

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING CINEMA LITERACY





The real question is not whether “Hollywood” movies should be used in the classroom but how and to what ends.

*—Teaching History with Film:
Strategies for Secondary Social Studies*



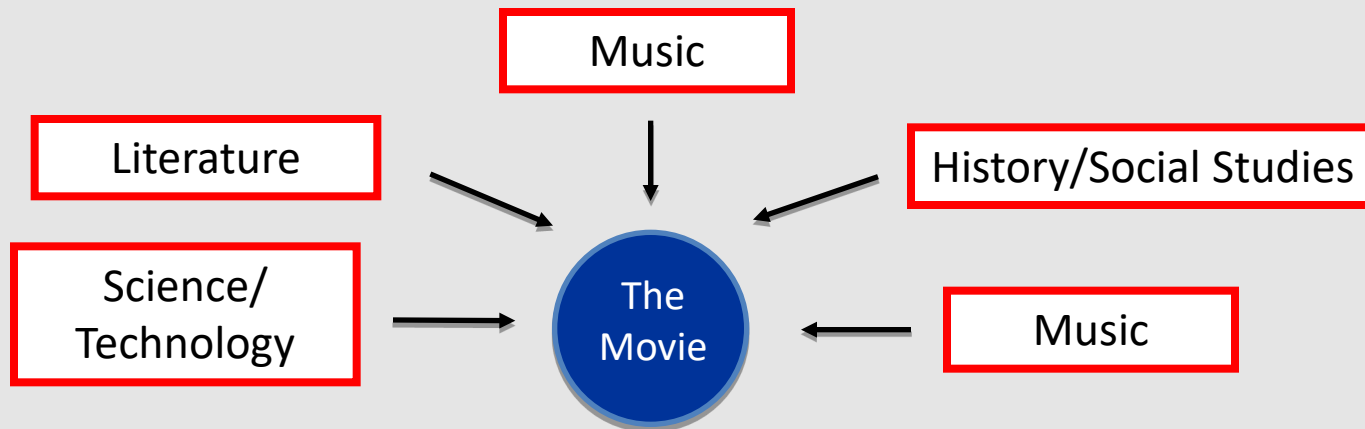
Interdisciplinary Approach

Objective: Students tap their existing knowledge of multiple disciplines to interpret the movie.

- Narrative focus moves beyond decoding the story to thinking critically about *how* and *why* filmmakers create meaning using visual and audio representations.
- Film language focus is on *cinematic devices* rather than literary devices.
- Historical/Cultural focus explores the historical period in which a film was made and the social issues relative to the film's themes.
- Aesthetic focus is on film as an art form, its visual design and elements of cinematic style.

The Story of Movies

Interdisciplinary Approach



By bringing their existing knowledge to analyzing the movie, students move from decoding the narrative to exploring the movie's historical and cultural contexts as well as its aesthetic value.

What Are Cinematic Devices?

Composition

**Selection and arrangement of elements
within a single frame of film**

Cinematography

**Camera distances and angles,
lighting and movement**

Pacing & Continuity

**Sequence of images, the juxtaposition
and timing of the images**

Soundtrack

Sound effects, dialogue, and music

SCREENING ACTIVITY

Close reading of a movie often requires multiple screenings. During the first screening, students connect the dots between shots and scenes to understand the narrative. A second screening allows them to observe more closely *how* the filmmakers tell the story cinematically.

Watching vs. Seeing

Watch.

- Screen the selected film segment.
- Allow time for students to share their observations.

Discuss.

- Prompt deeper critical thinking by focusing on:
 - specific images and sounds that are repeated;
 - suggested associations between people and objects;
 - the juxtaposition of images.

See.

- Screen the selected film segment a second time.
- Discuss what the students noticed in the second screening that they did not notice the first time they viewed the segment.

SCREENING ACTIVITY

Composition is the arrangement of all the elements within a single frame of film. All the elements work together to create meaning. Camera angles and distances as well as lighting are two ways to draw the viewer's attention to a point or points of emphasis within the frame.

Shots & Significance

Analyze.

- Use the video pause button or a movie still to encourage close observation of composition within the frame.
- Prompt students to comment on what caught their attention first and why.
- Encourage deeper critical thinking by asking students to comment on the following cinematic devices used in the shot:
 - The arrangement of people and objects in relationship to one another;
 - The camera angle and distance in relation to the subject;
 - The use of light and shadow to draw attention to or obscure the subject.

Infer.

