

OPENINGS

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ABSTRACT

This paper will analyse the openings of texts and films as both a genre and cornerstone for a university literature course. It identifies certain types of opening, the criteria for analysing them and discusses the task types appropriate to tackling such a genre in class. It shows how these tasks can be applied to both written and visual texts to develop a textual/visual literacy. The different strategies used by learners to analyse such texts are also discussed, we will see how the layering of gradually more demanding tasks can enable learners to discover their own multiple meanings.

We will then look at two practical activities based on openings: the first on "The Catcher in the Rye" shows how tasks are built up in complexity, finishing with the learners' own creative written work. The second, "Two Cities" reveals how analysis of text and visual image can be studied in a complementary way, examining questions of genre and adopting a formalist approach, by introducing learners to cinematographic terms to establish this visual literacy. These examples are presented as a new way of tackling the text/video interface and as an alternative to using "the film vs. the book" approach, conventionally adopted for studying literature and film in class.

KEY WORDS

Openings, video, screenplay, genre-based course, text-image interface, multi-modality.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo se propone analizar el comienzo de textos y películas en cuanto género y en cuanto tema básico en un curso universitario de literatu-

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ra. Se identifican distintos tipos de comienzo y los criterios para analizarlos, y se discute el tipo de tareas más apropiadas para abordar en clase un género de este tipo. Se muestra de qué forma pueden aplicarse estas tareas a textos tanto escritos como visuales, para desarrollar una competencia en la interpretación textual/visual. También se discuten las diferentes estrategias que utilizan los alumnos para analizar este tipo de textos; descubriremos cómo una secuenciación gradual de tareas cada vez más difíciles puede ayudar a que los alumnos descubran sus propios significados múltiples.

A continuación consideraremos dos actividades prácticas basadas en comienzos: la primera, sobre "The Catcher in the Rye", muestra cómo las actividades se estructuran según su complejidad, para finalizar con el propio trabajo creativo de los alumnos. La segunda, "Two Cities", revela cómo pueden estudiarse de manera complementaria el análisis de textos y el de imágenes visuales, considerando cuestiones de género y adoptando un enfoque formalista, introduciendo a los alumnos a la terminología cinematográfica para establecer su competencia visual. Estos ejemplos se presentan como una nueva forma de enfocar la interrelación texto/vídeo y como alternativa al enfoque que se plantea la utilización de "película frente a libro", convencionalmente adoptado para el estudio en clase de literatura y películas.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Comienzos, vídeo, guión cinematográfico, curso basado en género, interrelación texto-imagen, multi-modalidad.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail se propose d'analyser le début de textes et de films quant au genre et quant à sujet basique dans un année universitaire de littérature. On y identifie diverses sortes de débuts et les critères pour les analyser, et l'on discute la sorte de tâches les plus appropriées pour entamer en classe un genre de cette sorte. On montre de quelle façon peuvent s'appliquer ces tâches tant à des textes écrits qu'à des textes visuels, afin de développer une compétence dans l'interprétation textuelle/visuelle. On discute aussi les différentes stratégies dont les élèves se servent pour analyser ce genre de textes; nous découvrirons comment une séquentiation graduelle de tâches de plus en plus difficiles peut aider à ce que les élèves découvrent leurs propres significations multiples.

Ensuite nous examinerons deux activités pratiques basées en débuts: la première, sur "The Catcher in the Rye", montre comment les activités se structurent d'après leur complexité pour finir avec le propre travail créatif des élèves lui-même. La deuxième, "Two Cities", révèle comment peut-on étudier de façon complémentaire, l'analyse de textes et celle d'images visuelles, en étudiant des questions de genre et en adoptant une optique formaliste, en introduisant les élèves à la terminologie cinématographique pour établir leur compétence visuelle. Ces exemples sont présentés comme une nouvelle façon d'envisager l'interrelation texte/vidéo et comme une alternative à l'optique qui se pose l'emploi

de “le film vs le livre”, adopté conventionnellement pour l’étude en classe de littérature et de films.

