

Transcript

Chris Homewood, Lecturer, German Film

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

In some cases it's not hard, particularly when dealing with contemporary film. However when I've done early German cinema, for example the Weimar period, there's the whole issue of getting past 'black and white', which by the way you still might encounter as an artistic choice. One of the ways I got round that problem was actually showing the impact that Weimar cinema has had on popular and cinematic culture more recently, for example through the films of Tim Burton. A lot of his films stylistically are quite indebted to what came before; films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *Nosferatu*. Even with more recent film I try and find examples of how it might relate to the students and the kind of things they might watch for pleasure. A couple of years ago when I was teaching *Run Lola Run* there was a great episode of *The Simpsons* when they parodied the film and used the same structure, and I found that was a really good way of turning the students onto it.



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What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

I think it's the way it brings the study of German culture to life. A lot of the time things you'd otherwise only read about in a text book or a history book are suddenly there being represented on the screen. I also really enjoyed the way that you can look at how the images are used to create meaning. Obviously it's not just about what the characters are saying to you about that particular issue or about a particular point of time in the past, but also about how the use of aesthetics can support or even contradict the message that's being given elsewhere.



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

I also do a good bit of language teaching as well. As we all know students love learning the language but aspects of it can sometimes be a little bit dry, particularly having to get through all of that grammar. I've actually found that film can be a very useful tool in the language classroom at the same time, for example I've often used short films which relate to one of the topics we might be doing. They're great for listening practice, comprehension and even for getting them to write a critical synopsis of the film, so yes they can be really useful when it comes to teaching language.



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

I think my 'top tip' would be, simply put, don't be afraid of film! I think if you feel you're not that well versed in how film operates its formal qualities there can be quite a bit of anxiety about how to teach it. You can approach it so many different ways; on the one hand just as a cultural text, for example what does it say about Germany, but also it's quite easy to just start looking at the basics of aesthetics, for example the use of colour or thinking about the implications of why you've got a low or high angle shot. Also a very small amount of basic reading including a glossary of terms and a little bit of an introduction on how to read film would certainly give you the arsenal that you need to feel comfortable and really get the most out of teaching film in the classroom.



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Which area do you most enjoy teaching?

I teach all areas of German cinema but I really enjoy Weimar cinema and obviously I've done quite a bit on the New German Cinema. I think one of the things I really enjoyed teaching recently that the students really enjoyed as well was Hans Weingartner's film *The Edukators*, especially given the way it poses questions about how a politically active youth can focus its dissatisfaction when they think that everything has been said and done and failed already. It's a really interesting text, not least because it brings up questions about the legacy of 1968 in Germany and the spectre of terrorism, which is an area I'm very interested in. Visually the film is very interesting due to the intertextuality that goes on as well.



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

I think one of the reasons I gave for doing it, and the same goes for the students as well, is the way it can particularly bring the past to life. Students will engage at varying points with the period of the Nazi regime, the GDR (German Democratic Republic), the Stasi, even the legacy of terrorism and film really does help bring it to life more for the students. I think films are also very important as cultural texts as they do tell us something about what was happening at that particular period in time. For example, the filmmakers associated with the New German Cinema, a very critical cinema, were well known for opposing the dominant consensus or view through methods such as 'Official Memory'. Therefore film can be very revealing about what it tells about Germany at a particular point in time.

