

Classroom

VIDEO

Teacher's Notes

Film as Text

Grades: 7-12

Duration: 25 mins

Timing Information

Set counter at zero at beginning of program

Mins	Topic
00.01	Start
00.47	Narrative Conventions - Narration
01.56	The Plot – Techniques to Express Plot:
02.15	- Manipulation of Time
03.10	- Shot Design and Construction
04.22	- Lighting
05.05	- Props and Set Dressing
05:57	- Sound and Music
08:06	Theme
10:37	Characters – Techniques to Express Characters:
	- Casting
12:28	- Wardrobe and Make Up
15:43	- Metaphors
17:22	Setting
19:33	Editing
23:26	Resolution
25:13	End credits

INTRODUCTION

This highly informative and educational video explores the cinematique techniques used by filmmakers to express the narrative conventions essential to telling a story. Using the award winning short film "Caravan" as a reference, the video is an introduction to the textual characteristics of a dramatic film, exploring the elements that film as a medium and text as a medium share. The program aims to demonstrate that film as a medium is far more relevant to today's society than pure escapism – that each film is not merely a story told with a series

of images and sound behind it, but a carefully designed structure that will bring the filmmaker's message across to the audience in the most aesthetically pleasing way possibly. The program aims to emphasize the similarity of film to text, in order to highlight the importance of the medium in society today, and the way in which each essential convention found in text is expressed in film:

- **Narration**
- **The Plot** – the use of :
 - o Manipulation of time
 - o Shot construction and design
 - o Lighting
 - o Point of View
 - o Props and set dressing
 - o Sound Design and Music
- Using Metaphors and Visual Motifs to express the film's **Theme**
- Expressing **Characters** through the use of:
 - o Casting
 - o Wardrobe and makeup
 - o Shot construction
 - o Metaphors
- The role **Editing** plays in the expression of Plot and Character
- The **Setting** – why a particular setting is chosen to further enhance the story
- The **Resolution** – how and why a film is resolved in a certain way

AIM AND OUTCOMES

The aim of this video is to help students understand how a film is designed in order to tell a story visually, using the same conventions that a textual medium would use. By exploring these techniques, the student should be able to develop a greater sense of 'reading' film rather than merely viewing it, and thereby being able to critically analyze it in depth.

Through viewing the program students will:

- Examine the key components in taking a script – the text – and making it readable on screen
- Increase their awareness of the complexity of the elements that combine to make a film
- Understand the similarity between the telling of a story visually and textually
- Increase his or her ability to critically analyze a film
- Develop skills in translating a film's message, thereby disseminating its meaning within a culture
- Empower students to recognize a film's deliberate structure to impart a message whilst diverting the viewer's attention with sound and vision
- Extend textual analysis from 'what does it mean' to 'how' has it been constructed to mean this.
- Enhance their own ability to design a film in order for it to be readable

1. NARRATION

Films generally use a narrator through which to tell a story. Although traditionally a narrator would be the actual voice of one of the characters that the audience would hear throughout the film, the story can also be told through the eyes of one of the characters, without the use of voice over. In order to achieve this, the filmmaker uses several techniques to show the audience what that character is seeing or feeling, without him or her having to physically explain it:

- Shot construction using the character's point of view
- Shot design showing only what that character would see or hear
- Occasionally, scene construction in order to show what is going on in that character's world, without the character knowing about it. This would be important in order to allow the audience to better know the circumstances in which the character finds him or herself.

Class discussion after viewing and taking notes

What specific shots were used that showed the audience exactly what the character, Saul, was seeing? What is 'point of view', and which shots in the film are Saul's point of view? How did the filmmaker show the audience what was about to happen to Saul, without Saul knowing, and without removing Saul from being the 'narrator' or central character of the story? Why was this important? Could it have been done another way, or not shown at all?

Activities for Students:

- a) After watching the film, write a synopsis or outline of one scene, describing how you would shoot that scene if you were telling it through the eyes of any one of the other characters.
- b) Think of how the filmmaker could have told the story using voice over, rather than shot design and construction, and write the script for the voice over so that the feelings of Saul would be explained verbally.

