

Reframing Literacy: a film pitch for the twenty first century

To get a film made in Hollywood there's a practice of 'pitching' an idea for a film as succinctly as possible to a busy studio executive. Succinct, for Hollywood, means '24 words or less'¹. In trying to influence educational change, it's a practice we could learn from. So here's a pitch for a conception of literacy in the 21st century:

'Literacy is not just about the written word.'

The pitch wasn't made by someone in film education, but by a city councillor in Peterborough a couple of years ago; if a politician has picked up and internalised an idea like this, then either someone has worked pretty hard to brief him, or - and I'd like to think this is the case - it might just be that the idea is a sound one, whose time has come..

Peterborough is one of over 60 local authorities in England that have been participating in a campaign led by BFI to 'reframe' literacy; our aim has been to persuade teachers, curriculum managers, and politicians that to be literate in our world we need to have as much familiarity with the language of the moving image as with the codes and conventions of speech and writing.

[PANEL]

As part of its campaign *Reframing Literacy*, between 2004 and 2007 the BFI enabled 60 local authorities in England to work directly with 2000 teachers and 1200 schools to develop a film-rich literacy curriculum. In our teaching resources we compiled 55 short films on 7 DVDs for KS1-3 and to date have sold over 13000 copies. We called the campaign *Reframing Literacy* because we wanted to do two things: to incorporate film into teachers' literacy practice, and children's literacy experience at school; and to extend, diversify, and enrich children's cultural experience by including films from around the world, and from film's rich heritage. The evaluation of the programme, by Professor Jackie Marsh of Sheffield University and Dr. Eve Bearne of UKLA, found evidence of direct positive impacts on the print literacy of children, and on the motivation and engagement in literacy of both pupils and teachers (Marsh and Bearne, 2007). Overall, children responded very strongly to films that differed from their usual domestic experience of the medium. Our account of the campaign is captured in a book of the same name: *Reframing Literacy* (BFI, 2008)².

If literacy is not just about the written word, what else is it about? The 'literacy' suffix has been multiplying in public discourse for a decade, probably more. Jonathan Douglas, Director of the National Literacy Trust, recently clarified the literacy debate quite helpfully when he said that on the one hand we have a 'strong' core definition of literacy; while on the other we have literacy as metaphor – visual, digital, media, cine-, emotional, and

¹ For hilarious examples of film pitches gone horribly wrong, see Robert Altman's Hollywood insider film *The Player* (1992)

² The full story can be found at

http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/teachlearn/pdf/reframing_literacy.pdf - or you can Google BFI Reframing Literacy

any number of other literacies. This bifurcation, between 'core' or 'basic' literacy, and other 'add-on' literacies has two impacts on teachers and policy makers: the core 'strong' definition of literacy stays unchanged ('it's about words') while the literacy cognates, like distant cousins, clamour for a hearing, making a noisy din, scaring the 'word' people with their unreasonable demands.

What I want to argue here is that a core definition of literacy can be both inclusive and intellectually strong, thus removing the need for policy makers and teachers to try and cover every 'new' kind of literacy as it, and its lobby group, arises. My definition of literacy relies on making a crucial distinction: between a medium of communication, and a language system.

Let's not deny it: the new digital media have genuinely transformed the way society speaks to itself, imagines for itself, and represents itself. The one radical change is that a way of coding information – essentially by programming electronic switches to turn on or off – can now handle ideas, messages or data in any form. Voices, photographs, moving pictures, music, numerical data, the alphabet, the 'quack' and 'chime' sounds made by Apple Macs, the 'page loading' animated icon for internet explorer (probably the most watched piece of moving image in the world) – they're all at root composed out of noughts and ones, the binary code of computing.³

However, I believe that what the digital encoding protocols have *not* done, is alter the DNA of the languages (or 'modes', to use the modish term) that digital technologies bring to us. True, screens present words to us in ways different from books, or advertising billboards come to that, but they haven't changed the alphabet itself. They haven't in themselves invented new words, or rewritten the grammars that govern their combination.⁴

