

## Study Guides: The Perfect Tool?

### Report Seminar

In cooperation with Film&Kino and with the support of the Kristiansand International Children's Film Festival, ECFA co-organized a seminar on film study guides on April 30th. Easier than ever, students get access to films and to all knowledge about the medium: the 'making of' on a DVD often shows more than any of our resources can, whether print, CD-R or online. Then why do we still need study guides? And are they really 'The Perfect Tool' for film education? 70 participants racked their brains about these questions.

ECFA President Tonje Hardersen explained about the seminar's concept. "*It's hard to discuss something we might all agree upon.*" Therefore moderator Cecilie Stranger-Thorsen appointed some devil's advocates, entitled for being obstructionists and challenging the speakers with critical remarks.

### Picking up skills

In her keynote speech, renowned media literacy expert Carry Bazalgette invited her audience to rethink the subject from the learners' point of view: '*Why do we think children and young people should learn about film?*' Little we know about what exactly goes on in the heads of the very youngest TV- and film-spectators, but we know they're learning something. We need skills to become full members of the social world, and those skills are easily picked up from the media at an age when learning is undeniably involved in everything we do. Most children watch TV before the age of 6 months; many of them can put on a DVD themselves before the age of 2. Children watch television with their parents and siblings, observing their reactions, trying to understand, watching the same scene over and over again, puzzling things together.

Therefore film education in schools should start with reflecting and articulating about what children already know. The rules and expectations of narratives, characters, descriptive passages, etc. are understood at a very young age, as a foundation for a more elaborate media education. Nowadays media education is usually a group activity, a mini film set. Considering the different skills children already picked up before they started school we should explore an individual learning path with computer programmes such as Audacity, Photostory,... where children can make their own decisions and determine their own learning path.

But what level of investment in equipment and training would be needed to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn? And who should organise and pay for all this?

The IT industry makes us believe that all media skills are a purely technical matter. With this idea haunting the computer classes in school, children's skills are grossly under-challenged. A learner-centred approach would ask: '*what sense does it make to use a 20th century curriculum in a 21st century society?*' which would lead us to argue for a school curriculum that includes film education as a normal part of learning.

### Critically creative and creatively critical

Ian Wall (Film Education, UK; [www.mediaeducation.org](http://www.mediaeducation.org)): '*Youngsters are technology obsessed but they're missing out on the critical aspect in what they're doing. We want them to be critically creative and creatively critical.*' That requires a certain level of interactivity in study guides, depending on what a film's distributor is willing to share with the educationalists. Comparing the study guide on CASINO ROYAL, for which Ian Wall had access to the film's rushes and sound files, with the guide for STAR TREK, made on nothing but 9 film stills, students were keen on the highly advanced CASINO ROYAL guide while teachers often preferred the basic STAR TREK approach. Children today are 'digital natives', many of their teachers are still 'digital immigrants', often sticking to what they know: using film as a 'help' on other subjects as opposed to true media education. The Film Education DVDs try to offer them both.

Wall guided the audience through an interactive study guide on THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA – PRINCE CASPIAN, introducing some advanced technology. By compiling a trailer with the use of footage and images provided by the distributor, students are forced to

reflect upon persuasive texts as used in film promotion campaigns.

The instruction 'write a speech' is a comfortable territory for teachers. But finding the best matching graphic design is more a pupils' thing. By the end of the day, everyone is happy.

Devil's Advocate Marjo Kovanen (Koulukino, Finland) wondered why to pick Hollywood films for writing study guides about. Ian Wall: *'No longer ask students to leave their backpack of experiences outside the classroom, but invite them to bring it in. Are we the ones to decide about directions for young people to expand their interest for film? We make them start on where they are ready to be. Teach children to ask the right questions, without indoctrination about what art and culture should be.'* Ian will go down in history as the man describing art house cinema as *'Mongolian films about dogs and camels that I can only watch in fast-forward modus'*.