MOTS-CLÉ

Débuts, vidéo, scénario cinématographique, cours basé en genre, interrelation texte-image, multi-modalité.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching context

We were asked to design an English literature course for 2nd year Humanities students at a Spanish private university. Having undertaken an initial placement test and questionnaire, we discovered that the average linguistic competence level of students was approximately pre-intermediate and that the majority had had little or no experience of reading literary texts in English. Therefore, rather than choosing a purely corpus or skills-driven approach, it was decided that extracts from a wide range of literary genres should form the basis of a course designed to develop a critical awareness when reading. Instead of highlighting any specific grammatical or lexical structures in an explicit way, the course would encourage learners to make inferences and hypothesise about a given text. To this end, it was thought best to adopt a “language through literature” or “pedagogic stylistics” approach, keeping metalanguage to a minimum. The course was therefore designed in generic modules: short stories, poetry, plays and novels. However along with these established genres, other more “experimental” modules were included such as screenplays, comparative texts (novel/screenplay) and openings. It is the last category –openings– which will form the basis of this paper. The practical activities shown below formed part of a 15 hour module on “openings of literary texts and films”, indeed it is the interface between text and video that formed a central part of the course.

TEXTS AND TASKS

Why choose openings?

Clearly, one of the great frustrations felt by students in class is the tendency to study text extracts and cut-up video sequences, moments isolated from their true context. As teachers, we have our fingers per-

petually on the pause button, cutting and pasting at places which make perfect sense for us but may prove puzzlingly abstract for some learners. As John McRae points out, "How much of (an extract's) relevance to the text that originally surrounded it has been lost or betrayed in the process of extrapolation?" (McRae, 1991, p. 54). Very often, the text has been selected as "suitable for classroom use" because of an agreed teaching agenda which has constantly to be "made apparent", in this way the learners are often prevented from discovering their own meanings.

So, how can we avoid this but still use texts of a "manageable length" in class? One advantage of using openings is that "they are the least destructive form of abstraction" (Cook, 1986, p. 152) and are as such logical points of entry into a text. Perhaps more importantly, they place the learners on an equal footing with a native speaker. This has been neatly put by Alan Durant, choosing beginnings for him is beneficial because "readers in the classroom are faced with a situation analogous to that of "real" readers, inasmuch as there is no presupposed information from earlier in the work that would be available to general readers but that which is denied to students carrying out the activity" (Durant, 1996, p. 73).

Another great benefit obtained from using openings is that they provide ideal vehicles for inferring and hypothesis, two of the key skills that we wanted to develop in our course. The opening will necessarily provoke a series of questions that may or may not be answered by further reading. In this way, studying the openings of texts may act as a motivation, encouraging learners to read on outside the class. They are, like all extracts, closed fragments of text but in a sense they are closed on one side only. For this reason, more than other texts they automatically beg the question: what follows?, what comes next?

What type of task?

The danger of a "language through literature" approach is that the large number of these open-ended questions in workshops may produce a great deal of analysis and debate, but that pedagogic goals can become blurred and students may not altogether know to what ends they are undertaking this analysis. For this reason, in both the activities described below, I wanted to make sure that the students themselves produced some work as a result of the tasks. In this way, aside from analysing texts, this very analysis could lead to a **determinate end-**

point (in these cases, a piece of written work), which could not otherwise have been undertaken.

In both activities, I took the step to build up from simpler more specific questions to more open-ended tasks. This grading of tasks was planned so that the initial tasks could guide weaker students and thus inform the more demanding tasks to come, taking the learner each time a step deeper into the text. In the case of “The Catcher in the Rye” activity, pre-watching tasks involve a multiple choice, followed by open-ended questions enabling learners to justify their choices, and then an extended analysis. In the case of “Two Cities”, pre-watching includes a differentiation activity, followed by a gap-fill and open-ended questions. After watching the film, a more in-depth interpretation is encouraged, including work on formalist, cinematographic issues. Like in the first activity, learners are finally asked to produce their written work.

