



## **Introduction**

by Dudley Andrew, Professor of Film and Comparative Literature

Telling stories is the most natural thing in the world. Stories orient us and our children; they make sense of where we are in life, how we got here, why we do the things we do, and what happens if we do what we shouldn't. Stories also allow us to project a future we hope to make real (utopia) or represent the future we fear (nightmare). As we know whenever we interrogate someone who has gotten out of line (whose behavior doesn't fit what is supposed to happen), we often hear stories we are dubious about. For stories don't, on their own, tell us if they are fact or fiction. But even when they propose something that doesn't exist, they always tell us something true about the direction of our thoughts and desires. This is why stories are so endearing and why we expect students to perk up when a good story is introduced in one form or another into the midst of the school day. We want students to be as eager to get on the story's journey as when they were little kids, listening to a grandmother recount the old days or having a parent or sibling read a book. Stories draw audiences along and unite them not just to the characters involved in the plot, but to the storyteller and the others who experience it. They are perhaps the most powerful means of social cohesion.

And so stories are the most cultural thing in the world. Not only do the topics of stories vary from social group to social group, but the way they are told changes as well. Supposed universals like chronology and cause-effect play surprisingly distinct roles for storytellers in Tamil, say, as opposed to ones in Peru. Studying stories from around the world, we can appreciate those things that all humans seem to value and those things that are different from our own tradition. We can come to understand how precious are the stories we construct, indeed how precious and powerful is our way of constructing them. And we can begin to have respect for other views as well as other values in the world.

Our seminar aimed to get immediately beyond the American context so as to encounter other worlds created by other peoples. And we did so via foreign films with the idea in mind that when other cultures go to the great trouble of telling stories in such an expensive medium, they may want to mimic Hollywood, but they are more likely to want to feature their culture's difference, including its different approach to pictorial and narrative art. We chose films that seemed intent to be distinctive and we tried, wherever possible, to anchor that distinctiveness in such cultural practices as we could access: poetry, written stories, graphic design. Cued by a sense of the specific aesthetic tradition operating in one or another region, we identified the cinematic devices at play in the films we watched, accounting as best we could for the distinct tone these films sounded and for the values they promoted.

For films can best be seen as perspectives on a common world that seems open to other perspectives. As theorist Jean Mitry once said, a novel is a world built up through a story, whereas a film is a story cut out of the world. We know what he means: we go into the theater and nearly pass through the screen to be present

in a different world. In this new environment we look and listen for the clues and signals that let us make sense of it; we narrativize what is put before us. Of course, the filmmaker has arranged things so that the story that emerges from our viewing of what's before us is (approximately) what he had in mind in the first place. Through framing, sequencing, repetition, music, glance-object cutting, and many other devices, the filmmaker organizes a world that seems to exist on its own but which also looks "a certain way" and so takes on meaning. All of our sessions, and all of the units that came out of this seminar were attentive to the "certain way" that each film has of approaching the world. By contrasting Hollywood's way with the way the world appears in African, Iranian, Irish, and Chinese films, we all expanded our sense of what is possible in cinema, and we countered the prejudices of our own perspective, including egregious stereotypes perpetrated often unconsciously in American films, TV, advertising, and ordinary conversation. Watching full-length stories unfold from a different perspective can be humbling; it gives you the time and it gives you the rationale to adopt a different point of view, if only momentarily. It's hard to imagine a better way to foster respect for difference and to foster enthusiasm for stories, whether written, spoken, or filmed.

The units produced during this seminar cannot help but clarify for students in both middle and high school how stories are put together in every medium. Some of the units aim directly to improve the understanding and criticism of narrative, in part to lift scores on standardized tests. Other units plan to deploy stories as a way of getting students to look more broadly and more deeply at the world around them. What is the life of children or women like in Iran? Iranian films can tell you, not just in what they show but in the way they show it and the voice they adopt. Several other units take on the specific mission, so relevant to urban schools in the USA, of how black people are represented. Since young people understand their futures in relation to the images that surround them, this is a crucial topic. Letting American youth "listen" to African filmmakers who have taken on the traditional role of the griot will liberate them from the limited and dependent roles black Americans are thought to play, at least as the mass media would have it.

And so these units operate on the three dimensions: first, they provide practical ways by which students can grow to understand, analyze and use stories in literature, and especially film; second, they demonstrate ways teachers can use foreign stories to widen the cultural and geographical knowledge base of students in our global world; third, they pose powerful ethical questions either by using exemplary films that can shock our students into awareness, or by probing beneath films to find a substrate of ideas that, for better or (more often) for worse, affect the behavior and attitudes of a given culture, including the very culture the students belong to. May many "stories around the world in film" find their way into classrooms around America, where, if taught in the ingenious ways proposed in these units, their power may be released...a power to delight, amaze, and provoke students who otherwise retreat to the comfort of standard TV and film fare.

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