

CREATING A NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This workshop considered the implications that digital technology has for creating narrative and meaning in relation to the values ascribed to media by different disciplines: English teachers may favour film; Art teachers, photography, for example.

All media have varying degrees of narrative power – the most appropriate way to evoke meaning – spatial, kinetic or sensory – but the most direct is via a medium that contains a language component. Therefore cinema and television have the highest narrative potential. However, whilst music and sound may not be able to create self-sufficient narratives, they expand our ability to imagine these worlds.

Using interactive tools and digital cameras, workshop members used and created a selection of multimedia assets to communicate a simple narrative, exploring how medium affects meaning. Delegates considered how to use the media most effectively and satisfy audience expectation in light of the demands of their disciplines.



ISSUES OF STORY

How we evaluate multimedia texts to make sense of the world becomes a crucial aspect in developing twenty-first century literacy. Digital technology has broadened the range of sources and approaches available to students to be both critically and creatively aware of their meaning.

This workshop considered the implications that digital technology has for creating narrative and meaning in relation to the values ascribed to media by different disciplines. Structuralist theorists such as Barthes, Propp and Bremond suggested that narratives were mental constructs composed in response to a variety of signs. Whilst they succeeded in having narrative recognised as a semiotic phenomenon transcending disciplines and media, it has been suggested that they failed to account for the configuring action of media itself and the different ways in which various disciplines define media: English teachers may enumerate film and TV; Art teachers may suggest watercolour and photography, for example.

All media have varying degrees of narrative power – the most appropriate way to evoke meaning – spatial, kinetic, sensory – Ricoeur regards the 'proper' subject for narrative as being the temporal character of human experience and therefore cinema and television have the highest narrative potential as they are able to fully articulate a story, unlike media that operate through purely sensory channels such as music or sound. However, whilst music and sound cannot create self-sufficient narrative worlds, these media expand our ability to imagine these worlds. Therefore we must think of the appropriateness of a particular medium in expressing a narrative element or idea –

is a season better represented through still or moving images or narration and music? What about a character's point of view in relation to a season?

Using interactive media tools and digital cameras, workshop members created a selection of multimedia assets to communicate a simple narrative, exploring how medium affects meaning. Delegates considered how to use the media most effectively and satisfy audience expectations in light of the demands of their disciplines.

The workshop was informed by the central theoretical tenets of the conference – critical practice, creative process, cultural perspective – that the understanding necessary to produce engaging practical work develops from initial work on simple scenarios rather than complex narratives. A deliberate continuity was intended from my earlier Critical workshop 'Issues of Story' (engaged in unpicking elements of storytelling in given short film texts), to this Creative workshop (using theoretical and critical approaches in a practical exercise), through to the Group Task, 'Dissolution' (responding creatively to a piece of prose).

The intended outcome was to give delegates confidence and ideas for approaches to practical work, emphasising the aesthetic over the technical.

CONTEXT

Although the workshop was practice-based, delegates spent the first fifteen minutes exploring the theoretical context for the exercise that they would be doing. The workshop's intention was to explore three key areas:

- ways of creating effective, short, simple narratives that engage an audience
- the notion that media differ widely in their efficiency and expressive power in terms of creating a narrative, and as a consequence
- appropriateness for the task in hand – some projects are better done as photography or a radio play rather than as a video

These areas are especially relevant to this conference, as a major aim was to assemble groups of educators and professionals from diverse backgrounds and disciplines who were engaged with using digital media and the moving image in their work, and to enable a consideration of how people approach creative projects differently. It was hoped that the workshop would enable discussion of how educators from different disciplines privilege certain media and how this affects their approach to practical work. Would art teachers favour using primarily spatial media – still images / photography; would media studies teachers favour kinetic forms – moving images with music – to tell stories? How would each work within the strengths and limitations of the medium used?

The workshop aimed to explore these ideas within the context of the work that we ask our students to do themselves i.e. make a short film, which led onto the Group Task later on in the conference. Delegates explored these notions in a practical exercise using images plus music to create a narrative according to a simple brief, ending up with some diverse short pieces of work at the end of the workshop.

Delegates were asked to describe what sort of creative projects they were involved in, what media they used and also whether this was outside or inside the teaching and learning context. Delegates were split about 50/50 in terms of working on creative projects, with most using digital video in classroom rather than personal contexts. This discussion was intended to suggest the importance of a theme of the conference, namely, trying to unite theory and practice in relation to creative projects.

'ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS...'

As part of the context for doing a practical exercise on narrative, the workshop began by getting delegates to consider the very basic notions of stories, storytelling and how to engage an audience. Although this had been an element of my previous workshop, the ideas were extended in this session beyond notions of stories generally, to consider how film and other media tell stories.

In pairs, delegates discussed what elements went towards constituting a story that would engage an audience; what they, as audience members, would expect to hear from a story. Feedback from delegates suggested elements such as conflict, character, genre, structure and setting. They then considered what expectations they might have of a film as a vehicle for storytelling, suggesting elements such as camera movement, editing and sound effects, for example. Finally, in relation to storytelling through other media such as painting, music and photographs, they suggested ideas such as character, placing within a scene and pace.

STRUCTURAL AND SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF FILM LANGUAGE

What delegates had identified in the 'Once upon a time...' exercise as the ways that moving image makes meaning were either the structural elements associated with genre or the specific elements of film language. Delegates took handouts of these two PowerPoint slides for future reference. Although some were familiar with the formalised notions of these concepts, many were not and suggested that they would find the diagrams useful during the conference and in future work, to help them to think about the visual shorthand that they were going to have to employ in the Creative workshops as well as the conference's Group Task of making a short film.

A major part of Film Education's creative methodology is based around *mise-en-scène* and camerawork - making students aware of framing and the notion that every shot is important, both within its own conception as a unit and as a unit within the montage as a whole. Within the creative process, whatever medium people are working in, it is vital that they keep reminding themselves and their students about:

- what creative choices they have available to them
- an awareness of the appropriateness of their choice (especially in relation to editing)

Looking at these specific-level tools of film language makes it easy to identify how film tells stories in visual and auditory ways and has the most potential in terms of telling a narrative – other media tell narratives in slightly different ways.

'HAVING NARRATIVITY' AND 'BEING A NARRATIVE'

As discussed in the introduction to the article, a distinction can be made between 'having narrativity' and 'being a narrative'. Still images, music and dance have narrativity without literally being narratives, since they do not use language and therefore lack the syntactic rules that enable media such as film to articulate specific meanings. In being limited to the visual or the auditory, these media are unable to express abstract ideas such as causality that are essential in making sense of complex narratives. Therefore, the choice of medium modifies the way in which a narrative is shaped, presented and received.

The workshop moved on to explore the notions of the different expressive powers of various media further by looking more closely at two examples – a photograph and a short film – asking delegates to consider what clues each form was giving them about the narrative.

- How are they creating a narrative?
- Why is it interesting to the audience?
- What is the story?
- What shots / elements of the image are significant?
- How many shots does it contain?
- What is outside the frame?
- How long is the sequence?
- What clues are you using?

In considering these questions, it is useful to make a distinction between the notions of 'having narrativity' and 'being a narrative', as suggested by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Narrative Across Media* (2004).

Still images operate through a single spatial visual channel, freezing the 'action' into a single shot – Gotthold Lessing's notion of 'the pregnant moment' – the most suggestive moment at which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible. The audience must provide a past and future for the image – by reaching into the past and the future, still images can also speak to the imagination.

In other words, these are alternative modes of narrativity which stand in contrast to the nature of exposition common to 'complete' narratives such as films.

Delegates discussed a photograph on screen about which they had no information at all and suggested some quite abstract narratives for the image. However, to illustrate the point about the power of language in bringing / expanding / imposing meaning, delegates imputed increasingly specific narratives to the photograph as they were told more information about it.

The photographer:

- Francesca Woodman
- American
- Born in 1958
- Frequently present in her own work
- Committed suicide in 1981

The photograph:

- From the 'Angel' Series
- Taken in Rome
- Taken in September 1977

Films operate through multiple spatio-temporal channels. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson argue in *Film Art* (2003) that the seemingly disconnected series of cinematic images,

a man tosses and turns, unable to sleep
a mirror breaks
a telephone rings

can become a narrative sequence if the spectator supplies common agents and logical connections. Language is the privileged medium of summaries because it can articulate the logical structure of a story.

