



Introduction

The general public is right to be skeptical of much of the research in the Humanities, since it can often seem arcane or at least forced. In our hyper-specialized society research and teaching at the university level seldom links up with primary and secondary education. Whenever topics are discovered to interest teachers of all levels, we need to foster them. One topic that catches everyone's attention from the kindergarten class to the doctoral seminar is stories and storytelling. Indeed studies in this domain have increased in both depth and breadth in recent years, and their relevance to younger students, indeed to the general public, continues to grow. In addition to literary scholars, today one can find professors in sub-fields of religion, medicine, law, history, and anthropology examining the mechanism and potential of narrative, since all these disciplines concern human activities that depend on stories. For this reason I proposed a Yale-New Haven Institute seminar to bring teachers together to look into "Stories around the World in Film and Literature."

We all love stories because they promise an involving experience in which we enter and learn about a world different from our own. At the primary level, our seminar behaved like any good book club or film society: we talked excitedly about our reactions to what we had just read or seen, following up on the consequences implied by all the stories we encountered, most of them concerning children. Although we indulged this natural attitude, we also wanted to gain some systematic understanding of the functioning and role of stories. For we wanted to be able to assess each story's relevance by relating its rhetoric to its purpose or topic, insofar as that can be determined. And so we made certain to learn the terms needed for the rhetorical analysis of stories, before tackling the relation of various stories to the issues they thematize. It turns out that most of the vocabulary that applies to prose fiction makes equal sense for feature films. Indeed "point of view," "subplot," and "omniscience," for example, may be easier to grasp with the movies in mind. Every film and story that we took up provided an opportunity to refine this vocabulary, to see it at work, and to discuss the value of bringing this to the attention of students. Certain films and stories seem designed as primers in "the theory of narrative." By studying films like "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," while carefully going through one of the many good textbooks on the subject, we learned to demystify to a degree the process by which a story grabs and controls the attention of an audience.

Beyond all the stories we delved into, and beyond their mechanism, we were most interested in the cultural role of storytelling itself. Our plan was to leave the seminar with a far better command of what constitutes a story and how to discuss every story in a way that would take us past impressions, taste, and relevance. As someone who works in both Comparative Literature and in Film Studies I have encountered innumerable forms of storytelling and it has been a pleasure to introduce some of these to the teachers of children from six years old to eighteen. A variety of forms (short stories, comic books, films, TV shows, and so on) conveys the greater variety of stories (genres, we term them) that in turn respond to a plethora of cultural needs (entertainment,

moral development, historical memory, identity, artistic experiment). By sampling films from around the world and sharing favorite short stories, we were certain to encounter enough material to be able to grow in our understanding of this crucial human activity.

Learning often occurs best when we defamiliarize something we take for granted. Hence our inquiry began in Africa as we compared some of their most distinctive films with the more familiar types of stories we know about in the United States. African stories often maintain a connection to the griot, or official storyteller in indigenous societies. We learned about Griots, read some of their tales, and then saw them at work in the openings of several films. Other African films that do not contain griots still derive power from the griot's meandering manner of narration. Later on we listened for "oral narratives" in films we encountered from Ireland and Japan. One of our discoveries was the potential link between the most primary mode of narration (orality) and the most technologically sophisticated one (cinema). Between these two forms is the published novel or short story where the teller can hide. We were at pains to try to expose storytellers and their purposes wherever we could.

All of the teaching units that developed within the ambience of the seminar promote the use of fiction film in the classroom - primarily foreign film. Several units deploy movies to vivify or strengthen lessons that are hard to convey. Ekaterina Barkhatova uses film to develop moral reflection in fourth graders by alerting them to the responsibility entailed by choices characters make. Mary Lou Narowski will let movie versions of Romeo and Juliet bring Shakespeare into the lives of students who are close to the age of those famous lovers. William Garraty wants to get at the complexity of the Civil War by having his students to watch three relevant films very closely. Other units use film to highlight storytelling methods or to throw light on issues of cultural universals and cultural diversity. Mnikesa Whitaker and Judith Katz both deploy films to bring out hidden dimensions of writing - "the writer's voice" in one case, and "the elements of fiction" in the other. In this way their students will have more control over options in their own verbal expression. Joanne Pompano, despite the fact that she teaches the visually impaired, has found certain African films that highlight the power of oral storytelling, which is a crucial topic for her students. As for cultural diversity, this is precisely what Kathleen Rende wants to expose her kindergarteners to, but in a non-threatening manner, and using images of little children and family life from around the globe. On the other hand, Sandra Friday and Matthew Bachand exploit student fascination with distinctly uncomfortable emotions. Is anxiety universal, Friday asks, and how do children in other places face up to it? What about the supernatural, Bachand, asks? How is it evoked and what does it serve in Japan, a culture steeped in representations of ghosts and similar phenomena? A teacher of French, Crecia Swaim takes two great films about children by Francois Truffaut to encourage her students to gain and synthesize information about a foreign culture so that they can discuss and write about it with verve, expanding their verbal skills. Expanding skills is what each of these units will surely deliver, and the skills in turn enable improved thinking and articulation about a range of issues in the humanities.

While these units do many other things beyond employing films, I am struck by how lively the classroom seems in the projected light of cinema. This is the light of attention, of focus; it is a beam thrown out to unfamiliar geographies and issues; it is within this light that stories stand out in vivid silhouette and through them we make sense of our vibrantly multi-colored world.

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