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Film, Literacy and Cultural Participation

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Chapter Outline

English needs to start from an idea of education, before an idea of the subject.

(Medway, 2010)

For some years I have been working on behalf of the British Film Institute (BFI) promoting a version of literacy that includes film (Reid, 2009). My starting point is always a definition of literacy as 'being able fully to participate in a culture'; the implication is that one cannot participate fully in twenty-first-century culture without a grounding in the moving image. As the late Anthony Minghella put it, 'It is vital and obvious that understanding, manipulating, and appreciating the film sentence should be an accepted part of the education system' (Minghella, 2005).

What I would like to do here is explore, and then formalize, a participatory definition of literacy that includes the 'film sentence', and then illustrate it with examples from work at the BFI.

Let us start with a straightforward question: what does it mean to be literate? And answer with an example from Gee (1990). A man goes into a bar. It is a Hell's Angels' bar, and the man wants to pass as a Hell's Angel. So he wears leathers and denims, biker boots. He wants to look the part, so he grows his hair long, and grows a beard. This process takes several months. In everyday life he is a stockbroker, so he knows his accent and idiom would immediately give him away – so he watches biker films, and reads biker magazines and

practises biker talk, a process that also takes several months. But when he finally goes into the bar, and speaks to the bartender, in spite of all of his preparation, he is still identified as a charlatan. It seems that there are a set of beliefs, values, assumptions that Hell's Angels subscribe to, that our character is not aware of. No matter how perfectly he replicates the appearance of the Hell's Angel, underneath he is still a stockbroker. His daily acculturation is as a stockbroker; in order to 'pass' as a Hell's Angel, he would have to immerse himself in their habitus, and absorb their beliefs and values, those attributes that are embodied in dress, language, body language. (Although to some extent it is also true that taking on the outward appearance of a discourse enables you to 'let it speak through you', as it were. Discourses are embodied, as well as separable, ideologies. Maybe more 'taking on' the appearance of different discourses would help students perform better.)

James Gee (1990), from whom the example above is taken, wrote about literacy as an immersive, total discourse system, what he called 'saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations … which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes' (Gee, 1990, p. 142). To be literate, (my paraphrase) is 'to participate *fully* in a culture' (my paraphrase), where a culture is more than a loose collection of people assembled contiguously together, but rather a community of people who share values and beliefs, behaviors and practises.

Take artists for example. 'Being an artist' entails more than developing and establishing a repertoire of craft skills – like painting, or sculpting. Artists group themselves into discourse communities governed by very implicit rules – of language, dress, behavior, even belief. As if to take this makeover of identity seriously, some of them even change their names, to signal their change of state, their membership of a non-civilian order. (Andrew Graham Dixon talks about the art community as a clerisy – a priesthood; just like a religious order, its members sometimes change their names, and follow a dress code.) In short, literacy is not just about writing; it is about whole value systems, and about the cultures that people participate in. The language that you use is just one marker of the culture you are a part of.

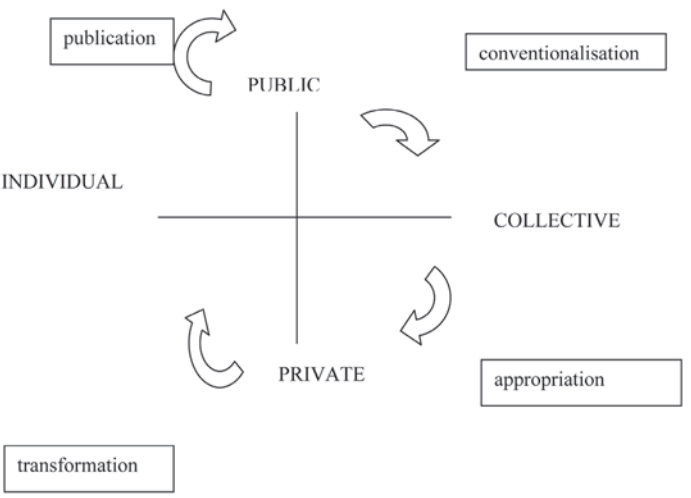
This is a long way from film, which is where I work, and where I want to take this chapter. But it establishes a central tenet for English: literacy is not about text types, or meaning-making systems (modes), or about the vehicles that carry these messages to us (media). It is about accessing, inhabiting and critiquing culture as 'a whole way of life', as Raymond Williams put it (Williams, 1958, p. 54). And the role of educators is to support people in accessing a range of forms of life beyond those they already inhabit, as other educators did for us.

