



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1995 Volume II: Film and Literature

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## **Science Fiction Selections: Connecting Film to Literature for First and Second Graders**

Curriculum Unit 95.02.01  
by Kathleen Ayr

### **I. Introduction**

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This curriculum unit is designed to help young children acquire skills through the study of film. One might wonder how the power of the screen can be utilized in a first or second grade setting. Teachers generally show a film for entertainment, reward or enrichment purposes. But there is concern about school film viewing because teachers are in a battle for children's attention and they often blame the passive viewing habits of movies and television as the foe. There a positive role for films that teachers can readily adapt for their classroom. My premise is that children can be taught to be active learners if film study is connected to literature.

This unit will focus on the genre of science fiction and develop many strategies that promote learning. I teach children aged six to eight in a self-contained classroom at Bishop Woods School in New Haven. The learning and language disabilities of these students vary, but they participate in many mainstream activities during their day. These students struggle to learn skills in reading, writing and language. They are often quite aware of their deficiencies and withdraw from language situations that put them at risk. Some children are impulsive and meet rejection or criticism frequently. But all of these students enjoy a movie and watch with rapt attention. The elementary teachers that I have spoken to all agree that viewing a film is a very powerful class reward. Selecting an appropriate film that will maintain attention is a teacher's first task. Ideally, the teacher has previewed the film or found a film with a unit connection. Sometimes teachers can take a story and find a film version to extend the learning and enjoyment. It is this connection to literature that makes films a worthwhile investment. But young students need very specific guidance to make this connection and I have organized several sections that offer preliminary concepts for developing young reviewers instead of passive young viewers .

### III. The History of Film

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A secondary goal of this unit is to introduce students to the history of film or “motion pictures.” The history of film goes back to 1889 when Thomas A. Edison developed a clear celluloid that was coated with developing chemicals. This celluloid strip contained a series of photographs. Edison did not think his invention was important, but other European inventors continued inventing cameras and projection equipment. The Lumiere brothers filmed outdoor scenes for their 1895 showings. Some early viewers were not pleased when people were captured in action . They thought there was a danger in presenting humans as “soulless parts” because their only previous art representations of people were paintings. These replicas of the human form followed rules of art that consistently used a whole figure style. People in the 1890’s were shocked to see the photographs start to move and began to attend displays of this new marvel. Some of the ladies actually raised their skirts as to stay dry when a scene of ocean waves was shown. The invention of moving pictures caught on quickly but as the shock wore off, the business almost died. The motion pictures rebounded because they learned to tell a story and not just show a scene. By 1907, there were 5,000 nickelodeons in the United States. These silent film halls were a popular treat for just a nickel and the price included piano music. (Knight 1976) Children enjoy watching a Charlie Chaplin film like *The Immigrant* and paying a nickel admission price can reinforce an historical perspective. The pranks of Chaplin can be compared to the pranks of a current children’s show called “Nickelodeon.”

This historical perspective is present in the unit. The three films I selected are older movies that span the decades of the 1930’s to the 1980’s. The first film, *Frankenstein* , is a black and white classic horror movie from 1931. As I first watched this movie, I thought there would be no interest in the over-done gothic setting and primitive science fiction-style special effects. But after viewing this film as a piece of literature, I discovered that it had classic themes that children could grasp and enjoy. Children need many opportunities to make a connection between literature and a film. Most public libraries have a large section of children’s books about these old horror and science fiction movies. Ian Thorne’s book entitled *Frankenstein* does an excellent job of describing the plot and it provides photos from the film. It describes other science fiction genre movies that were based on the *Frankenstein* story. It also has an author study of Mary Shelley, the author of the original story. It was written when she was eighteen years old and at first her name did not appear on the first editions of the book. (Thorne 1977).

The second film of this unit is *The Wizard of Oz* . Although usually labeled a musical, it contains the elements associated with the genre of science fiction. This 1939 release offers a dramatic comparison to *Frankenstein* . The Wizard of Oz has color, better sound, enormous sets and loads of special effects.

