

Media Analysis and Technique: "And That's the News"

ERIN GRAHMANN / ERIN WARREN / MAY 12, 2004

Unit Final Project

Full class entertainment newscast, including movie reviews, top stories in local and national news, weather, music news, commercial advertisements/breaks, human-interest stories, etc.

Unit Context

The audience for this unit will be an eleventh grade classroom in Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis, MN. The class will consist of approximately 30 students, a majority being Asian (Hmong), with the remainder being a combination of both African American and white students. Most of these students will be from relatively poor families, as seventy-five percent of students at Henry are on the free or reduced lunch program. This unit will be towards the end of the fourth quarter of a yearlong course in American Literature. This unit will follow various units of American literature texts, such as *Huck Finn* and *Fallen Angels*, and will follow a unit on creative writing, which taught the students that they can contribute to the canon of American literature. This unit will give the students insight into the components of producing a television newscast, analyzing film and other media, the technical aspects of media production, and perspective taking when viewing media.

Unit Objectives

Students will acquire rudimentary knowledge of camera angles and shots;

- Students will learn how to critique media, through the technical knowledge of sound, camera angles, camera motion, lighting, editing, and color usage;
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of how to critically evaluate advertisements, through the analysis of discourses, audience, demographics, and usage of space;
- Students will be able to categorize music in terms of genre, lyrics, and genre-specific characteristics; and
- Students will display knowledge through the construction of a newscast, which will draw upon their comprehension of audience, sequence, slant, sponsor, style, structure, and scope. Standards Addressed

I. READING AND LITERATURE

Students will read and understand grade-appropriate English language text.

D. Literature

Standard: The student will actively engage in the reading process and read, understand, respond to, analyze, interpret, evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of fiction, poetic and nonfiction texts.

The student will:

7. Evaluate a literary selection from several critical perspectives.
12. Synthesize ideas and make thematic connections among literary texts, public discourse, media and other disciplines.

III. SPEAKING, LISTENING AND VIEWING

The student will speak clearly and effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences and actively listen to, view and evaluate oral communication and media.

A. Speaking and Listening

Standard: The student will demonstrate understanding and communicate effectively through listening and speaking. The student will:

4. Describe the role of communication in everyday situations (e.g., advertising, informal social, business, formal social, etc.)
5. Understand the effects of media on society and culture.

B. Media Literacy

Standard: The student will critically analyze information found in electronic and print media, and will use a variety of these sources to learn about a topic and represent ideas.

3. Evaluate the source's point of view, intended audience and authority.
5. Evaluate the content and effect of persuasive techniques used in print and broadcast media.
6. Make informed evaluations about television, radio, film productions, newspapers and magazines with regard to quality of production, accuracy of information, bias, purpose, message and audience.
7. Critically analyze the messages and points of view employed in different media, including advertising, news programs, web sites, and documentaries.
9. Critically analyze and evaluate the strategies employed in news broadcasts, documentaries, and web sites related to clarity, accuracy, effectiveness, bias and relevance of facts.

Activities

Week One-Two

Introductory Activity: Students will be given a handout that includes the slogans of 20 different companies or products (see Appendix A). They will be given 10-15 minutes to fill in the company or product name below the slogan. The goal of this will be to show students how pervasive media messages are in their lives, since most likely, students will be able to identify a majority of the slogans. After this activity, the class will discuss how they know these slogans, how companies manage to ingrain these in their minds, and what that information shows us about the invasive nature of media in our lives.

Introduction to Audience: How do different forms of media choose their methods of delivery? On this day, students will be challenged to identify the target audiences for various magazine and TV ads. Teachers will provide magazines and pre-recorded advertisements for the students to analyze. Discussion will follow on why these audiences are chosen, the cues that prove this, and why this media (magazine or television show) would have chosen these specific ads. This will foster the decision of what ads to include in the final newscast project.

Teaching Film Technique: The following days will be focused on providing students with the tools with which to study media. Ideas such as lighting, camera angles, camera motion, sound, color, editing/directing, and frame construction (see Appendix B) will be explained and assessed through teacher instruction, clip viewing, and student practice. Students will be asked to bring in clips of their own and explain how they show these media techniques in order to visually add to the text of this piece.

