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SARAH HANSEN: Today on the podcast, The Film Experience. In this episode, we'll explore what it takes to reframe historical artifacts, things like classic plays, books, and films, for a modern audience.

DAVID THORBURN: And I said to him, what did you actually think Shakespeare's environment was? He somehow had managed to disconnect the literary power of Shakespeare from the fact that it was done on this incredibly popular stage. And it was so sensational. And it was so much more like television or the movies than it was like some process of sitting in a library, in wood-paneled splendor, reading words in silence. That's not what Shakespeare was.

SARAH HANSEN: How can we compare media so that students today might better understand what it originally was? Welcome to *Chalk Radio*, a podcast about inspired teaching at MIT. I'm your host, Sarah Hansen, from MIT OpenCourseWare. My guest today is a longtime professor at MIT.

DAVID THORBURN: I'm David Thorburn. I'm a professor of literature and comparative media. I've taught The Film Experience for 39 years at MIT.

SARAH HANSEN: We'll be talking about Professor Thorburn's class, 21L.011, The Film Experience. And like all of the classes we talk about on this podcast, you can check out The Film Experience on OCW's website at ocw.mit.edu. Professor Thorburn made a splash in the academic world by bringing in media that traditionally hadn't existed there. We'll start with how this all came about and what it was like for him to challenge what might be considered unholy in the sacred space of the classroom.

DAVID THORBURN: The story of what made me into a film scholar, or a media scholar is, at least, interesting to me and still surprises me. I had been teaching at Yale for seven or eight years, and I was offered a chance to do a visitation at the University of California in Santa Barbara. And I was trying to introduce the students to the idea of conventions. What it means when you begin a story once upon a time, and every story begins that way. Or what it means when you say they lived happily ever after to take the simplest example of what a convention is. I was trying to illustrate how, in fact, we internalize these things, and we understand the conventions of the narratives of our own time in our blood without even thinking about it.

So what I needed to illustrate the principle were shared texts. So I began by asking them-- this was in the 1970s, in the early 1970s-- and I asked the students there-- these are bright California public school students-- how many of you have ever seen a John Wayne movie? Maybe 15% of the students raised their hand. Then I said, well, how many of you have read *Huckleberry Finn*? Maybe 30%. I tried other novels, classic novels. I tried Shakespeare plays. I was at a loss-- remember, this is in the early '70s.

Finally, I said, how many of you have seen *All in the Family*? For those in the audience too young to know this, *All in the Family* was a television program, a classic and transforming one, that appeared in 1971 on American television and involved a working class hero who had never-- such characters had never appeared on television before. It was a very important program. And of course, 100% of the class had seen it.

And I began to take my examples from television programs. And I began-- this wore on me. It wore in on me as the term went on. And what I realized was that the literature of our own day, the story forms that belonged to my students and to the generation of kids I was teaching, were visual, not literary.

So I became interested in television as a narrative medium. And then I came to realize, as I began to think more seriously about the role of television in American life-- remember, by 1970, American television was the dominant form of entertainment and narrative in American life. And, in fact, this initial understanding, out of which my whole interest in media developed, has shaped-- I realize now just in talking about this-- my way of teaching the film experience.

When I got back to Yale after my year's visitation, I introduced a course called Literature and Popular Culture, in which I explored these ideas in greater depth. I read some bestsellers. I ended the course by looking at *The Honeymooners*.

And I remember, I was teaching the course in a room at Yale College called Linsly-Chittenden Hall, in which legendary figures had lectured on Shakespeare. And one of these legendary professors, the man who had actually hired me at Yale, Maynard Mack-- a great literary scholar-- poked his head in while I was teaching *The Honeymooners*, and then later called me into his office and expressed great disappointment over the fact that I was polluting this environment.

So then I-- and we then had a serious conversation. And I said to him, what did you-- what did he actually think Shakespeare's environment was? And that was when it struck me how narrow my education had been because he really had not-- even though he was a great man and a great-- he knew the history. But he somehow had managed to disconnect the literary power of Shakespeare from the fact that it was done on this incredibly popular stage. And it was so sensational. And it was so much more like television or the movies than it was like some process of sitting in a library, in wood-paneled splendor, reading words in silence. That's not what Shakespeare was.

**SARAH
HANSEN:** Part of why we wanted to talk about Professor Thorburn's film experience class is because teaching film changes as technology and student life evolve. I asked him what this evolution means for the ways in which he presents his materials. His answer? Start from the very beginning.

**DAVID
THORBURN:** When I begin the film experience, I ask the students to do something they find increasingly difficult. In the old days, before the proliferation of smartphones and visual media all over the place and everyone being able to make his own video and so forth, and the ubiquity of DVDs-- before those days, I was able to tell the students, look, we live in an audio-visual age. We live in a televisual age. I want you to think that stuff away. I want you to get-- think yourself back to an age before people understood that there is such a thing as a film.

And think of what the original meaning of movie is. Go back to the root meaning. It's a metaphor that is a dead metaphor for us. But it actually-- it tells you what the most fundamental aspect of the movies were for the original audiences and why they were so fascinated by the capacity of this new technology to capture motion. It seemed like-- and it was-- a tremendous new advance in technologies of the representation of human experience because it captured humans in motion. It captured the movements of the world.

The first films, as I try to show my students, were so preoccupied by this wondrous capacity of the medium that it's almost the only thing they filmed. And you can see the evolution of the medium embodied in the way in which, after an initial profound fascination with the novelty of movement begins to wear off, other properties of the film medium begin to be discovered.

