



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD: SEEING THE FILM THROUGH THE LENS OF FILM LANGUAGE AND MEDIA LITERACY



American media educator seeks to help teachers better teach the film with his film study guide, in an exclusive four part series in *Australian Screen Education*.

Introduction

Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (TKAM) is undoubtedly one of the most popular novels used in literature classrooms. Teachers also use the Academy Award nominated 1962 film in order to help students understand many of the themes of the novel. This film study guide is designed to help teachers and students look at the film through a different lens. Using media literacy as the



FILM AS TEXT

central core for examining the film, it is hoped that teachers and students will re-examine the film, using the 'language of film' as well as the 'core concepts of media literacy.'

Screen Education: Why Study Film?

The use and study of film has become more commonplace in classrooms and with the advent and ease of Video Cassette Recorders (VCR), and now Digital Video Discs (DVD), teachers are comfortable using film as an instructional tool. Teachers know well that students respond to film: their students are, for the most part, film-goers,

and talk about the latest releases and what genres they like best (i.e. science fiction, comedy, drama, etc.) Because many schools now include video/media production courses, teachers and students are keenly aware of the many facets of producing a non-print text, including editing, lighting and postproduction, just to name a few.

Improving students' film literacy raises their awareness of the power of the human mind to interpret clues, and through this awareness students learn to think critically and analytically as well as to engage in creative expression. Therefore, any student who actively

PART ONE



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tries to understand a film is indeed involved in a process of criticism and creative expression, which helps him or her to develop skills to effectively read both film and other media products.¹

Visual language is too much with us to be ignored. Films are too powerfully popular with young people to be shunted aside or squelched. Films are simply an overwhelming presence that won't disappear. The sincere teacher who wishes to help students to observe and interpret their world cannot exclude electronic media—least of all its voice, the film. Film study will absorb or overcome various obstacles and grow.²

For more info about film education read: *The Importance of Screen Education* http://www.bmm.qut.edu.au/commentary.php?Commentary_ID=59

What Do Students Know About The Film?

More than likely, your students have read the novel, or are about to read it. You may be considering using the film in your classroom. To begin with, you might explore with your students what they already know, if anything, about the film. This guide is designed to help your students explore the answers to these questions and more:

- What year was *To Kill A Mockingbird* made?
- What was happening in US history at the time the film was made?
- What was happening in US history during the time depicted in the

film?

- Who wrote the novel? What do you know about the novelist?
- What does it mean when a novel wins the Pulitzer Prize for literature?
- Who wrote the screenplay? What is the difference in the novel and the screenplay?
- How many Academy Awards did the film earn? For what did it win?
- Who was the producer of the film? What does a producer do?
- Who was the director of the film? What does a director do?
- Who wrote the score or soundtrack? What is the role of the composer?
- What role does music play in the film?
- What is a cinematographer? Who was the cinematographer on *TKAM*?
- Is there a message, or more than one message, in this film? If so, what are they?
- Does the movie stand the 'test of time'?

What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy refers to composing, comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, and appreciating the language and texts of ... both print and nonprint media. The use of media presupposes an expanded definition of 'text' ... Print media texts include books, magazines, and newspapers. Nonprint media include photography, recordings, radio, film, television, videotape, video games, computers, the performing arts, and virtual reality ... [and]

*all [are] to be experienced, appreciated, and analyzed and created by students.*³

Some of the 'core concepts of media literacy'⁴ include:

- **All media are constructed:** in a film (for example) scenes are shot out-of-order and then edited (constructed) to make a logical story.
- **Media use creative languages:** in film (for example) a wide, establishing shot may be used first to tell the audience where action is taking place; music is composed deliberately to convey mood or evoke emotions.
- **Different viewers may see the same message differently:** in film, the audience brings prior experiences and frames-of-reference to their viewing; thus may come away with differing reactions to the same message.
- **Media communicate values and points-of-view:** after viewing this film, some viewers may get a 'stereotypical' view of the South, poverty, racism, etc.
- **All media are businesses:** this film would not have been made if the producers did not feel that they would have a return on their investment; this is a successful film in that regard; it went on to win several Academy Awards in 1963 (Best Actor; Best Screenplay; Best Art Direction).

More about the core concepts:

<http://www.educ.uvic.ca/Faculty/sockenden/edb363/students/MichelleDaly/mediaconcepts.html>

Critical Inquiry/ Critical Viewing—Key Questions

When contemplating media, the following questions may assist teachers and students:

- Who is the producer of the message (film)?
- What is the purpose of the message (film)?
- What techniques does the producer use to increase authenticity and/or believability? (See language of film, below)
- What lifestyles are portrayed?
- How might different people react to the same message (movie)?
- Is anything omitted? Why? (Compare the novel to the film adaptation)

Language of Film: It is essential that students understand how a film director uses the camera, lighting, and soundtrack to create a mood and to communicate his vision. Once students understand these elements, it will be easier for them to understand and appreciate how director Robert Mulligan approached each scene and how he made certain decisions about how to portray it.

