

Using Film to Teach American Literature: Roland Joffe's Adaptation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Peter Ustinov's Adaptation of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* as Two Case Studies

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It is argued that film is becoming an important educational tool in the classroom, that it enlivens and enriches classes, that it helps students and teachers alike, and that it facilitates students' understanding of course materials. As such, it is incorporated into the course materials of an American literature class that uses Roland Joffe's production of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Peter Ustinov's of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* as two case studies.

The discussion demonstrates that film should not be used as a silencing and stupefying device, an isolated text, and a means of wasting time. Rather, it should be used on account of its high potential impact and its power to stimulate discussion, engage students, increase their ability to think critically, and develop students' reflective and communicative skills .

It has been shown that film is an effective teaching tool, that it is an integral part of the environment, and that it is a powerful medium that transmits knowledge visually. Thus, it has been used in the American literature class that bears witness to its being fruitful. In view of this argument, this study recommends that film be harnessed and extensively used to revive education.

I have had the privilege of teaching American literature classes at the Hashemite University in Jordan for over fifteen years. Although my students have been mostly juniors and seniors, I have realized that students of this age grapple with two knotty problems of which fluency is one and writing well is another. This consciousness has been driving me

to do my utmost in order to help my students with acquiring the necessary skills that make it easy for them to learn English and speak it well.

So far students have been unable to speak this language well because of the traditional methods of instruction that emphasize theory and disregard practice, which renders these methods futile. Instead of empowering students, these methods have been reducing students to parrots that are just good at repeating all that they have heard without necessarily understanding anything. Much worse than this is that these same methods have been responsible for students' being tongue-tied, helpless, passive, frustrated, desperate, and unwilling to do any preparation at home. In a sense, students have been crippled by a method of instruction that has been imposed upon them.

In line with this argument, students have been disempowered and stripped of the right to self-expression. Sensing these dangers, I have determined to adopt a different method of instruction. I follow a learner-centered approach that gives students the opportunity to express their minds, make whatever remarks they want on the topic discussed, and raise any questions occurring to them. I have also made the classroom much more comfortable and classes much more interesting by making learning enjoyable.

To achieve this objective, I create a safe and comfortable classroom environment, where students listen, raise questions, and make comments. Given this opportunity to voice their opinions, students relax and become as involved as I am in class discussion. In addition to involvement, students are urged to speak English without worrying at all about the mistakes made. When they speak, I listen carefully to them, praise them for their contributions, and pick one mistake to correct. I also tell them that their mistakes lead to learning and, therefore, the more mistakes they make the better.

To add to this enjoyment, I incorporate film into my course materials, telling students at the outset that film provides entertainment as well as education, but for the purposes of the course, the whole focus will be on education. I tell them that they'll discover on their own that film constitutes an unrivalled educational tool whose magic is unimaginable.

As far as magic is concerned, the magical power of the film lies in all that it does. At the outset, I'd like to emphasize film's ability to entertain and move people in equal measure. Relevant to entertainment is the spell the film holds over audiences. By virtue of this spell, viewers sit still and focus on the film for two or three full hours running. It is the film's infusing life into subjects that seem to be remote from today's world that makes viewers sit still for so long a time. In view of this power, the use of film in the classroom enlivens it and enriches classes, facilitating students' understanding of course materials and helping teachers keep students who avoid reading these materials engaged.

These students can be easily kept engaged by being given the opportunity to watch a film, but the movie should not replace the required reading. Furthermore, film encourages, Jonathan H. Lovell argues, in "Where We Stand," "the use and development of communication skills, and can be used to establish social contexts for English as a second language and to provide visual cues for deaf students." Like Lovell, Kelvin Sealey contends, in *Film, Politics, and Education: Cinematic Pedagogy Across Disciplines*, that film as a classroom tool, "can catalyze a valuable discussion, or display in visual form a critical idea that might remain too abstract or remote when encountered in discussion, literature, or debate" (2-3). Sealey adds that the pedagogical use of film is justified because of its "clear visibility, the way it allows for the consumption of knowledge and ideas with the eye, its potential for touching our emotions, and, with the rise of technology in education, the growing ease of its use in the classroom" (3).

