

THE STORYTELLER'S TOOLBOX: A COMPARISON OF THE TOOLS
DIRECTORS USE TO GUIDE ATTENTION
IN FILM AND IN THEATRE

by

Ethan Massengale

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirement for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Theatre
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 8, 2023

THE STORYTELLER'S TOOLBOX: A COMPARISON OF THE TOOLS
DIRECTORS USE TO GUIDE ATTENTION
IN FILM AND IN THEATRE

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Alan Shorter, M.F.A.

Department of Theatre

Harry Parker, Ph.D.

Department of Theatre

Richard Allen, M.F.A.

Department of Film

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the crucial role of guiding attention in storytelling and details the tools at a director's disposal to manipulate audience attention in both film and theatre. The concept of the "toolbox" is introduced, which refers to the set of techniques used by artists to create their art. Initially the paper defines and discusses the tools used to guide attention in theatre, including the use of lighting, blocking, and color, to create focus and enhance the audience's experience. It then explores how many of these same tools are similarly used in filmmaking, while discussing additional tools uniquely available to the film director such as editing, composition, and aperture. The paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the tools available to directors in both theatre and film, and the significance of using these tools intentionally to guide attention and shape the audience's experience. To demonstrate the application of these tools in practice, the author describes his experience of creating *The Theatre TCU Welcome Video*, a music video which involved adapting performances of theatrical songs for the screen. The author then discusses his various roles in the creation of the video, including director, music director, sound engineer, and editor.

Introduction

Properly guiding an audience's attention is a critical aspect of effective storytelling. Without proper guidance, the audience may miss important details or fail to fully engage with the story, leading to a lackluster experience. Take *Cinderella* for example. If the audience misses the Fairy Godmother's warning to Cinderella that the magic spell breaks at midnight, then they might be a bit confused when Cinderella's beautiful carriage suddenly turns back into a pumpkin mid-way through the story.

In both film and theatre, the task of guiding the audience's attention toward important elements of the production falls to the director. However, the tools at the director's disposal differ between the two mediums. This honors thesis will compare and contrast the differences and similarities between the tools that directors use to guide audience attention in film and theatre, and how those differences affect the audience's experience.

The Storyteller's Toolbox

Storytelling is a craft. In fact, an analysis of the etymology of the title "playwright" will reveal it derives from the Old English term "*wyrhta*" meaning "worker" or "maker" (e.g. shipwright or wheelwright). Like any craft, there are certain tools that one must understand to successfully produce their goods or services. The same principle applies to storytelling. The storyteller's toolbox can be applied across many art forms including but not limited to film, theater, dance, music, visual art, and fashion. A storyteller's efficacy relies heavily on their knowledge and understanding of the various tools at their disposal. A skilled storyteller who understands the importance of pacing, for example, can use it to create a specific mood or atmosphere that enhances the overall impact of the narrative. Without a comprehensive

understanding of their toolbox, a storyteller may struggle to effectively communicate their message or engage their audience. To gain a mastery of their tools, artists will often turn to educational institutions or seek experiential learning opportunities. In these safe spaces, artists are free to experiment and fail under the guidance of a professor or mentor. Failure can be a powerful way for artists to not only learn the tools at their disposal but, perhaps more importantly, discover how they can manipulate these tools to effectively express themselves.

This paper will focus on comparing and contrasting the toolboxes of theatre and film. Within this paper, I will use the term film to refer all media shown on screen (television shows, movies, music videos, etc.) as most of these subcategories utilize the same principles. Additionally, it's important to note that these toolboxes as I describe them are non-exhaustive.

The Toolbox for the Stage

Lighting

Lighting is a powerful tool that a director can utilize in theatre to guide the audience's attention and enhance the overall experience. A skilled director understands the importance of using lighting to highlight specific characters, objects, or moments on stage, drawing the audience's focus to key elements of the narrative. For example, a bright spotlight on a particular actor can indicate that they are the focal point of the scene, while dimming the lights in other areas of the stage can de-emphasize background details and maintain the audience's attention on the main action. Additionally, the direction, movement, focusing, and color of lighting can be used to create a specific mood or atmosphere, further immersing the audience into the narrative. Ultimately, lighting can greatly impact the audience's understanding and interpretation of the story, making it a vital aspect of any theatrical production.