Week Three

Music Analysis: During this week, students will learn about the various music genres, such as folk, jazz, rock, country, rap, new age, punk, metal, hip hop, reggae, etc. They will essentially teach themselves about the genre-specific characteristics by bringing their own samples of different kinds of music. As students bring in different kinds, the class will categorize it together and will be asked to give reasons for these categorizations, thus self-defining the genres. Discussion will focus around lyrics, sound, styles of dress/dance/behavior associated with each genre, after which students will be challenged to deconstruct these stereotypes, teaching them, if nothing else, to be open-minded concerning their musical choices.

Week Four

News Program Production: Students will be introduced to this topic by being assigned to watch a news program the night before, and to take notes on the topics covered. After breaking down these topics in class, the “Seven S’s for Analyzing News” (as discussed by Rick Beach) will be taught (see Appendix C). After spending several days on teaching the Seven S’s, students will be asked to reconstruct on paper the newscast on which they took notes according to their personal judgment. Throughout this week, special attention will be given to the last two S’s, slant and sponsor, since this will reconnect with the initial idea of media influencing consumers.

Week Five

Begin Production of Newscast: Class will break into segment/production groups in order to produce newscast. Groups included will be: film, music, news, weather, production, camera people, and advertisements (see Appendix D). Throughout this week, each group will have to plan out their tasks/segments/responsibilities in relation to the newscast, and will be charged to compose an essay analyzing their group tasks according to the 7 S’s of News, to be handed in on the last day of the unit.

Week Six

Production: This week will be devoted to in-class work time on the filming of each group’s task. Many groups will have to work together, since the production and camera groups will be involved in each segment, and the news group will need extras (provided by the film and music groups). As the taping progresses, the raw footage will be fed into an iMovie program, which one or two members of the production crew will be asked to edit together into the final program. Class party while we watch the program!!

Invasion of the Brain Snatchers: Slogans in Our Everyday Life

Directions: Below are twenty company/product slogans that you may see or hear throughout the day on TV or radio. Fill in as many blanks as you can with the company or product name.

Example: Have it your way. Burger King

1. I'm lovin' it. _____
2. Drivers wanted. _____
3. Eat fresh. _____
4. _____ gives you wiiiiings!
5. Get more. Pay less. _____
6. Taste the rainbow. _____
7. Obey your thirst. _____
8. Get the door. It's _____.
9. A truly organic experience. _____
10. Hot eats. Cool treats. _____
11. Zoom zoom. _____
12. Think outside the bun. _____
13. Choosy moms choose _____.
14. Just do it. _____
15. Hungry? Have a _____.
16. The purple pill called _____.
17. Can you hear me now? _____
18. The convenient stores of _____.
19. Grab life by the horns. _____
20. Better ingredients, better pizza. _____

Analyzing Film: Formal and Technical Considerations

I. The Shot

- long shot (establishing shot?)
- close-up (normal/extreme)
- medium shot (“plan américain”)
- low or high angle
- insert shot
- cut-away shot
- reaction shot
- shot/counter shot
- zoom (fast/slow/in/out)
- freeze frame
- slow or fast/reverse motion
- soft focus
- sharp focus
- deep focus
- superimposition
- special effects
- computer-generated images
- grainy or sharp texture
- distorting lens
- filtered lens
- odd point-of-view or angle
- subjective shot
- point-of-view shot
- special other kinds of shots

II. Camera Movement

- stationary camera
- camera on fixed axis: pan (horizontal) or tilt (vertical)
- moving shot (from above/below; inside/outside)
- dolly, tracking, trucking shots
- crane shots
- zoom (often a low-budget dolly)
- hand-held camera or steady-cam
- mixture of pans and tilts, tracking and zooms, etc.

