

9. *How do you know that?* Movie narratives and storytelling in the EFL classroom

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Who has the time to integrate an entire film into a syllabus? Unless your group actually studies film, you may opt to show movies in class as a form of Friday afternoon recreation. Indeed, film can seem as if an airlift to the promise land of native speakers, where at every ambient turn someone rattles on in the target language. But depending on the level of your group, a movie's smartly recounted world in an hour and a half may baffle and discourage learners as much or more than the pleasure of respite from usual classroom fare. A selective culling of scenes, however, as opposed to the film itself could achieve the desired effect, of enjoying a taste of that language context, the realm of magic and its special narrative with much less likelihood of overkill.

Ambiguity in the narrative

Like any extended narrative, film tends to be in fact an interweaving collection of narratives, several strands of which could be the scene we treat in class. Our criteria of choice depends not only on length — we after all want to go from 90 to around 5 minutes — but on how much of that magic is on tap in the extract we present. That narrative which is missing is not necessarily a problem. A scene contains its own logic in order to integrate with the overall narrative. What is left unsaid or unresolved is the very liveliness of film narrative and its prime mover, ambiguity. Film narrative needs the viewer to get involved, and the viewer's movie memories and stories are brought to task.

Philosopher and film buff Stanley Cavell writes (Cavell: 1971):

As with dreams, you do sometimes *find* yourself remembering moments in a film, and a procedure in *trying* to remember is to find your way back to a characteristic mood the thing has left you with. But, unlike dreams, other people can help you remember, indeed are often indispensable to the enterprise of remembering. Movies are hard to remember, the way the actual events of yesterday are. And yet, again like dreams, *certain* moments from films viewed decades ago will nag as vividly as moments of childhood. It is as if you had to remember what happened *before* you slept. Which suggests that film awakens as much as it enfolds you. (his italics)

An essential task in the classroom is to create an atmosphere of genuine interaction. The Cavell text implies two approaches for the language teacher, and both evoke the magic of film. Retelling movie stories is the first strategy for the language class, retelling them and listening to others as they tell them.

Probably no other type of story occupies so much of our narrative-storing brains than those of movies we have seen. Myriad stories swirl in partial states of completeness, seen at nearly every point of our lives, and are held together by scraps of remembrance, not unlike the "certain moments" Cavell describes. Here then is the second major strategy, drawing attention to differences of opinion, in other words, to where student memories of a narrative vary. In a classroom of memories, there will likely be as many versions of a tale as there are tellers to tell it, each knitted from the student's own internal narrative, each with their own eccentricities of memory, of fantasy, of rewriting, of interpretation. It is at this point that debate can figure in class, and here the prospect of intriguing and satisfying student interaction. Let us consider the results possible when working with a single scene from a film selected for its stand-alone value. The article assumes the reader will likely not recognize the film I cite and its scenes discussed. Indeed, I have purposely chosen a somewhat lesser known recent American movie. While curiosity may lure some reader-teachers to check these scenes out at the earliest opportunity, these scenes need not be known beforehand by the reader any more than by my students. Moreover, the reader should not imagine that these scenes alone have an exclusive fit with the classroom. What is at issue is a fundamental incompleteness or ambiguity in movie narrative and how the student fleshing-out of these narratives represents a meaningful language practice activity.

***Guarding Tess*, directed by Penny Marshall, 1993**

Here is my summary of this film's opening scene:

A car drives up and parks in front of a fine late 19th century American gothic house. A young man in a parka (played by Nick Cage) gets out and walks toward the front door. A couple of other cars are parked in front. It is wintertime. Cut to Nick — we have at this point no other name to give the character — inside without the parka carrying a tray with food and a single long-stemmed rose in a vase. He is humming a tune. He goes up hardwood stairs to the first floor. In front of a door at the top of the landing he stops, takes a gun out of a hip holster and puts it down on a small table beside the door, all the while holding the tray in the other hand. He knocks on the door. Nick says, "Breakfast! I'm going. I thought I'd say goodbye." No answer from within. He holds the tray again with one hand and picks up the gun and

