

IMAGE TO SOUND TO IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

This workshop was based on Media Education Wales' recent projects with Year 6 and 7 children and with adults. In this workshop we looked at different relationships between sound and image; how you can use moving images to stimulate poetry writing and performance; using digital cameras to explore metaphor; the process of planning a soundtrack; and using Final Cut Express semi-professional editing software to add movement and effects to still images.

When you're using film with children you don't have to be literal. Some of Media Education Wales' most successful recent projects have steered away from traditional narrative and used experimental or non-mainstream films as stimulus.

Trying to follow the rules of the traditional 'continuity' system – where careful camera position, framing and editing create the impression of continuous action and real – is appropriate if you're teaching vocational courses, but it's both difficult and repetitive for younger children. The strict technical rules require a lot of discipline, and it's difficult to record good quality live sound with basic camcorders.

So we've tried to use models which focus is on planning and ideas rather than trying to emulate conventional film and television. One approach is to start with a narrative soundtrack and then to plan images to illustrate it. This is the 'digital storytelling' approach, which is technically much easier because the sound is recorded in a controlled environment. We've used variations on this approach successfully. But for Ffilmschool 2, our current project, we wanted to go further and to link the filmmaking to poetry and music instead of narrative.

Once you get away from narrative you can focus on different aspects of the relationship between image, sound and meaning. One of these is visual metaphor; another is composition; a third is 'montage', a technique developed in the 1920s by Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein. In a montage sequence, meaning develops through the juxtaposition and contrasting of images, rather than from depicting action in a naturalistic way. Eisenstein also distinguished between 'horizontal montage' (how images combine to make meaning) and 'vertical montage' (how images combine with sound to create meaning).

We'd already experimented with montage in a workshop with adult poets at Tynwydd, the national writers' centre of Wales, in 2006. This workshop was conceived by Mark Reid of the BFI and Ynyr Williams, producer of 'Dal:Yma/Nawr', a film about the Welsh poetic tradition. We also worked on poetry and metaphor with two Year 6 classes for the 2007 Hay Festival.

2006 also saw us working on a Wales Millennium Centre project in which A Level Media students illustrated A Level Music compositions, inspired by *Koyaanisqatsi*, a 1970s film which used Philip Glass's minimalist music and Godfrey Reggio's montage techniques to convey an environmental message.

In Ffilmschool 2, we wanted to explore how these kinds of non-narrative filmmaking techniques – together with exposure to non-mainstream film – could be used to encourage children's creativity on a longer-term transition project.

This project is focused on Briton Ferry, an area of social deprivation in South Wales. We've worked for a year with four primary schools and the partner secondary school, building up children's skills through a series of filmmaking projects (and INSET for their teachers).

METAPHOR AND POETRY

We started by working with Cardiff performance poet Lloyd Robson. Lloyd introduced poetry techniques, and then I got the children thinking about images, associations and metaphor. I wanted them to get away from dull long or wide shots of objects or places and to think more imaginatively about framing and the possible meanings of images.

I showed them a series of still photographs, most of which were semi-abstract or close-up shots. My images concentrated on detail, pattern, shape, rhythm and colour: in the discussion, we considered what metaphorical meanings these could have. So criss-cross shadows or stanchions could suggest confusion or imprisonment,

while pale blue paint could denote calm. We also looked at personification (a poetry technique in which an inanimate object is described, or speaks, as if it were a person): barnacle-covered concrete stanchions could be warty skin. Finally, I showed them a standard 'tourist' shot of Penarth pier, where all the images had been taken.

Each group worked together on poems with help from Lloyd, and then recorded them into iMovie HD as performances in front of the class. This resulted in much more engaging voiceovers than the halting 'speak your weight' delivery we'd often had from other children.

Their next task was to illustrate these poems with images they could film around the school. They imported their video clips into iMovie HD, added markers to the timeline where they wanted the images to change, put the clips on the timeline and trimmed them to fit the markers.

Each school chose a different theme or topic. In the most successful ones, each group had a different emotion to illustrate. The quality was hugely variable but a couple of films made very sophisticated use of camera and sound effects. There were a few problems: almost every class seemed to think that poetry had to involve rhyme, which took precedence over meaning. To get away from these preconceptions we told the last class that Lloyd was a 'writer' rather than a poet.

IMAGES TO WORDS TO IMAGES

We also worked with local adult writers' group 'Writers in the Vale' in nearby Neath. We introduced the project as we had done with the children, and then gave them a new stimulus: a short montage of abstract images of flowing and rippling water shot using a digital point-and-shoot camera. Their poems ranged from a very personal, autobiographical piece to a polemic about the Iraq war and a subtle piece about the numbing power of television.

The following week they worked on their performances, looking at the importance of emphasis and pace, and recorded their poems. Then we pulled the rug away from under them: instead of creating a new poem film – as they had expected – they would be using their poems as the basis for a completely new set of images. They had to think of new visual metaphors based on the words they had written.