What's true of printed words, as one language system, is true of others. Digital technology hasn't altered the pentatonic scale, for example, and recorded speech is essentially the same thing whether you download it or listen to it on the radio, or on a scratchy piece of vinyl. And it's the same with the language system that I work with, the moving image. Regardless of whether it comes to us as television, or in the cinema, or on a mobile phone, the moving image has a system of rules, conventions, and expressive possibilities that determine how it communicates, and in many ways the system remains stubbornly resistant to the technologies that bring film to us.

It seems clear to me in fact that there are a small number of language systems or modes that together constitute what it means to be literate in the 21st century – and that they were pretty much the same for the 20th century too. The modes are: speech, writing, pictures and moving pictures,

³ The writer Lev Manovich (2001) writes eloquently on the distinctiveness that is digital - but also how digital technology recreates older media – books, pages, video, analogue sound – in new contexts. He's also the origin of that idea about the page loading icon.

⁴ though they may determine different kinds of arrangement of words - shorter paragraphs, say, or different page layouts - and the ways in which we read them.

music, and the dramatic modes of performance and gesture and the 'mise en scene' of theatre design.

Of the academics I am aware of who have written about modes (Kress, 1996; Burn and Parker, 2003; Burn and Durran, 2007; Marsh et al, 2006), Andrew Burn has been the writer who focuses on and explains most clearly, what the relationship is of film to these other modes. Film, he says, combines modes uniquely - music, speech, costume, body language and gesture - and combines them with its own 'kineikonic' mode - its own recorded, time-based choreography. Beyond this he points out that the texts that constitute English have always integrated more than one mode: the ballads we read were once musical; the Gospels were illustrated, as were Blake's poems; Shakespeare wrote to be spoken and performed, not read. Multi-modality isn't a new fangled thing, brought to us by a new fangled technology; it's always been with us, but it's only recently that we have woken up to it.

But beyond the multi-modality of film, there are threads *between* modes that traditionally have been seen as unrelated. Recently Cary Bazalgette has looked closely at the modes of writing, speech, and film, alongside the media of print and screen (2008). She asks whether it makes sense to distinguish between texts that come to us via print, and those that are durational, time-based, and recorded. Her phrase (from an earlier article, 2000) is that the time-based, durational texts are 'stitched together' in time. As well as helpfully drawing attention to film modes that are often overlooked - the audio and temporal dimensions of film - she also makes connections across modes in a way that reveals continuities as well as differences. If a new 'modal' definition of literacy is to work, it needs common agreement on features that modes share, as well features that make them distinctive.

I often explore the comparison between the modes of writing and film with teachers and trainee teachers, by asking the question 'how do writing and film tell stories differently, and what strategies or features do they share?' A typical response will come back that '*writing leaves more to your imagination; it's a more active process*', to which I usually ask whether anyone has ever read 5 pages of prose without taking in a word of it - and in fact isn't there such a thing then as 'passive reading'? And how is passive reading - or viewing - possible, if not because we're so able to process the language, so sophisticated at it, that we can process it on auto-pilot. By the same token, observation suggests that young children, contrary to popular belief, don't process the moving image passively: sit with any 3 year old and watch a piece of film with them and see how their processing is all externalised; they ask the questions and 'think aloud' the sense-making that as adults we have long since learned to internalise.

But there's another counter to the 'passive, already imagined' reduction of film: there are some things that films *do* leave to the imagination: they can show us how people are feeling, and this is especially powerful when characters are feeling complex or contradictory things. To use some examples that I've noticed recently, there's a memorable shot of Nicole

Kidman's face about a third of the way through the film *Birth*⁵, or there's the final exchange in *Lost in Translation*, or the last shot of the final episode of series 1 of *The Wire*⁶. The strength of film lies in its ability to *show*, where the lazy option is to *tell*. Getting writing, especially children's writing, to *show not tell*, is a much tougher challenge.