The special role that English has is that it is concerned first of all with the imagination: how people have imagined new and different worlds, and re-presented the worlds they already know. The structuring of experience in materials that have been adapted for this purpose – in film, theater, poetry and prose – is our subject. But these forms reach beyond themselves, and their closed interpretive systems and communities; novels, films, TV programs change both the way we see the world, and sometimes, the world itself. So, to go back to the quote

that opened this chapter, our role is to enable people to change, or develop, or extend, the way they read, watch, listen, and think, in ways that help them participate in society. This, to answer Medway, is 'the idea of Education that English should start from' (Medway, 2010).

Theroizing literacy as participation

Here is a model of how an individual participates in society, through the act of making something.



A social model of the arts as a 'making process'

What this diagram presents is a heuristic for conceiving how a child relates to the wider social world, as mediated through the act of making something. For Ross et al. the made objects were from the arts of sculpture, painting, dance, but it serves equally well as a model of making in literacy: the relationship between reading and writing, between self and other, and between a child's present context and the traditions they have access to.

Following the cycle clockwise from the top, we first of all witness the absorption (or *conventionalization*) of a newly made object, or text, into a collective meaning or set of practises. This is typically how a new film, poem, novel or painting (Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, say (Scorsese, USA, 1990) joins a pre-existing set of other films, novels etc. in the public domain (Scorsese's body of work; gangster films; films about New York or about Italian American life) and then changes that set of examples, either subtly, or in a major way. The set, or sets, of examples, we call genre, and a film artist like Scorsese will change our sense of what the genre is, and can do.

The new work, welcomed to the collective realm, doesn't have to be made by an internationally recognized artist: works by children sometimes enter larger collective bodies of work, anywhere where a work of art enters a community and a communal memory: in the sixth-form Media Studies department I used to work in, video work from previous years' students served as a reference point for us, and for our students, and the same was true on a larger scale for the exam boards who collated and disseminated the best of student work.

In the 'private' quadrant of the cycle, individuals absorb, internalize, or in Ross et al.'s terms *appropriate*, the sets of meanings, techniques and strategies that come with either a specific film or poem or painting (there's the famous 'restaurant tracking shot' in *Goodfellas*, for example, or its bravura opening), or are absorbed more generally from a set of works within a genre (children's internalized sense of the dialog and characterization in soap opera, for example). In either case, we make texts personal to ourselves; their strategies, moments, features enter a personal canon or repertoire. With some people – those embarking on making something – not just film, but any work of art – the special, personally associated meanings and tropes and features of *Goodfellas* will become part of their personal lexicon. What T. S. Eliot (1920) said about poets ('immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different') applies just as well to other art forms**:** filmmakers will be (and have been) influenced by powerful examples of a genre, whether consciously or unconsciously, and some of them will quote from it, or remake it into something new.

In the third quadrant, the *transformative* stage, the internalized meanings and feelings and associations bump into the materiality of the maker's chosen form: if it is written language, then some things can be said, and others not. If it is visual art, then some things can be shown, and others not. If it is film, then the resources of film – sound (speech, music, sound effects), pictures (and how they're framed and designed, and what's in them), and time (how long shots last; how shots are juxtaposed with each other, and with sound) – enable some things to be shown, reproduced, revealed, and not others. The material and form – and generic rules – allow and enable some things to be said and shown, and proscribe others. As Elliot Eisner puts it:

> Transforming the private into the public is a primary process of work in both art and science. Helping the young learn how to make that transformation is another of education's most important aims. (2002, p. 3)

And later, considering how the imagination acts transformatively on its objects, how it is more than a passive looking glass on which other images are reflected:

> Yet there is a difference between recalled images and their imaginative transformation. Were we limited to the recall of the images we had once experienced, cultural development would be in trouble. Imagination gives us images of the possible that provide a platform for seeing the actual, and by seeing the actual freshly, we can do something about creating what lies beyond it. (2002, p. 4)

The *publication* phase of making is the presentation of the made work to the outside world. This does not have to mean publishing in a global sense, in which everyone in the world potentially accesses the work; instead it is the presentation of work to an audience outside the self – maybe only classmates, family and friends, a teacher. On the identity matrix above, it's the work moving from individual to public. And then, in Ross et al.'s terms, the work, once made public, joins the swim of humanity: 'The child's products are offered as additions to the conventional wisdom of society, and she herself becomes a bearer of the culture.' (Ross et al., 1993, p. 54).