Types of openings

Before presenting the learners with these activities, I felt a minimum of metalanguage was necessary to guide our study of openings in general. In this way, a number of different openings were presented each of which exhibited different strategies (established techniques which were recorded in a list) to attract the attention and curiosity of the reader. Bearing in mind the open-discussion style tasks adopted, I felt that such categories would focus the learners and allow them to hold on to certain key concepts. I also wanted the class to become familiar with these terms, as they would later see how they can be used equally for studying literature or the cinema. Furthermore, given that the course would analyse a wide variety of genres, it provided learners with useful tools to make “broad” comparisons between very different texts and to grant them an overall impression of these, rather than rushing into a full analysis of a single passage.

The following is a list of 10 techniques, clearly not an exhaustive one, which was used to pinpoint these strategies. (I am indebted to Alan Pulverness who introduced me to this idea of categorising openings, indeed some of the following techniques (marked *) were coined by him in a paper given in Dillingen in April 1998.) After the description of each technique, an example from a well-known work is given.

1. **In at the deep end.** The text clearly begins in the “middle”, with clues given to what has taken place before, these may have to be gradually unravelled by the reader to find out what is going on. In the same way, the text may appear *to begin at the end* -with, for example, a farewell- which closes one door but leads us through another. (eg. “*As I walked out one midsummer morning*”, *Laurie Lee*.)

2. **Direct Address.** The first person “I” transmits immediacy and a clear protagonist with his/her own voice, it often allows us to identify with the speaker. But this is often accompanied by a direct reference to the reader “you”, this may suggest that the narrator is involving or confiding in the reader to a greater degree. (“*The Catcher in the Rye*”, *J. D. Salinger*.)

3. **Flashback.** The opening is a memory or recollection. The author looks back on the significance now of what happened then. Many films adopt this technique at the beginning and the end, in this way the story “comes full circle”, and the whole movie acts a flashback. (“*One Hundred Years of Solitude*”, *Gabriel García Márquez*.)

4. * **Setting the scene.** A voice in-off depicts the landscape or the weather, richness of description that allows us to gain an idea of the atmosphere or the symbolism of place. (“*The God of Small Things*”, *Arundhati Roy*.)

5. **An air of detachment.** In contrast to the first person, a third person voice may be employed to allow a certain distance between it and the characters he/she describes. This may create a sense of mystery, that there is something that is being hidden or that we have to solve as readers. (“*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*”, *Carson McCullers*.)

6. * **A short, sharp shock.** A short, snappy sentence describing a shocking event could be all that is needed to capture the reader’s attention - a technique frequently used in the cinema as an alternative to the traditionally slow scene setting which allows time for the credits to come up. (“*The Crow Road*”, *Iain Banks*.)

7. **A declaration of intentions.** Some openings are unmistakable in that they very self-consciously act as such, introducing us into a world in a “once upon a time” style or by adopting a clearly established genre like a diary and then subverting this. (“*Bridget Jones’ Diary*”, *Helen Fielding*.)

8. * **Action!** Authors have again adopted cinematic techniques to open a text with fast moving action or description, this very often overlaps with “in at the deep end”. (“*How late it was, how late*”, *James Kelman*.)

9. * **A time and a place.** Another more traditional technique is to quickly establish the location and the moment. There is no ambiguity, or mystery. Such precision is comforting for the reader, allowing him to quickly immerse himself into the world of the text. (*“Lost in Translation”, Eva Hoffman.*)

10. **A one-liner.** A short message that may create a sense of mystery. In this technique, this one-liner is often qualified by another which makes sense of it or immediately changes our perspective on events or characters. For example, a quotation, a song lyric, etc., may act as a symbolic message which may not be understood at first but that echoes throughout our reading of the text. (*“Night Train”, Martin Amis.*)

PROCEDURE

A sample screenplay text - “American Beauty”

The following text from the screenplay of “American Beauty” is a good example of an opening in which a large number of the above techniques can be found. It was useful to show this text to students before undertaking the subsequent tasks. It also established, from the outset, that written and visual texts could be analysed in similar ways. In other words, techniques could be spotted in the text itself, by watching the video without sound (cinematographic features) and then by studying the whole thing.