Devil's Advocate Per Ericsson (Swedish Film Institute) recognized many teachers as technophobes. They are scared to hand over the control to their pupils. To motivate them we should use the technology that they feel comfortable with. Make sure technology doesn't get in the way. A survey brought up that study guides are used most frequently by 40plussers. They once felt comfortable with printed booklets. Now they made the switch to DVDs. Additional online material will be the next step, but that again will take time.

### 'Dangerous Films'

Flemming Kaspersen (Danish Film Institute) spoke about the accessibility of films (distribution) and of educational material, easy to consult. With [www.filmstriben.dk](http://www.filmstriben.dk) (DFI's digital platform, containing 700 shorts and documentaries, covering 75 % of the Danish schools) the DFI has the ultimate distribution channel in their hands.

DFI considers short fiction films as the ideal format for film education. That was a reason for launching 'Dangerous Films': a compilation of 4 short films for children (9 – 12) using different styles of narratives and different genres. DFI cleared the film rights for educational purposes, but Kaspersen realizes that the copyright issue still remains a significant barrier when it comes to using films in the classroom.

Devil's Advocate Tonje Eikrem Jacobsen represented the voice of film clubs. As an important film exhibitor, they claim the right to get support in their educational activities too. *'Why can't film institutes provide us with ready made material or with national guidelines on how to teach film in our clubs?'*

Media teacher Dagfinn Tvedt emphasised that standards are fixed by the students, used to various types of mass media. Teacher training comes in short. *'Teachers should know how to make a film with their mobile phones. It's not about fitting media education into the curriculum; it's about changing the curriculum.'*

### Vampire values

Lisa von Hilgers represented Mediamanual, a free Austrian online resource for teachers ([www.mediamanual.at](http://www.mediamanual.at)), focussing cultural education on popular culture: What do young people actually watch? How are those films culturally embedded? What does popular culture tell us about young people's role models? As illustrated by a study guide on TWILIGHT: starting out with Bram Stoker's original story, the guide then links up with the mythological relevance of vampires, the aesthetics of the fantasy genre and its appeal on teenagers, the cinema marketing industry, the star phenomenon and the representation of vampires in other art forms.

Again comes on the question whether or not to use commercial films for educational purposes. Greet Stevens (Open Doek Festival, Belgium) suggests that education material, used in a school environment, should be more challenging. *'I want study guides to trigger the students, to broaden their horizons. Where is the challenge in learning about blockbusters? How does it stimulate their growth?'* Von Hilgers states the two do not exclude one another when working with the 'bottom-up principle': start with what they are used to and later move on towards 'the unknown'.

But then again, do teenagers actually want the school curriculum to intervene with things belonging to their 'leisure time' domain? Do they want teachers to steal TWILIGHT away from them? The Swedish Film Institute's essay on TWILIGHT particularly awoke the interest of librarians, not of students.

Devil's Advocate Jerzy Moszkowicz (Ale Kino! Poland) pled for respecting the original value of vampires. *'Nowadays vampires have become mascots of popular culture'*.

### 5 Questions

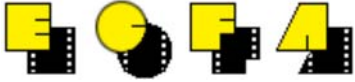
In the round up discussion of the seminar Cary Bazalgette broadened the idea of 'teacher training'. To achieve changes in education, it's necessary to '*teach the ones who are teaching the teachers to teach*'. Teachers of 'mother language' are the most frequent users of study guides. They know about narratives and story development. What they need to know more about is 'film language', which means much more than the technical terms for elements of film. They want to be provided with simple lesson plans, with predetermined outcomes. When they ought to be asking children more open questions about films, listening to their responses, and building their teaching on these. Examples of open questions, as used in the British Film Institute classroom resources, are:

- Was there anything you liked?
- What caught your attention?
- Was there anything you disliked?
- Was there anything that puzzled you?
- Did you notice any patterns?

All speakers and participants agreed it is time for the EU to stand up. There have been enough studies and seminars. Show us some money! In this regards, moderator Cecilie Stranger-Thorsen concluded that the seminar's closing note on a closer co-operation would be a good lead for the future work of ECFA in this specific field, both in terms of copyright and research on teachers' needs and feedback.