slides the tray on the table. Cut to Nick, still without his parka, walking into a kitchen where we find three men, one dressed as a cook, another seated dressed all in white like a nurse and another in a dark suit, and Nick says, "Well, gentlemen. All the best and good luck." He pats the seated white dressed man on the back and adds, "It's been fun." He goes out the door and through the kitchen window we see him approaching another car where another man on the driver side is waiting with his parka. They get in. Cut to Nick seated in an airplane, obviously already in the air. A flight assistant brings him a bloody mary. Nick says, "Thank you." He sips the drink, and giggles, and music kicks in — not music inside the airplane mind you, but for us, the viewer — and he smirks and giggles again. End of the first scene.

What is going on here? What do we know about this situation? Read the description again and you will probably not know much more. Yet keep in mind that my description is just one of an almost infinite number of descriptions. But no matter how many descriptions we come up with, unless we have already seen the film, we cannot say we know with certainty what is happening (and even if you have seen it, it still does not mean certainty). As teachers, we know that language students often have an insatiable craving for certainty. The language heard in the scene is not lexically difficult. What is "difficult" is the scene's confounded inexplicitness. I have chosen this scene partly because of its relative obscurity, though other films would not necessarily provide more certainty given a single scene, opening or otherwise, as sample. Let us work with what the students know or deduce — especially deduce —, what they can find out from sharing with each other and go from there.

Typically when students talk about a film story, some of their information comes from the video, but not all of it. Information can come at them from worksheets, exercises, illustrations or whatever we use to complement the video in addition to the video itself. That includes the teacher who may telegraph, that is plain *give away*, elements of the story without even realizing it. After all, in all likelihood, the teacher has already seen — and re-seen — the scene. Telegraphing particularly hits home when teachers try to herd discussion toward "right answers". Narrative interpretations, however, are not necessarily right from the beginning. Interpretation develops as the story develops. Ambiguity can be seen as part of the game, not as an obstacle requiring special compensation. Encourage students therefore to build upon what they understand. There is little need to force comprehension at one point when the student may deduce the answer later on.

Discussions that generate among students, even those interpretations you think lead *the wrong way*, are leading at least in one essential way, toward student interaction.

Activity: Student-generated comprehension questions

Ask students in pairs to write 10 questions about the film story they have seen so far which they hope the next sequence will clarify. Collect these questions on the board (working on these questions' correctness is an activity in its own right). Here is a sample of ten possible questions:

- 1 Who is the man with the gun?
- 2 Why does he put the gun down on the table before knocking on the door?
- 3 Who is behind the door?
- 4 Why doesn't the person answer?
- 5 Where is he going?
- 6 Why is he going?
- 7 Who are the men in the kitchen?
- 8 Why do they remain quiet even as Nick is leaving?
- 9 Where does the scene take place?
- 10 Why is he smiling at the end?

And so on. There is no need to tell the students the title of the film or the name of the actors. Simply explain the activity and let them get on with it. Let the film alone, with all its tantalizing and quirky elements, provide the information. How often for example have film reviews or previews spoiled a sense of discovery in a film you later go to see? Let the students discover the film purely on its own terms, without help of preteaching and marketing. Occasionally, some students will have seen the film. Have these students work together and answer the questions according to what they remember. Remember, these memories are incomplete, highly selective and influenced by countless other movies and their own readings of movies. If you resist guiding your students the "right" way, you may soon wonder how many different scenes — even different *films* — you have showed them, as the variety of interpretations could suggest you have done just that.

It is a good idea to have students predict possible answers to their questions *before* viewing the second scene. While the questions provide students with reasons to pay careful attention to the second scene, possible answers, including those of other pairs, will provide the students with more elements to confirm or rule out as they view — and listen to — the second scene. For example, regarding the

fourth question — Why doesn't the person [behind the door] answer [when he knocks]? —, some students may speculate that she has been murdered, perhaps by Nick himself, or that she is not there, and so on. By working with the second scene, these theories can be tested, and once again, listening is one of checking, and not of simply getting the right answer, like some timid creature, to come out and show itself.

