

Chapter 2

The skater and the Old Man: multimodal design and moving image production

In this chapter, we will look at the moving image. Its multimodal nature has been recognised in many different ways throughout the history of film theory. The theorist Christian Metz, who wanted to propose a way to analyse film as a language, decided that he would have to identify what aspects of film properly constituted this ‘language’, and chose some elements of the practices of filming and editing, calling these the ‘cinematic’. The other modes that go to make up film – dramatic action, music, and so on – he excluded from his analysis, calling these the ‘filmic’ (Metz, 1974). Our approach will combine these two, in what we have called the *kineikonic mode* – literally, the mode of the moving image (Burn and Parker, 2001, 2003).

We will analyse part of a short video made by three GCSE students in the UK, and will concentrate on the function of *representation*. Our analysis of the video will ask: how do pre-planned and improvised aspects of design and production shape the kinds of representation made by the filmmakers?

Skateboarding documentary video: discourse

The film was made in 2000 by a group of three GCSE Media Studies students (15 and 16 years old) who attended a media arts college in Cambridge, UK. Their task was to create their own documentary, and within that form to make something that reflected the specific characteristics

of the 'tribute' video genre. An example of this genre (a video about the Manchester United footballer Eric Cantona) was shown at school and was critically analysed before filming began.

The students' film runs for approximately five minutes and takes as its subject matter 'skateboarding'. It situates itself within a quite specific genre – the documentary – and it functions within that genre in a number of interesting ways. In one sense it is speaking directly to skateboarders, or to 'youth' generally, and the discourse which this orientation invokes informs the content of the film, the music, and the close attention to particular skateboarding moves or tricks. However, a second discourse is operating which links the filmmakers to the audience of their teachers and examiners, a discourse that is driven by the need to show, through practical production, an understanding of the genre and its conventions, with the ultimate aim of gaining accreditation towards a public examination.

Design and production

We will analyse one section from the video, taken from approximately mid-way through the film (Figure 1). In this sequence the conception of the authoritarian adult world is represented by an elderly man who attempts to move the skateboarders away from the precinct outside an office complex where he works. We want to look in some detail at the mixture of gesture, speech, sound, action, music, words and to consider how this multimodal ensemble is shaped through decisions made during the processes of filming and editing.



: Figure 1: six screengrabs from the skateboarding video

To begin with, the boys making the film have a planned set of representational resources, integrated by the logic of the kineikonic mode, and designed using specific conventions of the tribute video they have studied. They have an idea of what kinds of shots they want, noted down as a shot list. These shots aim to construct the subjects of their documentary as skateboarding

heroes. They have also been asked to include an interview sequence; they plan to interview one of the skateboarders, one of his friends, and a number of passersby.

Secondly, they have two skateboarders, members of their own year group at school. In one sense, these are the subjects of the documentary, to be represented; in another sense, they are the material substance of the representation – they are, as it were, acting themselves. This will happen in a consciously-designed way: they will be directed by the film-makers, rather than being filmed in the so-called ‘fly-on-the-wall’ manner. As we shall see, however, they are also collaborators in the design and production processes, in ways not necessarily anticipated by the film-makers.

Thirdly, they have the camera, and those aspects of the kineikonic it affords – framing, shot distance, camera angle, focus, light control, camera movement.

Fourthly, they have the editing process, and use a Media 100 digital editing workstation. Here, they have the final combinatorial affordances of kineikonic production, such as the assembly and trimming of shots, the construction of transitions, the articulation of the soundtracks.

So far, these modes and media are familiar, and suggest an orderly, conventional view of how design and production works in the moving image: scenes are planned, filmed, edited; representational resources are gathered, synthesised, assembled.

However, nothing in the real world is as neat as this. The analysis should take in the typical raggedness and improvisation that is part of any creative enterprise, any effort of communication. In the case of this film, this improvisation was always a part of the work. As well as planning shots, the young film-makers were always on the lookout for serendipitous moments to capture which would fit the discourse of a rebellious subculture they wanted to represent. We will see this improvisation as a form of dramatic process.