- ASK: What do you think is the intended meaning? What emotion, if any, does the composition convey?

How Movement Communicates

Movement can engage an audience by drawing them into the action. Movement also creates the illusion of three dimensions, introduces information to the audience, and often draws attention to important details within a shot or scene.

What's in Motion and Why?

Screen.

- Screen the selected film segment.
- Allow time for students to record their observations on movement within the shot or scene, noting one or more of the following:
 - The camera is fixed, and the subject is in motion.
 - The camera is in motion, either moving closer to, farther away from, or around the subject.
 - Both the subject and the camera are in motion.

Infer.

- ASK: What do you think the motion communicates: a passage of time, a change of location, an expression of emotion, and/or a struggle between characters? What is the significance of movement in this shot or scene?

How Music Communicates

Music has distinct functions: to convey information, suggest meaning, and evoke an emotional response in the audience.

5 Principles of Music Composition

Rhythm

Patterns and duration of sounds

Tempo

The pace or timing of the music

Dynamics

Strength and degree of volume

Pitch

Highness or lowness of sound

Timbre

Color or quality of sound, the resonance determined by the type of instrument being played

SCREENING ACTIVITY

The soundtrack includes sound effects, dialogue, and musical score. While students' focus is often primarily on dialogue, additional elements of sound design can influence how they perceive the characters and the situations.

Ears and Eyes

Eyes Only

- Screen the selected film segment without the soundtrack.
- ASK: What did you see?
- Allow time for students to record and share their observations about the images, actions, and/or emotions conveyed.

Ears Only

- Re-screen the same film segment without images, just the soundtrack.
- ASK: What did you hear?
- Again, allow time for students to record everything they heard—sound effects, dialogue, and music. Prompt discussion about the volume 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?

What Is Mise-en-Scène?

- Mise-en-Scène is a type of analysis in which the student identifies elements of composition in a single scene, explaining how all the elements work together to communicate mood and meaning.
- Because Mise-en-Scène requires students to read various cinematic elements—pulling away layers of meaning in the scene—this activity is good for team or group work.
- When writing a Mise-en-Scène analysis, students apply their knowledge of film language terminology. Their focus is on the use of cinematic devices. This includes, but is not limited to: cinematography, production design, editing, and soundtrack.

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Mise-en-Scène

Watch and Record.

- Screen the selected film segment.
- Re-screen the segment, allowing time afterwards for students to record their observations on the use of the following cinematic devices:

Camera Distances and Angles

Lighting

Camera Movement

Soundtrack

Discuss.

- ASK: What information is communicated explicitly?
- ASK: What information is communicated implicitly?
- ASK: What can you infer about the characters and/or the situations based on the use of cinematic devices?

SCREENING ACTIVITY

All films are representations of social reality, at times mirroring and at other times distorting society. Like all visual images, film depictions have connotations that can be positive, negative, or neutral. In this activity, students apply their knowledge of cinematic devices to interpret the connotation of a depiction.

Interpreting Depictions

Identify the Depiction

- Screen the film segment. It may be necessary to screen the segment a second time for students to observe and comment on the following cinematic techniques:

Appearance—costuming, hairstyle, makeup;

Acting—body language and expressions;

Dialogue—what is spoken and how, as well as what is not spoken;

Framing and composition—camera angles and distances, lighting.

Infer.

- Prompt discussion on whether students feel the depiction is positive, negative, or neutral, based on the points above, encouraging them to explain their response.
- ASK: What do you believe was the filmmakers' purpose in creating the depiction in this way? What do the filmmakers want you to think or feel about this subject?

Historical and Cultural Contexts

Time & Interpretations

- When interpreting a film, students should be able to distinguish between past and present and to identify historical and cultural events relative to the film.
- The key question to ask is not what part of history did the filmmakers get right or wrong. Rather, encourage historical inquiry by having students investigate social issues that may have influenced not only the filmmakers but the audiences at the time the movie was made.



SCREENING ACTIVITY

Films are reflections of the cultural and historical periods in which they were made. Studying the period in which a film was made provides insight to social concerns that may have influenced the filmmakers. Audiences viewing a movie in the present day may have different values and sensitivities than audiences at the time the movie was made and first released in theaters.

Time & Interpretations

Research.

- Students identify historical events and people relative to the movie's setting and/or period of production.

Infer.

- Students analyze the movie's overall themes and depictions to determine how, if at all, the filmmakers were influenced by the historical/cultural events related to the movie's setting and/or period of production.

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' performances.