Learning to look: A case for cineliteracy in the classroom

~ Dr Pritha Chakrabarti

Some of the most joyous moments of my school life were those rare days when the class was huddled into the school parlour (a room attached to the principal's office for receiving guests) for a screening. The musty red carpet, the pitch-dark curtains, and the giant old television—it meant looking forward to a couple of hours of silence from the children for our teachers as we sat engrossed watching BBC productions of literary texts taught in class. From Pride and Prejudice to Oliver Twist, from Julius Caesar to Macbeth, the texts magically came alive on screen, revealing new ways of looking at them. We have come a long way from those days of rented VCR to classrooms dominated by audiovisual content, where parents and teachers are constantly being challenged to try to control children's "screentime". Meanwhile, policy-level focus on use of ICT has increased pressure of using more and more audiovisual content in the classroom as teachers struggle to find suitable teaching-learning materials to support their syllabus content. On the other hand, the pandemic driven world has further seen a deep dive into the digital space, even among primary school children, raising concerns about "digital fatigue". As the little rectangle of our smart phones capture and captivate the attention of our children more and more, the collective sigh about the "end of reading" gets stronger by the day in the teachers' community and beyond. The shift from the written text to the audiovisual has not been easy to accept, as teachers in schools across the country, with little infrastructural support, struggle to keep up with the changing technology. But what has been even more of a challenge, is our mindset that audio-visual materials can be "fun

interruptions" or at best supporting materials but could never be an alternative to traditional reading and writing.

Now what if I told you that a film can be taught as a text in itself? That it has the potential to be unpacked and read closely, the same way you would treat a written text? That it has its own layers of meaning, its own grammar, and its own function in society the same way a literary text does? You probably know that already, but we have always assumed that it is something to be taught in colleges and universities. What if I said that they are meant as much for school children in the preparatory or middle level? That films would not be 'enjoyment' at best and 'distraction' at its worst. A leading literacy teacher from Peterborough responded to a film literacy campaign run by the British Film Institute as follows:

> I found that the children were motivated, engaged and exceedingly attentive right from the beginning. Their descriptive, inferential and predictive skills were extended, and they found that they were better at this than they thought because this form of media was familiar to them. The biggest difference in participation and quality of work was from the boys who are not usually enthused by literacy. By the end of the two weeks, the children had extended their vocabulary and were able to write for a variety of purposes and in different styles with greater confidence. (Reframing Literacy, 3)

In other words, as a medium that children are more "familiar" to, films have already captured their attention well enough to help them learn better. Beyond the expected language learning that films have been aiding in ESL classrooms, there are three specific skills sets that the instructor mentions: *descriptive*, *inferential* and *predictive*. We can see exactly how films can help improve these skills with concrete examples in the supporting lesson plan, but before that let us take a quick look into the potential that film holds in preparatory and middle level classrooms.

Let us begin by challenging the binary between a film text and written texts, where it is assumed that the first can be easily glossed over while the latter automatically involves deeper reading. In an article examining the way our brain function is changing in the digital age, Nicholas Carr observes:

> " Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle." "

If this is a 'struggle' for Carr, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, imagine the ordeal faced by our school children, especially when their formative years are largely spent immersed in smart phones and videos! This is probably where the function of Same Language Subtitling (SLS) comes in, which has now, through multiple pilot projects undertaken by different governmental and non-governmental organizations across the country, proven highly effective in improving grassroot level literacy. Following the words being spoken on screen simultaneously in writing has been comparatively much easier than reading a standalone written text, especially when combined with culturally familiar audio-visual content like [Bollywood movies](#) and [TV serials](#). This could be thought of as an extension to the traditional Reading-Listening model of language learning, where the elements of reading and listening are combined to aid the learning process, albeit through culturally familiar materials.

