# STORYTELLING ON FILM

INTRODUCTION

Story is at the heart of any good film. Special effects, setting, stars – unless there is a good story to be told – are meaningless.

Traditionally, stories were passed down from generation to generation by the storyteller – someone whose job it was to share the stories which help us to make sense of our world. Today, we receive our stories primarily through screens: the television screen, the digital screen, the tablet, the mobile device.

This resource aims to help children understand how stories are told on screen, and the types of tales that inspire filmmakers. It offers teachers suggestions of suitable films that could be shown to support a storytelling focus in class and proposes some ways into exploring these film texts, as well as exploring film language and the art and craft of creating story on screen.

The suggestions here are intended for teachers of primary-aged children but could be adapted for a range of contexts, and used as part of activity around National Storytelling Week or throughout the year.
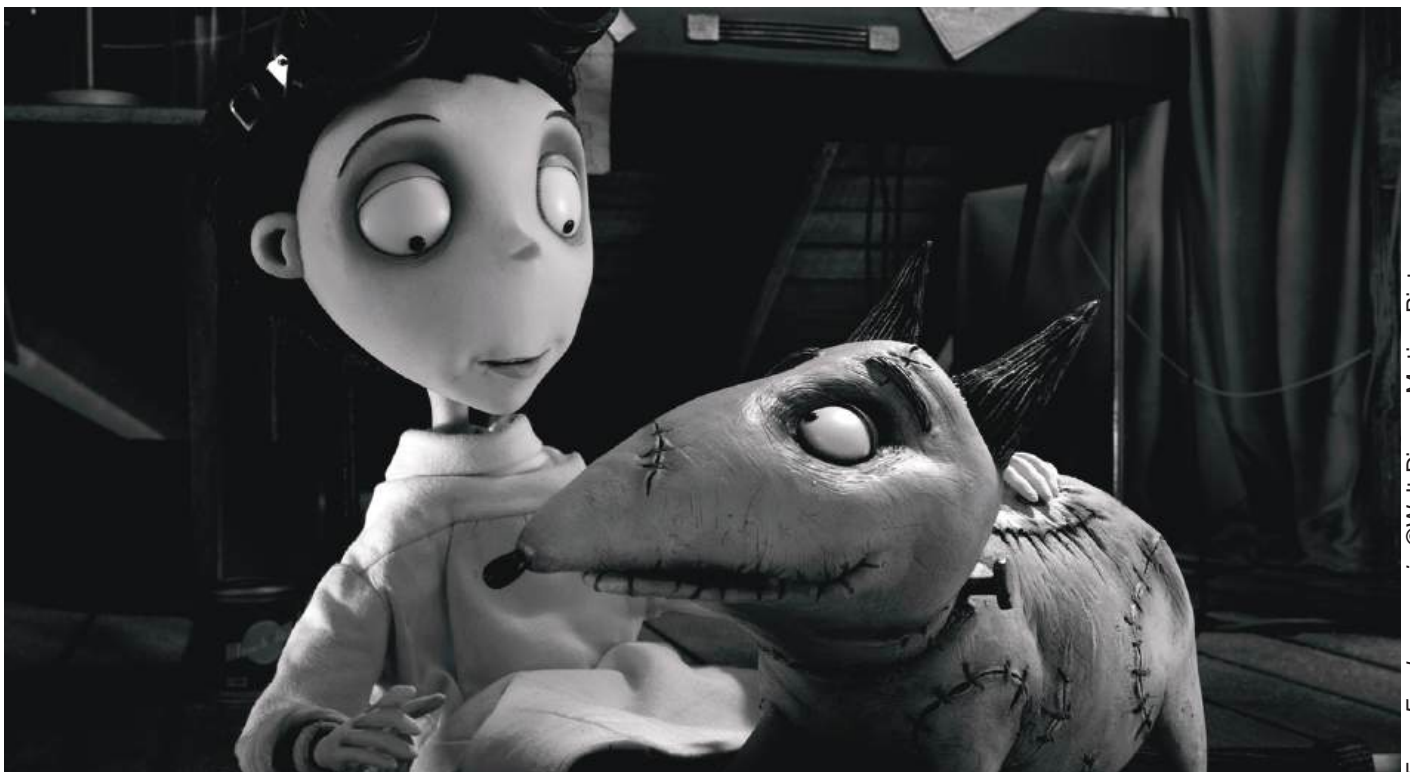
From *Frankenweenie* ©Walt Disney Motion Pictures