So if, as it seems clear to me, there are a small number of inter-related, but distinctive, language systems or modes that together constitute what it means to be literate in the 21st century, and film has its own equal but different mode of operation, the question for those in charge of the curriculum, and for English teachers in particular, is how to organise children's encounters with those modes in school.

For much of its life, subject English hasn't had a settled rational system for making sense of 'texts'. Even the notion that the world can be 'textualised' has been challenged (Morgan, 1996)⁷. Over the decades, English has absorbed a whole range of cultural activity and forms of life into its maw: books of course, but also speech production, film, other media like newspapers and magazines, television (though actual study of TV has always been rare in English), advertising, and now all the new media forms like blogs, wikis, and other web paraphernalia, texting on mobile phones and yes, even computer and video games. Through this period of change, the modes that produce this range of texts have been pretty constant: speech, writing, performance, pictures, moving pictures with sound. And yet English still has no organised rationale for covering these, no 'blueprint' that sets out with any equivalence what distinguishes these modes, and more importantly, what they have in common. Instead, it has by accretion added each new textual outfit as it becomes fashionable, as if to keep updating its wardrobe with each new fashion without ever having Trinny and Susanna to sort out its 'basics' once and for all.

The result is a mess. As the recent Cambridge Review of Primary Education puts it:

Separate development and management of the national strategies (by DCSF) and the national curriculum (by QCA) have dislocated the teaching of English and mathematics. *English is in urgent need of re-conceptualisation.* (italics mine) (Report of the Primary Review, 2009)

⁵ It's an extraordinary shot, in an extraordinary film; she's at a concert having just met an 11 year old boy who has claimed to be her reincarnated husband. More than one film critic has cited it as the moment when they realised 'Kidman could, you know, actually *act*'.

⁶ It feels like I've come very late to *The Wire*, but if you're with me, what is Stringer Bell thinking as he counts out his dollars in the funeral parlour? If you want to take it a little further, what is the *film* telling us has been going on throughout the whole series? If the idea that a film can *think*, that it has an agency independent of its makers and its watcher, intrigues you, then you need to read Daniel Frampton's *Filmosophy* (2006).

⁷ I'm not certain how useful it is to call computer games a text, for example: isn't its 'game' status the point - you play it, rather than watch or read it. Bob Morgan says essentially that English 'textualises' a plethora of areas of experience and turns them into objects of study; nobody has 'textual' experiences outside of an English classroom. Instead we're all happy enough reading books, watching films, going to the theatre - not the same as textual study at all.

A medium doesn't need a literacy

The key thing for me is that the medium of delivery for these modes – the book, the radio, the computer, the cinema, the DVD – doesn't in itself require a special literacy to engage with it. The immateriality of binary code doesn't in itself change the fact that people need to be able to know how to watch, read, write, and listen in order to communicate via the new media technologies. I think clarifying this might help make sense of the literacy metaphors Jonathan Douglas referred to.

One implication of a simplifying of 'core' literacy around a handful of modes instead of around a plethora of media and technologies is that it directly challenges the notion of the need for a special 'media literacy'. The rubric for 'media literacy' that the BFI signed up to – and actually helped define – in 2004/ 2005 covered the following elements:

To be media literate means being able to **choose** and **access, understand** and **analyse, create** and **express** oneself from and in a range of media forms. (paraphrased from the Charter for Media Literacy, 2005)

But the underpinning verbs here – *choose, access, understand, analyse, create* and *express* – all could equally refer to the modes of speech and writing and dramatic performance, as well as to moving images and sounds – and the verbs operate independently of the media in which we access them. The definition is one that could apply to a strong definition of literacy that covered those modes.⁸

The one thing that new media technologies have changed is our ability to make and distribute new kinds of things out of the modes of speech, music, drama, writing and images, and our ability to present these modes in new combinations. It is now easier to compose, construct, and edit in these modes than it was before, and is especially marked in our ability to remake things using pre-made material – like the sound loops in Garage Band, or the film clips in the Creative Archive, or even a digitised version of Paradise Lost. Maybe this is why the past 10 years have seen an explosion of interest and investment in media-making technology in schools.

