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in Singapore

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Developing Multimodal Literacy through Teaching the Critical Viewing of Films in Singapore

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Abstract

The changing nature of communication has accentuated the need to develop multimodal literacy in students. While the conventional way of asking a series of questions to elicit students' comprehension has helped build reading and comprehension skills, teachers could provide more support in the form of the language, pedagogical scaffolds, and technological tools to develop students' critical viewing of multimodal texts. Working with teachers from a secondary school in Singapore, researchers from the Ministry of Education trialed an instructional approach to teach the critical viewing of films. The approach is informed by systemic functional theory, multimodality, and media studies. In this article, we describe the instructional approach and the study conducted to develop multimodal literacy in adolescent students.

Keywords: Literacy, Multimodality, Pedagogy, Films, Instructional Approach, Critical Viewing

Teaser text

How can we guide our students to be critical viewers? This article offers a perspective from Singapore.

In a world saturated with interactive digital media, literacy practices have shifted beyond the reading of print texts to include the viewing of multimodal texts that make meanings through resources such as language, images, animations, and music. The challenge confronting teachers today is how to effectively prepare our adolescent students for the literacy needs of today and for the future.

Kress (2003: 1) argue that it "is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological, and economic factors". Unsworth (2014) and Walsh (2006, 2011) discuss the changed nature of literacy within new communicative contexts and explore the pedagogy needed for 'multimodal literacy' combined with traditional literacy practices. Multimodal literacy (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; O'Halloran & Lim, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2017) is about students learning to view multimodal texts critically and to communicate effectively through multimodal representations. The cause for multimodal literacy grows ever more pressing as interactive digital media and information technology become increasingly ubiquitous in our lives (Jewitt, 2007, Smith, O'Halloran, Podlasov, & Lim, 2013). As educators, we need to develop the knowledge and pedagogy to teach multimodal literacy. We cannot assume that just because our young are growing up in a media-rich world, they will be able to view multimodal representations critically and not be naïve consumers of media texts.

This aim of this article is to introduce an instructional approach, inspired by Systemic Functional Theory, to develop multimodal literacy in adolescent students. We argue that multimodal literacy is developed by providing students with a language to describe and discuss multimodal texts, guiding them on where to look and what to look out for in a multimodal text, and teaching them common media strategies and their typical effects.

In this article, we begin by presenting the context in which the approach to teach multimodal literacy has been developed and discuss its theoretical underpinnings. We also describe the instructional content in the series of lessons to provide teachers with a sense of how the lessons were organized. We then present the methods and review the findings from a study conducted. The article concludes with a discussion on the limitations and implications of the study.

Context

According to the 2017 results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, Singapore's students were found to be adept in reading and navigating online text. Emerging second out of 58 territories, they "did well in higher-order skills such as interpreting and evaluating information. The Ministry of Education (MOE) attributed Singapore's improvement in literacy performance to changes in the way English Language has been taught in schools in the past decade" (Teng, 2008). These include teaching students how to use the language in real-world scenarios and exposing them to a variety of text-types, such as posters and films in class.

The teaching of English Language literacy at the primary and secondary school level is guided by the English Language Syllabus 2010 developed by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division at the MOE. In the 2010 syllabus, two new areas for language learning, namely Viewing and Representing, have been added. With the focus of developing in students "critical viewing skills" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2010: 19), the 2010 syllabus signals that the nature of literacy in Singapore schools has broadened beyond the traditional areas of language learning, that is, reading, writing, and speaking, to a literacy that includes multimodal communication.

In this light, teachers need to know how to guide students in the viewing of multimodal texts and develop multimodal literacy in them. Lim, O'Halloran, Tan & E (2015: 916), working in the context of schools in Singapore, observe, that most of the time, teachers would typically 'teach' multimodal texts by asking a series of questions to elicit students' comprehension. While this has helped build students' reading and comprehension skills, teachers could provide "more support in the form of the language, pedagogical scaffolds and technological tools, to develop understanding of the multimodal text" for students. The authors have attempted to address the challenge of developing multimodal literacy in our students in Singapore by designing a set of instructional content and resources for a lesson package to support teachers in the teaching of critical viewing to adolescent students. The instructional approach was first developed by the authors, as researchers, from the MOE headquarters for the critical viewing of print advertisements (Lim & Tan, 2017) and extended to the viewing of films, described in this article.