In arts education, the notion of the publication of children's work – its presentation to an outside audience – is now recognized as fundamental. But the conditions in which this happens are crucial to whether the child's work actually *lives* beyond its own means. If a child's film, for example, is not shown in its entirety at awards ceremonies or celebratory screenings, then such presentations cannot fairly constitute publication in its fullest sense. Further than this, without maker and audience being able to talk about the work (or sometimes just the audience; artists can be notoriously reluctant to talk about their work, preferring it to 'speak for itself'), there is no real 'conventionalization' of the work in wider discourse. In order to become assimilated to a wider body of work, of form, and genre, works of art are given life beyond themselves, by social means. This is the purpose of book groups, film societies, adult education art courses, internet fan groups, arts reviewing: they are how works of art are given life and sustained within a culture, and they are given life often through language.

I want to argue that a child progressing through this whole cycle constitutes a moment of literacy, and literacy as social and cultural participation. The child who produces a piece of film melds examples and features of films she has seen, sometimes consciously, but more often without directly being aware of them, into her own personal film lexicon, into a piece of her own film, and possibly, shown to a 'public'. The whole process is one whereby a child joins the 'film conversation' – the set of discourses, and discourse communities that have built up around film over the past 115 years. There are subsets of film conversations that are more closely related to children, young people and film: around animation in schools for example (but also around home-made animations on YouTube), or around pieces of film made for assessment at post-16 study (Media Studies; Moving Image Arts), or among teachers (see Yahoo groups on film in Modern Foreign Languages). But these are all in the end part of a larger discourse group – the 'film community'.

On the face of it, the Ross model is not so different from other accounts of the creative process in education (see Burn and Banaji, 2010). But other accounts tend to follow a particular pattern: from planning/input, through making, to publication/sharing/output. What is crucially different about the Ross model is that it theorizes a relationship between four points and two axes that between them express a relationship between the individual and the social, and between the public and the private (lest this be confusing, the social or collective sphere is different from the public sphere: it is possible to be private and collective, as with Masonic groups, for example).

The movement between public/collective, and private/individual is one of the fundamental dynamics in society: it is how individuals create and maintain a sense of their own individuation, but from within a group, or set of groups. Social groups are made up of individuals that share some features in common, while individuals choose from the many common features at their disposal in order to incorporate their own uniqueness. Any act of creative 'making' – from babies learning to talk, to great artists changing the direction of painting, sculpture, or film – has a constitutive role in this transaction between individual, collective, private and social, and can be explained by it. Without the social or collective dimension of the matrix, we have a series of single voices in empty rooms, of work made in a vacuum. We have no conversation, in fact no public realm, in which to participate.

We know that creative learning is about the self, the 'expressive entitlement', but less about the self's central but subordinate role in participating in a culture. Contemporary public and policy discourse about education tends to follow the 'business ontology' (Fisher, 2011, blogging as *k-punk*) where the only purposes of education are instrumental and economic, where the training of children is as agents, serving the economy as its instruments. However, there is an alternative sphere, or ontology: the public space, or public realm. This place is created out of collective participation, and is collaboratively built. Being literate as a form of social and cultural participation is therefore more than an individual entitlement: it is a necessity if the public realm is to exist at all.

This is why a social, participatory model of literacy (or of creative practise more generally) is so important: it projects the maker, and her work, beyond herself, into the wider world, into history, into discourse, into language, into what philosopher Michael Oakeshott (cited in Ross et al., 1993) called 'the conversation of mankind.'

Film, identity, literacy – a case study

From here, I would like to examine some work we have been doing at the BFI that is illuminated by the Ross model – and which shows how film education can help children join 'the conversation of mankind'.

For two years now, the BFI has been participating in a program run by the Cinémathèque Française – the Paris-based, French sister organization to the BFI. In 1995, the Cinémathèque instituted an idea called 'Le Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse'. ('Cinema 100 years' young', or '100 years of youth'). The year 1995 was the centenary of film, and the idea was to invite a group of filmmaking workshops to make films in the style of, and under some of the same conditions as, the Lumière Brothers – for many people the originators of film as we know it. Each year subsequently, the program has taken an aspect of film language – light, camera movement, depth of field, framing, color – and set out an education program around it. The program comprises watching – a double DVD is put together of clips from all over the world, and across film history – and a 'curriculum' of specified exercises and tasks (playful experiments that enable children to try out some of the techniques they will have seen in the DVD of

clips), culminating in a final 'film essai'. I use the word 'curriculum' deliberately (as opposed to 'project' for example), in the sense of a set of prescribed steps and activities and offered resources supporting them, underpinned by a set of pedagogical principles. The program takes around two terms, or 50 hours, to complete.