But can we think about using film text as something more than a supporting text or a language learning tool? To go back to the literacy teacher from Peterborough and her experience in the class, how does one use films to inculcate 'descriptive,' 'inferential' and 'predictive' skills in children? How can films be used to develop creative and critical thinking in school children? I would claim that developing film literacy as part of our primary school curriculum can aid in making our children language literate, culturally conscious, critically aware, and creatively oriented all at the same time. Screen a film with suitable content for a five-year old child and pause a frame. Ask them to describe what they see in the frame, and you will be struck by the observational and descriptive skills that they display. Zoom into the face of a particular character and ask them to infer what the character might be feeling, and you will be surprised to see the empathy a child displays. Ask them to imagine what is happening outside of the frame, to what the character inside the frame is responding, and you will have the children bringing a wealth of perspectives to the table! Pause a film and ask the children to guess what happens next and their predictive skills will leave you spellbound. You may have to aid them over time with some basic vocabulary related to cinema like shots, angles, genre, lighting, etc., and you will see how the children adapt to their familiar world of moving images in a brand-new way. Exposing them to a range of film texts from across the world would also make them culturally aware as you open discussions about why a character acts, dresses, or eats in a certain way in one film text vis a vis another. Bringing their attention to how a low angle shot makes a character appear bigger and often scarier will help them understand how images can be read closely to create new meaning. Playing a film without sound or playing a soundtrack without images will help students understand the function that sound plays in a film and in their lives too, making them appreciative of their gift of hearing as well as empathetic to those who don't have it. In other words, making them better human beings. As they grow older, many of them will process this knowledge to create their own audiovisual content, since access to technology is becoming increasingly easy, thereby churning out filmmakers of tomorrow.

At a time when videos are the first gateways for our children to the outside world, when "Wheel on the Bus" replaces grandparents' tales in an increasingly alienated world, it is easy to sit and lament about the good old days. Or alternatively, we can use this to our advantage through a properly developed visual arts curriculum right from the primary school level. We tend to underestimate the power of a child's imagination, or their ability to understand characters, stories, and genre. Even before a child learns to read a text, the first thing they learn to read is the expression on their parents' faces—if they are angry, sad, or happy. They learn to anticipate how their parents or those around them will react to their actions, and they know how to describe and express their emotions to them, whether it is one of hunger or anger. It is only as they grow older that they forget some of these key skills. Learning to watch a film closely can help them hold on to these life skills as they learn to describe, express, infer and predict the stories of the characters. In the process, they might also realize that their life is a story, and it is up to them to emerge as an interesting character in it.

Here are some useful links that will help you start off in your journey to teaching films:

[Look Again!](#)
[Teaching Using Films: Statistical Evidence](#)
[Screening Literacy](#)
[Framework for Film Education](#)
[Opening Our Eyes](#)
[Reframing Literacy](#)

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Are you already using similar approaches in your classroom? What kind of interactions do you include? Tell us some of the roadblocks that you face in implementing them. Write to us at OTTIndia@oup.com initiate a discussion on this.

Lesson Plan: Cineliteracy at Preparatory Level

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Aim: To develop critical, cultural, and creative skills in students
Target: Class III to Class V
Areas of Learning: Reflective learning, Specificities of film, Historical and cultural context of films
Learning Objectives: To understand

- ✓ that a visual image can be read as a text since it carries meaning.
- ✓ that putting multiple images one after another and the order they follow creates multiple meanings.
- ✓ the four elements of sound in an audio-visual content: music, sound effects, voice, and silence that contribute to the meaning of the film.

Learning Outcomes:

1. To remember keywords related to films and other audiovisual content.
2. To understand how the specific form of film produces meaning.
3. To apply the understanding of technology of cinema in reading other audiovisual texts.
4. To analyze films frame by frame and shot by shot to elicit meaning from them.
5. To evaluate a film text as a work of art.
6. To create short films.

Play a short film of age-appropriate content for the class.