In schools, a strong focus for film has been on the 'skills' associated with using film-making technology. At their most basic, film-making skills tend to be about handling cameras and learning software applications. Because cameras and computers upgrade very frequently, and teachers are busy, the skills tend to be functional, and learned at entry level. Because there are no models of progression in making film, and no requirement for children to get better at it, children tend to stay at that level, no matter how old they are⁹. The problem with a skills-based approach to media making is more

⁸ The aims of the Charter for Media Literacy have been boiled down to a handy formulation called the 'three Cs': the creative, critical, and cultural dimensions of media. The three Cs have themselves been absorbed into other subjects, for example informing the conceptual underpinning of Art and Design, Drama, and English in the Revised KS3 curriculum.

⁹ 8 and 9 year olds are now editing film as easily as GCSE students used to when I was teaching them 15 years ago; the 8 and 9 year olds are also learning about close-ups and long shots which again, I used to teach at GCSE.

fundamental though: a skill is a context-specific operation. Training in such an operation tends to prepare one only for operating in that context. A child who just learns how to use iMovie or Moviemaker is not learning that editing news, documentary, or music video involves different kinds of understanding. They're not necessarily learning how to *make meaning*, which is what editing is fundamentally about.

Progression in Understanding...

A recent source of illumination on the relation between knowledge, skills, and understanding comes from the Interim Report of the Independent Review of Primary Education. One of Sir Jim Rose's bold claims is that 'understanding is the crowning attribute of learning.' (2009) The implication is that in our emphasis on subject knowledge, and on skills, we've been promoting a limited view of learning. 'Understanding' is the grounding that enables us to develop our skills, and to apply them to new contexts. To do that we need to mobilise subject knowledge, but acquiring that knowledge isn't a sufficient end in itself ('coverage is the enemy of understanding' as Howard Gardner puts it, (1991)).

A literacy curriculum for the 21st century should prioritise developing children's understanding of how the dominant cultural modes of speech, writing, performance, pictures, and moving pictures with sounds operate; how to choose from a wider range of texts than they might otherwise; how to read, interpret and analyse those texts; how to make them, and use their language systems to express themselves. Doing all three requires cultural breadth, critical engagement, and creativity. To be capable in any one of these dimensions alone doesn't qualify someone as a fully literate participant in a culture. The 'three Cs' need to be fully integrated, so that children critically evaluate what they create, and so that what they make is grounded in a wide range of cultural experience.

What kinds of 'understanding' are we looking at in film? We would maybe want to enable a child to understand the following (and we'd assess that understanding not always by asking them to write about it, but to *show us they understood it!*):

How point of view is created in a film – and how film can move between points of view

How film can show us the emotional states of characters – from simple to complex – and how representations of emotion engage audiences and enable us to identify with (or against!) characters

How the soundtrack in a film can situate us in several places at once; understanding the differences between the kinds of sound that are 'inside' the film, and those that are 'outside'.

How editing can show us more than one thing happening at the same time, or how we can change a viewer's response to a character by editing shots in a different order.

How film can present an idea or an argument by 'showing' rather than 'telling'.