Dramatic Design

During the filming of the skateboard set-pieces, outside a university building in the city where they were filming, an unexpected event occurred. An irritable man emerged from the building, and tried to send the skateboarders away. This episode was clearly a routine part of the lives of skateboarders, whose choice of locations for the best skating often leads to territorial and generational conflict.

We can view such events as a kind of social drama, in which both parties in the conflict are playing out their chosen social roles. Erving Goffman's theory of the dramatisation of social selves (1959) offers a framework for the analysis of such real life drama. These roles, he makes clear, are constructed selves, put together for public display, in contrast to the hidden selves we allow to appear in the 'backstage' areas of our lives, especially homes. In our film, then, the clash between the skateboarders and the old man assume a kind of ritual quality. There is a heightening of dramatic display, exemplified in the old man's exaggerated gestures shooing the

boys away, and in the antagonistic tone and words of one of the skaters, who says 'I don't speak English'.

However, when we consider that, at this moment, a film is being made about the skateboarders, it becomes clear that the processes of representation through dramatic action are working as a series of layers of kinds of role-play with quite different *modalities*, or truth-claims (see chapter 4 for a fuller account of modality).

Firstly, there are the skaters, who, though going through their usual routines, are performing these for the camera, and so presenting a kind of dramatic display which, though rooted in their usual display, has a different kind of status. It is produced as a conscious representation, and includes processes which can be seen as a kind of proto-editing occur, as the boys break off a trick, repeat it, do it to order, in the kinds of disjunctive articulation typical of moving image production. This is a kind of drama; but its disjunctiveness is a design for the moving image, not for the usual display of the skaters in 'real' life, nor for the theatre, in both of which continuity is the rule.

As far as this process is concerned, we can see the film-makers and the skateboarders as collaborators in the design of the film. The skaters deploy physical action, the informal choreography of skateboarding, and the performance of a subcultural role complete with costume, gestural and spoken repertoires, and attitude! The film-makers deploy the tools of the moving image. The semiotic principles informing the whole process are those of the kineikonic mode, so

that all movements, gestures, speech are modelled by the framing, angle and movement of the camera, and the intentionality of the envisaged edit.

Secondly, the moment the old man enters the scene, the role-play of the skaters changes. Instead of a performed re-enactment of their routines, they move towards the kind of improvised role-play which is real life, as Goffman describes it. The battle with the old man is a real battle; the dramatised documentary becomes real life. However, the boys still know they are being filmed. This drama, then, has a double ontological status – it is being played out as real life performance, and as mediated performance for the camera.

Thirdly, the old man does not know he is being filmed. For him, then, the event has the status of life, unmediated by any representational process other than the first level of representation involved in the ‘presentation of self in everyday life’, as Goffman puts it.

Before analysing the text of this sequence, we need finally to consider the representational work of the film-makers at the point the old man enters their film. At this point, then, there is a change in the process of design. Up to that point, they have had control of all the variables of the kineikonic mode – the dramatic presentation of the skateboarders, the choice of location, the framing of shots and the movement of the camera. At the point of the old man’s entrance, not only does the ontological status of the dramatic representation gain another layer, but also the process of kineikonic design changes. Again, drama offers good analogies. Before the old man’s entrance, the filming is like a scripted drama, carrying out pre-designed semiotic moves. After the entrance, it becomes like improvised drama. New representational material arrives as the life-

drama is played out. A new temporality comes into play, the continuous realtime of everyday performance, so the filming can no longer operate as proto-editing, capturing disjunctive fragments independently of the temporal sequence and duration of real life events. Nor do they have complete control over framing and shot distance. We will consider, in our analysis, how this improvisatory, realtime camera design, the characteristic mode of documentary film based on actual events, is combined with editing, and with the footage from the pre-planned sequences.

