

ASKING THE QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

One of the earliest questions asked by children is ‘why?’ And this is the very question that we need to ask about moving image texts. Why is a particular camera angle chosen? Why are particular objects placed within a frame? And why are they placed where they are? Why is the camera placed in a certain position? Why does a particular character wear what they are wearing?

In constructed reality of moving image texts, when approached from a critical viewpoint, ‘why?’ is our key question as a starting point to developing our students’ critical and creative potentials.

Through viewings of a number of moving image texts delegates built up their own series of questions which can be applied to any text that they use in the classroom. We also looked at the creative ways in which we can ask these questions.

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 critical analysis of given texts.

This workshop’s aim was thus to explore the types of questions that we may ask in analysing an extract from a film (although these types of questions could equally be applied to a short film). The overall premise on which the workshop was based was the analytical tools and areas of questioning that were key to the understanding of how film communicates to its audience and the techniques that a filmmaker can use to achieve this aim. For this purpose a sequence from a film was chosen. Working with short sequences from films or short films themselves, allows students to really focus on what the director and their team are doing when they are attempting to tell a story using moving images and sound. In many ways, through deconstructing a film sequence it is possible to see the decision-making process that went into actually constructing that sequence.

The starting point was to get delegates to ask a series of questions about a short sequence from a film – for the purposes of this session, the opening two minutes of Aardman’s *A Close Shave*. The reason for choosing the opening from an animated film was very straightforward. It is evident that everything in an animated film has been constructed – in this case in plasticine! Working in pairs, the delegates were asked to come up with five questions they would ask about this particular sequence.

This first set of questions arrived at by delegates tended, in the main, to centre around textual questions based on narrative. Who were the characters that we were shown, what were they like, where did the action take place, what might happen next, what actions were we shown and why? These are the types of questions that we might ask of any narrative text – from a novel to a play. As can be seen, the main type of question being asked was based on the idea of ‘what?’ This is not to say that there is anything wrong with these questions. They are testing an understanding of the narrative of the text. We may call these the first level of questioning of any text.

What was needed now was to move on to a second level of questioning - how a filmic text operates and how the narrative itself is constructed through the use of what we might term film language. What we wanted to focus on was the how? And why? How did the filmmaker help us understand about a character and why did they choose to do so in one specific way? Why did the filmmaker choose one shot instead of another? It was as important to think about what was not on the screen as to analyse what was there. In reviewing the scene particular attention was paid to:

- Signs, codes and conventions
- Mise-en-scène
- Editing
- Shot types
- Camera angle
- Camera movement
- Lighting
- Diegesis and sound
- ‘Realism’

Through the close examination of these we were able to see how the ‘what’ ideas are raised in a filmic way. Thus the ‘what’ was turned into ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ as the starting points for what was being asked. A second viewing of the sequence, posing this type of question raised a completely different set of questions and answers.

It was noticed, for example, that there was a continual use of the colours red and green in the scene, from Gromit's wool, his alarm clock through to the use of traffic lights as Shaun the sheep escapes from the lorry. The basic question used here was 'why have red wool when it could have been yellow?' This raises the issue of choice within a film. Everything could be constructed in a different way. The fact, for example, that the wool was red, it was decided, was to indicate danger (which very soon unfolded within the film).

A close-up of Wallace's slippers sets up tension (highlighted by the use of music) as the cheese knife crashes between them. A shot of the knife simply crashing onto the floor and quivering is given additional force by having it land between what was considered to be items that denoted 'homeliness'.

The cutting between Shaun's eyes and those of the mysterious driver not only points to the relationship between the two but also the sense of fear in Shaun (achieved by close-up on the eyes.) Thus a mixture of editing and shot type convey to an audience the issue of the relationship between characters – our second level of questioning thus informing the first level.

In one way we were basing our questioning on some basic semiotics, looking at denotation and more importantly connotation. What is shown, why is it shown in this way, what does it signify and why is it shown in this way and this position within the sequence?

Delegates were then asked to look at a different film sequence and to come up with another series of questions. Each group worked on different sequences and were then asked to feed back to other members of the group. Extracts from films such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Little Dorrit*, *The English Patient* and *Paperhouse* were used. It was interesting to see the types of questions that suddenly were being asked. Delegates noticed, in the extract from *Lawrence of Arabia*, for example, the ways in which the characters were organised in the frame – very often in a triangular fashion. One key moment was identified as a particularly interesting use of sound – the moment when the distant figure is suddenly noticed is indicated by a sound cue – the dropping of the bucket down the well (which also identified the importance of the well – as shown in the very opening of the sequence).

Each group began to ask these types of second level questions:

- Why had the director chosen to move the camera in a particular way?
- Why did the feel of the sequence seem different from one part of the sequence to another, as if it had been shot on a different type of film (warm, soft shots to a harsher, more out doors feeling)?
- Why a particular type of music and why change music from one short sequence to another?

The other main discovery was that this type of exercise was instantly transferable into the classroom through the choice of appropriate extracts that were relevant to the age group being taught.

So what is the importance of questioning texts in this way, particularly when it comes to students' creative activities? The most obvious answer is that it makes students realise the constructed nature of a film as well as the decisions that have to be made by a director. Realising this, the hope is that when they come to create their own films they will realise the options open to them, the choices that have to be made and the critical approach that they should take when it comes to making these choices. Additionally, it offers the opportunity for students to consider that what they are trying to do is to communicate their ideas to an audience. They need to consider how they will do this with the tools available to them within the language of film. A critical approach, we felt, eventually leads to a better creative process.

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-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 have recently been awarded their second BAFTA for their *Recollections* interactive resource. In conjunction with Jane Dickson (Director of Digital Media 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 for Culture, Media and Sport's Film Education Working Party and has served as a jury member for the BAFTA Children's Drama Award.