IMAGE, TEXT AND SOUND

Tom Barrance

ABSTRACT

This session built on some of the ideas of montage which were outlined in my Critical workshop, Montage – The Hidden Language of Film. In particular, we looked at the concept of 'vertical montage'.

VERTICAL MONTAGE

The great Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein referred to the time-based element of editing (how images are cut together with differences in duration and pace) as 'linear montage'. 'Vertical montage' describes the way in which the content of individual images, and different elements of the soundtrack, interact to create meaning.

Eisenstein was making a deliberate analogy to the way in which music is scored. With professional video editing software, which features timelines with multiple video and audio tracks, the analogy is more explicit than it was in Eisenstein's day. We can also extend the concept of 'vertical montage' to include not just image and sound, but also layers of images and text. The purpose of this session was to explore how these different elements could be combined to explore the meaning of a piece of writing.

SOUND AND IMAGE: TITLE SEQUENCES

We started with an analysis activity to examine how sound and image worked together. I took the soundtrack of a film title sequence and divided it up into sections. With each section I asked the participants what feelings it evoked, what images they might imagine, and how the images might be edited together. Once we had listed to all the separate sections of the soundtrack, we watched the whole title sequence with the music. Interestingly, some groups had made very accurate predictions despite having no idea what kind of film it was.

The sequence I had chosen was a montage composed entirely of stills. It starts with slow dissolves between shots of rural early twentieth century America; the music builds as images from the 1920s and 1930s becomes increasingly urban; the pace becomes frenetic with multi-screen shots of crowded 1970s city streets, and it slows again with images of protest, pollution and decay. Finally a siren strikes an ominous note.

The sequence was from the 1970s science fiction film *Soylent Green*. One reason I used it was because a lot of the techniques could have been recreated using iMovie, and it would have been easy (though time-consuming) to reproduce it using Final Cut Express, the programme we would be using for the creative part of the workshop.

We also looked at the title sequence from the Japanese horror film *OniBaba*, a simple but powerful sequence which combines diegetic sound, music, simple titles and black-and-white shots of windblown grass.

The third example I used came from the short thriller *Cyn*. This sequence combines manipulated still images, silhouettes, textures and colours suggestive of blood, smoke, fire and water, overlaid with type in both a clean 'modern' sans-serif and a battered sixties-style face. The sequence was made with Final Cut Pro, the professional version of Final Cut Express.

CHILDREN'S FILMS

We then looked at some children's work which had been made using Final Cut Express. These films were from a Media Education Wales film and language project at Bettws High School in South Wales. Year 7 children had learnt about how, in French, different spellings can be used to express the same sounds. They had been given a bank of verbs, nouns and adjectives with which to create phrases, the criteria for combining them being the sound of the words (rhyme or alliteration) rather than meaning. They had then learnt how to pronounce these phrases and recorded them. They filmed and edited images which they thought matched what the sounds would 'look like', and then overlaid text and applied motion to it.

COMPOSITING

This process of combining and overlaying text and images, and adding movement, is known as 'compositing'. With a modern editing programme, there are lots of possibilities. You can overlay one video clip on top of another and then change the way the two clips relate to each other, either by making the topmost clip more transparent, or by selecting a different 'composite mode'. You can type text and then change the typeface, the size and the colour. You can also resize text, video and still images; and you can add motion, so that an image or a piece of text moves across or around the screen or changes shape. By putting each clip on a separate video track and resizing and repositioning it you can have multiple images playing on the same screen.

These kinds of techniques are most often used in title sequences, though they also appear in advertisements. We used them to explore the meaning of a piece of writing.

THE CREATIVE TASK

I gave participants the following poem by Shelley:

Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,
And it but mimic all we would believe
With colours idly spread, – behind, lurk Fear
And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave
Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.
I knew one who had lifted it – he sought,
For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
The world contains, the which he could approve.
Through the unheeding many he did move,
A splendour among shadows, a bright blot
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.

Lift not the painted veil, Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818

Each group was given a choice of one of three pieces of music (from the iLife suite). They also had a set of high-definition video clips (including water, a beach, a close-up of a face behind glass, a wire fence, and feet on a dance floor) and some still images. They were then allocated a short section from the poem, which they were to illustrate using the images that had been provided.