Theoretical Perspectives and Framework

While approaches to understanding specific semiotic resources beyond language, such as gestures (e.g. Kendon, 1981), images (e.g. Barthes, 1977), and films (e.g. Bordwell & Thompson, 1979) are not new, a multimodal approach to teach the critical viewing of films, building on knowledge from media studies and film analysis developed over the years. is described in this article.

Multimodality is about understanding how each semiotic resource makes meaning in itself and together in combination. This challenges the conventional paradigm of 'verbal' and 'non-verbal' communication, where language is typically privileged as the dominant or primary semiotic resource. Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016: 3) argue that "if we want to study meaning, we need to be attending to all semiotic resources being used to make a complete whole." As such, multimodal literacy is about the choices across semiotic resources to "fulfil the purposes of the text, the audience and context, and how those choices work together in the organization and development of information and ideas." (Lim & Tan, 2017: 176).

In Lim & Tan (2017), we describe an approach developed to teach the critical viewing of print advertisements for adolescent students. We introduce a meta-language, a set of vocabulary to describe multimodal texts, based on theories in multimodality and systemic functional theory (Halliday, 1994), known as the systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis approach (O'Halloran & Lim, 2014), or the 'systemic approach'. Systemic functional theory

describes semiotic resources as making meanings through fulfilling a range of social functions, such as organising the message, enacting relationships and constructing experience. In this article, the systemic approach is extended to guide the critical viewing of films over six lessons. The instructional content in the first four lessons focuses on the functions of the film text in organising the message (Form), enacting relationships (Engagement), constructing experience (Message), and how the semiotic resources work together in combination (Integration) (Figure 1). The content in the final two lessons focuses on applying the learning through textual analysis (Questioning the text) and the production of a digital storyboard (Artefact Making).

Figure 1 Meta-language in the Systemic Approach

Lesson on Form

The objective of the first lesson is for students to acquire an understanding of the film text genre by recognizing the features in the different types of film texts. Through a teacher-facilitated class discussion on various types of film texts, students are to identify the different features of each type of film, as well as the typical functions these features serve. The film clips selected are representative of a variety of genres as well as based on accessibility (age-appropriateness and interest) that would stimulate class discussion.

Three types of film texts – narrative, documentary, and presentation, are introduced through examples to illustrate the similarities and differences in the textual features. For example, the features of a narrative usually include an arc of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (Bennett, 2013) and the features of a documentary usually include voice-over narration, interviews, re-enactment, and stock footage (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005).

Lesson on Engagement

The objective of the second lesson is for students to learn about the media strategies and their typical effects in specific contexts. For example, students will learn to recognize how salience could be realized through the choices in size and contrast, appreciate how intimacy could be realized through the choices in the distance of the camera shot, and how power could be realized through the choices in camera angles (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In addition, they also learn about other media strategies through examples, such as the choices made in lighting and music, as described below (Figures 2 and Figure 3).

Figure 2
Use of Lighting

Figure 3 Use of Music

Lesson on Message

The objective of the third lesson is for students to build on what they have learnt in the lessons on Form and Engagement, and identify the types of argument used to appeal to the viewers. Students will learn to recognize if the argument in the film text has been made

through strategies realizing authority, reason, or/and emotions (Bruthuaux, 2005). Through exploring a range of film clips, students are guided to identify textual evidences to support their interpretations. Students will also discuss the literal and inferential meanings in the clips, examine the interest(s) of the text producers, such as whether it was economics, educational, or entertainment-driven, and consider the context of production and distribution (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) of the film texts.

Lesson on Integration

The objective of the fourth lesson is for students to explore the relationships across the semiotic resources. They are to discuss the similar meanings made across the semiotic resources to reinforce the message, as well as the apparently contradictory meanings made across the resources to infuse a layer of irony or play, in the film. Students are guided to appreciate the interaction between form and content in the multimodal texts, and how the integration of all the semiotic resources bring about a coherent unified representation to achieve the intended purpose.

