

# Harnessing the power of film in RE

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The last edition of *REsource* included an article on 'Using films about peace and violence in RE' and, in the Editorial, further material on the use of film in RE was requested. How uplifting, then, that Mark Constance should write an article about the films that he has come to use in his secondary RE programme.

## Introduction

We live in a visual culture. Maybe we always have. The use of image has been consistent throughout history: from the pictorial creation stories of ancient civilisations, to the hieroglyphics of the Egyptian; from the vivid imagery and theatrics of Greece and Rome to the glorious heavens and grotesque hells of the Middle Ages. People relate to pictures, and people relate to stories.

This rings true in the classroom. Many of my more potentially tedious lessons have been brought to life by pictures and stories combined, and now that many teachers have projectors in their classrooms they are able to use films and video clips more than ever before. Sometimes this is not a good thing. For the lazy teacher, the projector represents a get-out clause. I think, however, that films can be used very well in the classroom, both as an aid to work or as an end in themselves.

I have found the use of film in the classroom to be a very effective aid to teaching and learning and I believe that RE lends itself to this medium very well. Although I use others, the four films I most frequently use are *The Truman Show*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Million Dollar Baby* and *A Time to Kill*. Each of these brings the key topics we explore in the classroom to life.

## *Million Dollar Baby ... and euthanasia*

Teaching bottom set Year 11 boys is always a challenge. Trying to teach them about euthanasia is like pulling teeth. However, when I discovered that a number of the lads in the class were into boxing, I realised that I had just the thing to get their interest levels up. The boxing movie *Million Dollar Baby* (Warner Bros 2004) is broadly about a female boxer and her manager. Within this film, however, there are many layers. When Maggie, the boxer, gets badly injured during one fight, she has the prospect of spending the rest of her life in a

care home, never being able to move, let alone box again. The dilemma that surrounds the final third of the film is whether or not Frankie, her manager, should help her to end her life. This is a first-class film and the acting is excellent (Hilary Swank won the Best Actress Academy Award for her role). It helped my Year 11 boys to realise that euthanasia was a complex issue and one that didn't have simple answers. My explanations or written case studies would not have made them realise the issues surrounding euthanasia half as much as showing them this movie.

The difficult thing is making effective use of the film. Show the pupils too little of it and they are not engaged in the characters and so do not understand the issues. Show them too much and you've 'lost' three lessons. I prepared by watching the film and noting the chapters to include so that all the key parts of the film were covered, and then gave my class a one-hour whirlwind viewing of *Million Dollar Baby*. They got to know the characters, they got a sense of their humanity and morality, they saw the devastating condition of somebody paralysed from the neck down and they witnessed the lapsed Catholic boxing trainer administer a lethal dose of adrenalin to the boxer so that her life would end. As I have said, it was a great film, and the homework task for that night was a short essay with the title 'I do/do not think that Frankie did the right thing in helping Maggie to die because ...'. The quality of homework was really good. The pupils all had views even if they weren't quite sure why they held them. This led to a lively and informed class discussion the next lesson. My pupils learnt more from watching and reflecting on a film than through my previous efforts at teaching about euthanasia.

### **The Truman Show ... and identity**

Sometimes I think it is worth showing the whole film, not as a get-out for teachers, but as a valid learning experience for the pupils. A case in point is *The Truman Show* (Paramount 1998) which I watch with my Year 9 students as part of the WJEC GCSE on Identity and Belonging. The film follows the life of a very regular American man called Truman. The spin is that Truman does not live in the real world. Unbeknown to him, he is the star of a television show about his life. His wife, mother and father – everyone in his world – are actors and actresses. The reason I show the whole of this film is because, as with *Million Dollar Baby*, getting to know the characters well is the key to getting the most from the film. When Truman has his first suspicions that something is awry in his perfect world, the pupils can sympathise with him because they have got to know him. When he literally reaches the end of his world, by crashing his boat into the side of the set, the pupils understand why he is so upset and they are upset for him. This is a two-hour film, which is two lessons worth of work, but I think it's worth it. The follow-up work on what forms our identity goes much better and the pupils plan and make their own presentations entitled 'Which is better – a fake life where no real pain and suffering ever happens or a real life where there is the potential for real pain and suffering?' To see my Year 9s engaging in the usual sixth-form topic of the problem of evil is exciting. Also, with the popularity of reality television shows, *The Truman Show* has a narrative style which they can relate to.