2. THE PLOT

The plot is basically the story, whether it be on screen or in a book. Through this section of the video, we explore the many techniques used to express the plot in a film. Without a plot, there is no story, and without the multitude of elements combining to express this plot, it would not come across to the audience. The plot is made up of the actions that the characters take throughout the film, it is cause and effect, and it will always have a beginning, middle and end. Plots in a classical narrative film (which Caravan is, as are most the mainstream feature films that we see today) need to have conflict and resolution in order to keep the audience's attention. The techniques used by filmmakers to express plot are manifold, and each technique is essential to the overall success of getting the plot across to the audience.

One of the techniques used in

“Caravan” to express plot was a manipulation of time – starting the film in the present tense and flashing back to the past. The filmmaker, Jennifer Ussi, chose this structural approach because she needed to explain to the audience – without the use of voice over or expository dialogue – that Saul was alone in this deserted country caravan park, and that up until the point that he finds a specific playing card that he had ‘allocated’ to his Grandmother, he was allowing life to lead him, rather than he lead life and make choices as his grandmother had been teaching him.

Another technique, used in all films, to express plot is the use of shot design. Ussi used a combination of hand-held and tripod camera to express to the audience certain elements of the plot. As film cameras are heavy and bulky, they are always mounted on a tripod or dolly or other devices to keep them still. However, a shot, scene or sequence that uses hand-held camera generally has a specific reason for being shot in this way. The jerky movements that result in hand holding a camera will impart to the audience a feeling of uneasiness, tension or emotional disturbance – a deliberate act of the filmmaker to ensure a more intense audience interest and participation in the events unfolding on the screen.

Lighting, essential to the aesthetics of the film, is not only used to make a film look visually pleasing, but is designed in a manner which will lead the audience to *feel* exactly what the filmmaker wants them to

feel. Props and set dressing are vital elements of expressing plot. It is through the use of props that important messages or clues are sent to the audience without the need of dialogue.

Point of view is a way in which to show the audience exactly what the character – generally the character through whom the story is being told – is seeing, and thus feeling. If the audience sees exactly what the character is seeing, the plot is being unfolded to the audience at the same time as it is being unfolded to the character.

Music and sound design are one of the most used – and most well understood by audiences – techniques to express plot on film. As all audiences are very film literate, there are sounds that are already well established to mean something specific – even if that sound is manufactured and doesn’t actually exist naturally. It is the use and re-use of these sounds by filmmakers that has established their meaning. Without the use of sounds such as eery electronic sounds to enhance a mood of , for example, unease or potential danger, it would be extremely difficult for an aspect of the plot to be expressed in as short a time as it would take to play that piece of sound or music.

Class discussion after viewing and taking notes:

Would it have been possible for the filmmaker to express the plot without the use of flashbacks? If so, how? How do the opening and closing scenes of the film establish and express the plot? There are

two ‘set-ups’ in the film which lead the audience to recognize the blood on the fridge as the result of Uncle Pete being violent to Gran. What are they? Who does the audience most empathize with, and why? How do the playing cards express the plot? What set ups (a set up being a visual or aural clue to the audience) are used with the playing cards to hint at what will happen to Saul? What cycle(s) are shown in the film, and are the lessons Gran is teaching Saul going to help him break them in his life as an adult?

Activities for Students:

- Take a scene from the film and design a sound scape that is completely different from the original. Using your new sound scape, change the story – plot – to fit your vision of how it could or would play out using different music and sound.
- Take the film as if it is the first episode of a 6 episode series. Write a synopsis or outline of each of the next 5 episodes, describing what you think would happen to Saul and the other characters.
- List all the harmful cycles that occur in life between generations, and write a short explanation how each could be broken.
- List the ways in which the lessons Saul has learned will help him deal with incidences that could happen to him in the next

few years, and in a separate column, list how he would have dealt with the same incidences, without having learned anything from Gran.