Lesson on Questioning the Text

The objective of the fifth lesson is for students to apply their learning by evaluating the effectiveness of the different semiotic resources used to make specific meanings. They will be guided to critique the film text in terms of the form, engagement, message, and integration. As students have been taught the meta-language to describe the film text and the strategies to identify the meaning in the text in the earlier lessons, the role of the teacher is to encourage and challenge the students to develop their critical thinking and reasoning skills. For instance, the teacher might ask questions such as how the text, image(s) and sound(s) work together to communicate a persuasive message as well as what else could be done to make the piece of work (even) more effective for the intended audience.

Educational technology is also harnessed to enable collaborative annotation and peer feedback as students explore various film clips. A free web-based digital annotation tool, *VideoAnt*, is used by students to annotate on the film clip and allow students to view and add on to each other's comments (Figure 4). Selecting the annotate button will pause the video at a specific frame and provide an annotation form for the user to add ideas. Users will also be able to see and respond to annotations created by others. The tool can thus support students' collaboration and the building on of each other's ideas. It also facilitates students to explore other viewpoints, justify their own views, and use the feedback to strengthen their arguments (Figure 5).

Figure 4

Students Discussing and Responding to Peers' Annotation of Film Clip on VideoAnt

Figure 5

Students' Collaborative Annotations on VideoAnt

Lesson on Artefact Making

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The objective of the final lesson is for students to apply their learning through the making of a digital storyboard. Students, work in groups of threes and fours, to use a free web-based educational technology tool, *Storyboard That*, to produce a storyboard of a film text. Thereafter, they will complete a worksheet to explain the choices that have made in the design of the text - in particular, how the various semiotic resources work together in communicating its message.

Methods

Classroom Context and Participants

The study was implemented in a government (public) secondary school in the northern part of Singapore, in a middle-class neighborhood with mostly public housing. The students are of average ability and most of them live around the school. Prior to this, the head teacher had attended a workshop where the researchers from the MOE headquarters presented on the systemic approach to teach print advertisements. The head teacher, together with three other like-minded teachers, decided to trial the extension of the systemic approach in her school and worked with the researchers to design and develop the lesson packages.

The researchers and the teachers submitted the proposal for the study to the Singapore National Research Foundation and Interactive Digital Media in Education, eduLab Programme, and was awarded funding support. In Singapore, researchers from the MOE headquarters are involved in translational research where they seek out opportunities to bridge research and practice by applying theories developed in academia into instructional strategies to inform the pedagogical practices in the classroom. The collaboration between the researchers from MOE headquarters and the teachers described in this article is one of the many examples of translational research efforts in the eduLab programme to improve teaching and learning in the Singapore classroom.

The team decided to implement a series of lessons in a class of secondary two students (14-year-olds, US equivalent of Grade 9) in the school. The secondary two class is from the express stream where students are on a four-year course leading up to the Singapore-Cambridge GCE O Level examination. The teachers identified a class where the students were observed to have difficulties in discerning the meanings in multimodal texts and were unable to identify textual evidence to support their responses to the text. The teachers wanted to help their students to move beyond a superficial and naïve response to multimodal texts to a critical and informed interpretation that is supported by textual evidence. The systemic approach, with instructional content and strategies, was carried out over a series of six one-hour lessons.

Researchers and Teachers' Roles

The researchers' main role was to share their expertise and experience to facilitate the adaptation of the systemic approach developed earlier for the teaching of print advertisements to the teaching of films in this study. The researchers co-developed the pre and post-tests, and planned the lessons with the teachers. The lessons were conducted by the three teachers, with each teaching two lessons. The head teacher and the researchers were observers and took field notes during the lessons. The researchers also conducted a

focus group discussion with the students after the series of lessons, and engaged in reflective dialogue with the teachers after each lesson, as well as at the end of the study.

Research Process

The process the teachers undertook in adapting the systemic approach to teach the critical viewing of films began with the identification of students' needs and the co-development of lesson plans and resources with the researchers. A pre-test was conducted before the enactment of the lessons. Each lesson was followed by a half-hour post-lesson discussion involving the researchers, the head teacher and the teacher who conducted the lesson. The researchers shared their observation notes from the lesson and prompted the teacher to reflect on the lesson. This included what the teacher felt went well in the lesson, what did not and could have been done differently, as well as areas which they felt students would need further support. After all the lessons were completed, a post-test was conducted with the students. This was followed by a focus group discussion with a mixed-ability group of five students, selected by the teacher. The students were asked questions such as what they liked and disliked about the lessons, what they had learnt, and how they felt the lessons could be improved. At the end of the study, the researchers also facilitated an hour's dialogue with all the teachers to discuss the impact of the series of lessons and their reflections from the experience. The data was then analyzed by the teachers and researchers, with the project report written by the researchers.

