

Film, Culture and the Classroom



What place should film occupy in today's classroom? And how can we utilise cinema to explore cultural diversity?

Film Education

(www.filmeducation.org/) is a charitable organisation set up by our Managing Director - formerly an English teacher in a London school - over 25 years ago. During this time, both education and film-making have undergone significant changes: from chalk and BBC computers to IWBs and student laptops, and from *Back to the Future* and *The Breakfast Club* to *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Boat That Rocked*. The place of film in education has also undergone significant change. With multi-modal texts and the moving image featuring in both the Primary and Secondary Curriculum, film is now part of the fabric of learning. Some things don't change, though: *The Colour Purple*, also released in 1985, remains one of our most regularly requested resources. Our basic remit also remains the same: to provide free film screening events for school students, create curriculum-focused resources on feature films and deliver training for teachers.

At Key Stages 2 and 3, film is closely linked to literacy and the arts. But 'reading' film is a broadly cross-curricular skill: once students have developed a critical eye for viewing film texts, and a vocabulary of terms to express their responses, they can apply these skills in any subject. In Citizenship lessons, film provides stimulus for discussion and debate, helping students to develop advocacy and empathy skills. Films about historical periods can help students to an understanding of another time; they can also provoke discussion about how periods in history are represented - or misrepresented -



onscreen. Moral questions raised within a film's narrative can prompt learners to express opinions and consider alternative viewpoints, as the film's narrative helps make abstract notions concrete. A feature film narrative can also allow students to explore issues in a 'safe' environment - by discussing them in the context of the film, rather than in relation to personal feelings or beliefs. Learning to watch and respond critically to a moving image text can also help students develop an appreciation of the richness of another culture, another time or another individual's world view.



But what sorts of film are suitable for the classroom? In the same way that it's important for students to have a multicultural education, so we should avoid exposing students

to a monoculture of cinema - after all, it's not only the Hollywood studios that produce film. Cinematic diversity is ripe for exploration and filmmakers across the globe bring their messages to the screen in endlessly varied ways. Gurindha Chadha, film director and one of the patrons of our National Schools Film Week festival, explains why she supports our work: 'I very much want Britain to have a film culture and it's got to start with schools. In terms of developing that sense of wonder and that very emotional relationship with the big screen I think it's very important to encourage more filmmakers to take part.' Chadha's films are popular with teachers, and our resources on *Bend it Like Beckham* (www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilm.php?film=1038) and *Bride and Prejudice* are frequently requested.

Students sometimes surprise themselves with the kinds of film they enjoy, and broadening their personal 'film culture' by challenging them to widen their tastes can be very rewarding. For example, a subtitled French language film about a

school, shot in a documentary style, may not instantly appeal to the average fifteen-year-old but our screenings of the film *The Class*



(www.filmeducation.org/the-class/) had a real impact on many students: 'It's not the kind of film I would usually see but it opens your eyes, you know there're different films out there to see so I might go and see a foreign language film again'. Then there's *Persepolis* (www.filmeducation.org/persepolis/)- a black-



and-white animated feature about the life of a young Iranian girl struggling with her sense of identity, as well as her personal politics. A sixth former

at one of our screenings said: 'I found it really intriguing and entertaining to watch, as it's not the kind of thing I'd usually see. The film makes you think past Iran and challenges your preconceptions and makes you look deeper'.

So, a broad experience of film culture and of the cultures represented on film can be hugely rewarding for young people and educators alike. It can also be a lot of fun.

Film can offer an experience of another culture at a glance, in an immersive fashion - for example, the



glamour and the slums of Mumbai in *Slumdog Millionaire*. (www.filmeducation.org/slumdog-millionaire/) It's also interesting to see how one culture views another: did audiences in London respond to *Slumdog* in different ways to audiences in the US, or in India for example? Because reading film means understanding producers, audiences and the systems of communication and feedback between them, a film can tell us much about the people who made it, the time it was made and the audience it was made for. We should encourage students to ask questions of the films they see: is the portrayal of slavery in *Amazing Grace* historically accurate? Does it matter that the main characters in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* never really

existed? Does Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* give an unbalanced view of Iranian society? And what relevance does a docu-drama about a French classroom have for students in the UK? In terms of exploring viewpoint, film is a perfect fit: every representation is subjective, and documentary filmmakers are selective about their footage in the same way that all filmmakers are, choosing an edit that conveys the viewpoints they wish to represent.



Although cinema-going has been part of UK culture for many years, cinema admissions had their all-time high in 1946, when over 1,635 million cinema visits were made. Who

watches film and when, where, and how they watch has certainly changed over the years. But whilst film now competes with a host of other leisure pursuits for our time, the cinema auditorium still works its magic, and every year, Film Education puts on the biggest children's film festival in Europe, National Schools Film Week (www.nsfw.org/). Last October's event saw 400,000 school children attending free screenings of feature films at cinemas around the country, with the cinema acting as the classroom. As far as possible, we aim to provide additional value to the films shown (during classroom time) by producing accompanying resources linked to National Curriculum objectives, and by providing speakers, storytellers and industry professionals to talk to students in the auditorium. Every year, the feedback we get from educators and learners is overwhelmingly positive: for some of the younger children especially, this is the first time they've ever seen a film at the cinema and they relish the experience.

If you're feeling inspired to bring film into the classroom, our latest screening and resource programme features an educational website for KS3 students on the film *Sounds Like Teen Spirit* (www.filmeducation.org/soundsliketeenspirit/), exploring culture, creativity and identity. For older students, our resource on the film *Shifty* (www.filmeducation.org/shifty/) contains



materials suitable for Film and Media Studies. Our Film Library (www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilms.php?id=A) features many more film-based resources, all of which are free to access. We are currently developing our programme of screening and teacher training events for 2009 with more locations being added on a reg-

ular basis: just visit our website (www.filmeducation.org/) for more details.

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Film Education

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The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on the 'Real Histories Directory' link, then 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

A new section for parents, **Tell Me What I Need to Know**, is designed to help parents, especially those from Black and Minority Ethnic, Refugee, Asylum-Seeking and Traveller communities to support their children in education.



We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymede.trust.org.