STORY STRUCTURE

Generally, stories follow a similar structure. In very basic terms, this could be described in three parts:

Start: characters, setting and genre established
Middle: problems are encountered
End: the problems are solved and equilibrium is resolved.

Storytellers can create their own spin on this structure by mixing up the characters, settings and genres, and even by putting the end at the start and the middle at the end. When telling stories, audience is the most important consideration, and new audiences expect to be surprised and intrigued, so storytellers work hard to keep them interested with quirky twists and unexpected outcomes.

Key questions to ask about a film's story structure:
■ How does the film fit into the basic structure outlined above?

■ Why do you think it is structured in the way it is?

■ How could it be structured differently and what effect would this have on the development of the story?

From *The Fox and the Child* ©Pathé UK

FILM LANGUAGE

Storytellers need a language through which they can articulate their story. Traditionally, they used the spoken word or song. At the end of the 19th century, the Kinetographic camera (the movie camera) was invented as a tool that could be used to tell stories through moving images.

The earliest films tended to lack a story structure, instead just capturing movement, but as the medium became more popular filmmakers developed a 'film language' – or a set of grammar rules for how to tell stories on film.

There are grammar rules which writers adhere to – for example:
- sentence structure
- nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs
- capital letters
- compound words
- antonyms, synonyms
- contractions

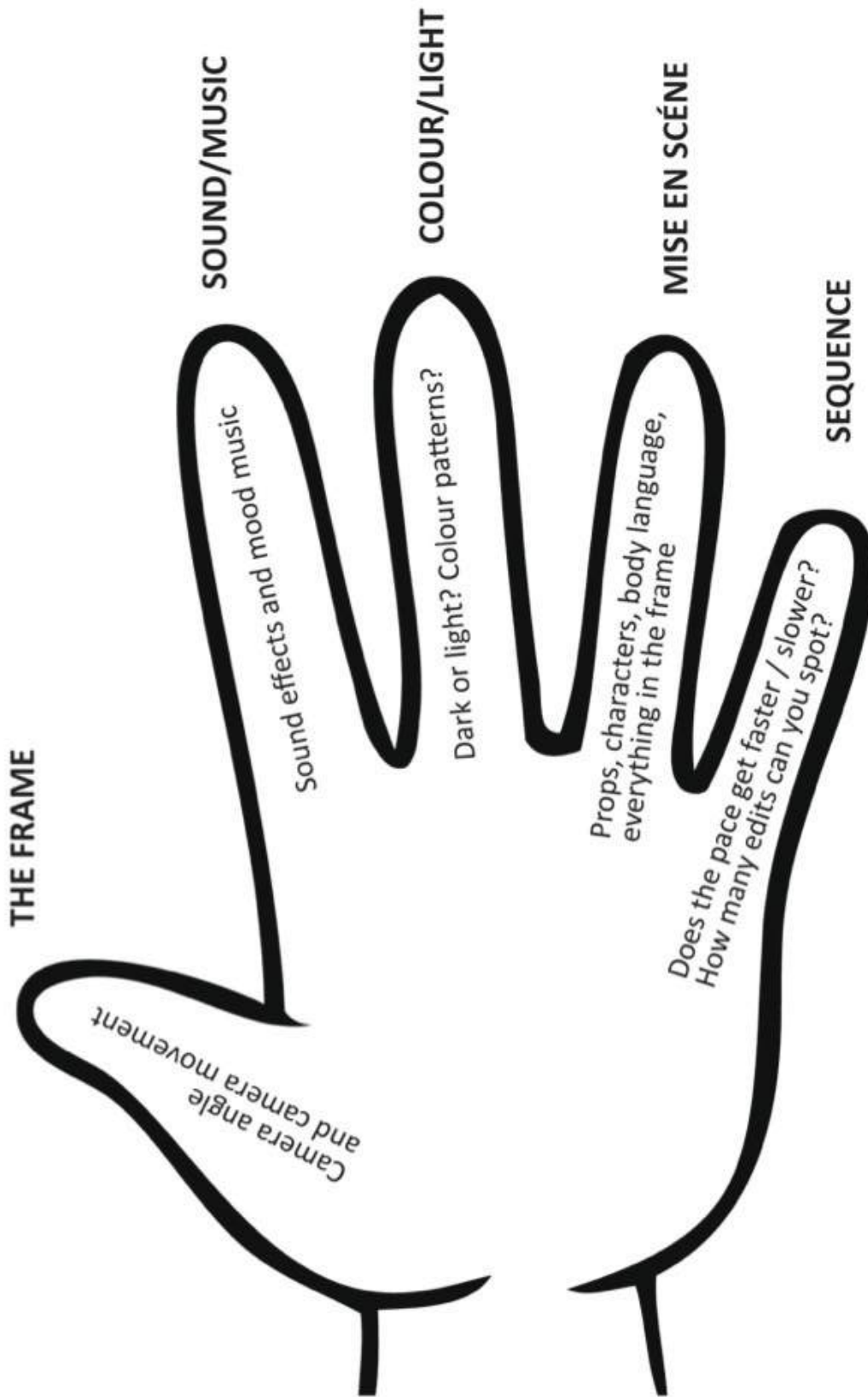These are the written and spoken word tools that are used to tell stories.