3. THE THEME

As much as the Plot expresses what the story *is*, so does the Theme express what the story *is about*. It is the theme of a film that makes the audience consider the issues explored in the film. In *Caravan*, the main theme is that by making choices in life, a person has more control over his or her destiny. Another theme is that Saul is a victim of a cycle and that it is by making his own choices that he is able to break that cycle. (The cycle of abandonment – his mother and uncle were abandoned by their father, and he in turn has been abandoned by his mother.) The theme of the film is always the main point that the filmmaker is trying to get across to their audience, it is the filmmaker's way to impart their own particular belief or point of view on as many people as possible. The use of metaphors and/or visual motifs is generally best used to express these themes, in order to impart a message without pointing a finger or 'preaching' to the audience.

Class Discussion after viewing and taking notes:

The third theme in the film is youth or teenage pregnancy. How does this come across? How is the theme of breaking cycles expressed? Although learning to cook food is the metaphor used to express the theme of learning to look after oneself, what other ways would Saul – or anyone – learn to look after him or herself? How do the cards express the main theme? Spiderwebs as a visual motif is used – how are

they related to the life of Saul? If the playing cards were not used to express the theme, what could have been used? What exactly were the lessons that Gran was teaching Saul?

Class Activities

- Compare and contrast the treatment of the theme in the short film "Caravan" with another film of a similar theme (My Life as a Dog, Rabbit Proof Fence, Billy Elliott, About a Boy etc.)
- Research the statistics of child abandonment in your local area, and the result of the abandonment on the child. Through research, discover the reasons why parents would abandon their children. Write an essay on how you believe these incidences can be minimized in the future.
- Write a dialogue between you, as a psychiatrist or therapist, and your patient, who is a young child who has been, or is, the victim of abuse – neglect, abandonment, physical or emotional abuse - by his parent(s). What feelings would the child have, and what do you think you would be able to say to the child for him to start the healing process?
- Write a diary of a teenage girl who has fallen pregnant. The diary should span 14 months out of the girl's life, starting with pre-pregnancy, and ending when the baby is about 3 months old.
- Make a list of 10 of your favourite films or books, and itemize the issues you think each of these mediums are discussing.
- Think of an issue that you feel greatly about, and develop a concept from

which you could write a film to get that issue across to an audience. Brainstorm the idea with your classmates, until you have a cohesive story following the structure of a classical narrative film.

4. THE CHARACTERS

Without real, believable characters, a film would not be able to engage the audience. An audience must be able to relate to one or more of the characters, identify with certain traits or have an emotion about a character, or they would become disengaged from the film and, in doing so, lose interest in all its aspects. The audience will not care what happens.

To express character in film, a filmmaker needs to make use of several techniques that will bring that character to life in the shortest time possible. The first, and arguably most important, technique is that of casting. A cast can make or break a film in the first 5 minutes of its opening on screen. It is probably a Director's most essential task – cast correctly, or lose your audience.

Casting is a long and arduous process which involves choosing an actor that not only can find the character from the script and bring him to life in an absolutely believable manner, but also *looks* the part.

Wardrobe and make up play another essential role in making the characters come alive. Although an actor would have been cast for his or her 'look', the emotional journey of a character is often mirrored through make up. It would be very difficult

for an actor – in the short periods of time that shooting schedules allow – to, for example, age naturally, or develop dark circles under their eyes, and then make them disappear for the next scene (films are very rarely shot in sequence). Wardrobe is used not only as clothing, but as expression of character – clothes maketh the man is very much the mantra of the filmmaker. Colour, style, texture and cost or cut of wardrobe is decided after lengthy discussion between the director and the wardrobe designer. Each choice is painstakingly made to ensure that the character is enhanced through that choice.

As with plot expression, shot construction is essential to imparting clues to the audience. Low angle or high angle shots will be used to express specific traits of that character, as will the design of the shots – using close ups to get closer into the character, or wider shots to keep the audience disengaged from that particular character.