Now show them the second sequence. Likely enough, this scene will not answer all of their questions. Students may also not follow everything that happens and is said in the second sequence. Some of their questions will not be answered until later scenes, if ever at all. The important thing though is that students are involved with the narrative beyond the linguistic level alone. They have produced their own worksheet, so that they listen and watch the second sequence with a purpose they themselves have devised. Also, they have confronted the narrative's essential element at this point, its intentional ambiguity.

You might have the students work in pairs where one student can see the screen and the other cannot. Those who cannot see should take notes as to what they hear. The others, saddled with the whole shebang cannot possibly take notes! It is interesting afterwards for the two students to compare their impressions of the scene based on their different impressions, one sound only, the other with image and sound. Interestingly, the sound-alone students may have an easier time with managing the sequence than those who could see and hear it all. The viewers will tend to be sloppier, patching plausible interpretations. The sound-alone students will hear narrative elements (chiming clocks, squeaky stairs, boiling pots in the kitchen) that the others do not notice. The two may find collaboration or an exchange of perceptions, a productive way of making sense of the scene.

Possible answers and comments to the ten questions as "provided" in the second scene

1 Who is the man with the gun?

In Washington, Nick shows an ID at the entrance of a large governmental-style building and says he has come to see the director of the Secret Service. Presumably then he is a member of the Secret Service.

Comments

Do the students necessarily know what the American Secret Service is? Students will have their ideas, such as it being some kind of security agency that is a part of

the US government. This detail may also suggest why he carries a gun. At no point, however, does Nick explicitly say "I'm a Secret Service agent". The scene seems to be explicit enough, however, the interaction of location and Nick with the man he has come to meet. Nonetheless, identifying his occupation will require some synthesis on the students' part, and any *de facto* assumption of identity on the teacher's part will skip over the students offering their reasoning as to *how* they know he is a secret service agent. In other words, the absence of explicit detail is the *presence* of a language activity.

2 Why does he put the gun down on the table before knocking on the door?

Not answerable. Presumably, this detail will be treated in a later scene (and as it turns out, it is, in the third scene).

Comments

Movies tend to do this: they lay trails of unanswered details that are "answered" at future appropriate moments of the film. Why should *all* student questions be answerable? In fact, the student conclusion that a question is not answerable is after all an answer, based on a careful reading of the film's aural *and* visual content. Activities which presuppose answerability imply a form of telegraphing as described above. When students undergo the mild anxiety of sorting through information not only to find answers to questions, but to evaluate whether the information is there in the first place, they are engaged in a much more real-life activity. Life beyond the classroom is full of situations where worksheets do not apply.

3 Who is behind the door?

In the next scene we hear of Nick's report about guarding Tess, wife of a former president. Presumably, the person behind the door is his charge.

Comments

This section of scene two is "hard" to understand as the language is offered in a fast-break, business-as-usual clip, with "inside" secret-agent speak, as well as Nick's masking his true feelings about the First Lady (he says he has been her bodyguard for three years and he cannot bear the thought of even three minutes' more). The activity at this point is not about processing all this language, meta- or otherwise, but simply focusing on the question, the identity of the person. At every level of

ability, students need practice in managing language in order to extract working conclusions without having to process *everything*. How much identification of the person behind the door constitutes the *right* answer? A woman, wife of a president, wife of a former president, wife of a former president who has become progressively difficult since his passing? Have I the teacher got the *complete* right answer? Does Nick himself know?

4 Why doesn't the person answer?

Nick describes Tess as eccentric, which could explain why she does not reply when he knocks at the door and announces breakfast and that he is going. Perhaps she is simply not in the bedroom at all, but this is never confirmed. The eccentricity theory, a pouting Tess (for reasons yet to be explained), would appear to suffice.

Comments

The obliqueness of information here strikes at the very essence of viewer narration, at least at this point of a film. By having students speculate on why she does not answer the door or show some sign of presence, and exchanging these speculations with other students, opens the film story up to the students' own narrative weave. Students may have a number of plausible answers to explain the situation, and until other information is presented to the contrary, that may be enough. There is no inherent reason on the teacher's part ever to demonstrate the students' wrong; their task is to convince the others in their group that their interpretations are *possible* considering what is known.