At the same time, we must consider how the *representational function* of this sequence is changed by the arrival of the Old Man. In effect, this is a narrative sequence, but the original plan for the tribute video is a particular kind of narrative: that of an Actor who demonstrates his skills. In terms of what in language would be called transitivity, this is a grammatical sequence which is intransitive – the Actor acts; but not upon any object or Goal. This is a hero without a villain. At the moment of the Old Man's arrival, the narrative changes from the intransitive tribute structure to a transitive structure – the Villain arrives; his actions are directed at the skateboarders, while he in turn becomes the Goal of their trespass and rebellious language.

Leo and the Old Man: the kineikonic and its subsidiary modes

We will consider the impact each mode has in the articulation of the sequence described above by considering the relationship between mode and meaning. To do this we will first look at each mode in turn, then move on to look at the way they are integrated by the kineikonic mode, through the interplay of shots, their design and order and their relationship with one another in space and through time.

Music: the contextual metaphor

At the beginning of this sequence the fast tempo and insistent rhythm of thrash metal music sets up a clear opposition between the filmmakers and the establishment values they are about to contest during the interchange between the old man and Leo. The music functions here to amplify the representation of the skateboarders as heroes, and to set up a cultural reference point for an insider audience – clearly the choice of music reflects the kinds of tastes and preferences of skateboarders and thereby suggests a value position. The music is edgy, aggressive – the lyrics spell out the kind of disenfranchised perspective taken by outsiders in relation to a perceived mainstream set of values. Finally, it acts as a rhythmic determinant: many of the shots are cut on the 4/4 beat, so that the music track functions here, then, as what van Leeuwen calls the ‘initiating rhythm’ (van Leeuwen, 1985). Here, an aspect of the organisational structure of the text across two subsidiary modes of the kineikonic (image and music) functions to support the text’s representation of the skaters and its orientation to its audience.

Action: determining agency

The actions of Leo and the old man are framed in a way that clearly defines our understanding of agency in this sequence. Leo is invested with the characteristics of ‘hero’ through the use of the skateboard and the appropriation of the public space outside the office building. He performs a series of jumps using the skateboard, involving actions that require timing, speed and co-ordination. The camera describes a space for him to move through, then pans with him to reinforce our sense of identification with his actions and his right to left, foreground to background trajectory. His actions on the arrival of the old man are to stop the tricks, and begin a

territorial circling of the precinct. As we have seen, this initiates an ontologically different kind of dramatic action, in which the pre-designed performative segments give way to a continuous display of antagonism at real-life level; while the intransitive actions of the tricks are succeeded by the transitive act of territorial appropriation, with the old man as Goal.

Shot level: the signification of order

There are four shots spliced together in different arrangements/combinations to make up this sequence. First, the skateboard trick shot. Second, the pan across, right to left, as Leo skates across the precinct. Third, a medium longshot of the old man's reactions. Fourth, a response shot, Leo 'talking back' to the old man. What is interesting about the arrangement of these shots is the way in which their position relative to one another suggests the dynamic nature of the argument between the two protagonists. A clear example of this is the way the old man's gesture of exasperation – used as the cue for the on-screen title 'old man gives up' – is actually taken from an earlier series of events. The fact that it is positioned later in the narrative sequence – removed from its 'real-time' position – shows the extent to which the editing process creates different articulations of the spatial and temporal elements of the film footage to alter the meaning; in this case, to intensify the meanings already expressed in the sequence.

Written language

The use of titling here has a practical, intermodal purpose. Because the boy operating the camera is unable to get close to the old man, and is having to improvise from the position he happens to be in, the old man is further away than is ideal. The arrival of the villain of the piece, if this were pre-planned, would probably be shown in closeup. We can tell that the cameraman wants to

achieve this effect, as he zooms in on the old man when he realises what is happening. The zoom on the camcorder only takes him to a medium longshot, however. The boys solve this problem, that the old man is not represented in the foreground, by using the title 'Enter Old Man' (and later, 'Old Man Gives Up'). The writing lends the necessary salience, names the villain, contributes the alarming properties of the colour red to the visual design of the piece, and generally amplifies the dramatic status of this Actor.