Metaphors are an important tool for the filmmaker to express character. Through the use of one metaphor, entire back stories – important information about a particular character or characters – can be explained, eliminating the need for extra scenes or dialogue to explain these stories. Metaphors can be expressed visually (as visual motifs) or they can be expressed verbally, but each metaphor is important to the story and to the character.

Class Discussion after viewing and taking notes:

Why was it important that Saul be physically small, rather than a surly, bigger boy? What could have been the motivation behind casting

the actor chosen as Tom? How does each character portray the themes of the film discussed in the previous section? How does wardrobe and make up effect the mood of each scene? How does each character's traits motivate the story – the narrative chain of cause and effect? How do the metaphors used in the films enhance the characters? What did Saul mean by "it's like a mcmuffin, but made at home?" What does that say about Saul, and about his life with his mother?

Activities for Students:

- In groups of two, script the dialogue that could have happened between Kerry, Saul's mother, and Gran when Kerry dropped Saul off at the Caravan.
- Compare the style or treatment of another film that deals with children being abandoned or isolated or experiencing growing pains – but is of a different genre (e.g. Billy Elliot, About a Boy, Home Alone, etc.)
- Create the kind of job that you think Uncle Pete would hold, then, in groups of two, do a job interview between him and his prospective employer.
- Using a metaphor not expressed in the film, explain the back story behind Gran's character, what has happened to her in the past and what she is feeling now.
- Write a list of reading material or the kinds of films that you think each of the characters would read or watch.
- Write a letter from Saul to his best friend that was at his old school.

5. THE SETTING

The setting used for a film is vital to the recreation of believable world. As with the characters, the settings need to be real and full, something the audience can identify with and therefore believe. Although science fiction films generally have 'unreal' settings, because the audience goes to see the film with the knowledge that what they are about to see is not meant to be real, they can suspend their belief to the point that the setting does become real. Settings can be manufactured – sets built in a studio – or they can be 'on location'. 'Caravan' was shot on location, on a wide open field in the country, and the caravan was also real. In fact it was a borrowed 14 foot caravan which was left intact, i.e. no walls or windows were removed to allow easy access for cameras and lights.

Using the caravan as the home of Gran was a deliberate choice by Ussi to further enhance the believability of Gran's character. It was also used to further express the plot – Uncle Pete's imposition into their life and his subsequent taking over of their life was made more threatening and foreboding as he was large and the caravan was not only small, but already full with Gran and Saul. It is established earlier on, when Gran and Saul are walking through the bush, that he is afraid of it, therefore the use of the open field, an abandoned and disused caravan park far from anywhere, was essential to the plot as it would make Saul's decision to go out into the 'wild' to seek help harder.

Class discussion after viewing and taking notes:

How did the setting strengthen the message that the filmmaker was making? If the film had been set in a more lush or tropical area, or even nearer to a town or other people, how would that have affected the plot? Not including the caravan, what other clues were given to the financial status of the film's characters, including Tom, Uncle Pete and Kerry, Saul's mother? How does putting Gran in a caravan, far from civilization, show that she has been hurt by people in the past? How do you think Gran's two children feel about where their mother lives? What would the implications of shooting in a 14 foot caravan, without removable walls, be to the film crew and cast?

Activities for Students:

- Design a brochure or website for the caravan park for when it would have first opened.
- Research the area in which you think Tom or Kerry would live and write an advertisement for a house that is on sale in that area, using realistic pricing and honest advertising.
- Write a letter from Gran to each of her two children, telling them she is moving away, and explaining why.
- As a police officer, write a detailed report on what you find when you go and investigate the disappearance of Gran.

6. EDITING

As with any textual medium, whether it be books, articles, advertisements or even poems, editing is a vital step in the process of getting a story across to the audience on film. It is during the editing phase that the final pace of the film is decided, the final choice of which shots to use is decided, and it is in this phase that the hardest decisions are made. If an editor, with the director, decides that there are certain shots, scenes, sequences or even entire themes are not moving the story forward, they will be cut out of the film. Regardless of how time consuming or how expensive these shots or scenes were to make, no matter how much the Director might be attached to them, they have to be removed for the greater good of the whole.

