

Learning from Film



Over the last few years, moving images have become a common feature of many primary and secondary classrooms. Recent changes in exam board and curriculum requirements offer students opportunities to incorporate reading of the moving image and even to present their ideas and responses in film format.

Moving image texts are prevalent in many curriculum areas and yet close reading of these texts is often limited to English and Media Studies lessons. At Film Education (www.filmeducation.org/), we believe this is a missed learning opportunity. Young people are exposed to media and moving image texts on a frequent basis outside of the classroom, so teaching them how to read and interpret these texts not only adds a relevance and authenticity to their learning, it also gives them a very useful skill.

Film Education, a charitable organisation founded over 25 years ago, provides teachers with a framework through which to approach teaching with and about films in a rigorous yet accessible fashion. This article explores some practical ways in which teachers can use newly released films to deepen young people's understanding of cultural diversity by introducing concepts such as representation, critical analysis and Western gaze and by organising film screenings inspired by National Schools Film Week events.



But with so many films to choose from, where does one start? Last month over 450,000 young people in the UK went to the cinema free with their school, to see one of 200 different films shown during Film Education's National Schools Film Week (NSFW). Many of the films screened were accompanied by talks from industry professionals or experts in subjects linked to the films' content. A fundamental principle underlying NSFW is that students are offered an insight into the culture and lives of people from around the world and the films shown at our events often depict the lives and experiences of young people.

Africa United

The feature film *Africa United*, released on 22 October, provides a great opportunity for exploring ques-



tions of cultural diversity and developing in young people a sense of connection between their lives in the UK and the lives of children thousands of miles

away. The film tells the story of a journey made by a small group of African children who decide to travel across the continent to fulfill a dream of attending the South African World Cup. With a strong focus on friendship, the filmmakers are clear that they did not want this to be a stereotypical portrayal of African children defined by nothing more



than their poverty and disadvantage. From a global citizenship perspective, therefore, this film provides interesting opportunities for work with young people. With varying degrees of detail, the film touches on themes such as HIV, child prostitution and child soldiers and yet, whilst these ideas are covered with seriousness, the film is still suitable for a KS3 audience as well as for older children.

Film Education's latest resource

(www.filmeducation.org/africaunited/) explores the film from a range of perspectives using key clips and stills that students read closely in order to establish how and why certain meanings are created. By teaching learners to question visual texts, we equip them with critical thinking skills that can be transferred across a range of disciplines. For example, a still image from *Africa United* showing the children trekking through lush forests on foot provides excellent stimulus for discussion in geography. Did you expect the children's journey



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across Africa to look like this? Do you think this image is typical of how their journey might look? Why is it being presented in this way? Such questions encourage students to reflect on their knowledge and understanding of the scale and geography of the African continent. The film includes a child's drawing of a map of Africa that is used to chart their journey. Research tasks based on this film asset

provide opportunities for developing skills and knowledge about the geographical relationship between countries and consolidating understanding of the continent's scale.

For older learners, or to provide stretch and challenge, the film can be used to investigate the concept of 'Western gaze' and notions of cultural perspective. Students of film studies, citizenship and business studies might explore the reasons why western perspectives are more dominant in world cinema and how this affects our understanding of global issues. Who financed *Africa United*? To what extent is it an African film? What do we know about the African film industry? Is this film aimed at African audiences? Such questions invite learners to engage with the film at a level that goes beyond simple responses to its narrative content.

I come from a Further Education College and I would use this film in the classroom. I would certainly teach the themes: diversity, safe sex, HIV. I found it really interesting ... for the students to discuss those issues and I think it's relevant to our students 16 to 19 to pull out on the many themes that came out of the film. I thought it was brilliant, really fantastic.

Teacher, City and Islington College

Made in Dagenham



Another interesting film for teachers looking to deepen young people's understanding of cultural diversity specifically in the UK, *Made in Dagenham*

was released on 1 October. The film tells the story of the women machinists at the Ford Dagenham car plant who took strike action in 1968 to fight for equal pay for women. The film has a distinctly British character and Film Education's resource (www.filmeducation.org/madeindagenham) includes a section entitled 'Britain Onscreen' to engage young people in thinking critically with debates around concepts of Britishness. Using questions adapted from a report published by the Commission for Racial Equality, students reflect on assumptions and ideas they have about definitions of Britishness before looking closely at still and moving images to identify how the filmmakers have represented this concept in the film. This accessible stimulus material gives learners confidence to engage with a subject that they may otherwise find, at one extreme, too abstract and at the other, too personal.

It's one of those films that has such broad curriculum appeal... A must for most schools and colleges.

Suraj Pillai, St Charles 6th Form College, Kensington and Chelsea.

Discussion about concepts of representation in film – in terms of social class, gender or race for example – is both relevant and challenging for Citizenship lessons. In this context, teachers can support students to recognise that moving image texts are a visual construct and that, however realistic they may appear, the images on screen have been carefully framed, selected and edited to create specific meaning. A close study of the assets from a film such as *Made in Dagenham* helps students ask questions such as: what are the women protesting about? Why don't the union full-time officials take the women seriously? Where are the black characters? What has changed since then? How accurate is this version of events? Asking these questions and working out answers develops students' critical thinking skills specifically in both History and Citizenship whilst building learners' general awareness of the concept of representation and increasing their ability to read moving image texts in a wide range of contexts.

Community Cohesion

Developing your school's relationship with local cinemas by organising screening events along the lines of NSFW offers an innovative way to strengthen your school's commitment to community cohesion. A lead teacher could work with a student group to organise a screening event at a local cinema, inviting children from various year groups, students from neighbouring schools or even carefully selected members of the local community. This kind of activity enables students to create a shared cultural experience that goes to the heart of the school's community cohesion agenda.

Start by finding out if your local cinema employs an education officer with whom you and your students can liaise. If no one fulfils this role, liaise with the cinema manager. Students should, wherever possible, lead the planning and delivery process including:

- Researching films that would promote knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity in the UK;
- Researching and contacting key individuals or organisations to invite to a Questions and Answers event after the screening;
- Liaising with local cinema manager or education officer regarding organisational aspects to the event;
- Reaching consensus as to who the event is aimed at within the local community, both in and outside of the immediate school community;
- Promoting and publicising the event;
- Overseeing proceedings on the day;
- Researching and agreeing resources (including visiting speakers etc) to be used in school to follow up the screening event;
- Reviewing and evaluating the success of the event and planning for future events.

Critical understanding of film and the moving image is becoming an integral part of literacy and therefore

central to a young person's educational entitlement. Moving image texts are increasingly positioned alongside more traditional stimulus material in the classroom and, arguably, teachers have a responsibility to equip their students with the skills of analysis to understand how and why such images have been constructed. This is particularly relevant when considering questions of cultural diversity and identity. From this perspective, studying moving image texts should not be confined to the classrooms of English, Media and Film Studies but should inform teachers' practice across the curriculum. To support you in developing this aspect of your teaching, Film Education creates curriculum-focused resources on feature films and delivers training for teachers. We also provide free film screening events for school students and offer advice to teachers wishing to organise their own screening events. We would encourage you to browse our resources, try some with your classes and send us your ideas and feedback.

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