

F I L M A N D P E R F O R M A N C E

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ABSTRACT

In this workshop, delegates looked at the ways in which we can learn how to make a 'film sentence' and recognise the power of film to manipulate, to exhilarate and to engage. This hands-on workshop started by analysing a short sequence (what are the questions to ask about a piece of moving image footage?) and then went on to use a selection of rushes from a simple scenario filmed in a variety of ways, allowing participants to experiment with conveying a story using the grammar of the film sentence.



THE FILM SENTENCE

The focus of this workshop was to look at the ways in which moving images create meanings. All too often we still cling to the word, but images have their own syntax, which needs to become an accepted part of education; as in a prose sentence, where word is connected to word, shot is connected to shot in the 'film sentence'. In looking at the concept of film language and how meaning is created it was important to bear in mind how, through a series of critical exercises, it might also be possible to have an impact on students' creative video work. Although we assume that students watch films and thus can easily 'recreate' the options available to them through the use of camera and sound, alas this is not always the case. In looking at the idea of the film sentence we are examining the ways in which, like a sentence, a film scene is constructed, the various decisions and options that are available to the filmmaker and, more importantly, why certain decisions and choices are made.

So in approaching this idea the attempt was made not only to be 'critical' but also to be 'creatively critical'. Key to this was an understanding of how film 'performs', the ways in which it can create and communicate meanings and moods. In order to understand this, it was vital to examine what techniques and tools are available to a filmmaker and the range of possibilities and decisions which are offered.

QUESTIONS

The starting point of the workshop was a short clip from the film *Paperhouse* (dir. Bernard Rose; 1988). Delegates were asked to think of five questions about what they had seen. Naturally, the first set of questions raised were about the narrative content of the piece, centered round questions of who, where and what.

However, as we were examining issues of film language, we turned these questions round to 'how' – how do we realise the mood of the piece, how does the filmmaker convey ideas about character? Effectively we started to think about film language itself. Ideas emerged as to how meaning was created in a piece of film – through the following:

- Camera angles
- Sound
- Camera movement
- Shot type
- Sound
- Mise-en-scène
- Actor's performance
- Music
- Length of shot

From analysing the extract in this way we were able to see how the director of the film had raised narrative issues (which were our starting point) and developed a way of communicating both narrative and mood through the use of the above.

Having analysed this short extract delegates then moved on to a practical activity which applied their knowledge from the previous exercise.

CONVEYING MOOD

Using an interactive editing tool, delegates were asked to edit together a specific scene by selecting shots and sounds which would convey a specific mood. At its basic level, the scene shows a woman sitting in a chair, reading a book and waiting for the phone to ring.

They had a selection of **rushes** to choose their shots from. The rushes were taken from Film Education's interactive CD-ROM – *MoPix: Phone Call*. What is presented to the user is a whole variety of different angles, shot types etc., which reflect one of two moods – joyful anticipation or dread – in either the way in which they are shot or the performance of the actor.

In addition, delegates had a variety of **music** tracks to choose from that might enhance the mood that they had chosen to evoke in their edited sequence.

Thus delegates were asked to choose one of these moods, select music which was appropriate and then edit together shots which established where the woman was and then her waiting until the phone finally rings.

Key learning outcomes of this exercise are:

- The ability to build up a mood in a sequence
- The ability to select shots which help build up this mood
- The ability to decide on the emphasis of a short narrative and decide on the point of view to be taken
- The ability to decide on the rhythm of a piece – of when to cut from one location to another as well as the length of shots
- The ability to manipulate screen time. The action takes place over five to six minutes. However we would expect the final edited sequence to last only two minutes maximum
- The ability to see the relationship between the beat of the music and the rhythm of the cutting of shots.

There are undoubtedly others – whichever mood is chosen will affect the shots that are chosen from the rushes. Also affected will be the way that the final piece is edited together.

The exercise shows how images alone do not create meaning – it is created by the way that images are put in juxtaposition with each other and their relationship with other filmic elements – music and sound for example – creating their own ‘film sentence’, by selecting the complex and expressive syntax of film language.

OUTCOMES

As always, every delegate came up with a different approach to the exercise and the finished (or nearly finished) products showed that there was not one ‘right’ way of editing the shots or selecting the shots. All of the pieces created a mood in different ways.

What the exercise also showed was that a film is not simply ‘an event on film’ – one shot of the woman sitting and then standing up and answering the phone. Rather, as in the Paperhouse extract, it is a filmed event, one in which careful shot construction and editing came together to create meaning and mood.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Film Education, *MoPix: Red Shoes*

Ian Wall started teaching at London Comprehensive School, Holland Park, where he held the posts of Head of English, Head of Film and Media and Deputy Head of Humanities Faculty.

In 1986 Ian founded FILM EDUCATION where, as Director, he is in charge of developing educational policy and ideas for publications, events, CD and DVD-ROMs and television programmes. FILM EDUCATION has become increasingly involved with digital resources and the use of digital video in education. Ian and the Film Education team recently were winners of a BAFTA for their King Arthur Interactive Educational CD-ROM. In conjunction with Jane Dickson (Creative Director at Film Education) he has developed a number of INSET modules dealing with the use of digital video within education.

Ian Wall is a founder member of the European Association for Audio Visual Media Educators, was a member of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport’s Film Education Working Party and has served as a jury member for the BAFTA Children’s Drama Award.