III. Lighting

- back-lighting
- front-lighting
- high-lighting
- various different sources of lighting
- natural vs. artificial sources of light
- black/white contrast (chiaroscuro)
- “unrealistic” lighting
- flat lighting

- light/shadow distribution
- harsh/soft, cold/warm lighting
- high key, low key lighting
- tone and intensity of light (for color as well)

IV. Composition

- position of characters in frame (in foreground/background; center/off-center; near top/bottom of frame; close to edges; cut off; partial view; only certain fragments of a body, face, etc.)
- view of character (unobstructed, hidden, profile, silhouette, linked visually to another or object)
- decor and setting as mood-setter or commentary
- relationship of a character to landscape (does s/he control the space by virtue of his/her position or does the space visually overwhelm the humans?)
- composition/design/visual rhythm/spacing between objects and persons
- symmetrical/asymmetrical . cluttered/empty . absence/excess
- balanced/unbalanced
- dominant contrasts (light/dark, distant/close, big/small, square/circle, etc.)
- arrangement of shapes (lines, texture, color)
- masking and matting (circular, oval, diagonal, etc.)
- iris (in/out)
- use of frame: open (frame is de-emphasized and is a fluid space, allowing relative freedom of movement) or closed (frame is a distinct limit, a self-enclosed miniature world, highly structured and carefully controlled)

V. Editing

- pace, tempo
- rhythm (a sense of spacing, a rate of change and motion, of correlation and interdependence of parts within a larger whole)
- disjointed/continuous
- types of continuity (shot/counter shot, matching cuts, invisible editing, flow cutting)
- dissolve
- fade-in or -out
- iris in or out
- cross-cut
- jump cut
- flip, wipe
- flashback or flash-forward

VI. Sound

- dialogue
- music
- sound effects
- off- and onscreen sound

- diegetic and nondiegetic sound
- voice and sound editing
- silence

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<http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~skidmore/ger292/ws2001/film/formal-technical/considerations.htm>

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 color and design

Film codes & signals

In the spoken or written language that we use, words often have hidden meaning, or a ‘signal’ behind the literal meaning of the word. For instance, the sun is literally a yellowish ball in the sky, but the word ‘signals’ to us meanings such as warmth, cheerfulness, life, etc. A teddy bear is a stuffed, brown plaything but it ‘signals’ comfort and childhood innocence to us. These are known as the denotative (literal) meaning and the connotative (hidden signals and implications) meaning of the word. Films use the same signals or coding systems. For instance if we see a picture of a wooden thing with branches on screen, our mind thinks ‘tree’. If the tree is a gnarled, large, spiky and leafless image, shot in black and white, we read the signal of disaster, threat, maybe horror. If the tree is drawn in bright crayon colors and is rounded and ‘lollipop-like’, it signals ‘children’, ‘happy birdies nesting’, etc. to us.

The codes films use do not only have to be visual. The use of sudden loud music signals ‘something dramatic is about to happen ñ pay attention!’ An extreme close-up shot of a person’s face signals ‘this character’s reaction is very important’. The study of these systems of signs is called semiology.

Most film audiences are able to recognize these film codes; even young children are aware of the basics. As students of film you will learn how to analyze this film language in more detail. Your level of interaction will be greater and you will be able to be more specific about what it is that makes a film ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

Let’s look at some of the elements which make up a film and through which the signals are sent to us. These are the basic criteria through which we can make judgments about a film.

Use of the camera

- 1) Different types of shots are used in a combination to give you information about where and when something is happening, the role of a character and his/her reaction, to draw attention to someone or something, or to create an impression or feeling. There are many variations and combinations of these shots.

2) Different camera movements can be used to create a specific effect, for example:

A character walks into a room and the camera slowly pans across (moves from side to side). We feel as if we are the character looking around. By stopping something, our attention can be focused on this; a feeling of unsteadiness or unease can be created by moving the camera diagonally (rolling). Our brains register that all is not well within this screen world; the camera pulling backwards from a scene (tracking) indicates to the audience that the action that concerns us has now finished. In suspense films the action may start suddenly again at this point, thus surprising or shocking our expectations.

3) *Mise-en-Scène*. This is a French term meaning “what is put into the scene” or frame. It is the director’s job to decide this and what is put in or left out can make a big difference to the signals we receive and the way we decode them.

If a director wants to show that the story takes place in Victorian times, he or she will signal this by the use of period clothes and props. The specific inclusion of a bed and rocking horse will signify a nursery. He may take this one step further and include a window with a storm outside, thus creating atmosphere. He may sit a child on a low stool in the middle of the floor, her toys lined up formally against the walls, thus signaling that she is isolated and repressed by this room and the society she lives in. So the selection of specific objects and images carry broader ideas. Like the words chosen to make up a poem, each item in a frame may be carefully chosen and positioned. The director can draw our attention to an object, a gun, say, by placing it in the foreground, near the camera lens. We then decode that the gun will be important in this scene.