We’re flying high above an upper middle class suburb. The wide streets are lined with stately elms and sycamores; the homes are traditional and well-kept. Coming closer to the ground, we pick out a couple of male joggers.

Suddenly, a man comes into view, flying Superman-style about three feet above their heads... this man is LESTER BURNHAM, Carolyn’s husband and Jane’s father. He’s forty-two, with a wide boyish face that’s just beginning to droop around the edges. He sits up in bed and rubs his face...

We’re in a large, comfortable bedroom that’s tastefully decorated but not overdone - it could be a spread from Metropolitan Home. Lester gets out of the king-sized bed, crosses to a bay window covered with stylish wooden blinds, lifts one of the slats with his finger and peers through it.

LESTER (V.O.)

*My name is Lester Burnham. I'm forty two-years old.
In less than a year, I'll be dead.*

We're in the shower with Lester. A waterproof RADIO plays COUNTRY MUSIC. He stands with his face directly in the hot spray eyes shut.

LESTER (V.O.)

In a way, I'm dead already.

How many techniques can you spot?

Students choose their own texts

Once familiarised with these terms and given texts which represented each of these techniques (including “American Beauty”), the learners were then asked to find an opening of their choice and analyse which of these techniques (if any) could be found in their chosen texts. This was important, firstly because it enabled the class to go back and reinterpret an already familiar text and secondly, because it provided “an initial personal ‘investment’ or ‘stake’ in the materials being read and discussed” (Durant, 1996, p. 70) –an important dimension of an “extended reading” course where choice of texts could be deemed arbitrary by some students.

General criteria for analysing openings

The students were then introduced to key criteria, which would underpin our analysis of other openings. It was established that a “good” opening, an opening that “worked” could be considered as firstly, **one that attracts our attention and that motivates us to go on reading** and secondly, **one that establishes the theme or tone of the work as a whole**. The learners were asked to analyse their chosen texts again according to the above criteria. It was suggested that to “test” the first criterion, students could note down the **questions that the opening provokes in the reader**, it was suggested that the more questions a text provokes, the more it may motivate us to go on with our reading.

Having then introduced the criteria for analysis and applied them to the learners’ own texts, I then proceeded to analyse openings of my own choice in more detail. Firstly, the class studied the opening of nov-

el and then the openings of two movies. Later we would compare the techniques used in both media and compare and contrast them.

ACTIVITY 1: Opening of J. D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye"

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two haemorrhages apiece if I told anything personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're nice and all –I'm not saying that– but they're also as touchy as hell. Besides I'm not going to tell you my whole god-dam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy.

This is the opening of a novel. Answer the following questions. For each of the first questions, *choose one of the three options and identify a word from the text which enabled you to make the choice.*

a) How would you describe the narrator's attitude or tone?

Negative

Positive

Not one or the other

Why?_____ (only *one word* is needed)

b) What would you say is the register of the text?

Formal

Normal

Conversational

Why?_____

c) What do you think is the writer's relationship with his/her parents?

Good

Indifferent

Bad

Why?_____

d) What does the narrator say he is going to do?

Tell us all of his story

Tell us only part of his story

Tell us nothing about his story

Why?_____

- e) Look at the “you” in line 1. Who is “you”? What does this say about the narrator’s attitude?
- f) What does the “it” refer to in lines 1, 5, 12? And the “that”? in lines 5, 7?
- g) Where is the speaker speaking from, where is “out here” in line 12?
- h) Can you hear the writer’s voice? What kind of voice do you think he/she might have? Is it male or female? What age?
- i) What kind of story do you think the writer is going to tell?
- j) What questions does this opening provoke in you, the reader? Does it make you go on reading?
- j) Of the techniques for opening texts that we have seen, which do you think the author uses? There may be as many as three or four techniques employed. Justify your answers
- k) The novel ends in a very similar way to how it begins. In groups, write the last paragraph in a similar style incorporating the following phrases: “That’s all”, “I went home”, “I got sick”, “next fall”, “I really don’t”, “that stuff”, “right now”.
- l) Now compare your version with the endings of other groups. What are the differences and similarities? Can you identify any mistakes in your group’s text or those of others?
- m) Finally compare your version(s) with the original below:

That’s all I’m going to tell about. I could probably tell you what I did after I went home, and how I got sick and all, and what school I’m supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don’t feel like it. I really don’t. That stuff doesn’t interest me too much right now.
- n) What are the similarities between the original opening and ending? Does any vocabulary coincide?