Findings

Pre and Post-Tests

The teachers analyzed the results of the pre and post-tests. The pre and post-tests each comprised questions based on a film clip that allow students to demonstrate their appreciation of how language, images, and audio made meaning individually and in combination. The analysis indicated a noticeable difference between the pre-test and post-test for many students, suggesting that there were learning gains for most students.

The first observation from the analysis was that many students were able to use the metalanguage and had a heightened awareness of the media strategies used in the film. As a result, students were generally able to cite textual evidence to support their responses to questions based on the text. For example, when a student was asked for his reaction to the film clip, his response in the pre-test was, "It kept me in suspense, wanting to know what the film was for". However, the same student's response in the post-test was richer and more extensive. He said, "It is entertaining and funny to watch and it captures the audience's attention as they want to know what happens next. There is also a part where their facial expressions changed slowly to keep the audience in suspense using dramatization". The response from the student indicated an awareness and appreciation of the media strategies used in the film to engage the viewers as well as an appropriation of the meta-language taught.

The second observation from the analysis was that some students were able to demonstrate a deeper understanding of how arguments were constructed to persuade viewers to their point of view in the film clip. For example, when a student was asked how the film clip was designed to persuade the viewers, the student in the pre-test, commented that, "It

persuades frequent flyers to choose Virgin Atlantic as their airline on their next trip by showing that their experience flying would be better than others due to the exceptional service". However, the same student, in the post-test, was able to identify the media strategies used and the effects they had in strengthening the persuasion of the text. He said, "The film uses direct gaze to make the audience more involved, along with directly calling out to the audience. They used emotions to persuade the audience". Likewise, another student in the pre-test wrote that, "The film persuades the audience by introducing characters with gifts". In the post-test, the same student, however, was able to use the meta-language introduced and observed that, "The film persuades the audience by the characters' expressions, color contrast, and humor".

The third observation from the analysis was that some students were able to show a more nuanced appreciation of the ideas and layers of meanings in the film clip. For example, when asked what the film clip was about, a student in the pre-test, answered, "The story is about children born with special ability, to predict, to have fast reflexes, smart etc". The same student, in the post-test, was able to articulate that, "The story is about this restaurant who wants to be promoted for being a green and environmentally-friendly restaurant and hence uses recycling materials to help others in need". There was a noticeable shift from a literal description of the message in the film to one that was more inferential in meaning. From the comparison and contrast of the students' written responses, before and after the series of lessons, it was noted that students were able to apply what they have learnt, and demonstrated an appropriation of the meta-language and an appreciation of the media strategies to engage the viewers. They were also able to provide responses that reflected a more critical understanding of the ideas and layers of messages in the film.

Focus Group Discussion with Students

In the focus group discussion with a group five students, the students reflected that they were now better able to describe and discuss the meanings made in a film text. They were also able to appreciate some of the media strategies used to engage the viewers in the film. A student described herself as more "astute viewer" as the lessons have given her the vocabulary and knowledge to view films more critically.

On the conduct of the lessons, students commented that they liked the opportunities to engage in collaborative annotation and discussion in class. They also liked how the video annotation tool enabled them to annotate videos easily, as well as to receive feedback and engage with their peers. Some students reflected that the lessons have not only encouraged, but also challenged them to have a deeper understanding of the meanings in films, and the other multimodal texts they encounter. While students noted that the content in the lessons would not be explicitly tested in the national examinations as the assessment is print-based and does not include the viewing of films, they agreed that they have acquired skills that would be relevant and useful in their daily lives.

Reflective Dialogue with Teachers

In the discussion with the teachers, many of them observed that the students were more excited and engaged. A teacher reflected that "the engagement and excitement levels are noticeably higher than if we were to carry out this lesson package with a teacher-centric approach." Teachers also found the systemic approach with the instructional content and

strategies useful, as they surmised, from the post-test results and the in-class discussions, that their students have become more discerning and evaluative of media messages.