In our first year of involvement, the theme was 'camera movement'. Better still, it was framed as a question: 'Pourquoi bouge le camera?' (Why move the camera?) Thus, all the work produced by children became a set of possible answers to that question. The program began with a two-day training seminar in Paris. Alain Bergala, the critic whose ideas have informed much of the Cinémathèque's work over the last twenty years (summarized in his book *L'hypothèse cinéma*, 2006), led the seminar, with a discussion of the many dimensions of camera movement in the history of cinema, starting with the Lumière Bros', early experiments with travelling shots, a long look at Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (USA, 1975), and a film called *July*, by Kazak director Darezhan Omirbaev (Kazakhstan, 1988). All of the clips used in Bergala's presentation (which itself ran to some seven hours over two days) were compiled and distributed on a double DVD soon after the training session.

The exercises for the Camera Movement year encouraged very short experimental pieces: contrasting film of moving objects, and moving cameras, with static shots and objects, for example. As many of the projects operate within school buildings (if not always school time), many of the exercises featured moving shots through school corridors, replicating, or referencing, travelling shots from Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (USA, 2003), or Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You* (USA, 1996), or Kubrick's *The Shining* (USA, 1980). You can watch some of the examples of the exercises made by children (http://100ans.cinematheque.fr/100ans20092010/?page_id=17), put 'Cinema cent ans de jeunesse 2009/10' into your search engine and click on 'quelques exercices realises' in the right hand toolbar.

In 2009/10, we worked with three groups of young people: one group of around ten Year 8 boys from a boys' school in south London, another of six Year 9 boys from a mixed secondary school, also in south London, and a group of Year 10 girls on a BTEC (vocational qualification from the Business and Technology Education Council) Media Production course at a girls' school on the outskirts of south-east London. The first group of boys came to BFI Southbank every Wednesday after school, for two to three hours, between October and May; the second group of boys worked on and off through the Spring term of 2010; the girls' group followed the program as part of their curriculum, on a Friday, between November and May. The Cinémathèque program allows for this flexibility: our after-school BFI group worked through a compressed version in eight weeks, while the BTEC group spent a day a week for over a term.

I should like to focus just for a moment on the exercises carried out by our groups. The early exercises of one of the groups, who came to BFI Southbank once a week after school for the duration of the project, were characterized by filmed 'group rucking': the filming activity was an excuse for portrayals of play fighting. Later, when we asked for story ideas,

their responses were typically about filming more violent stories. A second group, based at their school in south London, took a different tack in their exercises, choosing to film long single-take travelling shots along corridors, past and through groups of students, following a single character – a compilation of footage that became incorporated into their final *film essai*.

The second group had watched more of the DVD clips as part of their preparation: when we asked them at the end of the project which films had an impact on their final outcome, they all said the clips from *The Shining* (Kubrick, USA, 1980), in which there are many shots of the young boy travelling along corridors on his tricycle. The boys remembered in particular the heightened sound effect as the tricycle moved from carpeted to polished wooden floor – and it may be significant that a number of the group had been identified as being on the autistic spectrum, which sometimes presents as a heightened sensitivity to sound. In terms of the arts cycle, it may have been that the exposure to, and internalization of, some of the Kubrick work, came out explicitly in the exercises and completed films.

It is significant here that when young people are given access to examples of how expert creators make use of the language they have access to (the 'rhetorical tropes' that make up the expressive repertoires of a mode like film, or writing), they have the potential to move away from what might otherwise be their default story-telling techniques. In many film education settings (especially outside the formal sector) there can be a tendency on behalf of group leaders and educators not to want to scaffold, shape, or otherwise influence children's choice of story-telling resources, possibly based on a limited version of a 'liberation pedagogy', in which children were felt to be most creative when no artificial limits were set to their creativity (see a discussion of this tendency in film education in Reid et al., 2002). However, what we are finding in the Cinémathèque program is that children and young people welcome examples of work by filmmakers who have had to answer similar questions as themselves ('why and how will I move my camera?'); children can then choose (or not choose) to respond to or accommodate those ideas.