Sound

Sound design is another important tool that a director can use to guide the audience's attention. A director may choose to use sound effects or music to underscore a particular action on stage, signifying its importance to the narrative. Similarly, the direction and intensity of the sound can also help draw the audience's focus to specific characters or events. For example, when an actor runs on stage and yells "Fire in the second row, this whole place is a powder keg!" You'd notice him.

Blocking

Blocking is a fundamental element of theatre direction that refers to the movement and positioning of actors on stage. In theatre, a director can use blocking to guide the audience's attention towards important characters or actions through contrast for example, as well as create a dynamic visual experience for the audience. Through the use of blocking, a director can establish a clear narrative flow and visually emphasize key moments of the play, creating a more impactful experience for the audience.

Gesticulation

Gesticulation (the use of hand gestures and body movements) is a fundamental component of stage acting. Oftentimes, directors will use gesticulation in theatre to guide attention when there is a large ensemble on stage. For example, a director might instruct an actor to raise their fist in the air right before they deliver their line to ensure no one misses it. The understanding and intelligent use of this tool can often be the difference between a stellar production and one that fails to clarify the story.

Color

Color is an essential element in theatrical productions, found in costume design, set design, lighting design, and makeup and can be a powerful tool in guiding attention. In theatre, the use of contrasting colors creates visual interest and guides the audience's attention to key moments or characters. For example, if all the actors on a stage are dressed in trench coats and hats but one actor has a bright, saturated yellow coat on while the surrounding actors have muted, neutral coats, this signals to the audience that the actor adorned in the yellow coat is of some significance because it is different.

Special Effects

The implementation of special effects can greatly enhance the theatrical experience and acutely direct the audience's focus, making it a valuable tool for directors. This is exemplified in the musical *Wicked*, where Elphaba seemingly takes flight during the renowned number "Defying Gravity." Through the incorporation of special effects, such as harnesses and projections, the audience is captivated with a sense of amazement and enchantment drawing their attention to the character and the emotional significance of this moment. Special effects also have the ability to enable the audience to further immerse themselves in the narrative, intensifying their suspension of disbelief. The use of special effects provides directors with a means of crafting a stimulating and compelling theatrical production, which can have a lasting impact on the audience.

Other Factors that Affect Attention

While there are many tools at a director's disposal to guide attention in the theatre, there are some uncontrollable variables that need to be considered when guiding the attention of an audience- the theater space, group dynamics, and the “live” factor.

The Theater Space

The theater in which the staged work is performed can be a factor in the matter of audience attention. For instance, attending a show at a run-down, intimate college black box theater that uses folding chairs for seating creates an expectation of quality that differs from attending that same show at the Majestic Theatre in Dallas, Texas. Expectations of the quality of a performance given the nature of the theater space itself is oftentimes positively correlated with audience engagement.

Group Dynamics

The dynamics of a live theatre audience can have a significant impact on the attention of its members. The collective energy and engagement of the audience can influence the overall mood of the space and affect the level of attention invested by an audience member. For instance, if a theatrical work fails to keep its audience engaged, it's in danger of quickly becoming a very useful way of helping the audience catch up on their sleep. If a member of the audience begins to snore, it can be not only distracting but can signal other members of the audience that the show is not worth investing in and result in a loss of attention. In contrast, a responsive and engaged audience can create a sense of shared experience and enhance the emotional impact of the production.

The “Live” Factor

The nature of live theatre also has an impact on audience attention that falls outside of the directors control. Unlike recorded performances, live theatre is susceptible to human error, such as forgotten lines, electrical failures, missed entrances, etc. These unforeseeable events can have a significant impact on audience attention, creating moments of heightened tension that can make the experience more memorable and engaging. Additionally, the live nature of theatre creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy that is difficult to replicate in other art forms, allowing the audience to connect more deeply with the characters and storyline.