### **The Shawshank Redemption ... and hope**

*The Shawshank Redemption* consistently tops people's favourite films list. In the classroom I use it to provoke discussions on freedom, hope and free will. There is a particularly moving moment in the film when one of the elderly inmates (Brooks) is finally released from prison. As he had been in for so long, his sense of identity and belonging had been defined by the way he was viewed by the other prisoners and the special duties that he had: he was the prison librarian and wrote letters for some of the inmates. Within the small community of Shawshank Prison, Brooks was seen as a learned academic, a man of books. Upon his release, he was given a job at a local grocery store packing shopping. Brooks hangs himself from the rafters of his bedroom in the halfway house he was put in by

the parole board. To see this elderly character commit suicide through desperation about the state of his life has a noticeable effect on the pupils. From watching this in class, we discuss the concept of 'institutionalisation' and this leads to a further discussion as to whether we really ever have any freedom. The contrast to this is the overarching narrative of the lead character, Andy Dufresne, an innocent man wrongly accused of a brutal double murder. He refuses to let the system grind him down and, throughout the film, he finds moments of hope and freedom, even within the harsh constraints of a corrupt American prison. Andy finds hope in having a picture of an actress on his wall, getting his fellow inmates some beer whilst re-tarring the prison roof, establishing a large library at the prison and, ultimately in his audacious and triumphant escape and establishment of a new life. Andy experiences freedom throughout the film, well against the odds, and this is a powerful message which the pupils find inspiring. Along the way, his freedom is often marked with setbacks and suffering, but he succeeds. One of the amazing facets of this film is the way in which Andy brings hope to others. Rather than wallowing in his suffering, he finds purpose and a sense of direction in his situation. This is a great introduction to some work I do with my Year 11s on justice and inspirational people. Using a fictional example to start with works effectively because, again, pupils can relate to the story. It also works very well when teaching the Irenaean theodicy to my Year 12 class, where pupils can visually understand the concept of suffering leading to maturity.

### **Practically speaking**

On a practical level, the real key to using video successfully in class is choosing the right material. I remember being given a video on euthanasia by a colleague and when I started watching it with my Year 11 class the opening line was 'We are here to discuss what is surely going to be one of the most debated issues of the 1980s'. The film was out of date, the quality was awful, the clothes looked ridiculous and my pupils could not engage with it. That taught me the golden lesson of personally viewing everything before you use it in class. The three films I have mentioned are films of great quality. If we want something to be effective, we can't offer a diluted version of what pupils see at the cinema or at home. The key is to find effective ways of using good films.

Films with actors that the pupils recognise go down well. I was directed to a great film about genetic engineering called *The Island* by one of my Year 10 boys. The fact that it had Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson in it meant that both the boys and girls in the class were very keen to watch the relevant clips. Staying current and relevant with our pupils on everything is impossible, but if we show willing then they really do appreciate it.

The actor Matthew Macconaughey is a current Hollywood heart-throb and I remembered that he had starred in a film in 1996 called *A Time to Kill*. This is a great film for RE teachers as it confronts many issues such as racial prejudice, the death sentence, class and religion, face on. There are some moments in the film that I don't think are appropriate for school so, again, selectivity is essential. The need to be contemporary means that we have to accept that what has worked in terms of the use of film with previous year groups will not necessarily work again. Some movies are timeless whilst others capture a particular relevant moment in time.

### Concluding thoughts

I know that for many people film and television is seen as being a lesser art and a cause of dumbed-down society. I totally disagree with this. Since using film effectively in my classes, discussions have become much livelier and pupils have become much more engaged. Pupils also tend to retain more from viewing than they do from listening and this has come through in class assessments where pupils have shown much greater understanding of the key language and terminology in RE.

Religion has always had a strong visual element. The challenge for RE practitioners is to harness the power of contemporary media and use it in an effective way. The only downside to being known as the teacher with a large collection of DVDs is that you do get pestered by the other staff towards the end of term!

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