But I would argue that Lessing's notion of 'the pregnant moment' is still relevant, especially in relation to short films – effective film narratives try to get into a scene as late as possible and leave it as early as possible in order to maximise the dramatic potential.

After discussing the Francesca Woodman photograph, delegates moved onto discussing embodiments of narrative in moving image. They were asked to think about a number of questions in response to a simple brief that formed the basis of the example that they were going to look at.

...a woman was going into a building where a man was waiting in a room...

- What are your expectations of this narrative?
- How will the filmmaker choose to tell the story?

Delegates suggested a number of scenarios such as a job interview. They then watched the film through and discussed how it met / didn't meet their expectations and how the film had used visual shorthand to convey a story, thinking about the elements of film language discussed earlier such as lighting, editing, camera angle, costume and setting etc.

The short film was part of the early development work on Film Education's interactive CD-ROM *MoPix: Red Shoes*. Whilst it is intended mainly as an editing exercise, the resource demonstrates the importance and variety of creative choices that are open to a student. They demonstrate that every shot is important and that students need to concentrate hard to achieve a narrative that is engaging for an audience.

YOU MUST FOLLOW THE BRIEF...

Having briefly looked at how different media filter different aspects of narrative meaning, it is perhaps easier to make creative choices in storytelling and select media for their affordances, working around their limitations.

The practical exercise in the workshop took a lead from the *Red Shoes* film, giving delegates a very restrictive brief around which to create a narrative. The purpose was for the restrictions to encourage creative solutions and responses to the brief and for delegates to concentrate on aesthetic rather than technical aspects of the creative process.

Using delegates' self-certified levels of experience and competence with DV, they were allocated into pairs: the more experienced with the less. Each group had a DV camera, tripod and storyboard planning sheets to work with.

Pairs could choose one of two scenarios to work with:

- Going through a door
- Receiving a phone call

They were to use exactly 15 shots to tell their narrative.

In developing the notions of 'having narrativity', there were a number of pieces of music loaded onto the laptops that delegates could choose to use (or not) in their pieces. In suggesting that they listen to these before they began their planning, this raised another dimension of media (in this case, music) 'having narrativity' in that all the pieces available were very evocative of certain genres or moods and may have suggested to delegates what sort of narrative they might want to hang around their chosen brief.

The structure of the activity was that pairs would listen to the music, recce locations and plan their shots before going out to film anything in order to emphasise the need for good planning in these activities where time is limited. They had a short amount of time to film and then edit their pieces. Delegates were encouraged to always think about visual shorthand, pace and mood and the need for good planning and preparation given the limited amount of time for the activity, related to a classroom lesson.

Delegates were given assistance with the technical side of the process as required, although this was not a priority for the activity. All hardware and software used in the activity was selected for its ease of use and the ethos of the workshop was to encourage creative thought and enjoyment rather than technical hang-ups.

OUTCOMES

All pairs showed their work within the group, to great enthusiasm and applause by all. Most groups managed to complete the task, although all would have liked to have more time to improve their final films and seemed to enjoy having the opportunity to be creative with a simple scenario.

The limitations on the activity, conjoined with the incredibly inventive, witty and varied results produced, illustrated the need to encourage teachers and learners to build their confidence and concentration levels by making engaging 30 second pieces before moving onto anything more complex. By understanding that every shot is important, students should come to realise how much patience is required to sustain an interesting narrative for even the shortest space of time.

The levels of experience of using film in the classroom and the general aspirations for the workshop varied quite widely across the two groups. However, the level of discussion and achievement in the practical work suggests that delegates would feel confident in adapting and implementing the ideas and approaches in the workshop in their teaching and learning environments.

Given the time available in the workshop, there was insufficient time to fully test these theoretical notions in practical exercises. Most of the practical work produced during the workshops confined itself to using DV, digital stills and music. Delegates seemed keen to explore the full potential of considering notions of differing narrative potential in their own classroom practice which will hopefully be shared with other delegates on the CP3 website in due course.

For delegates wishing to explore some of the challenges of using moving image and music to create short narratives, Film Education's MoPix series of interactive resources provide editing software, assets and supporting materials.

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As a freelancer, Jane has worked on video projects with Ken Loach and for Carlton Television. Prior to this, she worked in the music industry.

Jane is currently studying the MA Digital Media course at University of Sussex and is interested in developing projects focused on digital literacies.