The movie *E.T., The Extra Terrestrial* may seem fairly new to many adults, but children are often unaware of this 1982 film. Like the monster from *Frankenstein* , this alien creature was terrified and could not speak. Students would be interested to learn that this was one of the first films to take full advantage of the toy business associated with a popular film. Most parents will gladly recall the many products that were out at that time. Public libraries often have a book version of *E.T.*

## IV. The Apparatus of Film

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The selection of older films in this unit opens up the potential for an introduction to the technology of film, or what is called the apparatus of film. It is fun to have a hands-on experience with the various frames or photographs that are the basis of this art form. The origin of the word “frame” can demonstrate that there is a connection between film and paintings. A film strip can be examined by the children so they can see the frames around each small picture. The small holes on each side of the frame help move the strip of photos through a film strip projector. These small holes are grabbed by little tooth like sprockets so that the pictures can be pulled through an opening that has a light source and a lens. The image is then put up on a screen so that many people can see it at once. Before the technology of film and film strips, people went to museums to see paintings and photographs. Then in 1895, the Lumiere brothers showed outdoor pictures that could capture movement. The machine that they used was able to pull a series of photos at a special speed that duplicated our movements. This special speed tricks our eyes into thinking we are capturing the motion. The truth is that every motion picture is made up of individual frames that move. The children might enjoy demonstrating slow motion, fast forward and normal motion with their bodies. Another suggestion to demonstrate the motion picture concept is to use a flip book of animated pictures. These hand-flipped booklets show children how the illusion of motion is made as pictures flip quickly by.

A video cassette can be used to show that there are sprockets (nine little white “teeth”) that pull the film or tape through a video machine. There is also an opening in the cassette that allows another piece of the machine to pick up the sound that is recorded on the strip of tape. Although one can’t pull the video tape apart, it is useful to compare a filmstrip to a video tape. Children enjoy hearing about the “old days” twenty-five years ago when people didn’t have video cassette recorders in their homes or schools.

## V. The People Who Work On Film

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Modern literature programs encourage children to learn about an author and an illustrator. As young film reviewers, it is important to know that there are many jobs involved in the making of a film. I have chosen eight film jobs that children can easily understand. It is a difficult process to teach young children about what is real and what is fantasy. As they learn about the many parts that make up a movie, they can develop a more realistic idea about what makes up a movie.

### A. Producer

Producers organize the work of other people and usually find the story that they want to produce. They create advertisements so that people will want to see a film. The children love to talk about the movie ads and toy products they see on television .

### B. Director

The director is in charge of the actors and he or she decides how each scene should be filmed. Often the main idea of the film is influenced by the director’s imagination. Children love to direct each other in a role-play of a favorite movie scene and this assists them in understanding this role.

### **C. Camera person or cinematographer**

This person is in charge of the cameras. The camera person helps to show a feeling or to do a special effect. A famous scene in *E.T.* shows the boys riding their bikes into the air with the moon in the background. It challenges children's imagination to consider how this scene could be made to appear so real. The make-up on the monster in *Frankenstein* took many hours to apply and special shadows made by spot lights helped him look scarier. One lesson that captures the illusion of driving a car can be duplicated if a teacher can use a video camera to film a few children in their chairs. If they are seated as though they are in a car, a camera can catch them from the waist-up. An imaginary steering wheel and some rocking motion by the young actors will result in the illusion of a real car scene, especially with a few coordinated curves thrown in to the scene. An assistant who shouts "lights, camera action" will reinforce the concept of filming one scene at a time.

### **D. Writer**

Each scene in a film has a story that describes what each person should say and how the scene should look. This special story is called a screenplay. The person who writes it is called a screenwriter. In many cases, the screenplay is based on an author's story. The actors have to study the story and memorize their lines. A familiar story like *The Three Pigs* can demonstrate the many details needed to translate a story to a play.

### **E. Actors and Actresses**

The people in movies get paid to act or pretend. Children are surprised to learn that everyone who works on a movie gets paid money to pretend. The actors and actresses sometimes make us think that they are the person in the film. They have to be ready to look and talk like the character in the screenplay when they hear the words "lights , camera, action."

### **F. Designer**

A designer creates clothing, Sketches, and plans all the fake rooms or sets. A swatch of fabric, a hat and a few props provides children with an acceptable set design. The appeal of this job tends to focus on the power to make decisions about what other people should wear. The children love to describe what their favorite super-hero wears.

### **G. Editor**

The editor is sometimes called the cutter because he or she selects the best scenes and puts together the individual pictures so that the whole story can be shown. To demonstrate a change of scene, the teacher can show a film and use the pause button when a scene is changed.

### **H. Composer**

The music of a movie helps people to feel and understand the movie. There are three suggestions that help students appreciate the composer's job. The first idea is to use mime activities to express how music is attached to moods in our minds. The teacher can ask the children to think about a happy summer day and have a volunteer demonstrate how the music for this day would sound. The next volunteer would demonstrate the music for a dark, stormy night. All the students could demonstrate the musical humming needed to rock a baby to sleep. Most popular is air guitar playing and an orchestra leader with a baton. A second idea is to replay a scene from a movie in order to hear the music they might have missed. The animated film *Fantasia* provides an ideal introduction to film music for budding composers.

