A Level Film Studies

Bridging Work 2019

Name: ________________________________

If you have any questions please email Mrs Griffiths on: griffithss@stedcamp.bham.sch.uk
Task One: Research

Your task is to research the director Guillermo del Toro
Your presentation should include:

- A brief background to the director
- Key features of the director’s style
- The most recognisable aspects of the director’s work
- Supporting film clips
- Examples of research from a range of sources (books, internet, magazines, DVDs etc)
- A supporting PowerPoint presentation

Task Two: Research the film context for Pan’s Labyrinth [del Toro, 2006]

What does it mean if a country is a republic?

When did the Spanish Civil War take place and why?

What is fascism?

Task Three: Understanding Film Language

Read the introductory chapter about Film Language.

- Film Language will form the basis of your studies of Film and, without an understanding of both the micro and macro features of film you will struggle to discuss, analyse and create your own film products.

- As a part of the chapter, there are green box activities. Whether you complete them or not is optional (there will be extra credit for those of you who do) but you will need an understanding of film language before you will be able to progress to...
Task Four: Applying Film Language

These still images are taken from the film Pan’s Labyrinth [del Toro, 2006]

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<th>Cinematography</th>
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<th>Performance</th>
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<td>Which shot and angle are used? What is the lighting like? What can you infer from their use?</td>
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<td>Look at any actors in the shot. What are their facial expressions like? How are they reacting to other characters? What does this help you to understand?</td>
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Task Five: Watching a Film

Watch the film Pan’s Labyrinth [del Toro, 2006]

The film is available on Amazon Prime or at https://vimeo.com/224259686

Write 300 words about the film. In this, you should include anything you notice about the representation of male and female characters in the film. Were there any gender roles that stood out to you when you were watching, such as roles of women in Spanish society in the 1940s. What genre is the film – how did you know – was this film similar to any others you have watched? Also include what you appreciated about the film.
Glossary

Create a list here of new words and terminology you encounter as you complete this bridging work.

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Chapter 1 Reading Films

In this section we will cover:

- The basic ‘language’ of film studies and how to use it.
- How we ‘read’ films rather than just watch them.
- What different devices film-makers use to tell a story.

Introduction

In order to study films you will have to learn about the different ways in which they communicate to an audience – their use of film language. The opening of a film can be very important because it usually introduces the main characters and sets up a problem, or a situation, that in some way needs resolving. It’s like the opening of a book – it has to grasp an audience’s attention and make them want to find out more about these people, or what is going to happen next.

Close up: the classroom

Watch the opening sequence of any film:

- How does the film-maker try to ensure that an audience will want to watch the rest of the film?
- What different images and sounds help to achieve these aims?
- What is your first impression of the setting and/or characters?
- Does the background music or dialogue affect your first impression?

In many ways, ‘reading’ a film is just like reading a book but instead of making sense from written words, we make sense of how visual images and sound combine to construct the narrative.

Sitting in the audience you and everyone else will have a unique response to any film that you watch. Although you may not realise it, your response is being guided by film directors. For they will place ‘clues’ along the way that help you piece together the twists and turns of the story and draw you in to understanding the film from a certain point of view. Just as a writer wants you to feel compelled to finish their book once you have started it, so the director wants you to feel that you can’t turn away from the screen; the idea is the same, it's just the techniques that are different.
Close up: the exam

Really, the most important part of your studies will be to gain an understanding of film language.

- The study of film is not merely a matter of watching a movie and discussing why you thought it was good or not (although this is very important).
- To express properly a detailed knowledge about films and the way they work, you need a vocabulary in which you can discuss why, and how, a film tells its story.
- To gain the highest possible marks you should understand this vocabulary – film language – and use it appropriately and often.

Close up: the classroom

Look carefully at this image.

- What visual clues are there to the setting and historical time period?
- What appears to be happening?
- Can you guess what kind of film this is?
- Can you start to piece together the plot and how it might be developed?
The setting of the film pictured opposite is clearly isolated and barren. The landscape shows sparse trees and a long dusty road. Straight away we know these girls are being taken against their will and a struggle is taking place. There seems to be nobody around who can help the women and the girls. The clothes the females are wearing clearly contrast with the formal uniform of the officer taking them into the car. They look wild and the colours of their clothes match the colours of the environment, showing they are very much at home and they are about to be taken into 'civilization'.

The officer is centre frame with the smallest girl tucked under his arm nearest the car, so it is more difficult for the older females to try and get her back. His stride is determined, his position strong in contrast to their stooped and straining forms, showing it is unlikely they will win the fight. All the facial expressions we can see are strained, nobody is happy about this situation, yet it is going to happen anyway.

