

UNIT 48 Reading film texts

Aspects of film

While written texts convey meaning through words, film texts convey meaning through a different set of features and structures. Films are multimodal texts: they use verbal language, images and sound to tell a story. In order to understand a film you need to understand the following essential aspects of film making. Creating a film is a collaborative event, but the director ultimately decides on how a film is to come together.

Cinematography

Cinematography refers to the way in which the director and cinematographer decide to use the camera to achieve a variety of camera shots. Different camera shots and techniques unknowingly influence a viewer's response to a film. For example, a close up of a character's face may encourage the viewer to focus on and identify with a character's response to an event.

Shot size

A director decides how close to shoot a subject to create a particular 'shot size'. A long shot, where the subject is a long way away, can be useful for establishing a scene. A close-up shot can direct the viewer's attention to the subject's emotions or a particular reaction.

Camera angle

The cinematographer chooses the angle of the camera to influence the relationship the audience has with the subject of the shot. It is also important for establishing power relations between characters on screen. For example, a low-angle shot, which is filmed low to the ground and looking up, can make a character seem imposing and powerful.

Camera movement

The way in which a camera moves is an important element for storytelling in film. By moving the camera in a certain way, a director can follow the action, create tension or fear, establish a setting, or mirror what a character is feeling. The main types of camera movement are:

- **panning:** a fixed camera pivoting from left to right, or right to left
- **tracking:** a camera is attached to a track and can follow the action taking place

- **zooming:** the shot moves closer to or further away from the subject, either by moving the camera or using a zoom lens

Sound

Sound in a film is important for dialogue and effects, but can also be used to manipulate the viewer's feelings. A soundtrack is often used in this way. Sound can be *diegetic* (originating in the scene, such as the music playing on a radio); or *non-diegetic* (put over the scene afterwards, such as a song). The non-diegetic songs form a film's soundtrack.

Mise en scène

Mise-en-scène is a French expression that means 'to place in the scene or frame'. It refers to the deliberate placement and combined effect of everything that the viewer can see in a shot. *Mise-en-scène* is built through elements such as film sets, costume, lighting, props and actors.

Lighting

Lighting can be used to create the desired atmosphere and mood of a film. Lighting controls colour, shadow and contrast, which are all important ways of creating atmosphere and mood. For example, a lighting which creates lots of shadows on one side of a character's face could be used to create mysterious or threatening atmosphere.

Editing

When a film is created, the director films many versions of the same scene, and may also film scenes that are not always used in the final 'cut' of the film. Editing a film refers to the way in which shots are selected and the way they in which they are linked together. Editing influences the way a viewer responds to characters, events and settings.

For group or class discussion

- Use a dictionary or research on the internet to define each of the following film terms.
 frame actors director producer soundtrack diegetic
 panning scene character cinematographer low shot genre
 bird's-eye shot producer flashback plot setting multimodal
- Use words from the word list above to change the word or phrase in *italics* in each of the following sentences to one more appropriate for discussing a film.
 - The film's *music* really adds to its tension.
 - The camera *moved from side to side* to show the full scene.
 - The viewer sees the character's childhood in a *scene from back in time*.
 - The way the film is *put together* makes it seem slow.
 - The *place the film is located* is important to understanding its themes.
 - The director set the scene with a *shot from above*.
- Explain to a partner the difference between a director and a cinematographer. As a class, discuss which of these you think is most important on a film set, and why.
- Discuss how a director could use camera movement and music to make a scene seem scary. Choose a particular song you know which would help create this mood if used as part of a soundtrack.
- How might a director use camera movement and music differently to present the same scene in a way which is *not* frightening? Choose a different song which would help to create this mood.

Practice

- Fill in the spaces below with the appropriate words from the word list from discussion task 1. The _____, _____ and _____ of the film, which was in the action _____, met to discuss the best way to make the _____ clear. They wondered if they should use a _____ to show the _____'s location, or if a _____ of the _____ would tell the viewer where the film was set. Once they had decided, they told the _____ to get into position for the first _____ shot.
- If you were a director, how would you tell your viewer the film was about to go to a flashback? What editing or sound might convey this message?
- Write a short instructional piece that outlines what a viewer needs to pay attention to when watching a film. Is it just the action and dialogue, or do messages come in other ways?

Film text focus — *The Sapphires*

The 2012 Australian film *The Sapphires* is the true story of an all-Aboriginal girl group who sing for US troops in 1968 at the beginning of the Vietnam War. Set at the time of the American civil rights movement, the film blends musical comedy, drama and romance with an examination of race relations in Australia.

Three sisters—outspoken Gail, talented Julie and party girl Cynthia—together with their cousin Kay, are inadvertently discovered by Dave Lovelace, a down-and-out music promoter and soul music fan. The Sapphires' tour to Vietnam tests the relationships between the sisters.

The film explores the importance of cultural identity for the three sisters, who were brought up in the Aboriginal community of Cummeragunja. The director Wayne Blair explores the effects of being part of the stolen generations through the strained relationship between Gail and Kay. Kay was taken from her family as a child and raised by white parents. She has difficulty reintegrating with her Aboriginal family, which highlights the terrible consequences of the policy that removed Aboriginal children from their families.

Look at the poster below, which advertises the film, and answer the questions that follow.