It is important to note, however, that the six tools I have explored (lighting, sound, blocking, gesticulation, color, and special effects) are not exclusive to the stage.

The Toolbox for the Screen

In the realm of filmmaking, the director's toolbox is certainly equipped with gadgets that the theatrical toolbox lacks. However, that is not to say there is not a significant overlap between theatre and film. In fact, all six tools previously named for theatre (lighting, sound, blocking, gesticulation, color, and special effects) are utilized in film, though some are now interpreted in different ways. For example, lighting in film can draw attention to a specific element within the frame through contrasting luminance values, similarly to the way it functions on a stage in theatre. However, in film, lighting holds a particular significance as it can also create a sense of depth on a two-dimensional screen. One technique used in film to create depth is the use of shadows. By manipulating the intensity, direction, and placement of light sources, filmmakers can cast shadows that create an illusion of depth to the human eye. Not only does this make shots

more dynamic and engaging, but by establishing a clear foreground and background, directors can let their audiences know where they should be looking on the screen.

Another particularly interesting example of cinema reinterpreting a theatrical tool is special effects. Both theatre and film rely on special effects as a tool to enhance the audience's experience and direct their attention towards a particular element within the narrative. However, in film, the definition of special effects expands to include computer-generated imagery (CGI) and visual effects (greenscreen, editing tricks, etc.). Although the techniques used by visual effects artists differ greatly from those used in live theatre, they serve the same purpose: to create a sense of awe and wonder for the audience, and draw their attention to a specific character or moment. Consider the interpretation of the character King Kong across the two mediums. The Broadway musical *King Kong* relied heavily on mechanical effects and puppetry to bring the giant ape to life on stage, while the movie *Kong: Skull Island* used CGI to create a more realistic and detailed portrayal of the iconic character. While the effect on the audience may differ, ultimately, both productions utilized special effects to capture the audience's attention and immerse them in the narrative.

However, while there is a considerable overlap between the tools used by directors in theatre and film, there are some unique tools that are exclusive to film. These tools give filmmakers great control over the audience's visual experience of the story. The following are a few examples of tools specific to film.

Editing

Editing, the process of selecting and arranging shots to create a cohesive visual narrative, is a powerful tool for guiding attention that is unique to film. Unlike theatre, where the

performance takes place in real-time, film allows the director to control the timing and pacing of each scene. Moreover, directors can even combine multiple takes of a scene and piece them together in post-production. By manipulating the length and order of shots, the director can create a sense of tension, suspense, or excitement that draws the audience's attention to key moments in the story. For example, a fast-paced sequence with quick cuts can create a sense of urgency and excitement, while a slower sequence with longer takes can build tension and suspense. By skillfully utilizing the power of editing, filmmakers can not only clearly guide an audience along through a narrative but also leave an audience reminiscing on a moment long after the credits have rolled.

Camera Placement

By strategically positioning the camera, directors can direct the audience's focus to the most important elements of a scene. Close-up shots are a prime example of this technique. Unlike in theatre, where directors might rely on gesticulation or sound to emphasize a key moment, filmmakers can use close-up shots to draw the audience's attention to subtle facial expressions and details that might otherwise be missed. This is a much more reliable tool, as there is no chance of the audience missing the hints left by the director. For example, if there is an important plot point of a character putting out a cigarette in a story, in theatre, the director might instruct the actor to put it out mid-way through their line so they know the audience is looking at them. However, during a performance, an audience member might suddenly become very interested in the shiny shoes the actor is wearing and miss the moment entirely. In film, the director could just cut to a close up of this cigarette. Not only would the audience have no choice but to be looking exactly where the director deems appropriate, but additionally, the audience

now gets to see the individual embers being extinguished. The result is a heightened level of engagement and immersion in the story.

Composition

Composition is another powerful tool that film directors have at their disposal to guide attention. In film, composition refers to the arrangement of elements within a frame, including the placement of actors, props, and background elements. By positioning these elements within the frame, film directors can create a visual hierarchy and draw attention to particular parts of the scene. This technique is quite similar to the way theatrical directors use blocking to guide attention. The difference being that while film directors make these placement choices for a 2D medium, theatre directors are operating in a 3D space.