Pertaining to using films as educational tools, I avoid focusing exclusively on films as isolated texts. I focus on films as objects of social, political, and cultural significance because "film offers students," Henry Giroux holds in "Breaking into Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film", "an opportunity to connect the theoretical discourses we engage in classes to a range of social issues represented through the lens of Hollywood movies" (589). I also realize that films are related to students' experiences in multiple ways. To take an example, there are students who feel powerless and insecure, and who "find a sense of relief and escape in the spectacle of film" (589). In my capacity as a teacher, I incorporate films into my course materials and use them to achieve various educational objectives. I don't use the film, as Geoffrey Thomas Smith claims in "Is Film an Effective Teaching Tool for High School Literature?" "as a silencing and stupefying device to distract the student" or "as a bribe or a reward to the students if they perform well on a test or on a big assignment" (5). I also don't use it as Ted Johnson accuses his colleagues of in his NCTE report, "Using Film in the Classroom," "to cover additional coffee breaks, provide easy Mondays, or improve the chances of survival on days before holidays" (3). Rather, I use the film because it is not only "an innovative tool," but "a necessary one," as Johnson adds, "for the students of today who see more films than they read books" (3). Johnson's students are no different from mine; they are the ones who have grown up with the Internet, television, videogames, and films. These can be effective educational tools because they are with high potential impact, accessible, and not cumbersome to use.

These tools are also an integral part of the environment in which students learn to read, write, listen, speak, and make meaning of their lives. In this environment, it is my duty to develop students' ability to respond to different texts. Arguing in support of this view, Paul Sommer

holds "that it is the teacher's duty to develop students' ability to respond confidently to a wide variety of texts" (485).

As far as ability development is concerned, I use films because they can stimulate students' interests, increase their ability to think critically, and apply course materials to everyday happenings. Arguing in defense of this point, Benjamin Bloom claims in *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* that "film can take students to the higher levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as they apply theories to lie on the screen, analyze characters, create new scenarios or endings to films, and evaluate the quality of a film's presentation of relevant concepts" (201-207) Similarly, John O'Connor holds that film enhances students' abilities to learn as "it encourages students to develop the critical thinking skills necessary for them to be well-informed about issues and events of their own time" (183). Like O'Connor, D. D. Anderson claims that film use which is combined with discussion promotes critical thinking (155-158).

This discussion should occur prior to or after film viewing permits students to wrestle with difficult questions. Thus, students reflect upon the film as well as the questions based on it, and start reflecting on how to answer them. This behavior, Patricia A. Connor-Greene argues in "Interdisciplinary Critical Inquiry: Teaching about the Social Construction of Madness," encourages reflective and abstract critical thinking (6-13).

Like Connor-Greene, Andrejz Huczynki and David Buchanan, and Ruth E. Harper, Lawrence E. Rogers hold that films can stimulate discussion and thinking on the part of the students. Michael Vetrie, likewise, maintains, in "Using Film to Increase Literacy Skills" that a "film is like any other text and lends itself to rich discussion and analysis like a written text does" (4). He adds that film engages students, gets their minds working, and keeps them actively involved in the learning process" (4). Following Vetrie's steps, Dennis Palmer Wolf, Director of Rethinking Accountability Initiative at Brown University's Anneberg Institute for

School Reform, claims that film classes not only teach students about cinema itself, but also give them skills for critiquing media images (Libby).

To me, the arguments of these scholars do make sense because learning through film in particular has proved to be fruitful at various levels. Equally fruitful is this of using film in the classroom which I have been following for a good number of years.

This semester I am privileged to teach a class on American literature, and I am teaching it the same way I have taught other classes. As usual, I'll teach students a few poems, a number of short stories, a play, three or four essays, two works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, especially *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, and two works by Herman Melville, especially *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*. While preparing the syllabus, I am accustomed to incorporating films based on the previous works, pointing out that viewing would occur when the works had been read and discussed. As long as students view films uncritically, I inform them prior to viewing of the necessity of reading the novel first and then viewing the film so that they can discuss the differences and similarities between the text and the film, and the challenges filmmakers face when adapting literary works.