Language of Film: *To Kill A Mockingbird*: pages 7 -11 <http://www.filmeducation.org/printpacks/secdocs/classics.pdf>
Consider this published 1963 film review:

... director Robert Muligan has paced his picture so that it can affect us. He has perceived that the relationship of the children to their widower father is the central theme of the film, not the more volatile ingredients of an attempted lynching, the trial for rape, nor a red-necked farmer's foul revenge against Atticus for defending the Negro he had accused. Each of these would lend themselves to the kind of excitement that pleases audiences easily, but which would have been completely inappropriate—if not indeed antagonistic—to the mood and purpose of his picture. Instead, Muligan permits us to look with a child's lingering curiosity at a broken swing on the porch of a ramshackle house, at the galleries of a courthouse where Negroes rise in silent homage to a white man who had defended one of theirs, at faces filled with gentleness, or hatred, or love.⁵

See the complete original *New York Times* film review at:
<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/review.htm>

Questions to consider:

- What is pace or pacing?
- How does a director achieve pace in a film?
- What elements can he use? (Consider: camera movement, editing, selection of music, etc.)
- What is mood?
- What is purpose?

When we ask students about films they have seen and films they like, they almost invariably talk about the narrative or action, with

little sense of how the visual composition conveyed the story. In teaching them to 'read' film, we have to draw their attention to the various elements of film language.⁶

What does the director do?

Most people who study cinema regard the director as the film's 'author'. Although the writer prepares a script, later phases of production can modify the script beyond recognition. And although the producer monitors the entire process, he or she seldom controls moment-by-moment activity on the set. It is the director who makes the crucial decisions about performance, staging, lighting, framing, cutting, and sound. On the whole, the director has most control over how a movie looks and sounds.⁷

What does the producer do?

The producer (in this case Alan Pakula) nurses the project (the film) through the script process, and arranges to hire personnel who will work on the film. During shooting and assembly, the producer usually acts as the



liaison between the writer or director and the company that is financing the film. After the film is completed, the producer will often have the task of arranging the distribution, promotion, and marketing of the film and of monitoring the paying back of the money invested in the production.⁸

Other sources for helping students understand the language of film:

Understanding Movies: web site companion to the text:
<http://cwx.prenhall.com/bookbind/pubbooks/gian-netti/>

Cinema: How Hollywood Movies Are Made <http://www.learner.org/exhibits/cinema/>



The Language of Film
<http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/resources/film.html>

How to Read A Film
<http://www.readfilm.com/HTRBook/HTR3.pdf>

Language of Film/Thinking About Film <http://www.crosscut.net/film/week1.htm>

Introduction to Film Language <http://www.denbighict.org.uk/dv/article.php?27.0>

Students might also benefit from viewing the 'Language of Film,' episode eleven in the series *American Cinema*. This program is streamed on the Annenberg CPB web site: <http://www.learner.org/progdesc/index.html?uid=67&sj>

After studying the language of film, students may wish to consider these questions:

1. Why do you think the film was shot in black and white and not color?
2. Does the fact that it was shot in B&W have an impact on you?
3. Where is the camera placed during the very first scene, after the credits? Would you agree that this is an effective establishing shot? Why do you think the director chose that perspective? How does this 'tell' the audience about the historical time period (The Depression)?
4. How does the director introduce us to the main characters?
5. How do camera angles, lighting and music con-



TOP 2 PHOTOS: CLOSE-UPS (PRIMARILY FACES, SIGNIFY INTIMACY); MIDDLE 2 PHOTOS: MEDIUM SHOTS (MOST OF BODY, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP); BOTTOM 2 PHOTOS: WIDE/LONG/ESTABLISHING SHOTS (SETTING & CHARACTERS; CONTEXT, SCOPE, PUBLIC DISTANCE); IMAGES ABOVE FROM TKAM ESSENTIALS WEB SITE

tribute to the overall success of what the director is trying to communicate?

What does a Cinematographer do?

The job of the cinematographer is one in which he/she has a palette of tools in which to use to construct and compose his picture frame. For *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the cinematographer was Russell Harlan. The tools to his disposal included things like cameras, lenses, camera angles, camera movement, lighting, setting, set decorations, and wardrobe, just to name a few. As your students watch the film, ask them to be conscious of these things, which are not readily apparent until they stop and concentrate on one or more of them.

Film Techniques

Film techniques are often used to manipulate audience feelings during a feature film. By using the proper technique, the director can create in the audience feelings of sympathy for the main character, even if he or she is a criminal. Every shot is carefully planned to produce the desired audience reaction.⁹

CAMERA SHOTS¹⁰

(See images this page)

Other camera shots: Students could also watch for high and low angle shots; when the camera moves and why; the distance between camera and actor or action.

Learn more about camera shots, focus, lighting and other techniques in the text: John Golden, *Reading In The Dark, Using Film As A Tool in the English Classroom*, NCTE.

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Portions of this study guide have appeared previously on the author's web site: <http://www.med.sc.edu/medialit/tkam.htm>

Endnotes

1. 'The Third Eye: Critical Literacy and higher order thinking skills are improved through a film studies class' in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Nov 2002, 46.i3 p.220.
2. 'The Introduction'. David Sohn, (ed.) *Good Looking: Film*

Studies, Short Films and Filmmaking, National Textbook Company, Skokie, IL, 1976.

3. Carole Cox, *Teaching Language Arts: A student and response centered classroom*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1999, p.451.
4. Core Concepts as proposed by the Center for Media Literacy.
5. Saturday Review magazine, 12 January, 1963.
6. David Considine/Gail Haley, 'Movies as Mentors' in *Visual Messages: Integrating Imagery Into Instruction*, Teacher Ideas Press, Englewood CO, 1999.
7. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 6th ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, 2000.
8. *ibid*, p.18.
9. Jeffrey Schrank, *Understanding Mass Media*, 3rd ed., National Textbook Company, Lincolnwood, IL.1986
10. Arthur Asa Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 2nd ed., SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998.