A real challenge is to show a video without sound and put on a mismatched recording of music. Ask the

children if this music works and if it doesn't work, ask for their musical suggestions.

## VI. The Business of Film

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Young children like to guess about the profit a film can make, so it is fun to chart the expenses that must be paid before a movie comes to a theater. If you are the producer or the film company, you want lots of people to spend their money on your film. The business of making money means that every movie will have ads stating that this movie is great, exciting or super. But there are arguments about every film's worth. The people who discuss their ideas are called film critics or reviewers. Sometimes they argue about whether a film is a bunch a scenes put together or whether it is a carefully planned art project. If we listen to people tell us about a film, we can decide where to spend our money. This unit will structure student's responses during "reviewer breaks". They will be watching a film just like the real movie reviewers.

One of the issues for parents and teachers are the toy marketing strategies that promote children to buy the toys even before the movie is released. The record-breaking success of *E.T.* in 1982 resulted in great demand for everything from underwear to jewelry. Now the stores are stocked with merchandise before the movie is even released or reviewed. Parents feel pressured to go because the business people have influenced their children's desires. Teacher's also feel a conflict because the story foundation of a film is often secondary to the status of having an item from the film. This conflict is reflected in a children's vote on the following question. Would you rather have a toy from a movie or a copy of the book that it is based on?

It is the goal of this unit to make first and second grade viewers into more critical reviewers. Can the business power of the silver screen be harnessed to promote literature and learning? I believe that my focus on the genre of science fiction provides an unusual and interesting approach that is easily connected to a variety of literature selections.

## VII. Unit Objectives

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1. To teach students how to review a film.

Teachers can utilize familiar literature techniques to treat a film story more like a printed story. These tried and true methods include building background, setting a purpose, vocabulary words, predicting plot, and various viewer response activities. These methods are not easily put into practice because children have so much visual and auditory information to absorb. Indeed, the most critical strategies for the teacher to include are breaking the viewing time into smaller units and providing appropriate response activities. These response activities often require a repeated viewing of a certain clip.

2. To introduce students to some highlights from the history of motion picture films through the

genre of science fiction films.

3. To introduce students to the terms and main roles of the motion picture business.
4. To teach students about acting and role-playing.
5. To teach students to compare literature and film.

The basic idea that written words may form the basis for a film is a meta-cognitive concept that children can develop. The three films that I have chosen all have a screenplay-based books at a young level . It is an exciting discovery when children see words and pictures based on the movie. It also helps them to separate fantasy from reality when the teacher reads.

6. To teach students comparison skills.

For each of the three films, I have selected a familiar literature selection from the HBJ Treasury of Literature (Farr and Strickland 1993) A character like *Henny Penny* has three friends who join *Henny Penny* on her trip to see the King. These young reviewers can easily compare this plot to that of Dorothy and her three friends in *The Wizard of Oz* .

7. To increase student's emotional response to characters with a handicapping condition or difference.
8. To develop student awareness of a theme.

One theme in all three films is the theme of broken connections between generations. Dorothy is raised by her aunt and uncle, *E.T.* was abandoned by his space family, and the monster has no family at all.

9. To help students understand the genre of science fiction.

Many beginning readers are fascinated with the idea of space travel and wild inventions. So children have a basis of appreciation for science fiction themes of time travel, space travel and inventions. The Greek writer Lucian wrote about going to the moon around 100 A.D. and children have always enjoyed describing their ideal trip in pictures, stories or discussions(Knight 1982). First graders enjoy reading the words in *Papa Get the Moon for Me* (Carle)

10. To communicate to parents the value of film review strategies and literature connections.

Parents can support this unit at home through discussions about film selections and literature connections. A

newsletter can describe the benefits of this unit and request support from home in carrying out movie review discussions or projects.

## **VIII. Strategies for Science Fiction Film Connections.**

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To better relate the previous objectives to lesson plan activities, I utilize a seven step strategy that I have adapted from a 1993 Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute curriculum unit on drama(Perrault 1993). The step strategy is credited to Dr. Thomas R Whittaker, who led a seminar entitled “Twentieth Century Multi-cultural Theater”. Here is my adaptation of the plan that I use for all three films:

Step 1. I tell students what I plan to do.

Step 2. I present questions in order to set a purpose.

Step 3. I tell students what I want them to understand.

Step 4. I discuss what parts of the movie will be difficult for them.

Step 5. I plan a way to discuss and compare theme, content, or characters.

