

Classroom VIDEO

Teacher's Notes

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN FILM



Years: 7 - 10

Duration: 21 mins

Program Summary

This highly informative and educational video presents insights into the construction and filming of the short film, "The Unique Oneness of Christian Savage", written and directed by Jennifer Ussi. Using this film as its reference the program examines some of the different film techniques and elements used in its construction of meaning. The program emphasises the creative decisions that are made in order to effect the realisation of a film from the page to the screen.

The program highlights the following elements in the construction of Ussi's short film

- storyboarding
- shot construction, shot size and point of view shots
- lighting
- sound
- set design and construction
- costume and makeup
- editing

AIMS AND OUTCOMES

The aim of this video is to help students understand how the meaning of a film is constructed and how the decisions made about different elements of film affect its meaning. The program aims to introduce students to some of the basic film elements and techniques while providing them with an awareness of the complexity of filmmaking. It seeks to encourage students to contemplate and examine the complexity of the film while considering how the filming itself works to construct meaning and elicit a viewer response.

Through viewing this program students will:

- explore the key film elements of the short film, "The Unique Oneness of Christian Savage"
- increase their knowledge of basic film techniques and elements
- gain a greater understanding of how film techniques and elements are used to construct and convey meaning

- develop their awareness of the complexity of filmmaking
- improve their visual literacy and critical reading skills

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the construction of meaning in film it is important to remember that you are considering an audio-visual medium which is multi-faceted. Films have no single author: they are a collaborative effort and a complex blend of "scriptwriter", "director", "actor", "cinematographer", "editor", "sound maker" and so on. A review of the credit list at the end of any film reinforces this. To fully understand how the essential meaning of the film is conveyed you have to identify the different elements that have combined to portray the narrative and enhance the themes.

This video reminds us that when studying a film we must consider not only what is being presented but also how it is portrayed to the audience. Just as with any study of literature we must ascertain the film's purpose, its message, its plot and story, its characters and the different elements that produce these and construct its meaning.

Films are carefully constructed to create a particular meaning and are constructed within a particular context and time. The representations of life in film become deliberate constructs. This is clearly seen in Jennifer Ussi's film, "The Unique Oneness of Christian Savage". Her concept for the film - the relationship between a black Zulu boy, Nyadze, and a white boy, Christian, in South Africa, set against the backdrop of the 1976 Soweto riots - informed her choices and decisions with respect to the filming process itself. This video examines the film elements used by Ussi to construct the reality of Christian's world and his questioning of that world and its ideology.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN FILM

1) Storyboarding

This section of the video highlights the need to plan each shot before filming begins. The director needs to work closely with both the director of photography (DOP or cinematographer) as well as the storyboard artist to determine which shots will best convey the meaning of the script. The job of the storyboard artist is to break the shots into single frames and sketch them so that everyone can see what the director is trying to achieve. The examples of storyboarding that can be seen on this video remind us of the detail and complexity required for an effective shot. Each storyboard provides a blueprint for camera angles, shot size and action. The DOP reinforces the need to work closely with the director in order to transfer the scriptwriter's ideas off the page and on to the screen. They make carefully considered decisions and deliberate choices about lighting, shot selection, camera angle, type of lens to be used to ensure the desired meaning is conveyed.

Activities for students:

- In small groups create a storyboard for the filming of a running race. Each of you should take a different role: director, cinematographer, sound maker etc. Decide how many frames you will need to use to construct the shot by thinking about the visual images and sounds of the crowd, the runners, the start, the stages of the race and the finish.
- Write the script for the opening shot of a new film version of a famous fairy tale. Create a storyboard for the script.

2) Shot construction

This section of the video discusses the importance of the construction of each shot in contributing to the overall meaning of the film. It highlights the various components of a shot: the angle and size of the shot, the lighting used, the choice of lens and the framing of the shot (what is included and what is left out). Camera angles in particular are used to present a particular perspective or interpretation of a character or event. The angle from which the camera takes the shot has an important effect on what the viewers see and how they respond. In Ussi's film low angle shots are used to exaggerate the dominance of the Dominee while an extremely high angle shot of Christian crying in the gully portrays more effectively his vulnerability and loneliness.

3) Shot size

Together with camera angles there are a number of standard shot sizes (wide, long, medium, close-up and extreme close-up), the choice of which depends on what the director wants that shot to say. Varying the shot size can create suspense and develop relationships between people. In Ussi's film wide shots are used to convey the open space and vastness of Africa in contrast to the closer shots in the Church and house which suggest the claustrophobia and restriction of the white world. Close-ups can also emphasise a particular line of dialogue, encourage the audience to empathise with a character or signal an important piece of information. The example given from the film is the repeated close-ups of Nyadze pulling Christian's toe. The close-ups of this gesture early in the film give it recognition value in the final scene when the puppy arrives – the viewer connects the puppy with Nyadze as does Christian.

4) Point of view shot

In a point of view shot the audience becomes the eyes of the character, allowing the viewers to empathise with the character's emotions as they see what he/she sees. In Ussi's film it is imperative that the audience understands Christian's conflict and confusion. Two point of view shots are used to convey this meaning when Christian is in the gully and his view of the trees seems distorted to create a place of evil and an eerie atmosphere. Similarly when he searches the sky for an eagle in the hope Nyadze has been reincarnated it is important that the audience sees what he sees – an empty sky except for the clouds.