Before they started, I went through the basic principles of editing with Final Cut Express and demonstrated what was possible. We looked at how the professional video interface works, with media being accessed in a browser, the use of two windows (one viewer for individual clips, and a canvas for viewing the film) and the timeline for putting the film together.

COMPOSITING TECHNIQUES

We looked at a wide variety of techniques which could be used for combining images, sound and text. These included:

- separating the video and audio tracks
- using multiple video tracks
- having multiple images on the same screen
- changing how clips on multiple video tracks were combined
- resizing video clips and stills, and adding motion
- using markers on the timeline to mark where the images should change
- changing the speed of clips
- adding text, and changing its size, style and colour
- adding and adjusting transitions
- adding motion to video, stills and text

Once they had an overview of these techniques, they went through their excerpt from the poem. Before they could work out how to illustrate it, they had to discuss and agree on its meanings.

Two hours is a very short time to learn a programme as complex as Final Cut Express, so for two of my sessions I went through the basics of what was possible very quickly, and then went round each pair or group: they would tell me what they wanted to achieve and I would demonstrate how to do it before they did it for themselves.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

This worked fine with a small number, but it would rapidly become impossible in a conventional classroom where you would need much more time to build the children's skills and confidence. Our Bettws High School project lasted over several weeks, with tasks that increased in complexity in stages. The first week's project was a group self-portrait: the children began by filming close-ups of items of clothing or other objects that were important to individuals within the group. These were then edited, using 'in' and 'out' points to choose the beginning and end of the selection, and put into a sequence. The children went on to explore the use of additional video tracks and modifying transparency and composite modes. In subsequent weeks we looked at how to insert and edit to markers and add transitions, how to add text, and using 'keyframes' and to add motion effects.

When you're compositing it's important to have a clear idea of what you are trying to do and why: it's easy for students to get carried away with effects and transitions. Even though this activity provides an opportunity for them to use effects legitimately and purposefully, I would still place creative constraints on them. This could include limiting the number of clips or video tracks they could use, limiting the duration of the sequence (or requiring a specific duration) and only allowing cross-dissolves or fades rather than more elaborate or gimmicky transitions.

It's also important to provide a variety of different clips. The ones I provided were a mixture of figurative and more abstract clips. Some of them were very simple and graphic while others were textures and patterns. I provided the still images in a higher resolution than the (HD) video format of the project, so that they could be zoomed and scanned without losing quality. I avoided images that expressed the apparent meaning of the poem too literally, as I wanted participants to explore how they could use visual metaphors; in fact I had selected most of the images before I found the poem.

THE FILMS

The participants approached the task in a number of different ways. Some of them used the whole text they had been given on the screen, while others just used a few key words. Images were dissolved into each other and applied on multiple tracks. Some of the interpretations were relatively literal – like the sunlit water which faded away to reveal the face behind, 'lifting the painted veil' – while others focused more on mood.

This activity could be extended in the classroom by getting children to film or select their own images and to create their own soundtracks using natural sounds, music and perhaps their own reading of the poem. They could also use it with their own writing.

REFERENCES

Soylent Green (1973), dir. Fleischer

OniBaba (1964), dir. Shindo

Cyn (2007), dir. Ferrari

All of the title sequences came from www.artofthetitle.com, a very useful resource with downloadable, high-definition QuickTime versions of a large number of title sequences.

Lift not the painted veil, Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818 – www.sonnets.org/shelley.htm#300

Tom Barrance is Director of Media Education Wales www.mediawales.org.uk, a Cardiff-based non-profit organisation which supports media and moving image education and filmmaking with children, young people and adults. He has run projects and workshops and delivered training in all four countries of the UK and beyond. Tom is particularly interested in ensuring that children's filmmaking is informed by an understanding of film language, and using non-mainstream and non-traditional film forms to encourage creativity and extend children's awareness of moving image culture and heritage. Recently Tom has led several projects in areas of social deprivation which have linked filmmaking to creative writing, music making and poetry.