker was influenced by the historical and cultural events related to the setting and/or period in which the film was made.

**Present.** Students argue the key historical and cultural events that influenced how the filmmaker told the story. This includes, but is not limited to, production design and costuming and the actors’ performance.

A second activity is identifying and interpreting film depictions. To complete this activity, students must understand film language. They apply their knowledge of cinematic devices to interpret the intended connotation of the depiction, whether it is positive, negative, or neutral. Equally important is exploring why the filmmakers represented their subject in this particular way—that is, how it contributes to the overall meaning of the narrative. The process is outlined below. Depictions are not limited to people only. Depictions may also include places and ideas.

**Identify.** Screen a specific film segment. It may be necessary to screen the segment a second time in order for students to observe and

comment on the following cinematic techniques for revealing the characters’ thoughts and motivations:

- appearance—costuming, hairstyle, makeup;
- acting—body language and expressions;
- dialogue—what is spoken and how, as well as what is *not* spoken;
- composition—how the character is placed within the frame, especially in relation to other people and objects, and how camera angles and lighting determine how the audience sees the character; and
- reactions of others to the subject.

**Interpret.** Prompt discussion on whether students feel the depictions of the characters are positive, negative, or neutral, based on the five points discussed above.

**Infer.** Ask: What do you believe was the filmmaker’s purpose in creating the depiction in this particular way? What does the filmmaker want you to think or feel about this subject?

### Cinema as Art: Aesthetic Valuing

If art is a human expression and feeds the imagination, if art helps us to know ourselves and our world, then film certainly is an art. Aesthetic valuing is another important critical thinking skill and involves a different set of concepts for students to explore.

The first concept is that cinema is a collaborative art that distinguishes it from other art forms. The director has the most complete understanding of a film’s overall vision, but a movie comes into being through the work of artists and technicians from various fields—screenwriters, production designers, cinematographers, actors, musicians, film editors. To understand and to distinguish the various filmmaking roles that contribute to the final work aligns with objectives established by the National Film Study Standards.

Again, the simplistic approach to aesthetic valuing is assigning students to write a movie review. This activity has limited value, especially if it is writing a plot summary and making a thumbs up/thumbs down recommendation rather than exploring the ideas the movie provokes. A more challenging activity is asking students to evaluate the collaborative process. Students attempt to describe the director’s

vision and how all the pieces of the cinematic puzzle come together to create this vision. An example is provided below.

### **Screen the movie.**

**Record observations.** Students write a two-page reaction to the movie they have screened. They should focus no more than one-third of their reaction on the movie's narrative elements (characters, setting, and plot). The remaining two-thirds of their paper should focus on how the story was told visually. They should comment specifically on the cinematic devices they observed. This includes, but is not limited to, cinematography, production design, editing, and soundtrack.

A second concept essential to aesthetic valuing, and one mentioned earlier, is that students will read a movie somewhat differently based on their own past experience and perspective. Meaning, then, is personal. In a viewers' response activity, the students explore how and why the movie affected them—the thoughts and emotions it may have evoked for them. The focus is not on the director's vision but rather on the meaning the individual student has taken from the movie.

In her book, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, Maryanne Wolf describes the stages of development that a child learning to read experiences. The emergent reader listens and mimics words and understands that letters and sentences convey meaning. The child may run a finger along a page and pretend to read. One value in reading to children at this stage is that they learn a vocabulary and a syntax that they most likely aren't exposed to in everyday conversations. A decoding reader understands the meaning of words and paragraphs and can recall details and identify what happens. A fluent reader takes a leap in comprehension—making inferences, analyzing, and forming judgments.

I believe these same stages of development are also true for students learning to read moving images. The students may understand what a movie's story is about—that is, what happens to whom and why. They watch and decode the narrative. They begin to learn the vocabulary and syntax of film. The fluent viewers use inference to read between the frames, to analyze and to form judgments.

Wolf goes one step further. "An enormously important influence on the development of compre-

hension in childhood is what happens after we remember, predict, and infer: we feel, we identify, and in the process, we understand more fully." In short, we empathize. Empathic readers of both print and nonprint texts internalize knowledge, applying it to their own lives and their world.

This emotional response, this connection between the viewer and the movie, is what I believe director Martin Scorsese means when he states that cinema as art is about "revelation—aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation." Sadly, just as not all children make the leap from decoding information to fluency of comprehension, even fewer make the next leap into empathy. For without empathy, we cannot fully comprehend others. Movies are one way educators can enhance students' insight into the experiences of others. This is why challenging students to distinguish between commodity and art has a place in teaching cinema literacy.

Roman Krznaric is a philosopher who believes that using empathy and conversations can lead to social change. And movies have a role in these conversations. He writes, "Cinema offers opportunities for stepping into the shoes of people whose lives we may never have a chance to understand through direct experience or conversation. We can all develop the habit of valuing films not just for their ability to entertain us but for their capacity to stimulate us to think and act with greater empathic sensitivity."

Encouraging students to elaborate on empathic moments in a movie, either through private or public

## TEACHING TIPS

*Many of us became foundationally interested in critical media literacy through our love of the movies. In this chapter, Catherine Gourley describes her work with The Film Foundation as it pertains to helping kids watch, see, and look at the historical value of film, ultimately developing their aesthetic senses. One idea for taking the ideas from this chapter is to give the themes to the students themselves and ask them to find films (or YouTube clips or TV shows) that exemplify the various tasks described in this chapter and present how the films they've found exemplify them.*

conversations, can deepen their comprehension of the movie and the process of aesthetic valuing. But the groundwork must be laid first—knowledge of the movie's narrative and cinematic structure and its historical and cultural context. These three ways of reading a movie—as a narrative, as history and culture, and as art—are not separate from one another.

They overlap. They shape one another. Cinema literate students understand this interaction. ■

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