

CP3 Conference 2007: Critical Workshops

P R I M A R Y P I C T U R A C Y

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ABSTRACT

Based on Anthony Minghella's concept of the 'film sentence', this workshop took the 'word, sentence, text' approach to Primary Literacy further by exploring the relationship between shot, sequence and text on film. Key film concepts such as sound, light, colour and most significantly, the importance of editing were explored in order to develop a greater understanding of the cultural significance of story on film in the digital age. Delegates worked on laptops to actively deconstruct film extracts.

BACKGROUND

Young children arrive at school with some degree of visual literacy, but as they learn to read print, we tend to ignore their ability to engage with still and moving images in favour of developing their reading and writing skills. In so doing, we are denying our children the chance to become 'literate' in the full sense of the word. The Primary Picturacy workshop aimed to demonstrate how pure film analysis work has a place in the Primary classroom as a way of developing a critical response to the art of storytelling on film.

CP3 AND PICTURACY – KEY CONCEPTS

The workshop started with the message that images have their own syntax – once children learn about the grammar of film they can focus on the articulation of the message, rather than on the means of communication.

The Picturacy Critical workshop focused on the following key concepts of film grammar:

EDITING

Delegates learnt that each new shot contains a new piece of information. They considered how film is a rapid succession of images whereas prose is a continuous exposition of detail. The idea of using the analysis of film editing as a way of organising analytical thinking and learning was introduced. We watched clips from various films to examine examples of:

- fade in / fade out
- dissolve
- wipe and
- cut

We talked about the 'four dimensions of editing': graphic; spatial; rhythmic and temporal (*Film Art*, Bordwell and Thompson).

GRAPHIC

- shots are organised according to their graphic qualities, i.e. patterns in light and dark, line and shape, volumes and depths, movement and stasis. Graphic editing is based on the idea that shots are aligned together because of their pictorial qualities.

SPATIAL

- shots are placed together in order to give the audience a definite sense of placement. Editors can literally create spaces where the story can unfold.

RHYTHMIC

- each shot is a certain length, measured in frames per second. Generally there are twenty-four frames per one second of film. Shots can be composed of a single frame or thousands of frames. Rhythmic editing is often accented to match the beat or tempo of the accompanying soundtrack. The pace of the editing can affect the meaning that is made from the images on screen – the longer a shot is on screen, the more information our eyes and brains can absorb. A series of rapid shots gives us little time to think about what we are watching.

TEMPORAL

- when the editing contributes to the plot's manipulation of story time. Temporal editing can create an 'ellipsis' where actions can be left out to move the plot along. An example of temporal editing would be the montage sequence.

We went on to examine the most common types of editing: continuity editing and the shot / reverse shot pattern:

CONTINUITY EDITING

- the most common form of editing in western cinema history, continuity editing ensures that shots are connected in such a way that they tell a story logically. The graphic qualities of each shot are continuous.

SPATIAL CONTINUITY

- otherwise known as 'the 180 degree system', whereby all of the action takes place around a centre line. The camera can film from anywhere as long as it stays on the same side of the line. Crossing the line tampers with continuity.

SHOT/REVERSE SHOT PATTERN

- a pattern which places shots together so that one end of the line is shown, then the other. Otherwise known as 'cause-effect' editing, this type of editing creates a strong sense of spatial continuity. It can be seen during conversations between two people, to show cars racing along a road or people walking. It is used to show clear reaction shots. Western audiences are so used to this style of editing that viewers often make inferences based on cues and prior knowledge of filmic conventions.

ALTERNATIVES TO CONTINUITY EDITING

- shots can be joined according to graphic or rhythmic possibilities, not time and space
- filmmakers can experiment by scratching on the film, painting it or sticking objects onto it
- long takes – where each shot is one continuous take without edits
- Jacques Tati ignored the 180 degree rule and placed the action at the centre. The camera was placed in multiple positions around it in a circle.
- Eisenstein 'wrote' films using a deliberate 'juxtaposition of shots' as opposed to using the continuity editing method. He aimed for a maximum collision of shots in order to actively engage the viewer and challenge his/her pre-conceptions of conventional cinema.

THE FILM SENTENCE

We used Minghella's idea of the 'film sentence' as a frame of reference through which we could justify film language study for young learners because of its conceptual links to the Literacy framework (word – shot; sentence – sequence; text (in print and on screen). We talked about film being a series of patterns in 'light and movement' – and how filmmakers articulate their message by writing in movement (cinematography) and light (photography).

Through editing and sequence analysis, delegates learnt about adding nuances and layers to a story using the scene, action, ending model of story development. The work on editing was analytical, not simply synthetic, in that delegates were challenged to question why this shot follows that and so forth. Delegates were asked to try different types of narrative structure – e.g. linear and non-linear, memory paths and chronological paths.

MISE-EN-SCENE

The idea of film as a construct was examined – i.e. the filmmaker stages an event to be filmed. We looked in particular at how the filmmaker uses lighting, setting, costume and the behaviour of figures on screen in space and time.

After a brief introduction and discussion on each of these aspects of film language, the delegates were shown how they could apply what they had learnt to their teaching in the Primary classroom through the Picturacy Resource Activity.

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PICTURACY RESOURCE ACTIVITY

For the last 45 minutes of the workshop, we applied our knowledge of editing and film grammar to Film Education's latest version of the Primary Picturacy resource.

Using clips from three very different films (*Azur and Asmar: The Princes' Quest*, Michel Ocelot, 2006; *Happy Feet*, George Miller and Warren Coleman, 2006; *Cave of the Yellow Dog*, Byambasuren Davaa, 2006), we examined shots and sequences in terms of their graphic, spatial, rhythmic and temporal editing properties. Delegates worked as a group and in pairs to consider how shots are joined together in terms of:

- onscreen and off-screen space
- framing, distance, angle, height and space
- movement and mise-en-scène

Aims of the workshop:

- learn about film
- demonstrate a sample lesson showing how Primary school pupils can carry out a close reading of a film clip
- encourage active engagement with the moving image viewing experience – through interrogating the way the clip is constructed
- use film language as the 'vernacular'
- understand that film is a rapid juxtaposition of images whereas prose is a continuous exposition of detail
- explore how meaning is affected when the shot-to-sequence order is changed. To explore how meaning is created using camera angle and editing techniques.
- focus on the arrangement of shots and how editing techniques affect meaning
- explore narrative structure in terms of key moments
- understand that details create a richer story
- understand that we can examine the language of films in order to gain a deeper understanding of the text
- understand that films have their own sets of rules and conventions that we can de-code
- understand that the style and speed of editing contribute to the mood and sense of the story

Primary Learning Outcomes:

- develop skills in the critical appreciation of film
- understand how film language makes meaning

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- Shooting Dogs, Michael Caton-Jones, 2005
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- A Cock and Bull Story, Michael Winterbottom, 2005
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Julie Green is Education Director at Film Education. She has written widely on film and moving image education across the Primary and Secondary sectors, specialising in developing moving image resources for Special Educational Needs and Literacy. She started out as a Primary teacher, working with mixed ability children in Kent before moving to London to work as a full time Film Education advisor. Today, Julie's role includes creating print, digital and online film-related resources, leading teacher training sessions and speaking at conferences on all aspects of film and moving image education.

Julie is responsible for the development of Film Education's Picturacy series of discs that make the teaching and learning of film accessible and interactive and which are ideal for use on Interactive Whiteboards and over a school network. Each resource contains a wide range of clips from recent and well-loved feature films accompanied by a range of innovative, interactive exercises. Pupils will engage with the moving image, deepening their understanding of narrative and developing the ability to become creative composers.