ACTIVITY 2: *Two cities*

Openings of the films “L.A. Confidential” and “The Full Monty”

Before reading the following texts. Answer the following questions.

Pre-Watching Activities

- a) What do you know about Sheffield and Los Angeles?

- b) Write down any words that you could connect to these cities. If you were watching a film about them, what images would you expect to find?
- c) Now try and match these words to either Sheffield or Los Angeles. Which words could be applied to only one city and which could easily be applied to both?

SUN	MACHINERY
BEACHES	WORKING MAN
TOP SOCCER TEAMS	MOVIE STAR
SHOPS	STEEL
DISCOTHEQUES	HOUSING
ORANGE GROVES	POOL
CHEAP	CROOKS
HAPPY FAMILY	JOBS-A-PLENTRY
CITY ON THE MOVE	PARADISE ON EARTH
COPS	CUTLERY

- d) Gap-Fill (before watching). In pairs or small groups put appropriate words from above into the following texts:

La Confidential

Come to Los Angeles. The ... shines bright, the ... are wide and inviting.

The ... stretch as far as the eye can see.

There are ... and land is ...

Every ... can have his own house and inside every house a ... all-American ...

You can have all this and who knows? You could even be discovered.

Become a ... or at least see one.

Life is good in Los Angeles: it's ... That's what they tell you anyway, because they're selling an image. They're selling it through movies, radio and tv.

In the hit show "Badge of Honour", the L.A. ... walk on water as they keep the city clean of ...

Yep, you'd think this place was the Garden of Eden – but there's Trouble in Paradise!

The Full Monty

(the word "steel" is repeated four times)

Welcome to Sheffield, the beating heart of Britain's industrial north. The jewel in Yorkshire's crown is home to over half a million people. And thousands more flock here daily to shop and to work.

All this is built on Sheffield's primary industry-...! The city's rolling mills, forges and workshops employ some ninety thousand men and state-of-the-art ... to make the world's finest ... From high tensile girders to the stainless ... that ends up on your dining table.

But it's not all hard work for the people of ... City. They can spend the day lounging by the ..., watching one of our ... or browsing in the ...

But when the ... goes down, the fun really starts in the city's numerous nightclubs and ... Yes! Yorkshire folk know how to have a good time! And it's good times for the city's ... too! Sheffield leads the way in town planning. Victorian slums have been cleared to make way for the houses of the future.

Thanks to ..., Sheffield really is a ...!

Pre-Watching Analysis

- What do these texts have in common? What types of texts are they?
- Which is more critical? Where is the criticism?

Post-Watching Analysis

- Having seen the videos, why do you think the director chose to open the films with these texts rather than adopt a more conventional opening?
- The texts are similar but have different voices, what is the difference?
- We have established that the texts are promotional. What makes them so? What types of words do they have in common? (Think of the aim of all promotional texts).

Writing

Now write your own text to accompany a promotional film about your city.

DISCUSSION

Text-Image Interface

By analysing these practical classroom activities, we have seen how the “opening” can be exploited by the teacher as a generic grouping in its own right and we have analysed the benefits of using such texts in an English Literature course at university level. However, the “Two Cities” or “American Beauty” activities also introduce a further key element into this paper - the role of the image, or non-verbal materials in class. We have seen that similar task types can be used to accompany written and visual “texts”. This is important on two levels: 1) it indicates to learners that there is an overall coherence in studying openings, be they “literary” or “cinematic”, that there are links to be made and 2) it encourages and develops a “visual” as well as a “textual literacy”. Reading, in this context, therefore refers to all forms of **engaging** with a “text”, be it through the listening, viewing or interpreting of various stimuli.