One director who emphasized the importance of *mise-en-scène* was André Bazin, who believed that it encouraged audiences to become more involved in a scene since they had to look actively and interpret what was included.

Lighting is an important signifier as it conveys the mood or atmosphere of the scene which we are observing. In a studio, the lighting is usually from three sources and is set up as follows:

- a) The key light, as the name suggests, is usually the brightest and most influential.
- b) The back light helps counteract the effect of the key light, thus making the figure look more ‘rounded’.
- c) The filler light helps to soften the harsh shadows created by the use of the back and key lights. There may be more than one of these.

The director manipulates this basic format to achieve the atmosphere he wishes to signify. For instance, if he uses only the key and back lights, he will produce a sharp contrast of dark and light areas on the screen as shadows are formed. This is known as low-key lighting. These shadows can be decoded by the audience to suggest an air of mystery, as used in the ‘film noir’ (dark films) of the 1940s and 1950s. They can also be decoded to suggest a world where there is depression and decay, as we find in many modern-day films depicting life in the future. Exaggerated use of low-key lighting can be found in horror films, where underlighting (placing a light under a face or an object) gives a dramatic, often distorting effect. Low-key lighting is often seen as expressive. High-key lighting means that filler lights are used. This will appear much more normal and realistic to our eyes but can also be manipulated to give a more glamorous appearance to a star’s face, or add a ‘twinkle’ to their eyes. It is much ‘softer’ than low-key lighting.

Sound

The extra dimension that sound adds to film has been acknowledged since the early days of cinema, when live music in the form of a piano, organ or even a full orchestra accompanied the images on the silent cinema screen. Although the first demonstration of sound on film is meant to have taken place as early as 1911 in the USA, it was only in 1927 that Warner Bros. released the first feature film with a soundtrack — *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. One of the main reasons for the delay in the implementation of sound technology is that the film companies were unwilling to invest large sums of money into sound equipment when they were making huge profits with silent movies. However, the next commercial sound film *Lights of New York* (1928) was so impressive that it stimulated a rapid and total conversion to sound within the entire film industry. Sound on film today is of course much more sophisticated with a digital synchronized soundtrack combining the elements of dialogue, music, and sound effects (SFX).

Diegetic & nondiegetic sound

The world of the film as we see it on the cinema screen is known as the diegetic world. We can see only a section of this world — the events which the filmmaker has chosen to include in the frame. However, as a modern-day, cinema-going audience we accept that there are things taking place around the edges of what we see on screen. For instance, if a character has gone to make a cup of tea, we accept that they have gone to the kitchen which is part of the “film” house in which they live. However, they are still part of the film world we are watching although they are out of vision.

Often, the edges of what we can see on the cinema screen are extended by the use of sound. We might hear a doorbell ring and we acknowledge that there is someone being let into the house even though we can't see them. Likewise, we might hear the siren of a fire engine and we know that there is a road outside.

When we watch a film, the sounds that we hear can be diegetic or nondiegetic. Diegetic sound is sound which is part of the film world we are watching. This can be dialogue, music or sound effects which come from a source within the film world. The music in this instance will be from a source in the film which we acknowledge could actually be producing music, for example, a CD player or jukebox.

Diegetic sound can occur either on screen or off screen; in other words we can either see the person or object that is making the sound (on screen) or we don't (off screen). Nondiegetic sound is sound which we do not recognize as part of the film world such as a voice-over or background music.

Use of editing

When the filming has been completed, the editing process begins. This is a matter of choosing which shots to include, which to put next to which, and what method to use to join the shots together. So how does the audience interact with the film through the editing?

- 1) **Selecting and ordering the shots.** The director can create a mood or atmosphere by choosing certain shots in a certain order, to build a picture in our minds. We automatically link what is happening in one shot with what happens in those either side of it, as this is what happens in real life. Thus, by showing us a window frame and then a shot of a house, we presume the house is what you see out of that window. In this way we are interacting with the film.

Some directors have exploited this idea to extremes. Lev Kuleshov, a Russian filmmaker in the 1920s experimented by showing shots of an actor in between shots of different objects — food, a dead woman and a child. The audience interpreted the actor's expression (although it never

changed!) as being hungry, sad and affectionate. This is because our brains try to make continuative sense of what we see. This placing together of images is called montage.