I also remark that directors read literary works the same way we do, that their understanding is not necessarily similar to ours, that they may not stick to the text, and that they have their own ways of dealing with texts. One of these ways is interpretation, which means translating a novel into a film. Another way is adaptation, which means transferring a written work into a film. One form of adaptation is the use of a novel as the basis of a film. An example is Erich von Stroheim's adaptation of Frank Norris's *McTeague* in 1924 with his film *Greed*. Other examples are Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), An Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), and important to my course, Roland Joffe's adaptation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

(1934). To make a completely new tale out of the novel, Joffe introduces certain changes which George Bluestone approves of and describes, in *Novels into Film*, as being "inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium" (5).

A third way directors deal with works is by deletion. Sometimes, a director may act the same way censors in some countries do, and may delete certain scenes from the film holding them to be against social standards. A fourth way is illustration by means of which the director adds certain scenes from his own culture in order to illustrate what is happening. A good example of illustration is director Akira Kurosawa's addition of certain scenes from the Japanese culture to illustrate what is happening in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which renamed *Throne of Blood*.

Relevant to students' uncritical viewing of films, I also arrange for familiarizing students with certain "making-it-easy-to-understand" terms, such as iris, wipe, cut, shots, fade in, fade out, music, close-up shots, medium shots, long shots, etc. I comment on the significance of directors' use of different shots, choice of costumes, choice of a certain type of music, lighting, and colors. I tell them that directors use long shots to show the entire body of the actor or actress. In this way, they provide viewers with details about reality. As for close-up shots that show an actor or an actress's whole face, hand, or leg, they are probably meant to let viewers know more about this actor or actress's reaction at the moment by making the actor concerned nearer to viewers. Regarding medium shots, they show people's bodies from the waist up. There are also people who are either in focus or out of focus. I tell students that actors and actresses who are in the foreground are ones meant by the director to be in focus, and that those who are in the background are meant to be out of focus. I provide all of this information in order to empower students and provide them with the vocabulary they need to understand the film.

This vocabulary also makes students more sophisticated in their understanding of film, more aware of the usefulness of film as an educational tool, and more capable of discussing this medium with their teacher. Arguing in support of teachers becoming more aware of the power of film, Johnson calls "for a need to become more sophisticated and aware of the usefulness and power of film as well as creating a vocabulary to enable us to discuss the medium with our students and, in effect, teach students to become more sophisticated in their understanding of film" (1). Like Johnson, Joshua Biedrzycki maintains it is "critical that teachers gain a richer understanding of the effectiveness of movies as a learning tool in the classroom and what better way to do that than to explore student's input" (28).

When the novel *The Scarlet Letter* has been discussed, and when I have provided students with the knowledge that helps them with understanding, I arrange for both viewing the film by myself and with students. While watching it by myself, I note themes, language, violence, and nudity. If I come across scenes that are horrible, I arrange for not showing them. To facilitate students' viewing and understanding, I divide the film into segments and prepare a few questions to keep them alert while watching the film. These questions may deal with the plot, the director's vision, and characterization. In addition to keeping students engaged, the questions keep them under control because they increase my command of the lesson. When students start film viewing, I sit with them to make sure that they all focus on viewing and not make any noise. When they have watched this film, we arrange for viewing the other film on *Billy Budd* together. If we lack in class time, I sometimes students to watch the film at home, individually. or in groups.

When students have watched the two films, I make certain remarks about productions, initiating a discussion that is both open and guided by questions I raise to expand critical analysis of films. I urge students to

take stands and defend them. I also tell them that my comments are open to revision, not final, and are made just to encourage them to think critically about the film. In a sense, I encourage a critique of my remarks and interpretation. In so doing, I give them the opportunity to take the initiative and embark on commenting upon all that occurs to their minds. When they raise their hands, I give each one of them an equal chance to express his/her opinion. I listen carefully to all that they say, tell them that there is no one correct answer, and make encouraging remarks meant to stimulate them to go on with contributing to class discussion that helps them with learning, and certainly promotes democratic values. Arguing in support of this view, Dewey claims that critical thinking encourages "democratic values among students," adding that "it is by associating and resolving issues with people whose views are different from one's own that democracy is learned."