Film has its own set of rules, called film language:
- shot types
- camera movement
- mise en scène (what is included in the frame and why)
- lighting
- sound
- editing

These are the tools that filmmakers use to tell stories on screen, shot by shot and scene by scene.

Key questions to ask about film language:
- Using the Film High Five model on page 4, interrogate any film clip in terms of film language tools and how they are used to create the story.

FILM HIGH FIVE

SOUND/MUSIC

Sound effects and mood music

COLOUR/LIGHT

Dark or light? Colour patterns?

MISE EN SCÉNE

Props, characters, body language, everything in the frame

SEQUENCE

Does the pace get faster / slower? How many edits can you spot?

THE FRAME

Camera angle and camera movement

SCREEN STORIES

There are thousands of films made every year, so where do filmmakers find their inspiration? Are there certain story types that are more suited to the screen?

The most popular film genres are comedy, action and adventure. Other film genres include:

- drama
- thriller
- crime
- horror
- romantic comedy
- documentary
- science fiction
- western
- musical

and more besides. Some films might combine two or more genres within their main storyline.

Key questions:

- Carry out an Internet search for the films released this month, then try to categorise them by genre, going on the films' synopses.

- What is your favourite film genre and why?

- Why do you think there are so many comedies, action movies and adventure stories made?

- Think of the most recent film you have seen at the cinema. What type of story was it? Look at imdb.com and the film's website to find out where the filmmaker got his or her inspiration to make the film.

- Many books are adapted into films. Which book would you like to see made into a film and why? Using the film language tools outlined earlier, think about how you would make your story choice into a film.

RELEVANT FILMS

Film Education has a range of resources linked to many films that are relevant to National Storytelling Week. Here are just a few suggestions:

MICROSITES:
Diary of a Wimpy Kid - www.filmeducation.org/diaryofawimpykid/
The Fox and the Child - www.filmeducation.org/thefoxandthechild/story.html
Frankenweenie - www.filmeducation.org/frankenweenie/
Legend of the Guardians: the Owls of Ga'hoole - www.filmeducation.org/legendoftheguardians/
The Cave of the Yellow Dog - www.filmeducation.org/cave/notes.html
The Story of the Weeping Camel - www.filmeducation.org/weepingcamel/notes.html

STUDY NOTES:
WALL-E - www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilm.php?film=1738
Beauty and the Beast - www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilm.php?film=1419
Hoodwinked - www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilm.php?film=1513
Dragonheart - http://www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilm.php?film=1475
How to Train Your Dragon - www.filmeducation.org/resources/film_library/getfilm.php?film=1980

Film Education's Storytelling resources (2006) include pre and post viewing notes on a range of suitable titles for the primary classroom:
    www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/StorytellingA-H.pdf and
    www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/StorytellingK-Z.pdf

See our Resources page for further suggestions.

