

Learning to read film

Note that the following suggested activity relates to outcomes in the new English Years 7-10 syllabus to be implemented in 2004.

Topic/Unit: *Learning to read film*

This activity could complement a unit of work on film and may be applied to *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets*; *Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone*; or to any other film text appropriate to Stage 4. The use of DVD or video format is particularly useful because discrete sequences can be viewed and reviewed in the classroom. As a unit on film this presupposes some awareness of the language of film. Teachers may choose to give their students a glossary of some of the language of film study prior to beginning the activities in this unit.

Outline: The aims of this activity include:

- involving students in taking an active role in engaging with a film text;
- encouraging students to move beyond the narrative of a film to analyse the elements used to construct the visual representation;
- familiarising students with some of the techniques of film such as: shots; camera angles; camera movement; editing; sound; and lighting.

Pre-unit assessment to gauge current level of understanding:

Brainstorm and list any of the elements of film that students are aware of that the director has at her/his disposal to manipulate and present images in certain ways. Consider, for instance, how a film sequence may be seen very differently if the sound track was turned off; if the lighting was different; or if the setting was to be altered.

Outcomes:

English Stage 4

1. A student responds to and composes texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis and pleasure.
4. A student uses and describes language forms and features, and structures of texts appropriate to different purposes, audiences and contexts.
7. A student thinks critically and interpretively about information, ideas and arguments to respond to and compose texts.

Teaching and learning activities/strategies

In the medium of film, directors use and manipulate images to convey particular messages. Some of the aspects of film that are useful to understand in reading film are:

Shots: long; wide; mid; close up; extreme close up

Camera angles: low angle; high angle

Camera movement: Pan; tilt; tracking; zoom; crane; aerial

Editing: cut; fade; dissolve

Sound: soundtrack; sound effects

Lighting: artificial; natural; colour filters

The following suggestions may be used for individual or group activities and students should be encouraged to share their perceptions with the class.

If teachers have the DVD or video of the film being studied it is useful to show the class the scenes in question once for an overview, a second time while students make notes; then a third time for consolidation of ideas.

- Consider the ways in which the title and opening credits sequence is presented in order to engage the audience and create the atmosphere of the film that is to follow.
- Select two interior scenes from the film that represent different places, e.g. in *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets*, the Dursley's home and the Burrow where the Weasleys live. What is the atmosphere of each? Make a note of the techniques used by the director to convey the atmosphere of each place. Look closely to see whose point of view the aspects of the setting are observed from. Repeat this exercise using two exterior scenes.
- Choose a film sequence that relies on special effects, e.g. in *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets*, the scenes with Dobby; the mandrake repotting; or Harry and Ron changing into Crabbe and Goyle. Make a note of the special effects used. View the film closely to note the techniques the director uses to make the special effects convincing to the audience. Are there any inconsistencies, 'bloopers' that destroy the credibility of the sequence?

Post unit assessment tasks to determine progress towards stated outcomes could include:

- write an evaluation of the way another related film presents the opening credits to engage the audience and create atmosphere
- write an evaluation of a film focusing on the tools used by the director (in at least two scenes) to create atmosphere
- write evaluative comments about the effectiveness of special effects in a film or television show, describing the special effect, the context in which it is used, and its effectiveness.