I also prepare a follow-up activity designed to test their comprehension. This activity parallels the one succeeding students' reading a particular novel. In both activities, students' comprehension is tested. I may ask them to compare and contrast the stories of the film and the novel. Another question may focus on comparing and contrasting the characters in the film and the text. A third question may ask students, for instance, to consider the endings of the novel and the film, and provide their own interpretations. I usually give students a take-home exam or an assignment, and ask them to turn it in next time we meet. When the assignment has been given, I resume the discussion, dwelling on the two films with the purpose of developing students' communicative and critical thinking skills. Beginning, for instance, with Roland Joffe's production, I ask them about the similarities and differences between the novel and the film. After listening to their responses, I tell them that there are major differences between the film and the novel in terms of characterization, narration, plot, tone, symbolism, imagery, and time frame.

As for characterization, many characters that are not in the novel have been inserted into the film, which brings about plot differences between the novel and the film. These differences are manifest in the characters themselves. While Dimmesdale, for instance, suffers from internal conflict and avoids behaving in a way that arouses suspicion in the novel; he seems to be stronger and bent on visiting Hester's cell every day in the film. Like Dimmesdale, Hester's portrayal in the film differs from that in the novel. Whereas she lives miserably in the novel, she seems to be leading a happy life in the film. Similarly, Mistress Hibbins' character also shows this difference. In the novel, the relationship between Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins keeps her protected against the witch trials of the seventeenth century; in the film, nothing helps her Hibbins protect herself against these trials. Like these characters, Roger Chillingworth's character is indicative of this difference between the film and the novel. While Chillingworth hangs himself in the film, he dies of natural causes a year after Dimmesdale has passed away.

When I have clarified the differences, I ask students about the similarities. We discuss the similarities in the concept of original sin, the symbolic use of the red color, lust, Roger's evil nature, the theme of witchcraft, and the Puritans' obsession with rules.

As regards the second film, Peter Ustinov's adaptation of Melville's *Billy Budd*, I also emphasize certain issues that develop students' critical thinking skills. Along with comparing the film and novella, we also discuss the ceaseless battle between evil and good, and the chances of the latter to be triumphant. Furthermore, I may ask them about the problem of the head and the heart and the way to settle it. To help them with understanding, I remind them that Captain Vere is more ruled by his head than his heart, and, thus, he imposes an unjust sentence on Billy, mercilessly ruling that he be hanged. I also draw their attention to the trouble today's judges have with conscience and their subordination of

justice to law. I make it clear to them that judges such as these should strike a balance between the need to implement the law and the necessity of maintaining justice. Without this balance, these judges will certainly go on with making mistakes, doing others harm, and assassinating justice instead of maintaining it, just as is evident in *Billy Budd*.

In addition to the previous questions, I may conduct an activity aiming at improving students' summary skills. To take an example, I ask students to give an overview of what they have seen, and to comment on the relevance of film to their lives. When this task has been done, I may ask them to write an essay in which they comment on the lessons that can be drawn from film, their views of film as an educational tool, and whether film facilitates understanding or not. After checking the essays, I usually pick two or three ones that are written well, and ask that they be read to students. I make a few remarks about them and urge students to write similar essays. The remarks I make focus on organization, contents, paragraph development, structures, marks of punctuation, coherence, documentation, plagiarism, etc. These remarks also focus on students' views of film and the necessity of their understanding all about filmmaking to be able not only to learn from film but also to make their own films. To these remarks, I add encouraging ones that make them more confident of themselves, more interested in learning, more prepared to work, and more cooperative.

I also stress the idea that film is an educational tool whose effectiveness is determined by the way it's used, and that it is our duty to prepare ourselves to make the best use of it not only in American literature but also in other fields of knowledge.

I hope I have demonstrated the reasons underlying the incorporation of film into the course materials of American literature classes whose instructors should reconsider their approaches and look at film from a different perspective. This medium of instruction, film, is worth

employing in the classroom as it facilitates learning, makes learning more enjoyable, helps teachers and students alike, enriches classes, develops students' skills, stimulates discussion, engages students, etc. For these reasons taken together, I recommend that instructors incorporate film into the course materials of all subjects simply because it does make a great difference, especially when it's properly used.

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