Aperture

Aperture is a powerful tool that film directors can use to guide the audience's attention towards specific elements of a shot. Aperture refers to the opening in a camera lens through which light passes to reach the film or digital sensor. By controlling the size of the aperture, a filmmaker can adjust the depth of field, or the range of distances in an image that are in focus. More concretely, this means directors can selectively blur or sharpen certain areas of the frame. This technique can be used to draw the viewer's focus towards a particular subject, conveying its importance in the narrative. For example, a director might use a shallow depth of field to blur out the background and isolate the main character, emphasizing their emotional state or drawing attention to an important prop or object in the foreground. Alternatively, a director might opt for a deep depth of field (meaning more objects are in focus) to capture a complex action sequence

with multiple characters, ensuring that the audience can follow the action and remain engaged with the story. Ultimately, the use of aperture can greatly impact the audience's understanding and experience of a film, making it an essential tool for any director to master.

Implications and Expectations

The mediums of film and theatre share a fundamental similarity in that they are both storytelling mediums that engage audiences through narrative, performance, and visual elements. However, the differences in tools at the director's disposal to guide attention between the mediums have some implications on the viewing experience. One consequence of these differences is the level of engagement required of an audience to experience each medium fully. In film, directors have access to an array of additional tools, such as editing, composition, and aperture, all of which allow them to control the audience's attention precisely. This allows the audience to experience the story passively. One could even argue that the story is spoon-fed to them. In contrast, the inherent limitations of the theatrical medium require audiences to be more active in their engagement with the performance. The director has less control over the audience's attention, so the audience must be more alert to ensure their complete comprehension. The live nature of theatre means that there is no second chance to see a particular moment, and the audience is responsible for interpreting and following the narrative in real time.

In order to effectively utilize the attention guiding tools and engagement levels of each medium, the stories that are created for film and theatre are often adapted to fit the unique strengths and limitations of each medium. For example, in film, the ability to control the audience's attention through editing, camera positioning, and visual effects means that directors can craft stories that contain more intense action, with multiple storylines or flashbacks that can

be woven together in the editing room. We see this frequently in franchises such as *Mission Impossible* and *Star Wars*. Meanwhile, in theatre, stories are often adapted to be more dialogue-heavy and character-driven, as the limited control over the audience's attention requires a stronger focus on the script and the actors' performances. In addition, the live nature of theatre allows for a more immediate and visceral experience, often requiring stories to be more emotionally resonant and engaging to maintain the audience's attention throughout the performance. Overall, the way stories are adapted for each medium reflects the different approaches to storytelling required to fully utilize the attention guiding tools and engagement levels in audiences of film and of theatre.

Experiential Learning Project

Earlier, I suggested that one of the most effective ways to enhance the understanding of the artistic tools at one's disposal is through experiential learning opportunities. In an effort to better understand these aforementioned tools, I decided to experiment with the process of adapting stage content for the screen. My goal was to explore first hand the challenges of bringing theatrical songs to the film world, and to observe how material written for the stage could be adapted for film. To this end, I created *The Theatre TCU Welcome Video*. *The Welcome Video* is a music video featuring a mashup of theatrical songs with the lyrics of the songs changed to welcome the incoming freshmen to TCU's theatre department and the university as a whole.

The Creation Process

The creation of this video was a time-consuming process that required me to assume multiple roles, some of which I had never done before. First, I carefully selected three songs from the musical theatre canon that I identified would work together well harmonically. Once I selected the songs, I found tracks (instrumental accompaniments) for them and created a custom arrangement that would bring them together in a unique way. With the musical foundation of the project laid, I then turned to the visual side of things. I created a detailed storyboard and shot list to ensure the filming process would go smoothly and efficiently, and then contacted the appropriate groups on campus to secure the necessary permissions to film in certain locations.