This is the film language at work and you are already demonstrating a sophisticated knowledge of films! But think: not all people will read the same things into images and this will be covered later in the book where we consider different audience readings.

There are two sections to your studies of film language – micro elements and macro elements.

**Micro elements** are:

- Cinematography – the use of the camera
- Editing – the process of putting the shots together after filming
- Sound – music, dialogue, sound effects and voice-overs
- Mise-en-scène – sets and setting, lighting and colour, positioning of characters, body language, costume and make-up, props.

**Macro elements** are:

- Genre – how we recognise a type of film, e.g. Superhero, comedy – and how they are portrayed
- Narrative – the plot, the story and the way it is told
- Representation – how social groups and issues are 'presented' in a film... how they are 'portrayed'. Representation is a very important aspect of Film (and Media) Studies that crosses the boundaries between macro and micro film language but we treat it as a macro element at GCSE.

**Key terms**

*Frame:* Simply put, the camera shot we see on the screen.

*Narrative:* An account of connected events, or 'the story' (the term 'narrative' also refers to the way the story is told, i.e. narrative structure).

*Film language:* How a film communicates meanings to an audience.
The Micro Elements of Film Language

We can recognise the micro elements of film language even in only a short film sequence or in a still image from a film. This is because all the way through a film, the film-makers are creating atmosphere, action or tension by using lighting, sound and camera angles in a particular way. In Film Studies we separate the different micro aspects of film language to help us analyse them, but really they work together to portray the story of the film in a certain way.

Mise-en-scène

This includes:
- setting
- lighting and colour
- positioning of characters within the frame
- body language
- costume and make-up
- props.

All these areas combine to tell audiences where and when the film is set, be it past, present or future. For example, costume and props can give us a clear indication of a historical period. Colour and lighting can create a mysterious atmosphere, and the positioning of characters can tell us a lot about their relationships with each other or how they feel about each other at a particular moment in the film.

Depending on the genre of the film, how accurate the mise-en-scène details are will be of more or less importance. For example an action/adventure film or comedy may not be as concerned about costume accuracy as a historical or costume drama; though some observers would argue it is always important to represent a place or time in history accurately.
Close up: the classroom

What can you learn about the characters, the setting, the genre of the film and the narrative just from the mise-en-scène of the stills above?

**Setting** is significant because it is easy to take the setting of a film for granted and not notice the lengths a film-maker has gone to in order to create a sense of the place in which the film is set – whether that be a place relatively familiar to us or a place that is part of another world. We may notice iconic buildings that tell us where a film is set but the finer detail is equally important.

**Key terms**

**Iconic:** A readily recognisable image with commonly held associations. Eg, the Statue of Liberty is associated with New York and freedom.

WHERE WILL YOU BE?

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF INDEPENDENCE DAY

4: The Statue of Liberty still stands, despite a new Ice Age
Close up: the classroom

Create a still for a scene set in: a room in a horror film OR a villain’s hideout in an action film. Add in as much detail as you can to create the right kind of atmosphere and to give the audience narrative clues. See the above examples for tips.

As you can see, then, the choices made regarding mise-en-scène are important to creating mood and atmosphere as well as a sense of place.

Lighting and colour can also have a big effect on the atmosphere in a scene. The way lights are positioned focuses our attention on significant props, places or characters. When a scene is brightly lit, this is referred to as high key lighting and where there are obvious pools of light and shade this is referred to as low key lighting.

Close up: the classroom

Design the homepage for a website dedicated to one film genre. Make sure you consider all genre conventions but especially the use of colour.

Colour can suggest various emotions and moods and is often used for a particular effect. If a certain colour or group of colours is noticeable throughout a film, it is referred to as the film’s colour palette. Colour can also be used to signify a film’s genre.

Look at the posters opposite. How can you tell what genre they might belong to just from the use of colour?
Film posters are an important way that film-makers and cinemas advertise films. They use visual elements of film language to market the film – for example, colour, lighting, positioning of characters. Genre conventions are significant for a successful film poster in addition to the use of stars, directors and intriguing taglines.

**Close up: the classroom**

Create your own poster for a new Superhero movie taking into account what you have learned.

The other aspects of mise-en-scène to consider are all concerned with characters – how characters are positioned, how they use gesture and body language to express important aspects of the narrative and what they are wearing. **Make-up and costume** are important aspects of a film’s mise-en-scène. They can be used to show us a historical period or to help an actor age; but they can also be used to change an actor into an alien or monster!