The choice of the word 'essay' to describe the final outcome in the Cinémathèque program is interesting: the origin of the word, in French, means 'a trying out', an experiment. The program does not encourage children to feel that they will be making a complete film, but rather a summation of some of the ideas and techniques they have been learning, practising and experimenting with. In a world where very many children (in the UK it may be as many as 100,000) make a single film in their school lives, this distinction is important: if a film is cast as your first attempt, the implied expectation is that you will go on to make many more films. Also, to go back to Anthony Minghella's conception of the film sentence, it is possible that these film exercises are more like playing with phrases and sentences, and then combining them into a couple of paragraphs, than embarking on complete stories.

In 2009/10, between them, the two boys' groups produced five completed *film essais*: one school producing four, shorter films, quite early on in the year, and the other group

producing a longer, overall group piece. The four shorter films focus very closely on the film essai rubric (see https://markreid1895.wordpress.com in the July 2010 posting), particularly the moment of revelation that closes each film. In contrast, the single longer film (http://100ans.cinematheque.fr/100ans20092010/?page_id=16) incorporates a much wider range of camera movement as its defining feature. The girls' group produced four films that interpreted the rubric more loosely, combining aspects of the exercises with the final *film essai* (their examples are also included at: https://markreid1895.wordpress.com).

At the end of the program, in June, all the participating children and young people between 8 and 18 years old (by 2011 around 400 young people from Spain, Italy, Portugal, the UK, as well as France), had showed their work in Paris. But this was not a celebratory awards event; there we held three all-day presentations of work, in which children interrogated each other, as peer filmmakers, about technique, choices, accidents, sources in their work. Serge Toubiana, Head of the Cinémathèque, and Costa-Gavras, its Chair, joined in the conversation for a couple of hours, showing work they had made as well.

For the boys' group in the first year of our participation, there were many opportunities to present their work in public. Early in the year, four of them presented their exercises, and what they were learning about camera movement, to a group of teachers on a film language INSET day (originally an IN-SErvice Training day when schools sessions are not required to be run and staff undergo training). Another six of them came to Paris, and presented to their peers in the daunting 400-seat Lotte Eisner cinema. And finally a couple came and presented their work at the BFI. The opportunity for publication (or exhibition) in more than one context has meant the boys have become adept and confident at speaking to their work in public, and becoming quite unusually reflective.

Back to the model

The Cinémathèque program, viewed as a cycle, maps onto the Ross et al. (1993) model like this. The initial impetus – the viewing and discussion – is an instance of appropriation, where participants – students and facilitators – familiarize themselves with new ideas, forms, and sample answers to the central question 'why move the camera?', but it also is a kind of conventionalization, where a community of practitioners take on a new formal category in their chosen art form (why move the camera?) and explore examples of cinema through the prism of this new category. The films chosen for the training, and the DVD of clips, thus become repositories of 'camera movement' techniques, as well as whatever other generic category they already belong to. Kubrick's *The Shining*, in other words, becomes a 'camera movement' film.

The conventionalized, appropriated examples and central question are internalized by the participants and made their own, not just through watching the clips, but through playing with technique: filming a travelling sequence; comparing static and moving shots and objects; filming a fleeting encounter between three unrelated characters. These exercises have

something of the traditional rhetorical exercise about them (Lanham, 1993). In the medieval school and university curriculum, rhetoric was the vehicle through which students were trained in the language arts, and in thinking and behaving morally, by means of imitating rhetorical tropes in great works. Classic texts were not studied for ennoblement alone, but were copied, adapted, re-presented as an apprenticeship in cultural participation. Richard Andrews (2010, p. 258), refers to the progymnasmata of Renaissance rhetoric – exercises in which genres were modelled and then imitated by apprentice writers and speakers – and in the Cinémathèque program, apprentice filmmakers are doing the same thing: copying, internalizing, transforming stock techniques as demonstrated by the masters of cinema.

This is the process of internalization, following the third quadrant of the Ross model: the student or child takes the example of the thing from out of the world, and transforms it into his own thing, in his own voice. In Ross et al.'s (1993) terms, this is where the child uses publicly available aesthetic conventions and forms to order his own feelings. What is unusual about the Cinémathèque program is how the processes of filmmaking – which start with film viewing – are drawn out, decompressed and elaborated over time. The exercises that are prescribed as preparatory, playful preludes to the final 'film essai' enable explicit internalization of some of the conventions of film, before the student is invited to mobilize them in a final 'high-stakes' production. The process is private, internal and essentially inaccessible from the outside (from a teacher's perspective, for example). The process of transformation is only knowable after the fact, when a new object is presented for publication.