5 Where is he going?

As we see establishing shots of Washington and a large governmental-style building, we can imagine he has traveled to Washington.

Comments

While we are provided with a nice aerial view of the city, and the Washington Monument prominently displayed, the city of Washington is never explicitly mentioned. One might imagine similar shots depicting London with Big Ben or Paris with the Eiffel Tower. In this case, the Washington Monument serves as a metonym, that is, it means in place of text or utterance that this is Washington. But what if students don't know the Monument? Many large cities of the world have prominent obelisks. For an American, the metonym works instantaneously, but

should we assume it is true for others? In other words, we should *assume* nothing. Students should explain how they know it is Washington, and if they do not know that, offer speculation as to where it could be.

6 Why is he going?

In the course of his conversation with the director of the Secret Service, we learn that Nick's tour of duty guarding Tess has ended. He has come then to report on that activity and await a new assignment.

Comments

Again, managing dialogue is the trick here, but there is a fair amount of body language to take into account. He does not have the comportment of an escaped murderer at any rate. His demonstrations of relief — and in the second scene complemented by his speechlessness at being told he is going back to Summersville for another three years — together with the bits and pieces understood in the dialogue may be enough to answer the question.

7 Who are the men in the kitchen?

The next scene does not offer any further information about their identities.

Comments

Presumably they are employees of the household and not Secret Service agents. As with question number 2, their identities are not revealed in the second scene. This in itself is not a problem and queries to their identities can still be debated based on the information given. The shorthand presentation of characters, so typical in film, may never get any more explicit. Finding out who people are is an essential difference between print narrative and film narrative. Whereas print narrative is liable to out and out tell you who people are, film often has these identities revealed through context and interaction. Deduction is the name of the game.

8 Why do the men in the kitchen remain quiet even as Nick is leaving?

The next scene does not offer any further information about their silence.

Comments

See number 7. Perhaps they simply hated to see Nick go? We could offer that explanation based on their unusual silence at his departure. By the way, the film

never specifically answers this question.

9 Where does the scene take place?

It would appear to be Tess's home.

Comments

At one point during Nick's conversation with the director of the Secret Service, Nick talks about Summersville, Ohio, where presumably this house is located. By the way, location is often as understated as character identity.

10 Why is he smiling at the end?

He is glad to be on the plane, and leaving the situation he had behind him.

Comments

By the end of Nick's conversation with the director of the Secret Service, we can see that Nick had been looking forward to getting away from guarding the former First Lady and getting a "more active assignment". But does that fact alone explain his smile and giggle? We see and hear Nick's reaction in the plane. That alone, without explicit authorial interpretation, is what we have to go on. What do the students think?

Conclusion

Edward Branigan (Branigan: 1992), in his recent study on film narrative, writes: Interpretations of narrative depend in a crucial way upon the judgments we make about space, time and causation as we work top-down on screen data. Identifying an event as a "story event" is a matter of deciding where actions begin, how they break off, and which actions belong together.

These interpretations, however, are never quite definitive, never absolute, but remain essentially subjective. Although the message may appear ambiguous, it is perpetually the same, immutably on film. When students disagree about this or that aspect of a "story event", their task is to find the elements in the film to demonstrate the other is wrong. In other words, we agree to accept this movie world as having sufficient logic and meaning to apply our judgments and feelings. Generally movies can sustain, as marvelously as any art form, those judgments and quarrels over meaning.

What about students wanting to see the *rest* of the film? You have successfully

teased them; are you now going to leave them in movie purgatory without knowing what happens next? This is a pleasant dilemma you have created for yourself. Students clamoring for more is a desirable outcome for any teaching material. As for options, you may choose to show them another scene in the film — and not necessarily the next in sequence — that will begin the procedure of speculation and ambiguity all over again. Or you may choose simply to peer into an entirely different film. You may make the film available to students to view on their *own* time. But whatever you choose to do, you have made film work for you, and especially for the students, so that its innate narrative elusiveness creates a desire to continue. That desire to seek resolution, to fulfill narrative, to hear and tell stories, after all, is what movies are all about.

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