

# **Beyond Read-the-Book, Watch-the-Movie**

## **An Interdisciplinary Approach for Teaching Film in the Middle School Classroom Presented by The Film Foundation In Partnership with IBM and Turner Classic Movies**

Educators have long used film in the classroom, but too often the screening is not a study of film language or film's narrative structure. Instead, screenings are often a passive viewing experience, for both the student and the teacher.

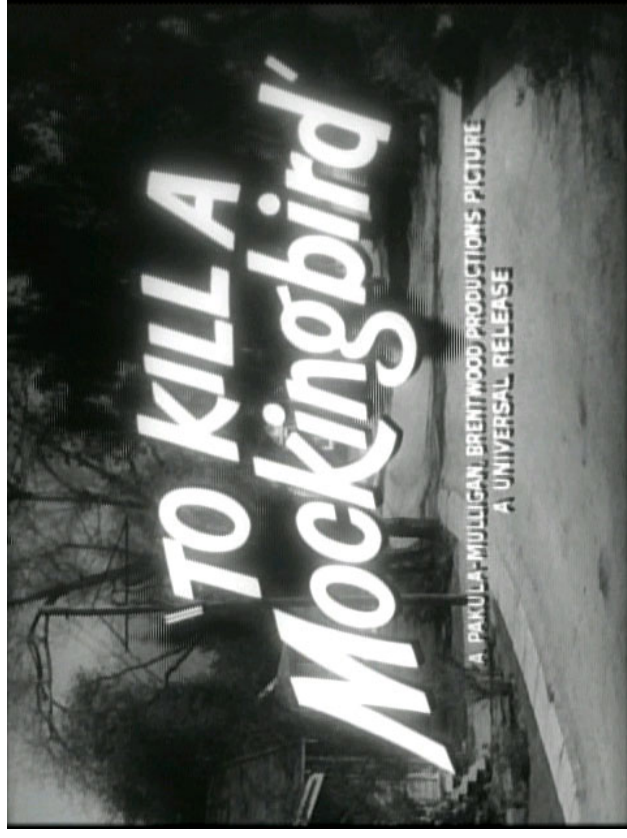
Two common approaches to teaching film follow.



# Approach #1: Read-the-Book, Watch-the-Movie



- **Strategy:** Teachers use the movie to help students decode a book or play they have read. This shortchanges both the book and the film because students aren't learning to read either one.
- **Limited value.** Students are not learning the language of film nor are they placing film in a historical or cultural context. Questions focus primarily on what the filmmaker got right — or wrong — in translating the prose narrative onto the screen.



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## Approach #2: Multi-Disciplinary Connections

- **Strategy:** Teachers categorize films into theme-based units, identifying links between the theme and some aspect of the film. Often the teacher will use short film clips from various films to illustrate a theme.
- **Greater value but still limited.** Students are learning *through* film but not *about* film. The film is a springboard or motivational tool for introducing other topics. Again, students are not learning to decode the moving images or to place those sequences of images in a historical or cultural context. Additionally, screening activities introduce students to a variety of images but students are not studying a single film in depth.

## **Approach #3:**

### **Interdisciplinary -**

a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, topic, issue, problem or work.

—Heidi Jacobs, Ph.D., Columbia University,  
*Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation (1989)*

The difference between multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary is subtle but significant, as it determines not only how educators approach film study, but also the scope and content of the lessons and activities.

**The interdisciplinary approach** challenges students to tap their knowledge of subject areas such as language arts, history and social studies, science, art and music, and apply that knowledge to explore and learn about a new field of study.

## **Example: Applying knowledge of history/social studies**



Pre-screening discussion focuses on the boxed topics. Knowledge of these subject areas prepares students to better interpret the scene.

**Knowledge of  
Lincoln's  
Gettysburg  
Address**

**Knowledge of how  
America's Civil  
War divided the  
country**

**Lincoln Memorial  
Scene from  
*Mr. Smith Goes  
to Washington***

# Example: Applying knowledge of literature and language arts



Pre-screening discussion

## Methods of characterization:

- character's behavior
- character's physical appearance
- character's spoken words
- opinion of others



Screening: Bob Ewell at Tom Robinson's house at night



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## Example: Applying knowledge of music

Pre-screening discussion

**lyrics & melodies  
of American  
patriotic songs,  
folk songs and  
ballads**

Screening: Smith's tour of Washington, D.C



Courtesy of Columbia Pictures

**characteristics  
of music:  
rhythm, pitch,  
dynamics**

## **Comparing the Three Approaches**

### **Read-the-Book, Watch-the-Movie Approach**

Questions focus on comparing one storytelling venue to the other. Example: What part of the novel did the film get right... wrong?