It is this interface between the written and visual text which these activities begin to explore. For example, an extension of the “Two Cities” task, could be to ask students to “write” and/or “envisage” the opening from a different literary/cinematic angle or by using a different technique. “The Full Monty” seen from a traditional “first person” perspective might open with an image of the principal character walking out of his house to cash his dole cheque. Adopting a minimum of cinematic “metalanguage” such as “long-shot” or “close-up” can also be helpful to develop a visual literacy. For example, the aerial shot at the beginning of “American Beauty” sets the scene for us in a very familiar way, though “the catch” is that we are watching all this through the eyes of Kevin Spacey whose spirit is flying over his hometown - an important element of fantasy planted at the outset of a film and thereby subverting the “realist drama” genre.

Incorporating this type of task allows the learners themselves to interweave different possible meanings, while retaining an overall focus. Thus, the generic structure of the course gives the learners the base from which they springboard ideas in their own direction - this can be seen in the “freer”, more open tasks, such as the final writing activities, which could be regarded as the learners’ reward for carrying out the earlier “closed” tasks.

Genre, Strategies and Multi-modality

We can say that visual texts such as those seen in “Two Cities” are multi-modal - “made up of potentially conflicting verbal, visual, and musical codes where these different codes may be in a contradictory relation to each other” (Meinhof, 1998, p. 5). Encouraging these multiple, contradictory meanings to flow in class is an essential element here, but to avoid chaos the central theme of openings is maintained as a critical focus throughout. We have seen that the genre can be studied from the point of view of its formal properties - the different techniques employed by writers/film-makers. However, when discussing genre, we should also highlight the expectations that readers/viewers bring to these texts. This cognitive understanding of genre is another key factor. For example, when learners are asked to “rewrite/redirect” the opening of “American Beauty” as if it were a traditional romance, detective story or comedy - they activate “schema” both about the nature of openings and these particular literary genres and how they function visually. In this way, we can see that learners are engaged in both “**concept-driven**” strategies, predicting from prior knowledge what will happen as well as “**data-driven**” strategies, identifying these predictions from given information.

An example of the above can be seen in the “Two Cities” activity. From linguistic clues, we can identify that “L.A. Confidential” is the more critical text and seems to be the voice of a particular character, whereas “The Full Monty” is impersonal and uncritical, lifted directly from a real 60s promotional film. Having used these “data-driven” strategies, learners can then move on to “concept-driven” tasks which involve hypothesis, all this before they watch the text on film. In the case of “L.A. Confidential”, such questions as “Who does the voice belong to?” “What images will accompany the text?” could then be posed. After watching, we see that the narrator’s voice belongs to Bob Hoskins, a journalist, who is also a character within the film. He is, in reality, the link between the opening “promo-style” video and the main action, the insider who confides in us (the viewer).

“The Full Monty”, however, has in reality two openings. The false start, which is the promo video and the “real start” of the film which begins “25 years later” and shows us an image of a disused steel works representing today’s Sheffield. Adopting this approach, learners themselves come up with more general observations on genre - commenting, for example, on the use of irony in “The Full Monty”, a tragi-com-

edy on contemporary Britain, whereas "L.A. Confidential" is recognised as a period thriller and, as a result, that much more distant from us.

The positive factor is that these comments or conclusions have been "enabled" and come up spontaneously as a result of carefully graded tasks and not by the teacher opening with questions like "What does the writer/director want to achieve by this?" - typical of tasks which try to "jump the gun". In other words, without having the agenda set for them, the learners have arrived at a gradually more profound analysis and, hopefully in doing so, discovered a lot more of their own meanings besides. The learners may, in fact, be able to answer the above question, but if they do, they will have reached an answer largely through their own initiative.

Such tasks certainly differ in nature to the traditional way of studying the "film and the book" dichotomy, and as such release the screenplay as a valid literary genre to be studied alongside the novel, the poem or the short story. A final advantage, then, of adopting "openings" and screenplays as the bases for literature courses is that such an approach may help bridge the gap between "uncanonical" texts such as "American Beauty" and established literature, reinventing what some students may consider to be "genuine Eng Lit".

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