Caravan was originally shot as a 23 minute film, but when it had been assembled and fine cut, it was realized that the pace of the film was too slow. A test audience of fellow filmmakers, lecturers and a few friends were brought in and the overall consensus was that some shots were too long, and some of the themes or motifs were merely disrupting the audience's engagement with the story of Saul. As it is the audience's engagement that is vital to the success of a film, these themes, motifs and shots were cut out. In the end, 5 minutes of the 23 minute final product was cut out.

Class discussion after viewing and taking notes

Are there any other scenes that could be removed from the film without affecting the story? As the director of the film, how would you argue to keep any of these scenes or shots in? There are several shots that still remain in the film, but which were shortened. Which ones could they be?

Activities for Students:

- Write a short story of 10 or more paragraphs on any topic, then swap with a classmate and edit each other's story to 2/3 the number of paragraphs, without changing the essence of the story.
- Using the script of the dialogue between Saul's mother and Gran that you had scripted for 'Character' activities, edit it down to convey exactly the same meaning, but at half the length.

7. RESOLUTION

Films are structured in such a way that every visual motif, aural clue or action in the film is for a reason. It is at the end of the film that we discover the answer to all the clues. To ensure audience attention throughout a film, irrelevant or unrelated content is rarely shown. This causality engages the audience so that they anticipate what will happen because of an action. At the end of the film the audience will have gathered enough information to be able to understand not only what the film was about, but how and why it would end in this manner.

'Caravan', although maintaining a structure that remained true to the classic narrative, has been left open-ended. The reason behind Ussi's decision to not resolve all the issues were numerous. Firstly, to maintain strict believability in the issues broached through the film, she felt that a definite resolution – a good outcome for everyone concerned – would not be credible. Life's answers are never simple, and Ussi

determined that an ending which would merely be one small step for Saul in the right direction, would be far more true to life than an entire new world for him. By not resolving the story, Ussi was inviting the audience to further explore the issues in the film, by questioning the ending. Secondly, the story was about Saul, not about any of the other characters. By answering the question about Gran's fate, the story would have been more about Gran than about Saul.

Class discussion after viewing and taking notes:

Where is Gran? How else could the film have ended? Where was Saul going? Why did the Director choose to shoot the final scene in the very last rays of daylight? What clues are given throughout the film that Saul was actually cooking real food for the first time? What does the choice of Saul's wardrobe at the end and the beginning of the film say about Saul? What happened in the Caravan? What did Saul's last words mean in the context of the film? What would have happened to Saul if he had not found the Queen of Diamonds, his card for Gran?

Activities for students:

- Script another ending for the film, replacing the shot of Saul walking away or adding other shots or scenes to it, whilst staying true to the theme and plot of the film.
- Write a letter from Saul to his mother, explaining what has happened to him, and what he wants from her, if anything.
- Imagine that Gran died at the hands of Uncle Pete. Write the eulogy that Saul would say at her funeral.

- Research orphanages and write a poem from a child that has lived in one for the past few years
- In groups, write a song and put it to music for the end of the film.

Give a tutorial presentation to the rest of the class on one aspect of "Caravan" – themes, characters, plot, metaphors, etc.

Credits

Written by
Jennifer Ussi and Tresa James

Produced by
Jennifer Ussi

Directed and Edited by
Tresa James

Music Composed and Performed by
Sarah Gall

Narrator
Alex Waller

Executive Producer
John Davis

Teachers Notes
Jennifer Ussi

Distributed by: **CLASSROOM VIDEO** (2005)

ClassroomVideo
107 1500 Hartley Avenue
Coquitlam, BC V3K 7A1
Ph: (604) 523 6677 Fax: (604) 523 6688
email: sales@classroomvideo.com

Australia Ph: (02) 9913 8700 Fax: (02) 9913 8077

UK: Ph: 01454 776670 Fax: 01454 776689

USA: Ph: 1 800 665 4121 Fax: 1 800 665 2909

New Zealand: Combined Phone and Fax: 09 478 4540