### **Multi-Disciplinary Connections Approach**

Questions focus on the content area. For example: What can you learn about segregation by watching this movie?

### **Interdisciplinary Approach**

Questions focus on *how* and *why* filmmakers create meaning through visual and audio representations. Example: How do the filmmakers depict social classes in the rural South in this scene?

# What Is a Movie?

In challenging students to move beyond read-the-book, watch-the-movie, the SOM interdisciplinary approach focuses on three areas of instruction:



**Film is a  
uniquely  
collaborative  
art form**

**Film is a powerful  
communication tool**



**Film is a  
cultural,  
historical  
document**

# Film as a Communication Tool



When I was a kid, I thought that movies were made in an hour and a half and that they were shot in sequence. I was vaguely aware that there had to be a camera, but I imagined that it could change setups instantaneously. . . .

It took a long time for me to realize that movies are made. I had to step back even further to notice that they are made of shots, that each shot is a unit in itself as well as part of the whole, and that it is possible for the way a film is shot to convey its meaning.

—Bruce F. Kavin, Ph.D.,  
film historian, professor of English and film,  
University of Colorado, as quoted in *How Movies Work*, 1

Although students tap their knowledge of literary devices, such as imagery and characterization, in decoding films, they must advance to learning the language of film itself. A film is not a novel and so the filmmaker communicates using different tools than a novelist does. Rather than literary devices, the filmmaker uses cinematic devices.

## **What Are Cinematic Devices?**

**Composition** — selection of images and how they are framed

**Pacing & Continuity** — sequence of images, the juxtaposition and timing of the images

**Cinematography** — camera distances and angles, lighting and movement

**Soundtrack** — both visible and invisible sounds as well as music

# How do filmmakers create depictions?

## Literary Techniques:

- Methods of Characterization ↔
- Character's Physical Appearance ↔
- Character's Behavior ↔
- Character's Speech ↔
- Character's Thoughts ↔
- Reaction of Other Characters ↔

## Cinematic Techniques:

- Framing and Composition
- Costume and Make-up
- Acting
- Dialogue
- Lighting, sound, camera angles, visual symbols
- Reaction Shots

# Film as a Historical and Cultural Document



Film is a cultural document through which to explore the values and social issues of the past.

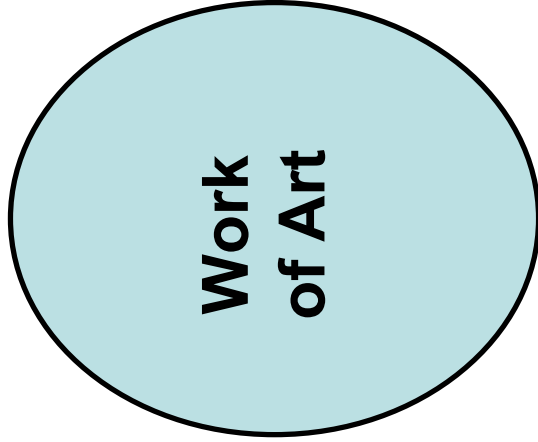
Students explore the historical period in which the film was made and the social issues relative to the film's themes.

Discussion does not focus solely on what part of history the filmmaker got right — or wrong. That is an exercise in fact-checking that has limited value. Rather, lessons challenge students to explore the social issues and biases that may have influenced the filmmaker. Asking *Why did the filmmaker make this movie in this way* or *Why did the filmmaker create this depiction* challenges students' critical thinking skills and prepares them to make informed judgments about the images they are viewing.

# Film as a Work of Art



## Mirror Images



### Viewer's Interpretation

The person you are determines, in part, *how you interpret* a work of art. Often you may see yourself reflected in the work of art, as when you relate to a character, an event, or a setting. Your understanding of your world is what you *bring* to the work of art.

### Viewer's Response

The work of art, in turn, may alter or influence your view of yourself, other people, or the world. Your *reflections* are what you see in the work of art and *take away* with you. This includes ideas as well as emotions.

## **Final Note:**

### **Selected Scenes v. The Entire Film**

A fundamental principle on which The Story of Movies is based is that students should view and study the entire film rather than snippets or selected scenes.

#### ***Why?***

- Films, like novels, have structure (a beginning, middle and end) that creates meaning. We do not study a novel by selecting just the first three chapters.
- Films, like history, have cause-and-effect relationships. We do not study history by studying just three famous individuals or one cause-and-effect relationship.
- To understand a film narrative, you have to see the whole picture. What happens in act 1 affects what happens in act 2 and that, in turn, determines the outcome in act 3.