The teachers observed that the students' responses were of higher quality as compared to the responses they had provided in the pre-test and that they were able to use the metalanguage to describe the textual features and discuss the meanings made in the films more confidently. For example, a teacher commented that, "With the focus on systematically teaching the students a suite of analytic skills to better comprehend the nuances of films, I observed that the students' insights had more depth and they were better equipped to discuss a wider range of topics in films."

The teachers also commented on how the use of educational technology has enabled students to collaborate and engage with each other's interpretation of the films. Students were also able to make a digital storyboard of a film to represent their understanding through the use of educational technology. There was also teacher growth in the confidence and comfort in harnessing educational technology for teaching and learning. A teacher reflected that, "After this project, I realized that so much more can be achieved when a suitable ICT platform is used in class... Now when I plan my lessons, I consider how ICT can be exploited to give every student a voice and support peer assessment to enhance the students' learning experience." Likewise, another teacher reflected that, "This project was a steep learning curve for me as it made me realise how much more I had to gain in skills and knowledge of how to infuse videos and ICT in general, and also in the teaching of critical viewing of film and enhancing digital literacy".

Discussion and Implications

The students showed that they were mostly also able to apply their learning in the analysis of the film texts and the making of the storyboard. Interviews with the teachers and students affirmed the value of the approach and instructional content used to teach the critical viewing of films.

Nonetheless, the study has also highlighted specific areas for improvements. The first area for improvement that surfaced through the discussion with the teachers, was to have more time devoted to teachers' preparation. Some teachers felt that, while the systemic approach was useful, they had to manage both the introduction of a new meta-language and the use of unfamiliar educational technological platforms. While a half-day workshop was conducted to introduce the teachers to the systemic approach, it would be useful to incorporate practice sessions, where the teachers apply the approach to peer-teach each other, with feedback from the researchers, as well as to try out the educational technology platforms to be used for themselves. This would help them be more accustomed to the instructional content in the lesson packages and be more comfortable with the educational technology platforms before implementing the lesson series for students.

The second area for improvement was to provide more time and space for students to discuss and work with the film texts. In the current study, the lessons felt rushed at times, with the teachers reporting feeling the pressure to cover all the instructional content prepared for each lesson. Due to a tight national curriculum, it was a challenge for the teachers to carve out more time beyond the six one-hour lessons for experimentation.

Nonetheless, the teachers agreed that in order for the learning to be more effective, more time and space for students group discussions should be provided. For instance, it would be especially useful to have two lessons, instead of one, for the lesson on engagement, so that students would have more time to understand and appreciate the range of media strategies used in the films. It would also be useful to have an additional lesson on questioning the text so that students can analyze and discuss their responses to more examples of film texts. Likewise, it would be productive to have another lesson on Artefact Making, so that students would be able to present their work to the class and explain the choices they have made in their design and production of the digital storyboard.

The third area for improvement was to make more explicit links between the critical viewing of film texts to the national examinations. As the national examinations do not require students to demonstrate the skills to analyze and interpret films critically, some students felt that the skills, learnt through the lesson series, were a 'good to know' rather than a 'need to know'. A task has been introduced in 2013 in the English examinations, "which requires students to answer questions in response to a text that contains visuals to test their appreciation of how language and visual images interact to create meaning and impact" (Spolsky & Sung, 2015: 71). In response, the researchers had developed sample video-based questions which are aligned to the task so as to strengthen the relevance between the lessons and the national assessment. After discussion with the teachers, the video-based questions were not trialed in this study due to time constraints, but have been used by other teachers in subsequent adoptions.

Following this study, the systemic approach, with further enhancements, has been adopted by more teachers in Singapore schools. The researchers also continued to conduct workshops for teachers on multimodal literacy to teach the critical viewing of print advertisements, films, and have recently extended it to online news as well. Lim, Kwan & Poh (in press) describe a networked learning community on multimodal literacy formed by researchers and teachers who have adopted the systemic approach to the teaching of multimodal texts.

The English Language Syllabus in Singapore is progressive in broadening its focus beyond the learning of language to developing multimodal literacy. Students are expected to be able to analyze a variety of multimodal texts as critical viewers and to communicate with effective multimodal representations. It is hoped that through introducing the instructional approach that has been implemented in a secondary school in Singapore in this article, we can contribute to the global conversation on how multimodal literacy in our students can be intentionally cultivated and effectively taught.

TAKE ACTION!