Elise van Beurden & Gert Hermans

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## COLUMN

### A vampire used to mean something...

*During the ECFA seminar 'Study Guides: The Perfect Tool' Jerzy Moszkowicz (Ale Kino Festival in Poznan, Polen) was appointed as Devil's Advocate, pledging against writing study guides on popular blockbusters, with TWILIGHT as a case study.*

I am a descendant of people from the Carpathians, ancient home of vampires. My grandfather, the colonel – whom I never met as he died before the war – looks at me from old photos. He does not look like the thin Kinsky's Nosferatu, though he might actually resemble the same historical archetype: Wallachia Prince, Vlad III Palovnik - mighty, short and stout, dark-skinned, with eyes deep as Carpathian mountain lakes. If it were not for his smile, which seems tinged with mystery anyway, he might look frightening.

In the wooden peasant house of my paternal grandparents, bunches of herbs were hanging in the doorway, with a string of garlic in the most prominent place. For my ancestors, vampires used to mean something. They were real, or at least really believed in. They were rooted in folk beliefs. According to the eminent Polish professor Maria Janion, the vampire story is part of an alternative human history, in which death and resurrection have their own, separate interpretations (1). Nowadays, vampires have become just mascots of popular culture.

In stories such as 'Twilight', the vampire loses his true and original value. His significance in the age-old order gets lost. He becomes a gadget in a teenage love story. Mass culture changes cultural codes. The "vegetarian" vampire in 'Twilight' (he drinks only animal blood – but what about our *humble brethren*, as St Francis used to call them?) becomes a doctor, helps people. It would not be surprising if he set up a voluntary blood donation centre in town! Or even, horror of horrors, protects people from real vampires.

Where is the ancient world order with a special role and position for the Prince of Darkness in the pantheon of the Greatest Monsters and Demons? French researcher Gilles Menegallo accuses Coppola's DRACULA of "trivialising the vampire character who, by becoming more human, loses his status of an entirely foreign, enigmatic and horrifying creature" (2). If the Dracula stylishly played by Gary Oldman is trivial, then what can be said about Edward Cullen as if taken straight from a teenage magazine and played by pretty-faced Robert Pattison? A real vampire will always be defeated by a film one, as was wittily proved in the movie SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE (E. Elias Merhige), when the real Prince of Darkness (Willem Dafoe) appears on the set to play the role of Nosferatu in a film by Murnau (Malkovich).

The vampire means a lot, indeed, for the film industry, since he boosts box office takings. The audience wants to be horrified, because cinema fear is a substitute for other, real experiences. Cinema-goers, hollowed out by popular culture and consumerism, want fear and sex, but not too much, preferably in disguise, so as not to experience a real shock or taboo breaking scandal. The vampire story is changed to match the expectations of the short skirted audience, a mixture of a kitsch horror movie and a love story, bold enough to attract teenagers and censored enough to prevent revealing too much. A vampire film, however, works only when it raises fear. Therefore, it is in the interest of the film industry not to educate youngsters about the marketing mechanisms of mass culture. It might turn out that fear loses its appeal as soon as the audience gets used to it. Which might mean they will not buy a ticket to see the film...

Since Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' was published, close and distant relatives of the original Carpathian vampires have been populating literature, theatre and musicals (see, for example, THE FEARLESS VAMPIRE KILLERS by Polanski). They found their home in the cinemas soon after the birth of cinematic art. Film is entertainment for the masses, based on illusion, which makes it a great medium for imaginary creatures trying to imitate the real-life models. If we are really interested in good and evil, in life and death, we'd better read 'Faust'. TWILIGHT is nothing but a perfect tool to give the youngsters safety instructions when dealing with young love versus the bloodsucking dilemma.

There is one clever sentence in TWILIGHT: "Death is peaceful... easy. Life is harder." And the hardest part is films about life. About teenage life in particular.

Jerzy Moszkowicz, with the help of Ryszard Pempere

Footnotes:

(1) Maria Janion: *The Vampire. A Symbolic Biography*. Gdansk 2002. (Monograph on the vampire motif in culture)

(2) G. Menegallo: *Du texte a l'image: figurations du fantastique (...)*. Quoted after Maria Janion's *The Vampire*.

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