However, before I could bring the ideas from the storyboard to life, I needed to add vocals to the tracks so performers would have something to lip-sync to on set. For the purposes of this video, lip-syncing to pre-recorded vocals made the most sense as we would not have to worry about acquiring the equipment necessary to capture high-quality live audio on set. I scheduled thirty-minute recording sessions for each of the over thirty performers in my dorm. During these sessions, I recorded their vocals and provided music direction to ensure the final product was of the highest quality. Once all the vocals were recorded, the next step was to sound mix the project.

Sound mixing for a group of thirty vocalists was a task I had never done before, but I quickly realized it would be a critical step in creating a polished final product. Mixing involves balancing the levels of the various audio tracks and making adjustments to create a cohesive sound, as well as drawing the listener's ear to important lines when multiple performers are singing simultaneously. One of the most critical tools used when sound mixing vocals are compressors, which help to control the dynamic range of a track by reducing the volume of loud

sounds and increasing the volume of soft sounds. Another key tool in sound mixing is the equalizer (EQ), which allows for local adjustments to specific frequencies of a track. A fine-tuned EQ ensures that all of the different elements in a mix can be heard clearly and that they are not competing with each other. Additionally, tools such as delay and reverb were used to add depth and dimension to a track. Delay creates echoes and can be used to make a track sound larger, while reverb simulates the acoustic environment of a particular space. By utilizing these tools and techniques, as well as many others, I was able to create a high-quality audio product that sounded professional and polished.

Once the track was properly mixed, the filming process began. In this part of the project, I took on the role of stage manager and director. In the days leading up to the shoot, I created schedules and communicated with the cast and crew so that everyone knew where they were supposed to be and when they were supposed to be there. Then, once filming commenced, I directed the performers and crew to ensure that everything ran smoothly.

I had never directed a video of this magnitude before, however, I found that thanks to my preparation filming went as smoothly as I could have hoped. Finally, I took on the task of editing the footage together and coloring the final product.

Lessons Learned

Now that the project is complete and I've had some time to reflect on it, I can properly evaluate which parts were successful and hypothesize why. Through my own analysis of the project and based on feedback I received from viewers, I found that the rap section ("It's All Happening" from *In the Heights*) through to the end was the most effective portion of the video. I believe this was largely due to the power that editing can have on a story - a tool that is not

typically at a director's disposal when directing the song as it's typically seen (on the stage). To enhance the varying energies of the different sections, I experimented with the pacing of the edit. The rap section was edited to be fast-paced with quick cuts to convey a sense of high energy and excitement. In contrast, the ending was slowed down to allow the audience to fully engage with the performers. By implementing these two highly contrasting editing styles right next to each other, the overall effect was powerful and effective.

Conclusion

By understanding the potential of each tool and how they can work together, artists can create powerful and impactful works that captivate their audiences. In conclusion, the ability to guide audience attention is a critical component of any successful artistic endeavor. As this thesis has demonstrated, directors have a variety of tools at their disposal to accomplish this, whether they are working in theatre or film. However, it is not enough to simply possess these tools; one must have the skill to use them effectively. It is crucial for artists of any medium to master their toolbox in order to fully realize their creative vision and engage their audiences in a meaningful way.

Moreover, mastery of an artist's toolbox can help artists find and refine their own artistic style as once an artist understands the rules of a tool, they can then intentionally break them and explore the effects of such a choice. Ultimately, mastering one's toolbox can not only achieve technical proficiency, it can shed light on the human experience. By understanding the full range of tools available and their potential impact, artists can fully realize their artistic potential and connect with their audiences with precision and power.

Bibliography

- Bordwell, David. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 11th ed., McGraw-Hill Education, 2016.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*. Expanded ed., Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Hagen, Uta. *Respect for Acting*. 2nd ed., Wiley, 2020.
- Prince, Stephen. *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality*. Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- Theatre Communications Group. "Audience Engagement." TCG Circle, 7 July 2015, www.tcgcircle.org/2015/07/audience-engagement/.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. PAJ Publications, 1982.
- Wollen, Peter. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Indiana University Press, 1969.