For group or class discussion

- 1 There are four members of The Sapphires in the film: Gail, Julie, Kay and Cynthia. Why do you think two of them are closer to the front in the poster image?
- 2 Do you recognise either of the actresses who are positioned at the front? What about the two at the back? Do you think this would have any impact on the construction of the image? Why?
- 3 Discuss who you think the man in the background is. What might his role in the group be? What makes you think that?
- 4 Can you tell when the film is set, or what it is going to be about from the poster? What details give you clues?
- 5 What overall mood or impression is created by the poster? Look carefully at the colours used, and facial expressions of the characters. Does the poster entice you to watch the film? Why?

Practice

- 1 Write a short analysis of the poster. What is its purpose? How does it hint at the film's subject matter, setting and mood?
- 2 Make notes about the facial expressions and body language of each of the characters in the poster: Kay, Cynthia, Julie, Dave and Gail. How are they the same? How are they different?
- 3 Write a paragraph that evaluates the poster. Do you think it effectively advertises the film, and gives a sense of what it might be about? Why or why not?

After *The Sapphires* audition in front of a panel of American military personnel for a opportunity to entertain American troops in Vietnam, they are asked:

Military officer: And your name again?

Gail: Cummeragunja Songbirds.

Military officer: Say what now?

[Kay pauses and then notices Cynthia's sapphire engagement ring]

Kay: ... we're The Sapphires!

Military officer: Sapphires ... we'll see you in Saigon.

For group or class discussion

- 1 Why do you think the auditioning officer is confused by the name Cummeragunja Songbirds?
- 2 Do you think Kay's quickly changing the name improves The Sapphires' chances of being selected to perform in Vietnam? Why?
- 3 The name The Sapphires is similar to a very famous all-female American soul group. Do some research to find out who this group is, and how they are similar to The Sapphires.

Practice

- 1 Write down the connotations of the word 'sapphire'. Do you think it is a good choice for the name of the singing group?
- 2 Come up with another five names that would be suitable for an all-girl soul group. Explain your choices.
- 3 What connection can you see between the name Cummeragunja Songbirds and the group's Aboriginal identity?
- 4 Write a paragraph that describes the possible reactions of the other members of the group when Kay changes the name. How might they feel? Why?



The film still below shows Gail, Julie and Cynthia at the beginning of the film. Look closely at the *mise-en-scène* of the shot, and at the characters' body language, and then answer the questions below.

For group or class discussion

- 1 What mood are the characters in at this point of the film? What makes you think that?
- 2 Who do you think the characters are looking at?
- 3 Why do you think the director has chosen to frame the shot without anything else in it?
- 4 Where is the camera positioned in relation to the characters? What type of shot is this? Discuss the distance from the subjects, and the camera angle.
- 5 As a class, come up with 10 adjectives to describe the three characters shown in the film still.

Practice

- 1 List the parts or features of the film still that help to make the characters seem imposing and determined.
- 2 Write a set of brief instructions for a director who wants to shoot the same three characters, in the same location and costumes, but make them seem warm and welcoming. What things would you change?
- 3 Create a short piece of dialogue between the three characters in the still. What do you think they are about to say, or talk about?

One scene in the film depicts The Sapphires singing for American troops on the night of Martin Luther King's assassination in August 1968, a moment of great historical and cultural significance. Throughout the film there are references to the civil rights movement both in the United States and in Australia. The film also includes a flashback to the time when Kay was taken from her parents by authorities and became part of the stolen generations. Flashbacks are scenes that are set in a time earlier than the main story, or are sudden and vivid memories of an event in the past.

Gail's voice speaks over the flashback scene of Kay being taken. She explains to Dave:

Gail: Kay's mum. It's her birthday, so we're doing a show for her and we were on top of a truck. Two black cars pull in. Government fellas. Mum and Dad screaming at us: 'Kids get across the river!'

Dave: I don't get it. What did they want?

Gail: Children. It's my responsibility, Dave, to look after the others 'cause I'm the eldest. I'm not to let 'em out of my sight, especially not Kay.

Dave: Why Kay?

Gail: If you're fair like Kay, them fellas reckon she could pass for white. Take her from the family. Put her in an institution. Teach her white ways. And pretty soon there'll be no black fellas left to worry about.

For class or group discussion

- 1 What do you think the flashback scene shows as Gail speaks the first sentence above? Why do you think she doesn't speak in full sentences?
- 2 If you were directing this scene, how might you use sound and your camera to recreate Gail's description of the commotion as the authorities arrive.
- 3 Highlight words in Gail's dialogue that would reveal her accent when read aloud. Which words would need to be read in a particular way?
- 4 Use an online video clip search to find the scene in which Gail and Kay fight about Kay's Aboriginality. Why do you think the director would have used a close up on Gail's face looking over a river directly after this fight?
- 5 Do an online search for the group 'ReconciliACTION'. Use their website to find out some reliable information available about the stolen generations.

The image below is from the end of the film when the group returns to Australia and performs at the Cummeragunja Reserve.



For class or group discussion

- 1 What type of shot is this: a long shot, medium shot or close up?
- 2 What has the director framed the shot to include? What is excluded?
- 3 Whose perspective is the shot taken from? How do you think the viewer of the film is supposed to feel?
- 4 What type of mood do the facial expressions of the characters and the colours of the set and costumes create?
- 5 What type of song do you think The Sapphires are singing in this scene? What makes you think that?

Practice

Look at the image of Dave below.

- 1 What type of shot is this: a long shot, medium shot or close up?
- 2 Why do you think the director chose to use that particular type of shot here? What is its purpose?
- 3 How is the visual language of this image different from that of the previous image?
- 4 Write a short paragraph analysing the image. Consider these questions: What is the mood of the image? How is lighting used to create this mood? What do you think Dave is thinking and feeling? How do you know?