Skills Inculcated	Process	Practice	Outcome	Follow up
Descriptive	**Freeze Frame:** Pause the film in a particular shot most suitable to elicit the maximum responses.	You can ask the following questions: 1. What do you see in the frame? 2. Where do you think the camera is in the shot? 3. How far is the camera from the object / character? 4. Is the camera looking up or looking down at the object / character?	This would introduce the students to keywords in appreciating films, angles: high-angle, low-angle; shots: close-up, mid-close, mid-shot, mid-long, long shot.	Ask students to explore shooting a single object from different lengths and angles.
Inferential	**Sound of image:** Cover the screen and just play the soundtrack of a short film or a scene. Now repeat the same exercise, only this time muting the sound and just playing the images.	You can ask the following questions: 1. What mood does the background sound signify? 2. What are the sound effects signifying? 3. What can you tell about the speaker from the voice that you hear? 4. Why is there a silence? What do you think is happening? Then watch the same scene with only images and discuss: *What difference does the sound make?*	Students will learn to understand the role of sound/silence/voice/sound effects in cinema. They will also get introduced to keywords such as "atmospheric" sound and "spot" sound and learn to understand the role of sound in setting the mood of a scene.	Add different soundtracks to a scene and see how the meaning changes. One could do this by playing two videos on two tabs, one with sound on and the other off and watching the latter. The students could be asked to reflect upon the difference in writing
Predictive	**Top of the frame:** Play the title tracks of different films and ask students to guess the genre.	You can ask the following question: 1. Is this a comedy, drama or horror film? 2. What does the font tell you? 3. What does the sound tell you? 4. Who is this targeted to? 5. What names are being displayed in the title? You can also play the end titles and discuss: *Why do certain roles and names of people come in the beginning while others at the end?*	Students learn to predict the genre of a particular film, while getting introduced to the vocabulary to describe the various genres. They also understand the role of the title track in a film as well as the various kinds of labor that goes into making of a film.	Students can be shown the beginning of a film and asked to guess three different ways the story can pan out, if it was a comedy, drama or horror.

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Gaze

Pronunciation: / geɪz /

Meaning:

1. *Verb* (used without object): to look steadily and intently, as with great curiosity, interest, pleasure, or wonder.
2. *Noun*
    a. a steady or intent look
    b. *at gaze*, Heraldry. (of a deer or deerlike animal) represented as seen from the side with the head looking toward the spectator: *a stag at gaze*.
    c. the collective preferences and expectations of a usually privileged social group especially when imposed as a standard or norm on other groups.

Origin and additional information: First recorded in 1350–1400; Middle English *gasen*; compare Norwegian, Swedish (dialect) *gasa* "to look".

Word section: Gaze is a commonly used cinematic technique to denote a meaning through the way a character looks, not just with their eyes but also their face. It is a useful way to convey meaning by using an image as it allows us to see where and how a figure/character is looking at something.

Gaze is of two types: **intra-diegetic** and **extra-diegetic**. While the former denotes a character when it is looking at something within the text, the latter denotes a character that looking at something outside the text, sometimes even straight into the camera at the viewer – what is popularly called *direct gaze*. *Indirext gaze* can be developed using point of view, where the subject or character is not aware that they are being watched/looked at.

Usage:

1. *Even good, arresting visual art is transformed by the gaze of a potential consumer.*
   (**Source**: [Sneer and Clothing in Miami: Inside The $3 Billion Woodstock of Contemporary Art](#) | Jay Michaelson | December 6, 2014 [| THE DAILY BEAST](#)

2. *The show, Bell Hooks argued in Black Looks: Race and Representation, represents wom[e]n as the object of a phallocentric "gaze".*
   (**Source**: [Science-Fiction TV Finds A New Muse: Feminism](#) | David Levesley | November 29, 2014 | The Daily Beast)

3. *In 1973, British feminist film writer Laura Mulvey wrote a seminal essay called "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", which explored how mainstream films appealed to a **male gaze**—a term she coined—because the industry was dominated by men who, inevitably, constructed representations of women from a masculine point of view.*
   (**Source:** https://www.theage.com.au/by/kerrie-o'brien-gjigmb | Kerrie O'Brien)