Step 6. I state specific objectives for each movie.

Step 7. I state how I will assess student performance.

## **IX. Section One: A Lesson Plan for *Frankenstein***

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### **Step 1**

In this lesson I plan to highlight the history of film through “Frankenstein”. I’ll explain that in 1931 there was only black and white films being made. I’ll review the invention of “pictures that move” in the 1890’s and show a flip book’s illusion of moving pictures. I’ll use a shawl-type prop to model a role-play situation of a fictional grandma character from the 1930’s. A small box will provide a 1950’s prop to demonstrate myself as a child seeing a TV for the first time.

### **Step 2.**

To set a purpose, I’ll ask the children to describe or draw what TV sets might look like in twenty years when they are grown-ups. I’ll explain that science fiction movies have inventions and travel. I’ll ask how many children think a monster can ever be good, if a scared group of people can be allowed to kill a monster, and if they think a man or a woman wrote the story book called “Frankenstein”

### **Step 3.**

I will tell students that there are good and bad parts to every character. I will introduce the four main characters as a vocabulary component and remind students that they will be comparing two character’s needs on a Venn diagram after viewing the first part of the movie(appendix c). Another worksheet will be used to

predict what will happen in the last half of the movie(appendix )

#### **Step 4.**

It is difficult to hear and see several parts of this old movie. Some of it is dark, it takes place in another country, and the monster cannot talk or understand language. I will need to stop this movie at least twice to discuss the plot and to make sure that no child is frightened or confused.

#### **Step 5.**

When children talk about their favorite part of a movie or they react to a character, they are analyzing the film at their own level. A Venn diagram worksheet will help focus on the needs of two characters(appendix c). A comparison of Dr. Frankenstein's need for fame and the monster's need for language ends at the windmill scene. The children can be asked to vote on whether these two characters are good or bad. It is ideal if children change their mind following a character discussion because that is what young reviewers are suppose to do.

A comparable theme is found in a children's book called How Joe The Bear And Sam The Mouse Got Together. It tells how two very different characters got together as friends even though there were many things they could not enjoy together.

#### **Step 6.**

The specific objectives for showing *Frankenstein* are as follows: a. It teaches about old-style movies and the horror genre b. It compares good and bad characters in role-play, writing and discussions. c. It develops sympathy for a character with a speech handicap d. It has scientific inventions that are made up or imaginary.

#### **Step 7.**

To assess student's learning, I would review their worksheets. Their diagrams and drawings of a favorite scene or character indicates their ability to have an opinion,

## **X. Section Two: A Lesson Plan for The Wizard of Oz.**

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#### **Step 1.**

The background information needed here can be located in several books by L. Frank Baum. In 1900, he wrote *The Wizard of Oz* and he produced twenty-two books about the land of Oz. A more modern illustrated version for young children is illustrated by Michael Hague.(Baum 1982). I would read the passage that begins when the cowardly lion enters the great throne room the ask for courage: *The Wizard of Oz* is a great ball of fire and the lion leaves in fear. I will ask students to predict how many songs they will hear in this 1939 musical.

#### **Step 2.**

I will present the following questions in order to set a purpose for viewing: a. Can you think of things that nature has done to scare you? For example, a tree branch tapping at your window, a thunderstorm, or a strange animal liking at you. b. Can you think of people who scared you? Which is scarier, an animal or a person? Bad weather or a monster? a bad dream of an amusement park ride? a fire or a robber in your house? 3. If people get a grouped together when scared, are they less scared or more scared? Would you be scared to



go on a trip without your family? Have you ever been lost and alone?

### **Step 3.**

I will tell students what I want them to understand in this film. This film was made during the first years of color movies and it has many caring viewers who watch it. The homework will be to interview their parents about when they might have seen this movie and what was their favorite part. I will talk about the fact that there are four characters that each have a goal. I will remind the class that during the response breaks, I will ask them to predict success or failure for the

### **Step 4.**

The difficult parts of this movie occur when the musical production numbers extend beyond a first or second grader's attention span. I will ideally show this movie over a two or three day span. A reviewers response form can be filled out after thirty minutes so that music, colors, setting and characters can be described. This is also a good time to check their comprehension of the story line. A final break can occur when the wicked witch is about to get melted. Children can predict a variety of endings if encouraged.

### **Step 5.**

A discussion of the ending will also involve a final reviewer response. This musical is ideal for a hands-on practice of the yellow brick road dance at a recess. A simple prop will help all the children take a turn at role playing. After I read the story of *Henny Penny* for a literature connection, I'll remind the children that Dorothy and *Henny Penny* can be compared. I'll make two writers webs and have the children choose a character to write about. A graph can compare the good witch Glinda and the Wicked Witch of the West. These witches make this film an ideal lesson for October.

