A Braveheart for film selection: Boys and the teaching of film

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ABSTRACT: Recent educational government initiatives affecting Victorian schools have placed the spotlight on literacy, and in particular, boys and literacy. I argue that the interpretation of studies suggesting differing learning curves for boys and girls and the push by the government to focus on gender issues may do more harm than good. Paradoxically, such initiatives may rebuild walls associated with stereotypical assumptions and associated behaviours rather than break them down. I argue that the issue for the government and the pedagogical community that it dictates to is to challenge students with a meaningful curriculum. Film as text provides us with the perfect medium. We need to make sophisticated and even risky film-text choices to challenge and engage boys and girls, alike. Such choices will help break down the stereotypical and unproductive assumptions that have enabled boys to hide beneath the gender-specific blanket.

KEYWORDS: Film, set texts, English, response, boys and literacy, curriculum, gender.

Film has become an all-important component of the study of English in Victorian schools. The inclusion of “film as text” was arguably one of the most innovative aspects of a comprehensive statewide reform of the senior English curriculum in the early 1990s, and since then English teachers at other year levels have embraced the teaching of film. Yet I have my concerns.

On a personal level I am consumed by film as an art: passionate for the independent film that once in a while triumphs and turns the homogenised Hollywood production line upside down; horrified by the latest blockbuster; fearful for the likes of Lasse Hallestrom and Ang Lee who have joined the ranks of the west coast moguls and teeter on the edge of consumption. I thank god they are still safe.

Hollywood has its fiscal fancies for churning out mediocrity, but I do not understand the safe road that we as teachers appear to be taking in our choice of film as text. Facilitators, are we not? Deliverers of the proverbial questions that hold the key to knowledge and wisdom, are we not? Why then do we reinforce mediocrity? Why do we make cowardly choices when selecting film as text? I think we should be more courageous in our selection of films, notwithstanding the need to be responsive to community concerns about the texts we set for study.

I was recently at a professional development seminar where the focus was on teaching film in the secondary school middle years. Interestingly, there seemed to be a strong consensus as to the choice of films used at this level. This was despite significant differences between the schools that were represented at the forum, not to mention the differences between individual classes and individual students within those classes. I know the challenges facing me as an English teacher in an all boys’ secondary school. I am obliged to interact with 28 unique personalities who have seen more than
I ever did at their age. Yet when they go to the movies, they only want to see action and special effects. This desire shapes their movie-going experiences, and most mainstream filmmakers are happy to satisfy their whims. I thought about this when working with an intelligent and cocky group of Year 10s last year, who were still expressing uncritical enthusiasm (even three years after its making) for The Matrix. “Another world, Miss…it’s cool, Miss…” So I showed them, Bladerunner – The Director’s Cut. I watched some students wriggle in their seats as the long drawn out scenes slowly revealed details of an oppressive world where the line between human and non-human had become blurred. We focused very closely on the glass-shattering scene that shows the death of the snake woman, Zora, and the final scene that heralds the end of humanity. The boys were riveted to their seats. The unit culminated in a text response activity in which many students showed an appreciation of detail and skills of interpretation that were well beyond their years. I asked them to borrow Bladerunner the original and think about how this film could have such a different outcome from the Director’s cut. The students sensed that Hollywood has very little faith in the intelligence of audiences. Their ability to read the symbols, motifs and subtleties of the director’s cut combined with growing scepticism about the assumptions that drive commercial filmmakers.

Other text response activities set included the obvious ones relating to theme, character and setting, although always with a view to enhancing their appreciation for film technique: How did the filmmaker achieve his aims? What techniques did the filmmaker utilise? How effective were they? And what correlation could they draw between this film and the science fiction genre films they were used to watching? They were able to weigh up their own values against the values explored in the film. Their focus wasn’t just on the written or spoken word, but on the language of film – Ridley Scott’s recent cut of the 1982 film, in particular. The boys discovered that something “old” could carry – still carry – powerful meanings. They were able to put the text into a context that set them on a quest to look more critically at more recent films, including The Matrix. The opportunity to study a more challenging text (Ridley Scott’s cut can test the viewing stamina of the maturest adult!) had provided them with an opportunity to be discerning.

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The positive outcome left me excited yet perplexed. Excited by the academic vigour of a class satisfied with their performance, and perplexed with a government intent on moving with yet another initiative, namely boys and literacy. Specifically, my experience of teaching Bladerunner with this class caused me to reflect on recent arguments about the difficulties that boys supposedly have with English.