How many of the things we see in a film are put there deliberately – by a director, writer, actor, composer, cinematographer, or editor (but that much of a film’s texture comes about ‘unconsciously’)

[PANEL]

... and understanding progression

BFI – along with Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, UKLA, and the universities of Sheffield and Nottingham - are currently supporting a small QCA-funded research project with teachers in Leeds and Lincolnshire to identify the kinds of understanding about film that children bring to the classroom, and how this understanding might be supported and developed. The teachers have been working hard to discover what primary aged children do and don’t know and understand about film, in areas like authorial intention, sound, identification with characters, how genres prime our expectations, and how visual styles of film, particularly animation, vary widely. We will be presenting at UKLA’s international conference at the University of Greenwich 10th-12th July

To recap

English is a language-based subject, but the languages that children need to access and control are – and have been for a century, even longer – ‘more than words.’ English could productively rebuild itself around our understanding of those 21st century languages – speech, writing, performance, pictures, and moving pictures – and what they can do. We would follow these modes into the different kinds of text they constitute, and the kinds of practices that they entail. The underpinning formulation that expresses this literacy – its verbs, rather than its nouns - could be ‘choosing, accessing, analysing, understanding, creating and expressing ourselves in’ these modes. Such a reconceptualisation would help simplify an overcrowded and confused English subject space. Maybe then we could really live up to a pitch for literacy as ‘more than the written word.’¹⁰

References

Bazalgette, C. (2000) ‘A Stitch in Time: Skills for the New Literacy’, *English in Education*, v34 n1 p42-49 Spring 2000

Bazalgette, C. (2008) ‘Literacy in Time and Place’, *Point of View Magazine*, Media Education Association,
<http://www.mediaedassociation.org.uk/LitTimeSpace.pdf#>

BFI Response to Rose Review Interim Report at
http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/bfi_response_to_rose_review_interim_report.pdf

¹⁰ A final word in a footnote: In Scotland they have done it already, defining literacy as:

the set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and in learning, through the different forms of language, and the range of texts, which society values and finds useful.
(Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2008)

- BFI/ DfES (2002) *Moving Images in the Classroom*. London: BFI
- BFI/ DfES (2004) *Look Again: a guide to moving image education 3-11*. London: BFI
- BFI (2008) *Reframing Literacy*. London: BFI
http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/teachlearn/pdf/reframing_literacy.pdf
- Burn, A. and Durran, J (2007) *Media Literacy in Schools: practice, production and progression*. London: Paul Chapman
- Burn, A. & Parker, D. (2003) *Analysing Media Texts*. London: Continuum
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009), Interim Report of the Independent Primary Review at
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/>
- Frampton, D. (2006) *Filmosophy*, London: Wallflower Press
- Gardner, H.(1991) *The unschooled mind: How children think and how schools should teach them* New York: Basic Books
- Kress, G.R. and van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading Images: the grammar of graphic design*. London: Routledge
- Kress, G.R. and Van Leeuwen, T. (2002). *Multimodal Discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Edward Arnold
- Learning and Teaching Scotland, (2008) *A Curriculum for Excellence*,
<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence/>
- Manovich, L. (2001) *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge Massachussetts: MIT Press
- Marsh, J. and Bearne, E. (2008) *Moving Literacy On: evaluation of the BFI Lead Practitioner scheme for moving image media literacy*. Royston: UKLA
- Marsh, J., Brooks, G., Hughes, J., Ritchie, L., Roberts, S., and Wright, K. (2006) *Digital Beginnings: Young children's use of popular culture, media, and new technologies*.
<http://www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk/docs/DigitalBeginningsReport.pdf>
- Morgan, Robert 'PanTextualism, Everyday Life and Media Education' in *Continuum*, vol.9, no.2, 1996
- Primary Review Briefings (2009) *Towards a New Primary Curriculum*, at:
http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Downloads/CPR_Curriculum_report_briefing.pdf
- Reid, M., Burn, A., and Parker, D. (2002) *Evaluation Report of the BECTA Digital Video Pilot Project* at

http://partners.becta.org.uk/page_documents/research/dvreport_241002.pdf

Scott, L. (2008) Learning and Development: Film: Baboon on the Moon, at
<http://www.cypnow.co.uk/Archive/843208/Learning---Development-Film---Baboon-Moon/>