Chapter 2
Film and Superheroes as a Pedagogic Tool

Mark J. Bendall
University of Chester, UK

ABSTRACT

Hollywood film has a mass-market and global appeal. As such it is already well received and known by many learners and offers a method to build from this into more sophisticated theoretical concepts. The chapter makes the case for film as a viable and valuable teaching strategy. In an environment where many are visual learners, film offers a multisensory pedagogic tool which can draw students away from the handheld mobile devices which often compete for attention with the lecturer. It also notes the risks in film and answers potential objections. Then it applies these broader pedagogic concerns to the specific case of superhero films, and how it can illuminate complex terminology in social sciences, such as polysemy, inter-textuality, sociopolitics, psychopolitics, cultural and visual criminology. Other concepts discussed include notions of the denotative and the connotative, and the metonym. Questions of identity, gender, nation, and liminality are included.

INTRODUCTION

Those hundreds of movie stills on my walls. That’s populating the empty universe, too. They’re my “friends,” I say to myself. But all I mean by that is that I love them (Garbo, Dietrich, Bogart, Kafka, Vera Chytilová): I admire them; they make me happy because when I think of them I know that there aren’t just ugly leaden people in the world but beautiful people; they’re a playful version of that sublime company to which I aspire…. For me, they’re reinforcements! They’re on my team; or rather, I am (hope to be) on theirs. They’re my models. They guard me from despair, from feeling there’s nothing better in the world than what I see, nothing better than me! … (Sontag, 1967, p.23)

Sontag illustrates here the emotional responses films powerfully can provoke. This chapter will first discuss multimodality and the credibility of using film in a multimodal pedagogic context based on evidence from previous studies. Multimodality emphasises how communication occurs across a range of verbal
and non-verbal cues and film encourages that translation process in its richest, multi-dimensional sense. Second, it will consider some of the limitations in using film and address how these can be negotiated. Third, it will apply these concerns to the case of superheroes, considering how they can be used in a social science and humanities context based on auto-ethnographic experience of the author. Implications in terms of its applicability to language teaching can be drawn, whether we are discussing the language of film or modern language skills.

BACKGROUND

Multimodality may be defined as Chandler (2015) notes, as

The use of more than one semiotic mode in meaning-making, communication, and representation generally, or in a specific situation. Such modes include all forms of verbal, nonverbal, and contextual communication. Multimodal literacy refers to awareness and effective use of this range of modalities (p.20).

Multimodality in the teaching environment can reflect on communication in its linguistic, visual, spatial, aural, gestural, dimensions. The use of multiple media and a multimodal approach has been well established by Huang (2015) and others not just for the technical language skills but also for the critical ideological work that can be done. Here Kellner’s notion of a critical media literacy is instructive where multimodality can encourage questioning and subversive readings, Kellner (2008) proposes focussing on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality’ [with the aim of demonstrating] how power, media, and information are linked” (p. 8) The point here is not just the acquisition of language skills but the ability to situate the language in a culture and deconstruct some of the dominant discourses that flow through, expressed openly or hidden within language. Multimodal techniques in the classroom allow students to detect where there is power and powerlessness, and to decode what is presented as natural but in fact ideological. Often implicit meaning is not just contained within language on its own but across also tone, image, silence, positioning; a multi modal method allows the whole apparatus of communication to be understood.

Much teaching tends to rely on books or on verbal discussion including self-disclosure or auto-ethnography from learners. There are limits as this provides a uni-diminsional mode of pedagogy (Higgins and Dermer 2001), relying on students’ comprehension and auditory skills. However, learning is often more memorable if it engages multiple senses. With the development of technology, it is increasingly more convenient to show clips or whole films in the learning environment. Beyond these learners are receptive to audiovisual engagement. The millenial generation of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 20011) are receptive to high –impact visual stimuli having been inculcated with such in an era of the X box and the i phone. In addition, tutors are increasingly competing for students’ attention, during the class, with hand-held devices containing more technology, than the first rockets to reach the moon in the 1960s. The drama and dynamism of film is a way to compete with the intense distraction facing learners, with access to global databases of information in seconds, which did not face a previous generation –the pre-digital natives.

The chapter makes reference to the language of film and this term is worth explanation. As Monaco (2000) notes: