



THINKING FILM

thinking FILM

FILM LANGUAGE

READING A FILM

When we look at a film or any moving images, lots of elements are working together to produce what we see, hear and feel. These different elements have been carefully constructed to draw our attention to certain things at certain times. For example a character is about to reveal a very important piece of information. For us, the audience, to hear it properly, the background sound will reduce and the actor's voice increase, the camera might move in closer on the character's face. These of course are only two elements of how a film communicates what is happening in its story.

This resource helps you examine how these elements work individually and together to form the way in which a film communicates its story. A range of short film extracts illustrates these qualities and some of the filmmakers involved describe how they believe their work creates meaning within a film.

From looking at these clips, you will be able to see how all these different elements work together and be able to connect your knowledge to films and other examples of moving image materials. These different individual elements can be described as 'devices'. Remember that filmmakers select these devices deliberately for a specific purpose and effect. Your job is to ask why and to what effect!

A TWO WAY PROCESS

A filmed story is firstly presented by the filmmaker and then interpreted by the audience.

As a viewer (and also possibly as a filmmaker) how do you understand what is going on in a film? If the filmmaker creates the film in a certain way and we understand it then we must have some things in common. These could be:

- an understanding of how films tell stories
- how a film creates meaning
- cultural ideas and values which help us understand what we see

The effectiveness of these messages depends on whether we, as an audience, recognise them. These elements can have a very definite effect on the way in which we read a film.



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ACTIVITY

How would you describe what a film is to someone who had never seen one before in 200 words? Compare your description with that of other's in your class. Merge all of the ideas together. What words are used most frequently?

A STARTING POINT

Feature films start their creative life with a script – written words on a page. The script is the 'idea' for the film. The director and their team will use this as a blue print for the final, finished film. But what decisions have to be made to turn these written words into an audio-visual story?

ACTIVITY

Divide into small groups to read through the following short extract from a film script.

Discuss what decisions need to be made

- before the film actually goes into production
- as it is being filmed
- after all of the filming is completed.

This list of key decisions starts to reveal how films are created to tell a story.

Script_Extract

1. EXT. DAY – NEW YORK CITY.

A Rolls Royce drives down 42nd Street.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR

A very English gentleman figure sits in the rear seat, sipping champagne.

This is CHARLES DE VERNAY. Elegant, dressed in the finest Saville Row

suit. He has his laptop next to him on the seat and idly taps the keyboard.

His driver, JONES, pays close attention to the road ahead, whilst also

looking in the rear view mirror every now and again to make sure all is

peaceful and calm in the back.



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JONES

We should be arriving in a few moments, Sir.

Charles looks up and peers through the window.

CHARLES

Thank you, Jones.

Charles puts down his champagne and pays more attention to his laptop screen.

CUT TO:

2. INT. HELICOPTER - NEW YORK SKYLINE

A helicopter flying over New York. The PILOT's face is masked by a black visor. Next to him sits a WOMAN who is concentrating on the screen of her laptop.

WOMAN

Can you pick him up on your tracker?

PILOT

He's going along 42nd, Ma'am. Do you want me to go down a little and see if we can spot him?

WOMAN

As close as you can.

PILOT

As close as we're allowed.

CUT TO:

3. EXT. DAY – NEW YORK SKYLINE.

Shot of helicopter flying over New York skyline. We can see the Empire State Building in the background.

PILOT

He should be right below us now.



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CUT TO:

4. INT. CAR

CHARLES, who opens the window next to him in the car. He looks up and sees a helicopter hovering above.

CHARLES

Damn. Jones, take the first right you can and put some buildings between us and that thing in the air.

JONES looks up and can see the helicopter. He looks into the rear view mirror and can see CHARLES feverishly tapping into his computer.

C.U.

Computer screen. What seems to be a computer game appears before us. A helicopter is hovering above a city, trying to aim in on a car below it. A telescopic sight moves right and left of the car, trying to lock in on its target.

CUT TO:

5. INT. Helicopter.

WOMAN

(Shouting) Hold this thing steady. I'm fine here. I've got him.

C.U.

WOMAN's computer screen. We see the same computer game with the same sight trying to fix onto the car.

CUT TO:

6. INT. CAR

CHARLES, frantically pushing keys on his computer. Ahead of the car the traffic lights turn red.

CUT TO:

JONES P.O.V. He looks through the windscreen and sees people crossing the road.

CUT TO:

CHARLES in the back of the Rolls Royce.



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CHARLES

Move! Why the hell have you stopped?

JONES

It's the lights, Sir. They've gone.

CUT TO:

7. INT. HELICOPTER

C.U.

On WOMAN's face. A smile spreads.

WOMAN

Yes. I've got you.

CUT TO:

WOMAN's computer screen. The sight is targeted on the car. Her finger moves to the return key and presses.

CUT TO:

8. INT – CAR

CHARLES looks at the computer screen and then looks up through window and sees the helicopter above.

CHARLES

No...

An explosion rips across the screen.

CUT TO:

8. EXT. 42nd STREET.

People are running in panic as we see a Rolls Royce in flames. Sirens go off, traffic in chaos.

PAN TO:

The helicopter above.

CUT TO:

9. INT - HELICOPTER.

Reflected in PILOT's visor is the scene below – a burning car and people (like ants) running back and forth.



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CUT TO:

C.U. WOMAN's face.

WOMAN

Game over. Next level, let's go.

CUT TO:

10. EXT – NEW YORK SKYLINE

Shot of helicopter flying away over New York skyline.

CUT TO:

11. EXT. 42ND STREET.

Panic. Police have arrived and are desperately trying to control the crowd. The Rolls Royce is burning by the traffic lights.

ZOOM TO:

INT. BACK SEAT OF CAR

Shot of where CHARLES would have been.

FADE OUT.

THE FILMIC WORLD

When you discussed what decisions to make to film the script extract, you will have noticed that the script mentions locations, costumes, and types of shot. Your decision list was starting to create a filmic world where nothing happens by chance. Everything that we see on screen has been selected and placed there for a purpose so that we can understand what is happening. We can do this through a subtle, shared understanding of **filmmaking conventions** and **cultural codes**.

Filmmaking conventions that both the filmmaker and audience understand might be that a close-up shot of something means that we are seeing something important. Certain types of clothing or settings will make us instantly recognise the type of film (genre) that we are watching. The pace of a film will reflect the genre of the film – fast action will suggest a thriller (with lots of different shots carefully edited together.)

We might also share **cultural codes** with the filmmaker – what certain colours suggest, what a style of clothes might say about a character.



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ACTIVITY

1. In your group, list some of the filmmaking conventions that you think a film director might be able to use.
2. Now list some cultural codes that a director might use as a 'shorthand' way of giving us information. This could include things that we hear as well as see.

We expect the world that a film presents to us to be coherent. Even if we take a genre such as science fiction, then we would expect that world to have logic, even if only within itself. If a character says "switch on the double inter star phasers", once we have seen what they can do then we are drawn further into that world, we can understand what part these 'phasers' might play in the story.

French filmmaker, Jean Luc Godard, said that 'film is not the reflection of reality, it is the reality of the reflection'. The world that we see on a cinema screen is not reality itself, but the reality of the filmic world that has been created and which we happily enter to enjoy the film that unfurls before our eyes.