

Transcript

Diana Holmes, Professor, French Film

How do you make sure your students can relate to your subject?

I work in French in the target language as I'm sure most people doing A-level will. I do that very flexibly, explaining to students very carefully that I would much rather they went into English if they've got something to contribute than they felt themselves constrained or limited and produce an oversimplified version of what they wanted to say because they can't articulate it in French. Therefore I use French but I use it flexibly, so as to not discourage people from trying to get their ideas across. Secondly, I try to pass over narrative voice to the students quite early on through various presentations and questions where students have time to talk together in groups so they can gather their ideas before presenting them. I think this is important in any subject but particularly with French, especially across generations, so the students get to know they have got interesting and original things to contribute. Although on the second level course we go all the way back to the origins of cinema, I always start with a contemporary film so that they're dealing with something that is relatively familiar and that, at first, they can analyse more easily. This then gives them the 'equipment' to go back and look at more complex and distant objects of study. Finally if discussion does flag, which it doesn't very often, I think a good method even in itself is to use a short clip from a film that you can all watch together and react to collectively. This acts as a useful stimulus to get people talking confidently as they've just seen what they want to talk about. So I think the use of extracts and clips is another way that you can really get students engaged with the subject.



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What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

I found it exciting myself to discover, go more deeply and go analytically into film as many of the skills and approaches needed to study film are actually very similar to those used for studying literature; the same approaches are sort of transferable. I find in teaching that the generations coming along behind are actually very visually literate already and they have mostly grown up, to a greater extent certainly than my generation did, consuming their stories more visually than through the written word and constantly dealing with visual image. Therefore they don't know they are visually literate but they are and I find it really satisfying and interesting to provide the analytical tools, the concepts and the vocabulary such that the students quite quickly become adept at analysing what is on the screen. Of course France also has the most amazing history of cinema and continues to make all kinds of wonderful films.



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What is the biggest challenge you encounter when teaching your subject?

The challenge in some ways is not enormous because students take quite easily, as I was suggesting before, to the study of film with some enthusiasm. If there are challenges I think one of them is possibly to remind students to remain, at least to some extent, focussed on the nuts and bolts of film as it's very easy to be so fascinated by the story that's being told and by the characters that you forget you are also working as an analyst of cinema. Therefore I think it is important to be aware of the camera angles, the way the music is used, the way the editing is done and how all of these are contributing and shaping to meaning but it's key to keep that focus without making it purely technical and irrelevant to all the other important questions about the film's meanings. Personally, I think one the other challenges is that I'm quite capable of watching a whole film and not noticing the music. I've never studied music, although I find it very interesting if I try to, but it does play a really important role whether subliminally we notice it or not so I have to pay attention to it. Also I'm limited in the extent to which I can actually analyse exactly what is going in music, but for that I tend to draw on the students, as there's almost always one or two who've got a proper musical education and can contribute that knowledge.



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What would be your 'top tip' for those going on to teach you subject at A-level?

I think the absolutely central idea to get across from early on is that film is a complex, technical medium that demands an enormous team of people to put it together, as shown in the end credits, as well as an enormous and ever-changing set of equipment. Therefore if you are going to analyse the film and what it is that has that very emotional effect on you in the cinema, which is the point of cinema studies as opposed to cinema going, you need to get across the fact that this is actually worth studying. I do think a lot of students get a kick out of analysing film yet it is important to never separate analysing this reaction from more obvious levels of study, such as theme, portrayal of society and portrayal of individual identity. Putting these two together from early on, perhaps through the close analysis of a very short film, is really important in my opinion. Some teachers of course, even now, will have studied some film at university however some won't and I think they can afford to feel more confident than initially they think they should. For example it can be a help if you've done any sort of literary analysis or if you're used to analysing language and a lot of teachers themselves, like the students after them, are going to have grown up on a diet of visual imagery as well. Therefore I think it is both pleasurable and entirely doable to get yourself to a position where you are a quite competent film analyst and you can then pass that on to students.



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Which area do you most enjoy teaching?

The new wave, even though it's now fifty years old, has managed to retain its vibrancy and it's such a young cinema that's still so committed to changing the world through film. It's so innovative and original that the students sometimes still find some of the new wave films quite surprising and original because they use such interesting techniques even though it's such a long time ago. I would defy anyone to watch Francois Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* without being both moved and impressed, or Godard's *À Bout de Souffle* which is still incredibly cool even in 2015. Then there's the very contemporary films of which there's a constant stream coming out of France and I try and keep loosely up to date with and change the films on the module so that we do get up to date ones. As with literature my particular angle on film, as opposed to which film, is that I'm particularly interested in the whole question of gender; I'm very interested in women film directors and in the way gender is represented, played with and performed in cinema.



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Why do you think the study of film is integral to the study of French?

France has taken cinema seriously from the beginning; I think the notion of cinema as the seventh art (le septième art) comes originally from France and film has been viewed not only as an important industry and as an important form of entertainment but also as an art form really from very early on. It's subsidised more than in other countries, it's culturally encouraged and it's a significant element of French identity which is one reason I think it's central to French studies in particular. One of the other reasons for studying film, as it is such a popular art form, is that it manages to capture, encapsulate and represent the spirit of the times, the cultural issues and the tensions and conflicts through cinema stars, the stories that it tells, the music and the techniques that it uses. Yet it doesn't only reflect and represent all of that, it also has its effect on them and it helps to shape what the French call the cultural 'imaginaire'. It helps to shape how we think, for example, of masculinity and femininity and it shapes how we think love and relationships ought to happen as well as all kinds of other things. I think it's the two way relationship with society and culture that is absolutely fascinating at any period. A third reason which I notice in the new A-levels is that there's quite an emphasis on using modern languages to produce and encourage in students a reflective and analytical vision of the world and I think it's vitally important that the whole generation of students nowadays does, in effect, media studies. It's important that they are taught and encouraged to become visually aware, critical consumers of images because they are constantly surrounded by



them and I think through studying film in any language we can really contribute to that, thus making the comparative dimension even sharper.