Activities for students:

- In groups select examples of a particular aspect of a shot (camera angle, shot size or point of view) from a film and analyse how it has been used to convey a particular meaning. Present your examples and interpretations to the class.
- Create a storyboard for the opening or closing scene for two films you have viewed recently that have contrasting settings. (e.g. a prison/courtroom scene as opposed to a science fiction, space scene). You will need to carefully consider what type of shot you will use to suggest the environment, action and mood for each scene that you wish to convey to the audience.
- Imagine you are a film director who is going to create a new film version of a play. Select a short scene from a play you have studied and write the director's notes you would make to outline the type of shot you wish to use for each frame of the scene to enhance its meaning.

5) Lighting

This section of the video is concerned with one of the more technical elements of a film. It emphasises how lighting is both practical (making sure the lighting generated matches the needs of the film stock used) as well as creative.

Decisions about the intensity and placement of light affect the meaning constructed in a shot. Light or shade can create an atmosphere as well as suggest something about a character. Christian, for example, is a boy who likes open spaces and being outside, so in Ussi's film he is shot most of the time in the sunlight. When he is in his kitchen he sits near the window and the dark corners and recesses are symbolic of the claustrophobic world he is questioning.

Activities for students:

- Draw a scene of a beach in winter with the waves crashing onto the cliffs and shore. What colours for this scene are appropriate? If you were to film this scene what lighting choices would you make? Why? Now draw the same scene but set it on a calm, sunny summer's day. What colours would now dominate? What lighting would be appropriate and why?
- Look at shots from films that have different lighting effects. Discuss the mood suggested by the lighting for each shot and how the lighting may affect the meaning and our interpretation of character or the action.
- For each of the following film genres discuss what aspects and elements of lighting you would expect the director and cinematographer to choose and how lighting can be used as a cue for the audience to interpret the meaning of a film: romance, horror, action/adventure, western, prison drama.

6) Sound

This section of the video examines the use of sound and music as a means to create the pace and rhythm of a film. The soundtrack of a film is multi-layered and carefully constructed to create a desired effect and meaning for the audience. Sound can create tension and suspense, provoke emotions and create a mood for the audience. The use of sound can enhance the impact of a scene by exaggerating an action or creating a sound memory for the audience. The audience do not need to see the lion Christian and Nyadze go to look for; they know it exists as they hear its roar. Christian's mother's anger and frustration are felt more strongly as we hear the thud of her chopper on the board in the kitchen. Ussi also suggests parallel worlds through the use of sound – the viewer hears the Dominee's speech while we are view Nyadze running through the fields reminding us that these events are occurring simultaneously.

Activities for students:

- For the scene you drew of the beach in the previous lighting activity make a list of what sounds you would need to add to enhance the different shots. Share this list in groups and discuss the difference sound would make to these scenes.
- View a scene from a film without the sound. Make notes on what message the visual images are conveying. Then view the scene with the sound, identify the different elements of sound used and discuss how these have enhanced the meaning.
- Research silent movies and how they used live music to develop the action and create the mood and effect they wanted for their audiences.

7) Set Design and construction

This section of the video comments on how the world of the film is created and made real for the audience for the duration of the film. While outside shots can quickly convey a sense of place, setting and environment, inside shots need to be carefully constructed to embody the world of the film and its messages. In the kitchen scenes Ussi's art department had to reconstruct a particular time period and lifestyle with appropriate props. The church needed to convey its dominance and presence in the land around it and so careful choices were made about its location and design. Props designed by the art department must be accurate replications of the time period to make the film seem real. Props can also be important symbols: Mathew's toy gun develops his characterisation, the contrast in the chickens being cooked reflects two different worlds and the radio is the means of communication about the riots which is so important as a backdrop for the story.

8) Costume and make up

As part of the overall design of a film and the construction of a world the audience can believe in costume and make up are essential elements in creating a credible character. The detail in a character's costume can make the critical difference in creating a character who is authentic while also suggesting much about their personality, attitudes, habits and lifestyles. In Ussi's film she had to present the Savage family as poor but well cared for and clean, and although she had a particular image in her mind for Nyadze's shorts it proved to be inappropriate once she had researched the era. Costumes can enhance themes and convey distinct messages to the audience: Mrs Savage's "Sunday best" clothes are authentic to the religion and the times while also conveying her character. Part of the overall appearance of a character is their make-up; this too needs to be appropriate to present authentic and credible characters. As a boy living in the rural countryside and always playing outside Christian needed to be tanned and with traces of dust and dirt in order to be convincing for the audience.

Activities for students:

- Imagine you are the set designer for a new film to be set in Australia in the 1880s. You have to recreate a living room in a wealthy man's home and design costumes for him, his wife and two children. Research the props and costumes you would need to make this world real for the audience. Draw a sketch of your designs, with an accompanying explanation and notes, for submission to the director.
- Imagine you have been asked to design the opening shot for a new film to be set in 2050 in New York. What would you need to include in the visual images and sound track to make this world real for your audience?

9) Editing

This section of the video examines what happens after the film shoot and how the editing choices will reflect the film's purpose, intended audience and desired length of the film. Editing is an important stage in the film's production as it affects the film's pace and rhythm and can manipulate audiences' responses to a sequence by considering the order of the shots as well as the length of the sequence. A shot can be changed significantly by editing out frames and reducing its length and pace. Editing can create different emotional impacts on the viewer. The example examined from Ussi's film showing Christian at Nyadze's graveside and then running to the gully had 20 seconds cut from it to change the rhythm and audience response to Christian's grief.

Activities for students:

- Imagine you have been asked to edit a film you have viewed recently for a younger audience. In groups discuss which scenes you would need to edit and why and how the editing would affect the meaning of the film for the younger audience?

- Select a scene from a film that you think has a deliberate slow pace. How has this pace been achieved and to what effect? Have any other film elements apart from editing been used to achieve this effect?
- View a car chase from a film. How has editing been used to suggest the speed of the chase and heighten the audience's involvement?

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