Speech: the accentuation of agency

There is only one moment where speech features in this sequence. During the confrontation between the old man and Leo the music fades out just enough for the words 'I don't speak English' to be heard. This sarcastic remark by Leo, his rejoinder to the man's protests, serves to accentuate his role in relation to 'established order' – he is the heroic Actor, the old man the villainous Goal of his remark. In common parlance, Leo has the last word. Again, this is both 'designed' by Leo as part of the real-life improvisation of the event, and re-designed in intensified form as an element on the soundtrack by the editors.

Movement over time: compression and repetition

We have already mentioned the fact that events are re-ordered in this sequence in order to emphasise a particular meaning. The management of time through the editing process allows for easy reconfiguration of order, or of a number of alternative orders, all of which could be saved digitally and compared. Key moments can be slowed to accentuate their importance. Trick shots in the early sequences are accorded high value by being repeated and/or slowed during the editing process. Superfluous material, or moments which threaten to disrupt the narrative or

create ambiguity in relation to the key protagonists can be easily excised. In this sequence we can easily discern the fact that of the four shots set up, none appear to be used comprehensively. Each one has been trimmed or altered in some way to simultaneously keep the pace of the narrative high and the meaning clear. As we have seen, however, this disjunction of realtime events to create new meanings happens both in filming and editing for the pre-planned sequences; but only during editing in the improvised sequence, since the camera is caught up in the realtime events.

Designing social space

The spaces occupied by people and objects in this sequence is also significant. An example of movement through space that enhances the opposition between protagonist and antagonist, is the freedom of movement accorded to Leo and the fixed, confined presence of the old man. Similarly, we, as spectators, are spatially much closer to Leo than we are to the old man until, crucially, the old man admits 'defeat', at which point we are taken closer to him than we have been before. This makes a virtue of necessity – the cameraman really is further from the old man than he is from Leo. However, since the social reason for this in real life – the enmity between the boys and the man – is identical with the relationship the filmmakers wish to represent, the physical distance serves as an appropriate signifier of social distance. The only problem remaining is that a closer shot is required to accord appropriate villainous status to the old man – a problem solved, as we have suggested above, by the use of titling.

Pulling the modes together

These elements are blended through the editing process, which we can imagine as a kind of multimodal mixing-desk. Its function is not simply that of assembly, but of re-design. Different editing software packages will adopt variations on a basic interface design, but the principles remain similar. There is a viewing window where each clip can be viewed. An edit bar, where clips can be moved along a time line and set against other elements, also time-based, such as music and sound effects. There is also a ‘shelf’ or ‘bin’ where imported clips can be stored as visual icons before being viewed in the main window. When clips are dragged into the edit bar it is possible to extract the audio from each clip and, if necessary, to replace it with another audio source. In essence the editing software represents a mechanism for viewing the modes separately in disaggregated form, for provisionally joining them to experiment with combinatorial effect, and for altering scalar values such as brightness or colour saturation, speed, volume and so on.

The interplay of shots that make up the exchange between Leo and the old man suggest a purposeful remix of modal properties through the governing mode (the kineikonic), which orchestrates the whole message. How does this happen and what are the traces of the remixing process we might look for in the finished moving image production?

We suggest that there are three important principles of multimodal combination at work in this piece.

Firstly, there are what Metz (1974) called the *pre-filmic*. Properly speaking, these are ‘found’ semiotic material, which are made in modes which do not refer to the kineikonic. In the case of this film, there are two obvious examples – the music, and the social performance of the old man.

Neither of these has been made with film in mind; both are appropriated by the makers to signify elements of the cultural values invested in the film.

Secondly, there are what we will call *pro-filmic* resources. These are modal assemblies made for the kineikonic. Here, the obvious example is the skateboarders. They assemble a performed version of their cultural selves using the movements, rhythm, costume, gesture, speech of skateboarding; but articulated within the kineikonic mode, already shaped by its organising structures.

Thirdly, there are the framing, assembly and value-scaling modes of the camera and edit suite, that element of the kineikonic in which Metz found the *cinematic* language. Here, the signifying properties of camera frame, distance, movement, angle, and edit suite assembly and rescaling of digital strips of moving image and sound, are deployed by the film-makers.