Harness educational technology to develop multimodal literacy by:

- Exploring online repository of licensed film clips to introduce age-appropriate and interesting film texts for students (for example, the Fandango Movieclips Channel on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/user/movieclips)
- 2. Hosting lesson slides and links to film clips on a free digital bulletin board so that students can access the lesson resources easily (for example, Padlet:

- https://padlet.com/)
- 3. Leveraging a free web-based collaborative video annotation software to facilitate students' discussion of film clips (for example, VideoAnt: https://ant.umn.edu)
- 4. Using a free-version of a digital story creator for students to design and make their multimodal texts (for example, Storyboard That: http://www.storyboardthat.com)

NOTES

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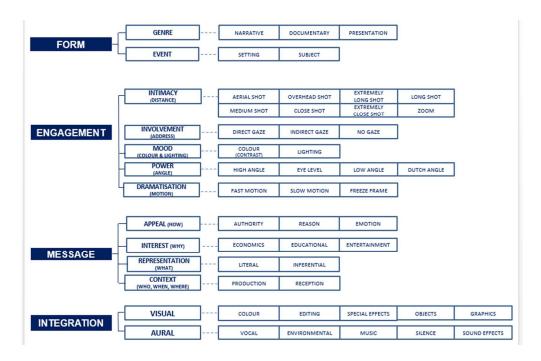
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MORE TO EXPLORE

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Meta-language in the Systemic Approach

Use of Lighting

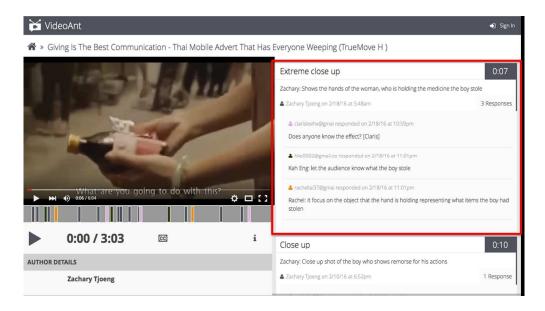
Lighting, such as low-key lighting (scene shot in darkness or with dark shadows) suggests mood of uncertainty, gloom, mystery, and danger (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005). An example of this is in Olivier Megaton's Taken 3 (2015), in which an extreme use of low-key lighting creates a gloomy atmosphere in the scene where Bryan Mills is on the run to evade police pursuit. In contrast to low-key lighting, high-key lighting tends to create a hopeful mood (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005). High-key lighting is used extensively in comedies where shadows cast by the key light are eliminated and the subject's facial details washed out. High-key lighting sets the bright and optimistic mood of Stephen Frears' Florence Foster Jenkins (2016). The lighting used complements the happy atmosphere in which Florence meticulously wraps her recorded compositions in Christmas paper, thinking that the recipients would be elated to hear her singing (Frame 57:00).

Use of Music

Music contributes to coherence in a scene, where there is shot to shot transitions. Music also help viewers interpret the mood of a scene (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005). Typically, the tone and mood in the visual event is matched with its corresponding music and sound. An example of this is in Taken 3 (2015), where Bryan and his friends are enjoying a leisurely round of golf and the accompanying music has a lively upbeat tempo that reinforces the light-hearted tone of the scene (Frame 13:33). In the scene where Bryan trudges in the tunnel after successfully evading the police, the music is slow in tempo and soft in volume, which corresponds to the fatigue, grief and despair he displays - reinforcing a somber mood (film segment 23:33 to 24:32). A more urgent, up-tempo, and percussive score contributes to a scene's emphasis on action and suspense (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005). In the scene where Bryan breaks into his deceased wife's car (that is in police custody) to download her GPS history, the music gradually increases in volume and tempo and progresses to a breathless, staccato rhythm that creates an atmosphere of haste and urgency (film segment 37:25 to 38:12). This reinforces his race against time (with the police approaching) and generates suspense and anticipation in the viewer. Music can also be used to establish an ominous mood and trigger feelings of horror and fear (Sipos, 2010). An example is John Leonetti's Annabelle (2014), where protagonist John Form presents a vintage doll, Annabelle, as a gift to his expectant wife, Mia (film segment 10:54 to 11:57) The music makes the viewers feel uneasy and the quavering high-pitched sounds as the camera zooms into the doll generates a sense of apprehension and fear.



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