The application of the arts cycle model to this particular approach to film education illuminates both film education and the model itself. Ross et al.'s model presents an essentially isolated and internalized sense of making and yet filmmaking is a social, collaborative experience. In education settings – and in the film industry more widely – single, controlled, hermetically sealed film creation is extremely rare. Children making animations in primary schools do so in groups: they collaborate on story-making, scripting, shooting, voicing their work. Students at higher levels are required to create film (in A level Film and Media Studies, or BTEC Media Production for example) in groups, allocating roles as they would in the film industry. So how can this transformative phase of the making process still be internalized, and private, among a group of individuals? One possibility is that a filmmaking group creates for itself a single, collective, subjectivity (Mitchell, 2001): for the purpose of making a particular film, an agency is constituted solely for the completion of the task. And the process of transformation, of gathering the resources to hand and applying to them the constraints of the task (Sharples, 1999), is more often than not conducted in language. For just as buildings can be said to be created in conversations between architects, clients and site managers so films are often created through talk between their participant makers.

The process of filmmaking is therefore elaborated in talk; but it is further elaborated in that it is a process that has a number of clearly defined stages: first, in conceiving a story or scenario; second, in planning out a series of shots and sequences, and maybe drawing or designing them; third in shooting those images, or ones like them; then in combining

the chosen images, and 'post-producing' sequences, with the addition of extra sound, transitions, effects; and then, probably shooting more footage, and recombining it with the existing material. This extended creative process distinguishes film from other modes: it is not possible with film to 'shape [it] at the point of utterance' (Britton, 1982, p. 139[1]) in an improvisatory sense, as it is with writing or speech; nor is film all preparation and rehearsal until it becomes performance. (Dance, as Wim Wenders notes when interviewed about his film *Pina*, has no way of archiving itself; all it can be is the performance – *Sight&Sound* magazine, May 2011).

Conclusions

> Consider the implications of the relationship between forms of representation for the selection of content in the school curriculum. Learning to use particular forms of representation is also learning to think and represent meaning in particular ways. How broad is the current distribution? What forms of representation are emphasized? In what forms are students expected to become "literate"? What modes of cognition are stimulated, practiced, and refined by the forms that are made available? (Eisner, 2002)

Eisner very eloquently and clearly makes the case for the school curriculum concerning itself with a wider range of modes of representation than just speech and writing. He means the whole curriculum, I imagine (see BFI publications *Look Again* (2003) and *Moving Images in the Classroom* (2000)), but even in its own backyard, English should have accommodated and given equal prominence to film, drama, comics and graphic literature, and radio, by now. He is right that new(er) modes enable us to think in different ways (Tufte, 2004), but the larger argument is that the public realm is now constituted out of the still and moving image as much as it is by the printed and spoken word. If we are serious about children participating in this realm, and these cultures, on their own terms, and adding to and enriching them, then a practise that follows the models above begins to develop a body of work in which children and young people take a more active role in 'the film conversation'. They will be essentially 'talking with' filmmakers of the past, and from around the world, on issues of common interest: how to move the camera, and why; how to use depth of field to tell stories; how to use color, light and sound expressively. They will become more adept at presenting, and reflecting on, their own work, and at interrogating the work of others – not just their peers, but more celebrated filmmakers as well.

The Cinémathèque program itself emphasizes other aspects of 'film literacy' that we can learn from in wider literacy: the importance of practise and play in making sentences of any kind; the centrality of shorter units of meaning in the creation of new texts; the importance of setting constraints in a task, but constraints that enable and scaffold new understandings.

1 Well, not entirely. Jonas Mekas, in the compilation of 'diaries, notes and sketches' he called Walden, effectively 'shapes at the point of utterance' with a 16mm camera.

The importance of repeated opportunities for working with film, as opposed to the 'one shot' which is more typical for young people. Practice, experiment and play; constraints, sustainability and long-term engagement; the sense of oneself as an artist or maker whose work and role is taken seriously; learning from, adapting, reproducing, critiquing the work of those more experienced; all of these elements contribute to the ability of a child to 'participate fully in a culture', to join 'the conversation of mankind'.

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