Sergei Eisenstein, another Russian filmmaker of the same era, believed that it was more effective if consecutive shots were not obviously linked, as the audience was forced to think and interact more to make the mental jump from shot to shot. Montage can be used effectively in propaganda, where the filmmaker wants the audience to believe in a certain idea or concept and is a common feature in present day advertising and pop videos.

- 2) **Joining the shots.** The director has a choice in the way he or she can join the shots together. Smooth continuity of events and “normality” for the audience is best achieved by using simple cuts. There are many technical rules to be remembered in order that the actors in consecutive shots are not suddenly looking in a different direction for no apparent reason. The director can also manipulate time and space by, say, having a car leaving one place in one shot and arriving at another in the next. We accept the convention that the journey has taken place — we interact by knowing that the film is not real time.

The director can create suspense by using short shots frequently edited with other shots. For example, the murderer breaks into the house, we cut to the victim in the bedroom, and then back to the murderer on the stairs and so on. Shock tactics can be used by jump cuts to a sudden close-up of an expression or object. Expectations can be built up by cutting from one shot to another and back again repeatedly, then suddenly replacing one shot with a totally new one.

Fade out shots, where the screen fades to black, or dissolve shots, where one image is slowly brought in underneath another one, are used to indicate the end of an event and beginning of a new one. These cause us to interact by giving us time to think about what has happened. A third type of cut is a wipe cut, where one part of the screen moves across the other. This is most often done today using computer graphics (swirls, blocks etc.).

The director may also choose to slow the film down at certain moments, thus highlighting say, a romantic moment or creating suspense by delaying the action. We, the audience acknowledge that in film language this is a significant part of the film. He or she may also choose to use black and white film for part or all of the film, which we will automatically read as being events in the past.

<http://www.filmeducation.org/secondary/concept/filmlang/docs/frameset.html>

The 7 S's for Analyzing News *

1. Stories: what's covered and what's left out?
 - Consider the audience.
2. Sequence: what gets priority?
 - Consider who decides the order of stories and their purpose.
3. Scope: how much coverage and how much time spent?
 - Consider what kinds of stories get what kinds of time and why.
4. Structure: how organized using what?
 - Consider graphics, headlines, and formats.

5. Style: how presented by writer/anchor?
 - Consider both verbal and nonverbal cues.
6. Slant: what bias is evident?
 - Consider sources, ownership, political agendas, and socio-cultural influences.
7. Sponsor: how is content shaped by financial supporters?
 - Consider what ads run during the broadcast, product placement, and ownership.

* Taken from Rick Beach, University of Minnesota, CI 5472.

Group Tasks and Responsibilities

Film review crew: Segment will include the review and analysis of two recently premiered movies. Must do a complete written analysis, to be provided for grading, from which the review will stem. Can frame segment from one of several formats, such as an Ebert and Roper "thumbs up/down" style, round table discussion, or critic panel, among others. Crew will also help news and ad crews as extras for segments.

Music review crew: Segment will include the review and analysis of two recently released albums. Must do a complete written analysis, to be provided for grading, from which the review will stem. Can frame segment from one of several formats, such as a top ten list, call-in show, or critic panel, among others. Crew will also help news and ad crews as extras for segments.

News crew: Segments will include local and national news, as well as one human interest feature. Must write a complete script, with an explication on the slant and sponsor influences that apply to the stories. Must choose two main anchors, as well as two to three on-site reporters.

Weather crew: Segments will include one short overview forecast for the start of the program, as well as an in-depth outlook towards the end. Must provide a researched script. Must choose two to three meteorologists to anchor the segments.

Production crew: Group will be responsible for the directing, editing, and general overseeing of entire program. Must do a program storyboard before filming, in order to create a map of the program. Must assign roles within group of director, editors, and segment producers.

Camera crew: Responsibilities lie in the complete filming of each segment. Must complete storyboards for each segment, in order to plan shots, angles, and view.

Advertising crew: Will design and produce five commercial advertisements to be included during breaks in newscast. Ads will concern four products and one television show. Must complete scripts for each ad, including assigned roles for each crew member, drawing upon film and music crews for extras, if needed.