I feel that the notion of treating boys differently in terms of curriculum and application of such a curriculum is really self-defeating and even undermining their progress in English. In planning this unit on Bladerunner, my aim was to engage the students and to provide a framework (and springboard) for them to explore the imaginative world of the text. To some extent, I was originally motivated by stereotypical notions that teenage boys enjoy science fiction and action in the cinema. However, I did not refine my approach so as to cater to these boys as boys. On the contrary, I quite deliberately chose a “difficult” film. I would have set exactly the
same analytical work for an all girls’ class. I was keen to enable these boys to think about the way they were positioned as a film-going audience and to reflect on the way commercial Hollywood patronises them.

As teachers we are creating problems if we allow ourselves to become overly preoccupied with choosing material that is suitable for boys, rather than focusing on the interpretive possibilities of the text. This obsession limits the choice of film, which consequently limits learning opportunities. We get what we put in, and when we start limiting the breadth of text we begin limiting the depth of response. This is not to dismiss arguments about the gendered character of literacy practices or to say that we should not be mindful of the difficulties some boys experience when participating in “feminised” pursuits like English. However, we do not want to end up with a separatist agenda, or worse still, curriculum that works at the expense of both sexes. I certainly baulk at the idea of “masculinising” my English class (Hurrell, 2001).

At this point I should add that when these students reach the senior years of their secondary education they will be obliged to study Muriel’s Wedding and Shakespeare in Love (texts traditionally set as part of the statewide senior English curriculum). So the idea that our students might be more easily catered for if we choose more “masculine” texts does not hold. At some stage we still require them to engage with other texts. (In fact, one of our Year 11 all boys’ classes voted, unanimously, to study Muriel’s Wedding in preference to other texts on the list.) What does hold, however, is the notion of challenging our students (boys and girls) with texts that may cause them to interrogate their reading or viewing practices. A mainstream film is fine for eliciting a mainstream response, but a more unusual film may spark a more interesting reaction and ultimately produce a more sophisticated, film-literate student.

I wonder whether we have missed the point about boys’ literacy. It seems to me that with every new government incentive, with each new educational policy, we seek to refine, re-categorise and further homogenise our teaching tools and pedagogical approaches. I cringe at the thought of having to stop and rethink my choice of text because of the sex of my students. I can’t help but reel back in horror at the thought of reinforcing stereotypes that we have spent many decades in trying to break down, only to restore them by implementing dubious educational policies that one day no doubt will begin unravelling as we reconsider our blunder. Out of all the research, all the books and policies that I have sifted through, and all the seminars I have attended, only one aspect of the boys’ literacy issue rings true: the concept that boys need to see powerful role-models engaging in reading and writing and other literacy practices. With respect to the focus of this article, boys need to see their role-models enjoying a plethora of films that offer more than a thin storyline and non-stop action.

And so my boys are exposed to the likes of A Simple Plan, The Shawshank Redemption, The Silence of the Lambs, In the Name of the Father and Slingblade. These have been the vehicles for some of my most successful classroom ventures in teaching film as text. I take risks with confronting material. Every film that I discuss in class requires a compulsory third viewing, my instruction being to take it home and share the experience with their family, however controversial the film might be. By small degrees, I thereby attempt to modify the film-viewing practices in which they engage at home and with their peers. The learning is interactive and situated within
their ongoing literacy practices outside school. My lesson aims are not focused on the concept of boys’ literacy, even though I happen to teach in an all boys’ school. My primary aim is to enable them to develop a critical perspective on film as text. By helping them to develop such a perspective on individual film texts, I hope to enable them to form a critical view on the medium of film and the social, political and personal dimensions of cinema. One parent recently came to me during a parent-teacher evening to thank me for teaching her son how to read film. In my view, such literacy can only come from challenging students with sophisticated material.

Film, as with other texts, calls upon us to recognise and understand the way meanings are shaped by social and cultural contexts. Kress (1985, cited in Lankshear, 1997, p. 45) argues that, “The forms and meanings of texts are determined by discourses – systems of meanings arising out of the organisation of social institutions and by genres – formal conventional categories whose meanings and forms arise out of the meanings, forms and functions of the conventionalised occasions of social interactions.”

Texts don’t exist in a vacuum, and effective literacy pursuits will acknowledge this, and even exploit it for the sake of the student (McClenaghan, Doecke, & Parr, 1996). Dare I say to those who are intent on focusing on the issue of boys and literacy that “connectedness” – feeling part of the classroom community and connecting it all to their own world – is the foremost concern. Are girls more adept at making the connections and putting the learning into context? Perhaps, perhaps not. The point remains that clever choices in film for the purpose of text should be considered as one very useful tool in connecting a class, not creating further divisions through what Hollywood has deemed a “woman’s film” as opposed to the action-oriented man’s domain.

REFERENCES