One poet refused to do this, insisting on using the original images. But the others used digital still cameras and mobile phones to film their images over the course of the week. They then edited the clips to the soundtrack as the children had done. They found this approach valuable: Lloyd suggested that they could go a stage further, seeking new metaphors for their new images and so on.

MUSIC AND IMAGE

The following term's project, with musician Neil White of Community Music Wales, explored the relationship between image and music.

I started by drawing their attention to film sound, using Godard's *Bande à Part*, which has a celebrated scene in which all the ambient sound disappears when one of the characters calls for 'a minute of silence'. We also showed an action sequence that Neil had scored in different ways to convey different moods and genres, from thriller to comedy.

I screened two contrasting excerpts from *Koyaanisqatsi*. This film uses a variety of techniques, including time-lapse and slow motion, to convey the (rather simplistic) message that nature is good and modern civilisation is bad. It helped to introduce the idea of montage, with one sequence comparing commuters on an escalator to sausages being extruded in a factory. They responded well to the film (though one speeded-up sequence made quite a few of them feel sick).

I then showed them some semi-abstract still images (ripples on a beach, tangled fishing line, decaying wood etc.) to which I had applied motion effects. We discussed these, asking them what kind of emotions or meanings each image might convey. I introduced short extracts of unfamiliar music and asked them how each one made them feel and which images it would go with. These were Acoustic Ladyland's frenetic jazz-punk 'Iggy' ('makes you feel like jumping around'; 'disturbing, out of control'); Gorky's Zygotic Mynci's psychedelic 'If fingers were xylophones' ('like what my dad listens to'); Rodrigo y Gabriela's dynamic Latin guitar piece 'Tamacun' ('makes you feel Mexican'); Miles Davies' classic modal jazz 'All Blues' ('boring', 'relaxing'), and Sigur Ros' epic 'Staralfur' ('makes you feel as if you're in heaven'; 'like an advert')

The children had to choose four of the images and compose a short piece of music (using Apple's GarageBand software) with four sections, one for each image. They would then edit the images to fit the music, as they had done with poetry. For the secondary school, we made it a bit more difficult: we allocated each group a contrasting pair of emotions to illustrate.

They used the markers in iMovie again, this time to match the images to the rhythm. This activity gave them an opportunity to experiment purposefully with the effects in iMovie. They hugely enjoyed both the music making and the editing, and at the end of the project we got each group to interview another group about their film.

In one, less successful, project we gave each group an action sequence, which they had to score to convey a change between two moods such as scared/relieved, normal/weird. I think the more prescriptive nature of this task made it less inspiring.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

The final term's work built on the two previous projects, with each teacher choosing their own task. We chose some other non-mainstream films as stimulus, including the opening sequence from Dziga Vertov's 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* to emphasise composition, camera angle, pattern, rhythm and montage, and Ridley Scott's stream-of-consciousness *Boy and Bicycle*. We found that – despite the teachers' expectations – the children were fascinated by *Man with a Movie Camera* because it was so unfamiliar.

One of the most successful pieces came from a class where each group had a different kind of movement to illustrate. We got them to plan and film their images first, before making their soundtracks. A group whose theme was 'falling' made very good use of close-ups, and used real instruments including a marimba and a sound beam. The end result is quite a dreamy and magical film.

The secondary class depicted the local park. In their English lessons they went through its features as a class one by one, making a mind map of metaphors. Once they had recorded their poems, with backing music, they went out to film in the location, and then edited the images to the soundtrack. Some of the work was very sophisticated and showed a very clear development from their first poem films.

Another class also concentrated on their local area, but this time each group filmed a location first (church, cafe, railway station, post office and school) and then scripted a conversation that could have taken place there. They produced some very lively and interesting dialogues. Another Year 6 group, working with very little adult assistance, matched images and effects to the rhythm of a rap they wrote about the negative features of their local area.

THE CP3 CREATIVE WORKSHOP

I started with the 'early morning' opening sequence from *Man with a Movie Camera* to introduce the principle of montage and the use of rhythm, pattern and camera angle. We then viewed the 'water' film which I had used with the adult poets in Neath. Working in pairs, the participants made mind maps to list metaphors, emotions or personification. They then chose six of the seven images – in any order – and wrote a line for each image. These were then recorded as a performance.

Next, they went out to shoot one image for each line using a basic still camera, imported them into Final Cut Express, added a marker at the end of each line, and shortened each image to fit the markers. Some participants also added motion to their images.

FFILMSCHOOL 2

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RESOURCES

Godard's *Bande à Part* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (Michael Nyman score) are BFI DVDs.

Koyaanisqatsi is widely available.

Ridley Scott's *Boy with a Bicycle* is on the compilation *Cinema 16: British Short Films*.

Tom Barrant is Director of Media Education Wales. He has delivered In-Service Training on film language and filmmaking around the UK and in the Republic of Ireland and wrote the acclaimed CD-ROM Making movies make sense: understanding and using film language.

Tom recently delivered a series of short filmmaking projects in primary and secondary schools around Wales, and is currently working on a year-long transition project linking non-narrative film, filmmaking, poetry and music to support speaking and listening skills in a group of schools in an area of social deprivation in South Wales.