Finally, there is the question of how the modes combine, raising two important questions which we have referred to in the introduction to this book. One is the question of *functional load* – which mode has a stronger weight, or a determining function, at any given moment? The second is how do the modes impact on each other?

For these last two questions, we will refer to two examples. Firstly, the combination of music and speech in the soundtrack. It is clear that, throughout this episode, music is given the dominant position through volume – any speech of the old man's is literally drowned out. That this is a signifier of the power attributed to the skaters by the filmmakers is evident when the

intermodal weighting is reversed, at the point where Leo makes his sarcastic rejoinder. Here, then, the relation between the modes is one of *opposition* (the music against the old man's speech); and *complementarity* (the music and Leo's speech).

The second example is of the filming of the skating tricks. The three modes in play are the choreographed movements of Leo, the camera's construction of the shot, using a zoomed closeup and a movement which follows the movement of the skater; the music; and the editing of the shot, which is determined by the rhythm and length of the skateboard moves, and by the rhythm of the music. These modes are all in a *complementary* relation, working to produce a common rhythm, a common cultural discourse, and a narrative placement of the skater at the centre of a sequence. It is hard to say that any of these modes carry a greater weight – they seem balanced in their weighting.

The final example is of the use of titling to aggrandise the old man. As we have seen, this is a *compensatory* use of one mode to accomplish what cannot be done in another, in this case, to raise the salience of the old man in a shot which had to be further away than was ideal. In this case, the red letters have a particular salience – they have an initiating function, leading us into the desired viewing of the sequence.

Conclusion

A combination of two kinds of analysis here – of the processes of design and production, and of the finished text itself – reveals a good deal about the way in which this text functions to

represent an idea, a culture, a group of people. It shows that the process of film-making depends on how the film-makers construct a representation in the kineikonic mode through the disjunctive narrative of the moving image, through the importation of musical rhythm and style, through a witty and stylish combination of dramatic event, text, speech, location. But it also demonstrates how making the moving image is itself a kind of drama, where the burden of representation shifts between participants in the process of making the film. It shows something of how the material bodies and movements of the Actors oscillate between the realtime drama of everyday life and performance for the camera; and how the film-makers themselves are caught up in this social drama, as partial observers, and as improvisatory re-makers, carving out a new version of the event.

Methodological points

1. Because the moving image is such an extended process of design and production, it can be valuable to take a diachronic view (across time) of this process. In this case, the succession of modes and media used, how they come into play, what they are useful for, who deploys them, can all be studied.
2. This analysis focuses on the function of *representation* – how particular ideas and narratives are constructed. A different analysis might focus on the *orientational* function – how this text addresses its two different audiences of peers and examiners.
3. The notion of drama as a mode is tentatively used here. Clearly, the moving image subsumes drama, itself a complex and powerful ensemble of modes, in certain ways. The history of the cinema is closely related to drama, using sets, actors, directors, scripts,

lighting and so on in ways originally derived from and still closely related to theatre. On the other hand, as we have tried to show here, any representation of human beings in documentary style is likely to encounter other forms of dramatic performance, those which Goffman identifies as the processes by which we construct the public selves through which we live our lives. This is a complex area, and there remains much to be worked on.

4. There are important aspects of the kineikonic mode as a multimodal ensemble which we have only touched on here. One of these is rhythm, which, as Bordwell and Thompson (2001) remark, is not well understood. See van Leeuwen, 1985 and 1999 for some thought-provoking ideas on this.
5. The data collected to inform analysis of the moving image can be varied. In this case, we have relied only on observations of the filming and editing process, and on the final texts.

Other data to collect can be:

- storyboards and other design materials
 - filmed processes of design and production
 - interviews with participants
 - screengrabs of editing software, especially the editing 'timeline'
6. In the analysis of moving image texts, it may be helpful, as we have done here, to use screengrabs to represent shots. However, it may also be important to notate other aspects of the text, to show how, for instance, the image sequence, the editing structure, the vocal track and music are articulated. See van Leeuwen's article on rhythm in film (1985) for an example of how different modes can be tabulated.