Mise-en-scène is thus very important. You need to remember how all the different elements in a frame work together to construct a narrative and create atmosphere.
Cinematography

The camera, and how it is used, is a crucial visual tool of the film-maker. It establishes a location by showing a landscape using a long shot at the start of a scene. It captures the reactions and emotions of characters and draws the viewer’s attention to the narrative clues we need to piece the story together by the use close-ups on faces or objects. And it can make people look powerful or vulnerable simply by being positioned in a certain place. Even the way the camera moves can determine if the atmosphere in a film is tense or exciting.

It seems obvious to say so, but film is essentially a visual medium. A talented film-maker will use the camera in many different ways to maintain the interest and enjoyment of the viewer. Considering how camera shots and movement are used and what effect these can create will be an important part of your studies.

Sound

Although dialogue is the way the characters communicate with each other and therefore part of how we learn the film’s plot, other aspects of sound are important in a film. Sound was not included in films until the late 1920s but even before that music was performed ‘live’ by musicians to create an atmosphere appropriate to the action taking place on-screen.

Today we are well aware of the importance that music and sound effects generally have on the impact of a film, and technological developments in sound (Dolby, THX, etc.) have greatly enhanced the pleasures received from action-packed films such as the science fiction and Superhero genres.

Just as in the days of live accompaniment, music plays an important role in creating the atmosphere, even helping to define the genre of a film; horror films in particular seem to benefit greatly from the use of suspense-creating musical scores. Changes in pace and volume can affect the emotions of an audience, making them disturbed, amused or very emotional. It can also be important when establishing a specific cultural setting – particularly evident in films like *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and *Amélie* (2001).
Close up: the classroom

See if you can find (or make) some suitable music to match these actions:

- A woman is walking down a deserted street at night, and she is being followed.
- A Superhero races to rescue a bus full of schoolchildren that has just crashed and is hanging from a bridge.
- A child is re-united with its pet dog after it was accidentally left behind when the family moved house.

Editing

Editing is probably the most important aspect of film creation, though one most of us rarely notice when watching a film. Arguably it is in the editing process where the film actually comes together and this is because the editing process is where film-makers put all the camera shots together.

At this stage the film-makers can decide:

- the order of scenes
- the pace of scenes
- the scenes they will include and discard.

When we look at editing there are two areas to concentrate on:

- the speed of editing (how long each shot lasts)
- the style of editing (how each shot is joined to the next).

It is also significant to consider what aspects of the narrative are being connected together by these edits.

- When two characters are talking, quick cuts are often used between the two faces of the characters talking – why is this?
- When we are looking at a setting the camera tends to move slowly, looking around, and this shot can last a while before an edit – why do you think this is?

The Macro Elements of Film Language

As referred to at the beginning of this chapter, macro elements of film language refer to the ‘bigger’ issues, the areas of study that bring together your knowledge of cinematography, sound, editing and mise-en-scène.
Genre

Genre refers to the categories that we put films into. We all talk about films in terms of their genre because it is an easy way to refer to films and let people know whether they are likely to enjoy a film or not. If you tell a friend you have seen a great horror film, you are telling them about genre. Straight away they will be making assumptions about what kind of things could happen in that film and whether they would find this thrilling or too frightening to watch! Of course, there are many different types of horror film, so you may need to go into more detail and then you would be talking in a very sophisticated way about film genre.

Close up: the classroom

Complete your own table like the one below with three films that you can think of that fit into the genres listed.

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<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Film 1</th>
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<td>Superhero</td>
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Key terms

Generic conventions: The various ways in which film language is typically used within particular genres. For example, most genres use typical settings and props (mise-en-scène), typical characters, typical narratives and typical music.

It is important both for the film industry and audiences to be able to categorise films. We as audiences know what we like and the industry wants to make sure it attracts as large an audience as possible, so marketing devices such as film posters and trailers will follow generic conventions that audiences will recognise.

Close up: the exam

- While studying film you will look at a variety of films and discuss what genre they are. But you should remember that genre is not a fixed concept.
- Styles change over time, as film-makers challenge our expectations and society changes its views on how issues and people ought to be portrayed.
- Be conscious that genre as a term is used differently by audiences and the people who actually make films, so what genre a film ‘fits into’ is always contentious.
Close up: the classroom

The two posters above are for films from different genres – so why do you think they share so many similarities?

Below are two descriptions of possible scenes from films (not the films above). Discuss in groups what genre you would fit them into and why.

Eventually they stumble into a clearing in the woods. In front of them is an old house and a light shone from one of the windows. As they approach the house they notice the light is a strange, blue colour and it isn’t just coming from one window, but glowing in a pulsating rhythm from the whole house...

