FILM STUDY GUIDE FOR TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD
SEEING THE FILM THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIA LITERACY

LANGUAGE OF FILM

"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" 1

It is essential that students understand how a film director uses the
camera, **lighting**, and **sound** 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 movie review:
"…director Robert Mulligan 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, Mulligan 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." 2

Read the complete original NEW YORK TIMES movie review.

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, lighting, editing, selection of music, etc.)
- What is mood?
- What is purpose?

Mise en scène
This French term comes originally from the theatre where it refers to
'putting the scene together.'
In film language it refers to
- setting and props (including architecture and interior design)
- costume, hairstyles and make-up
- body language and facial expressions of the characters
- the use of colour and design 3

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 (Depression)?
4. How does the director introduce us to the main characters?
5. How do camera angles, lighting and music contribute to the overall success of what the director is trying to communicate?

Suggested Links:
Film Language (UK produced resource)
Cinematographer speaks the language of images
Other websites on understanding films and film language
Looking Closely at the Film, by William Costanzo
Recommended books about motion pictures/films

Recommended Resources:
Reading Films Key Concepts for Analysing Film and Television (BFI)
How to Read A Film
Screen Language: From Film Writing to Film Making
A Movie Lover's Guide to Film Language: Classic Scenes from Timeless Films

See bibliography for all source material cited here