### **Step 6**

Classroom objectives for ' *The Wizard of Oz* include the following: a. to increase student's responses to characters who are handicapped. b. to teach comparison skills by contrasting it with *Henny Penny* c. To introduce the theme of separation from families and possible reunions. d. to expand a reviewers role by commenting on music, color, setting, special effects and dance.

### **Step 7.**

To assess the student's progress, a teacher must carefully observe the children's ability to discuss the film, to compare the film, and to develop sympathy for characters who have problems.

## **XI. Section Three: A lesson Plan for *E.T., The Extra-Terrestrial***

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### **Step 1.**

This movie may seem new in the eyes of most adults, but children are often unaware of the 1982 film. I will discuss space travel and the fantasy of space creatures as background. *E.T.* 's space ship leaves without him at the beginning of the movie, so I will remind students that there is going to be someone abandoned by their family .

## **Step 2.**

The following questions help to set a purpose for viewing: a. If you were to find an alien creature in your back yard, what would you do? How would you feel? Would you tell your family? b. If an alien creature could not speak, how would you try to communicate? What if it had bad germs or moldy smells? Would you touch the creature? c. Have you ever been lost? What things have you lost? What things have you found? d. Where in space would you like to travel?

## **Step 3.**

The boy in *E.T.* is named Elliot and his parents are divorced. I will discuss what the word divorce means to the students and ask them to predict how this character Elliot feels about divorce. I will connect this movie to a unit on the solar system and use this as a fantasy or fiction ending to a science unit that has been factual.

## **Step 4.**

It is difficult to understand why *E.T.* gets sick so I will let students know that our response breaks will focus on understanding the plot and their feelings. The child actors seem so much like regular kids that even grown-ups forget that they are paid actors. They will view the movie with the breaks scheduled at Elliot's first view of *E.T.* and when they are both sick. The completion of a reviewer response form can be completed at both breaks.

## **Step 5.**

After watching this film and clarifying content during breaks, I wish to promote the themes that were seen in the previous two films. One theme involves adults who seem to not care about their children's needs; Dr. Frankenstein's father isn't proud of his son's work, Auntie Em wants to get rid of Toto, and Eliot's Mom is too busy to notice him. Secondly, there is an innocent creature in each film who has desperate needs. The monster needs to develop control of his anger, Dorothy's friends need new parts to be whole, and the alien needs to get home. They all need help communicating their needs. There is a strong female character in each film who initiates actions needed to resolve the main problem. It is Dorothy who pours water on the witch, Elliot's Mom who realizes why *E.T.* is sick and Dr. Frankenstein's fiancée who forces the doctor's father to visit his son.

The comparable literature book for this film is *Jamaica's Find* (Havill 1988). Jamaica finds an old grey stuffed dog at the park. She takes it home but her mother reminds her that she has to return it to the lost and found counter at the park. This treasury selection has a happy ending and provides depth to the issues of wanting, belonging, and returning.

## **Step 6.**

The specific objectives for viewing *E.T.* include the following: a. to develop empathy for *E.T.*'s inability to speak. b. to discuss their feelings about being lost, ignored, ill and dying. c. to describe the many qualities of friendship, especially helping and caring. d. to improve comparison skills of the friendship theme in literature selections and in the other two films of this unit.

## **Step 7.**

Students will be allowed to repeat viewing parts of the film after they have completed a drawing of their favorite part and completed their response sheets. Many culminating activities can be formed after this movie. A large chart can compare the *E. T.* film to the other two films. Three webs can be developed so that a booklet of writing and drawing is produced and shared at home. Oral reports on their favorite movie part or role-

playing a scene can also be an enjoyable ending to this unit. The children can discuss a new genre of films to watch or keep a journal of movies that they watch at home.

## **XII. Conclusion**

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Students involved in a positive viewing process can come to know more about the world and themselves. In the text *How to Read a Film*, James Monaco notes that an introductory course should “teach people how to think about a film, rather than what to think about a film.” (Monaco, 1980) The strategies here can be utilized for other films that teachers might select and it can also provide a base for planning a student filming unit if a camera is available for classroom use.

### **Appendix a: Viewers Response Form**

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(figure available in print form)

### **Appendix b: Midway Break: Predict and Comment**

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(figure available in print form)

### **Appendix c: Venn Diagram to Compare Same and Different**

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(figure available in print form)

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