

## How to ... understand and interpret archive film

In the same way that speech is made up of words, sentences, phrases, film contains elements that combine to form an audio-visual 'language'. By looking at these elements closely we can analyse film texts to gain a better understanding and greater enjoyment.

In the education resource "Starting Stories", the British Film Institute suggests breaking the main elements down into 'Cs and Ss' to create a simple and easy to remember way of looking at film.

The elements are:

- Story
- Setting
- Sound
- Character
- Colour
- Camera
- Cutting

The 'Cs and Ss' can be studied on their own, or looked at together to help understand how films are constructed and how we can interpret meaning from the text.

	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Using archive film</b>
<b>Story</b>	The film's narrative. By studying how the action unfolds we can understand what the film 'tells' us about a situation or issue.	Unlike fiction or feature films, not all archive films have an obvious 'story' to follow.  However they all comprise a narrative, or sequence of events. By looking at how these events are ordered we can build the 'story' of the film and better understand what happens, how and why.
<b>Setting</b>	Where and when the film takes place. The setting can give us information about a particular time and place, or affect our understanding of	Many, although not all, archive films are non-fiction. So the settings are often real places, not created by the filmmaker as in fiction films.

	<p>the characters and their motivation.</p>	<p>Real settings allow us to understand historical, geographical, social and cultural differences and compare people and places. They also allow us to look at questions of 'evidence' and how people and places have been represented from different points of view.</p>
<p><b>Sound</b></p>	<p>There are 4 elements of sound: dialogue, music, effects and silence. Sound impacts on the atmosphere or mood of a film and can be used to encourage an emotional response in the audience.</p>	<p>Some archive films, particularly those made by 'amateur' filmmakers are silent.</p> <p>This allows us to be creative in interpreting the footage and ask questions such as:</p> <p>How does a soundtrack affect our understanding?</p> <p>What happens if we add or change a soundtrack? Or remove it from a film with sound?</p> <p>Do we understand the film more with or without sound?</p> <p>How do our assumptions about the action allow us to understand what we would hear?</p>
<p><b>Character</b></p>	<p>The people in the film. By studying how different characters look, behave and relate to each other, we can understand who they are and interpret the overall meaning of the film.</p>	<p>In a similar manner to setting, documentary archive films include real people, rather than fictional characters.</p> <p>By analysing and understanding these real</p>

		<p>characters we can learn about differences in how people look and behave in different places, times and situations.</p> <p>We can also learn more about why a film was made by looking at who has been filmed, how they are represented, why they have been filmed and by whom.</p>
<p><b>Colour</b></p>	<p>Relates to all the colours used in a film, including the effects of lighting. Colour contributes to how a film 'looks' and can affect the atmosphere and mood of a film and how we feel about what happens.</p>	<p>Many films held within archives have been made in black and white. This is due to a number of reasons such as the availability and cost of colour film stock.</p> <p>Colour archive films can challenge assumptions about 'old' film having been made in black and white and allow further understanding of how people, places and events looked in the past.</p> <p>By studying whether the film is in black and white or colour and paying attention to how this affects the atmosphere of the film can help in understanding how and why we respond to films in different ways.</p> <p>Actuality films use available light, rather than lighting scenes for a particular effect. In some cases this can impact on the exposure of the film and the clarity of the image. Looking at how the film has been lit gives us further</p>

		information about how the film was made.
<b>Camera</b>	<p>The camera acts as a 'narrator', leading us through the action of a film. Camera movement allows us to follow the action and directs our attention to specific points. The camera angle affects the perspective and how we look at what happens. The framing of each shot focuses our attention on details within the image.</p> <p>By studying how the camera is used, we can understand what has been included in the film, how and why.</p>	<p>While the camera still 'narrates' the action to a certain extent, archive footage does not always comprise a deliberate use of the camera in order to present an opinion or point of view. (Compare for example, the use of the camera in a television advert with that in an actuality film from the 1900s.)</p> <p>However, the filmmaker has still chosen what to film and how to film it, so there is a deliberate purpose in what is selected and included within the film.</p> <p>By looking at what the filmmaker has chosen to include and how s/he has filmed it – including camera angle, movement and framing, we can learn more about what was relevant or important to them at that time and what they wanted the audience to focus on.</p> <p>Other factors that affect camera movement and framing within archive film include the technology used, the type of camera and the film stock.</p>

		<p>For example, during the early years of filmmaking cameras were large, heavy pieces of equipment with a single, static lens that took only short reels of film lasting just a few minutes. The cameras were also relatively static, mounted on tripods with the camera at eye level and with no capacity for tilt or panning shots. They were 'hand-cranked' which means the operator had to continually turn a handle throughout filming to move the film through the camera. The result is that the films produced consist of a single, unmoving frame within which all the action takes place, sometimes running at variable speeds due to inconsistencies in the operating speed of the camera.</p> <p>Conversely, the introduction of small gauge film technology, beginning with the development of 16mm film stock in 1923, enabled 'amateur' filmmakers to produce their own films that demonstrate a high level of frame movement since the relatively small cameras could be hand-held.</p>
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<b>Cutting</b>	How the film has been cut, or 'edited' organises the story. By looking at how the story is built through editing and the relationship between different shots and scenes, we can understand what the film is 'telling' us and interpret its meaning.	<p>Amateur-made archive films and actuality footage are not always edited solely to further a story, build a narrative or construct a deliberate meaning. Instead, the shots and scenes are organised around other factors such as place or time.</p> <p>Some amateur and semi-professional filmmakers edited their films 'in camera' rather than after they had finished filming. The effect is that the action takes place in the order in which it was filmed.</p> <p>In looking at how an archive film has been cut, we need to question how each of the different scenes relate to each other and what the organising factor might be. By doing so we can understand what the film is about, how it has been constructed and why it was made.</p>
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