

Transcript

Duncan Wheeler, Associate Professor, Spanish Film

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

Film can be, often is, and necessarily is a reflection of reality; it's a kind of snapshot. And in a sense that's what all of teaching Spanish, or any modern foreign language, is about. It's about providing a snapshot and a gateway into a culture which isn't ours. I think with film it's a question of thinking, "Well what will they relate to?" You can have the most outlandish plot, as Almodóvar proves, but if there's something where students can put themselves in that scenario, and that can be as simple as children arguing with their parents or your boyfriend leaving you; some kind of hook which they can relate to. And especially if for example (obviously this will depend on the schools and what you do) they're doing a school exchange somewhere or you organise a school trip, having a film in a place where they've been or are about to go to. I think it's a mixture of the familiar and the exotic, striking that balance.

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What personally excites you about teaching your subject?

Well I think it's when I go back to what first got me into Spanish and I think a lot of it was to do with seeing Spanish films. Back in the '90s, can't imagine it now, they used to put films on the BBC on Thursday and Friday nights or going to the local cinema. So I saw a lot of the Almodóvars that came out in the '90s – films like *Jamón Jamón* – and that really provided me, someone who hadn't been to Spain much, with a kind of gateway into Spain. I still remember how that excited me and inspired me at the time. I guess it still does and it's passing on that enthusiasm. I think people can really see it when you're teaching and if you're enthusiastic, they're more likely to be enthused.

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

One is that the issue of political correctness is somewhat different in Spanish films so what's included, be that extreme violence or sometimes what we would perceive as sexist or racist language, can be a problem. I think that's more of a problem at university than at school because I think you can just pick films that are less likely to offend. So that's one problem. The other problem I think we have, but I think again you can get around this through imagination, is with or without subtitles? Because what happens sometimes is that if you don't put the subtitles people get completely lost, and if you do put the subtitles do students really listen? So I think what we tend to do here is to develop tasks, (especially in the first year, it's different by the final year) whereby we have the subtitles, but we set tasks that force them (be that identifying new vocabulary, describing differences between the English and Spanish - is there something where the subtitles had to make a cultural transfer?) in order to make sure that they are actually attentive and listening. So they're practising their language skills, whilst also engaging with a film.

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What would be your 'top tip' for those going on to teach Spanish film at A-Level?

As I think is likely to happen over the coming years, that film is going to perform more and more an integral part of language teaching in schools, it's seeing that as an extra opportunity with which to enthuse students. I'm sure you'll be familiar with some Spanish films but you're likely to see more if you're teaching them. I think this will only boost your own enthusiasm and that should hopefully be infectious in the classroom. Just see it as a gift, in a way, to the language teaching with the way you're doing all the things you're already doing but also providing a gateway, firstly into the lives of Spaniards (or Spanish-speaking people), that's what film does – it captures reality, or a slice of reality. But also if you've got students who might be going into university study it's a really brilliant opportunity for them because it's a gateway into the kind of things they'll be doing here. So for example we have a language portfolio whereby they write in Spanish based on watching a film in their own time. So it's providing them with those key skills and as I say, hopefully skills that they'll enjoy using and perfecting.

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Which area do you most enjoy teaching?

I think I really enjoy teaching the films that people are less familiar with. So we often start off with the well-known films, something like *Balbir*. But then I really like showing comedies, which do very well at the Spanish box-office. So a film such as *Ocho Apellidos Vascos* (Eight Basque Surnames), or other films that young Spaniards go and see on a Friday and Saturday night. I like putting those on because they're not ones that come over here. Also you can really see when the students' language and cultural awareness is getting better because a lot of the jokes are based on regional stereotypes - laughing at the Andalusians, laughing at the Basques – and you can really see, especially after the Year Abroad, how they really catch on to these subtleties.

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

I think it's important in the sense that we often (and I'm sure that it's even more so in schools) seem to be on a battle for time. We think, '*That'll* be great to do, but if we do *that* we're not able to do *this* and we need to do *that*'. But I think what's great about film is that it practices all of those core skills. So I'd see it as an extra, but it's an extra that feeds into everything else. Obviously to speak, the first thing you need to do to speak is to learn how to listen. It's a way of learning new vocabulary, and pragmatically it's something that young people can really engage with and they're not going to be put off by it - quite the contrary in fact.