So I tell my students this principle. And I ask them to try to think their way back into the attitude of these first viewers, who didn't know about the visual media, to play a kind of thought experiment. Today, it's much harder to make them play that experiment because I have to tell them, as I do in that first lecture, think away your iPads.

Imagine a world without iPads. Imagine a world without smartphones. Imagine a world without instant communication. And of course, this is much harder for the students to do. And of course, at one level, they are much more capable of processing audio-visual information than I am, and than my parents' generation, and than all of the generations older than they are, because they've grown up in an environment in which, essentially, they're surrounded 24/7 by audio-visual stimuli, by audio-visual signals.

Many people might see this as dangerous. Perhaps it is. But it develops new capacities. And one can see this in the history of television in which, at a certain point, there are certain kinds of television programs that become too complex for older generations. And only the younger generation that was used to going to the movies and had been watching television and had been watching MTV-- they were able to understand this very easily.

SARAH HANSEN: Professor Thorburn's class includes a two-hour lecture, with one more hour of discussion. In our conversation, he talks about the changing popular opinion surrounding lectures, namely, that they're outdated and less effective than other styles of teaching. In short, he disagrees. I'll let him explain.

DAVID THORBURN: I've thought a lot about what it means to lecture to undergraduates. I hated bad lectures. I thought they were the pits of higher education. And I swore to myself that if I became a lecturer, I would never bore my students, that that was a worse sin than almost any other a teacher could commit was to be boring.

And I have also felt that in recent years especially-- although it's always been an undercurrent in education-- there's been a kind of growing negative feeling about lectures as if they're herding students into a herd experience. And it doesn't give them hands-on experience. And I think, intellectually, that's a foolish perspective. Professors know more than students. It's appropriate for students to listen to professors sometime.

Professors should take the responsibility when they talk to students very seriously. And in a small classroom, they should certainly encourage discussion and interaction. And I think at my best-- I'm not sure I always am at my best. I know I'm not. But when I am at my best, I think I'm doing something that can't be captured in printed form or couldn't be captured if you gave students a transcript of what you had done, which is that I'm modeling thinking. I'm modeling how you make connections.

It seemed to me, as I thought about the most inspiring lectures that I had as an undergraduate, there was one professor I had especially. He's now dead, but he was a wonderfully inspiring man. His name was Lawrence Holland. His lecture was on American literature. And his strategy in lectures I've tried to copy.

One thing he always did was he presented an outline. It was not the text of the lecture, but it was three or four central, digestible points that organized the lecture in sequence. It didn't capture the whole lecture, but you could use that sheet to organize your understanding of the lecture. I thought that was a wonderfully helpful-- I found it wonderfully helpful both for review but also because what it showed me was that professor Holland had planned what he was doing, that he was presenting material to me that he had thought long about, that he had organized in a serious way.

But the second great thing about Larry Holland's lectures was that they were not completely written out. There were parts of them that were written out, very eloquent moments often at the beginning and the end. And I've sometimes imitated that. But the greatest part of his lectures was his lectures seemed spontaneous. Even though he was following his lecture, it seemed as if he was not. He was speaking to me.

And I tried to capture-- I've never been as good as he was. There was a kind of passion, a kind of feeling in what he did. And I realized that another aspect of what he was showing me was how-- not just intellectually engaged, but how passionately engaged, how emotionally valuable studying literature could be.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

Maybe the most telling feature of this course is its intended outcome for students. Professor Thorburn isn't trying to create film critics, or even experts, in his classes. His goal is much more significant.

**DAVID
THORBURN:**

One of the ways that the study of literature, the study of film differs from the study of technical things, and the reason I teach it, is that it belongs to everyone, that it's valuable for everyone. Not everyone needs to know about quantum mechanics. But I believe everyone should-- and if they don't, I feel they're impoverished-- know how to read a good story, enjoy plays, know how to enjoy the movies. So I feel that what I'm giving my students is in some sense something even more valuable to them because it will be something that they'll have with them for their whole lives, their whole careers.

One of the things MIT students sometimes often do not realize is that a very large number of them do not end up making their living in the areas in which they majored. But all of them end up wanting to go to the movies. All of them end up with the capacity to read and enjoy literature. And I hope that coming out of my classes, they'll do those things with greater joy and with greater intelligence.

One thing I've thought about that-- I don't-- I haven't actually said this in my courses yet. But I think implicit in my film course is an admiration for a certain kind of achievement, an admiration for a certain kind of artist, an artist like Jean Renoir, the great filmmaker, or Monet, the great painter, whose cathedral series I often talk about in my teaching. And I realized that I shouldn't leave it implicit because I want to set up as a candidate for their admiration an alternative to Wall Street, an alternative to entrepreneurial genius.

I admire Jean Renoir's genius or Orson Welles's genius or James Joyce's genius universes more than I admire what entrepreneurs do. I respect what entrepreneurs do, but I am in awe of what great artists do and of what great doctors do, while we're on the subject. We've become so preoccupied by what we might call commercial or financial success instead of the kind of lasting success that great art or the practice of medicine or the practice of nursing or, dare I say it, the practice of teaching might also embody. [LAUGHS]

SARAH

HANSEN:

Professor Thorburn shares additional thoughts on teaching The Film Experience in a series of videos within the Instructor Insights section of his OCW course. You can find them at ocw.mit.edu. And while you're there, download the teaching resources from this course and find so many other materials shared by faculty across all of the schools at MIT.

Thank you for listening. We're so glad that you're tuning into what makes MIT such an exciting place to learn, conversations with people passionate about impacting the world in positive ways. We hope you'll open MIT to more people by sharing this podcast and OCW with your own colleagues and friends. Until next time, I'm Sarah Hansen, from MIT OpenCourseWare.

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