

DAVID

I'm David Thorburn. I'm a Professor of Literature and Comparative Media. What else? I've

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taught the film experience for, I guess, 38 or 39 years at MIT. And I've taught a lot of literature subjects as well.

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've told it a few times. But it was actually a somewhat transforming experience in my life.

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 for the first time in my life, I was asked to teach students who weren't the product of very elaborate private school educations or very powerful public school educations. They were smart kids, but they were less well-read in some ways.

So I was trying to illustrate-- it was a literature course, Introduction to Literature, or Comedy, or something like that. 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 narratives of our own time, in our blood, without even thinking about it. And I was trying to illustrate this principle. 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 10% of the students-- in 1970. It's not 2016 now. Maybe 15% of the students raise 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. 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. I talked about the conventions of situation comedy as a way of explaining. And I began to think about this. And 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 belong to my students and to the generation of kids I was teaching, were visual, not literary-- or at least, many of them were. And the ones that were shared 100%, shared by everyone, was certainly televisual. 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 deeply embedded in American life. It 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 course, the film experience-- and it's one of the things I think that makes the film experience unique.

Because I began thinking about television. I was not a film scholar. I was not a media scholar. I was a literary scholar. In fact, ironically, I was a specialist in the high modern period, a period of Joyce and Virginia Woolf and Picasso, right? And I knew about what we might think of as-- I was an expert in art-- in forms of art-- that could be thought to be elitist, or at least non-accessible to the ordinary people.

And here I was confronting texts that everyone could understand and everyone shared. We get to think about them more deeply and think more deeply about my own literary education, which was narrow in some sense. As everyone in my generation was so educated, we were cut off from the historical implications of the texts we studied.

So I began to fill that in as well, as I began to learn more about television. And what I realized, thinking about television, was I couldn't understand television without the movies. So I then set on a sort of personal course of education, and I read very deeply in movie history and movie scholarship. And I amplified my own knowledge of movies tremendously by constant viewing of movies, mostly because I was trying to understand television, ironically.

And then I began to develop a recognition of what a remarkable cultural phenomenon the

movies were. I began to generate great respect for the great movie scholars. It was a great era, the late '60s and early '70s, for movie scholarship, because it had become mature by that time.

And the people writing movie criticism in the United States, certainly in the 1970s, were very interesting critics. Critics and scholars, the equivalent of the literary scholarship that I was used to, that I aspired to write myself, and so forth. So it was very exciting, intellectually, for me to have this experience.

When I got back to Yale, after my year's visitation, I introduced a course called Literature and Popular Culture in which I explore these ideas in greater depth and with greater intensity. 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 the great Shakespeare lecture course had been taught for generations. And my course, Literature in Popular Culture was very popular with the students. I had a couple of hundred students. And I was lecturing from the same podium that legendary figures had lectured on Shakespeare about.

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 I had actually dragooned the medial people at Yale to give me a reel-to-reel tape recorder so I could tape the stuff off the air.

Mack saw this and later called me into his office and expressed great disappointment over the fact that I was polluting this environment. So we then had a serious conversation. And I said to him, 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-- 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.

And that began to lead me into recognitions of the importance of popular culture, the fact that most high culture was a form of popular culture. I became much less apologetic than most

teachers of popular culture are. And so when I came to MIT in the mid-- I came to MIT in 1976. And I was already in the throes of this.

But it was, I think, fortunate for me and fortunate for MIT, in one sense, because MIT's literature program was much more open than Yale's had been. And they were interested in my work on television and media. That was one reason they wanted me to come here. And it was much less hidebound about literary and historical study here.

So it gave me a chance to-- and I introduced a course in television. And that was one of the very first courses in the American Academy that studied television programs for their content. Now, that's common. It's thought to be-- of course, everybody takes it for granted. But at that time, it was a very rare thing.

And what I also did was take a course that I inherited from my wonderful colleague-- still teaching here in his 80's-- Alvin Kibel, a course called the film experience which was of a course, that was not intended for all students but a small one I transformed it into a general introduction to film and I've taught it almost every year since.