The best place to watch a whole film is in the cinema where both the visual and audio effects have their strongest impact. You can liaise with your local cinema to request a screening of a film of your choice in the morning when the cinema would otherwise be empty. Film Education co-ordinates film programming hubs in a range of locations to support teachers wishing to work closely with cinemas for this purpose.
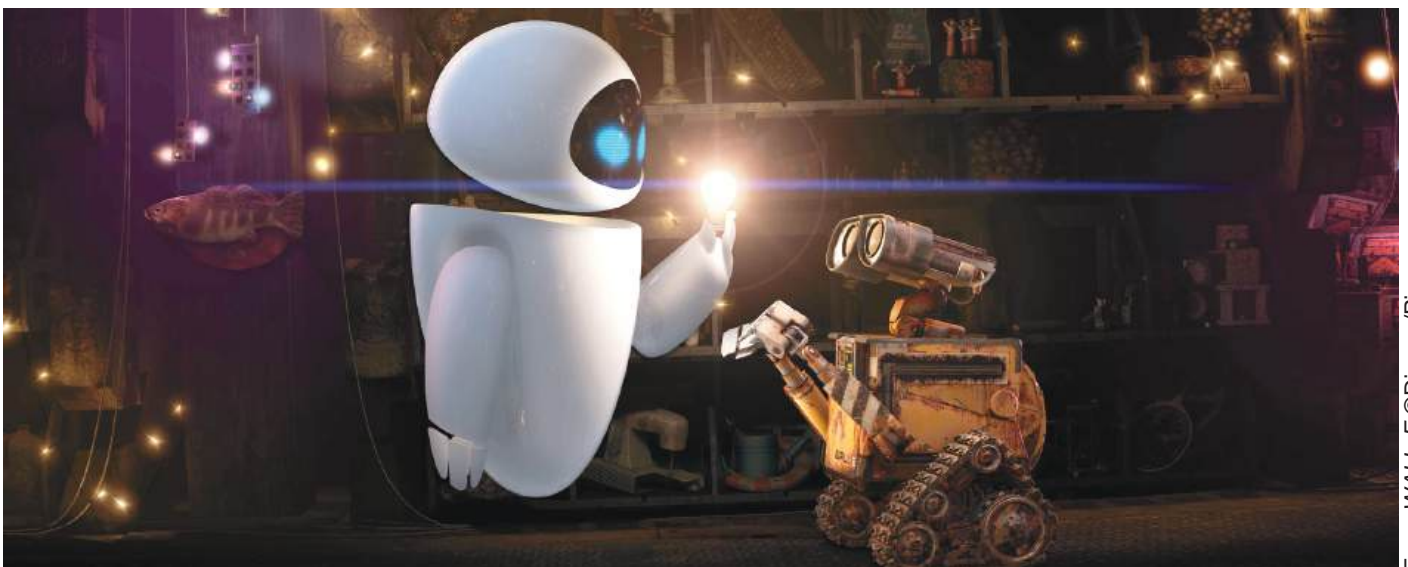
From *WALL-E* ©Disney/Pixar

USEFUL LINKS

www.filmeducation.org/staffroom/film_in_the_classroom/film_language/

www.literacyshed.com/

www.storymuseum.org.uk/the-story-museum/schoolsprogramme/storytellingschools

www.nationalgallery.org.uk/storytelling

www.literacytrust.org.uk/reading_champions/case_studies/filter/storytelling%20and%20drama

From Legend of the Guardians: the Owls of of Ga'Hoole ©Warner Bros. Pictures