At last the day had come. 15 years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. He was angry, very angry, and they were going to pay for what they had done to him. He laughed to himself. ‘I’m sure it won’t come as a surprise to them. After all, they were the ones that trained me.’

You and your friends have probably argued about what genre you would fit these films into. Are they horror? Science fiction? Action? Gangster? Thriller? Of course, you have been given very limited information about
the films but this might have made you realise that films don't always fit neatly into one genre, even if this might superficially appear to be the case. Some genres share a number of characteristics so it can be difficult to differentiate one from another at times.

**Close up: the classroom**

Come up with your own “film sequences” in small groups. Discuss as a whole class whether they do or don’t fit neatly into one genre.

**Narrative**

The narrative of the film is basically the “story”. But in the same way as a book we read might go backwards and forwards in time, or start telling part of the story from another person’s point of view, so can a film.

Do you sympathise with the main character? Are you given more information than them so that you have a different understanding of events and other characters?

Sometimes a film will just need to set the scene, tell us where we are going or create atmosphere that is important to how we feel at particular points in the story. This is still the narrative at work and unlike the author of a novel, a film-maker is able to use music, sound and special effects to suggest things that, in a novel, are left to our imaginations. Film uses sound and images to create meaning, not just words.

Films use different techniques to show us they are moving to a different part of the story. Sometimes this can be done simply by using editing or colour but sometimes film-makers make audiences work harder to piece a story together.

**Close up: the classroom**

*The Dark Knight* is split into clear sections, almost as if different stories are being tied up and then another part of the story begins. Can you trace these different episodes in the film?

Film-makers are able to utilise other techniques to help us follow the story. They might use a *narrative voice-over*, as in *Whale Rider* (2002); or they can even use captions to tell us where the narrative is set in time or place.
Representation

Representation refers to how people and places – fictional or real – are presented to us through various media, in this case film. Films depict how characters in different, often unusual, situations behave and react; but they also carry implicit messages that relate to race, gender and age, which we interpret based on our own cultural and social background and the messages we have received before. Women and men, for example, tended to be represented differently in films made in the 1960s compared to the 1980s – and in some ways differently again in the 1980s compared to today – and we can interpret those representations in different ways. It is also interesting to think about how films produced in different countries offer us different viewpoints, which is something that will be particularly significant in your own study of films produced outside of Hollywood.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Superhero films, which are often based on older graphic novels or comics, do not seem to follow a pattern of changing representations of gender but still offer some very different female characters. For example, the original Superman film, made in 1978, presents a strong, working woman in the form of Lois Lane, whereas Mary Jane in Spider-Man [2002] seems to be a rather more stereotypically submissive female. And the original Superman appeared around 30 years before Spider-Man!

Close up: the classroom

Discuss other representations of women in Superhero films you know. Can you begin to explain these representations?

Every film creates meanings for audiences in a variety of ways. Some are directly and consciously expressed, while others are implied. In Media and Film Studies we refer to these two kinds of ‘meaning’ as denotation and connotation.

Denotation refers to exactly what is shown on screen. So, for example, the opening of Iron Man 2 denotes Iron Man flying through the sky, landing on a stage surrounded by cheering fans and glamorous women. But the connotations of this sequence are that Iron Man (or his alter ego, Tony Stark) is very successful, that he is adored by lots of people and that he is very much enjoying this (female) adulation!

However, every viewer might not see the same connotations, because, as individual members of an audience, we come from different backgrounds, have different beliefs and enjoy different things. So, though most of us
will enjoy the spectacle of this scene, some people may just think the
coracter is horribly arrogant, or they may feel the whole idea is too
unbelievable to enjoy.

**Close up: the classroom**

Watch the opening sequence of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

What is denoted in this sequence?

What is connoted about the Aboriginal people that you see in this
sequence?

**Key terms**

**Stereotype:**
A simplified representation of a
person or group of
people, repeatedly used
so it becomes seen as
the norm.

These representations in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* could be seen to be
**stereotypical** as they represent Aboriginal people in a way we have often
seen them represented in films or television programmes before. They
could however be representations that are telling us important things
about the culture, beliefs and lifestyle of Aboriginal people in the past.

It is important that you always consider who has made the film you
are watching and what messages and viewpoints the film seems to be
expressing. You will no doubt see a huge difference between many of
the Hollywood films and the films made outside Hollywood you study in
preparation for Paper 2, especially in reference to the representation
of people from different cultures.

**What have we learnt?**

This section has been a brief introduction to the way film-makers
communicate using 'film language'. Make sure that you can write a
short definition of each of the main terms as you will be expected to
employ appropriate terminology in your discussion of films – it’s really
important!