

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE VISUAL IMPACT OF STOP-MOTION ANIMATION FILMS ON ITS AUDIENCE

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### Abstract

This paper proposes a qualitative study to investigate how 3D stop-motion animation films impact the audience. An exploratory interview was conducted with nine participants who are at similar ages and have had some level of education about film studies. Based on some basic literature about stop-motion, combining with the information given by the participants, this research focuses on the impact that stop motion films have on an audience which does not have much knowledge about how the films have been made. The research is conducted by keeping two feature-length films in context- *The Little Prince* (2015) and *The Boxtrolls* (2014). Through analyzing five aspects: Responses related understanding the preconceptions and knowledge about stop-motion animation among the general audience, verifying the concept of tangibility and materiality among the general audience, understanding the audience's opinion on the relationship between stop-motion and the 'uncanny', Understanding how the technique of stop-motion animation influences the audience's experience of watching a film, understanding whether the knowledge about the technique influences the audience's decision to watch a film, the key findings include how the participants feel about the technique of stop-motion animation, especially their overall thoughts or attitudes toward it, and what are the visual impacts of the medium, and the other related phenomena.

**Key words:** Stop-Motion Animation, Tangibility, Materiality, Uncanniness.

### Introduction

Filmmaking has always been about telling stories. Animation or live-action, whichever technique the films may use, they have been narrating stories from near and far, and all around the world. The genre of animation grew along with live-action filmmaking, but animation had its own charms in adding life to inanimate visuals-graphics and objects. (Chandrashekhar, 2011) Stop-motion animation is one of the oldest animation techniques, which requires physical manipulation of objects in small increments to create each frame. These frames are photographed individually and played back to create an illusion of motion.

This technique of filmmaking started with dead bugs and toys and stands with strong admiration with its 3D printed characters; a technology that developed rapidly over the decades. (Yekti, B., 2017) More than often, stop-motion has been captivating its viewers with its magical ways that bring everyday objects and impossible characters to life, since the earliest days of cinema. (Forno, 2016) This research is an exploration of these effects that stop-motion animation has been associated with.

### Literature Review

The beginning of stop motion animation can be traced back to an 1890's film, *The Humpty Dumpty Circus*. J Stuart Blackton and Albert E Smith used stop motion animation for the first time in a film, using little toys that came to life as animals of a circus. Since then, stop motion animation has come a long way; experimenting with paper cutouts, puppets, and clay for animation. With movies like *King Kong* (1993) and *The Lost World* (1925), stop motion gradually developed into special effects for live-action movies, instead of being recognized for the craft in storytelling. (Chitra Chandrashekhar, 2011)

Before becoming a composite technique of making visual effects, stop motion animators thoroughly experimented with the craft with the help of technological innovations that have influenced the fabrication of

puppets until the present day. The characters or puppets that we see in stop motion animation films today, in big studios like LAIKA and Aardman Animation Studios, are very different from the ones used back in the day in Tim Burton's films, or in the models used by Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen for their films.

The art of making puppets is full of technical and material variables, and consequently there are different meanings that these objects can communicate. Puppets are also an expression of style and a type of signature. In the most general analysis, as suggested by Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, the puppets used by Aardman and Burton, and much earlier by George Pal for his Puppetoon series, are stylized human caricatures, whereas the models used by O'Brien and Harryhausen were interpretations of once-living mythical creatures and the aim was to convince viewers that they were watching real creatures in a real world. (Vincenzo Maselli, 2018)

Maselli (2018) argues about how material and technical variables of stop motion, conveying different meanings, tells a lot about how an audience is impacted by stop-motion films that have used different techniques and materials throughout their long history.

For this research, the researcher has focused on the three-dimensional stop motion animation features. As it has been an exclusively manual animation practice since its origination, at the end of the nineteenth century, it required direct manipulation of the different material and technical variables of puppets and models that Maselli (2018) talked about. Rocha (2016) explains that this "manipulation of the handmade puppets and models allows a more tactile approach of the physical act of animating and a more sensuous perception of the tangible by the viewer, that is, the elicitation of the sense of touch through the experience of watching an animated film." By doing so, it stimulates the sense of materiality, which is the idea of touching what is being seen, which the different textural surfaces that address the sense of touch our fingertips bring to us. (Rocha, 2016) Now, this materiality is not only evoked when the real built objects are animated but also when watched by the viewer. Rocha (2016) concludes that the sensuous perception and touch that stop motion evokes, can be related to the experience of the real material world. This is something that resembles the live-action, as opposed to the cartoon experience. (Bouldin, 2000, as cited in Rocha, 2016)

One would like to believe the said conclusion to be final and binding; however, a lot more literature talks about the 'other-worldly' feel of stop motion animation films. Jane Shadbolt (2018) talks about how no matter what form it takes, stop motion has very strong and distinctly varied effects. Stop motion was known and understood for its visual properties which are very different from other forms of filmmaking; not just other forms of animations. (Shadbolt, 2018)

Ray Harryhausen, a very well-known animation effects artist, has worked tremendously on creature features and fantasy films like *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), and *Clash of the Titans* (1981). He talks about the dynamic of stop motion animation when juxtaposed with live-action cinema.

This aspect of stop motion can be weighed against the real-world experience Rocha (2016) talks about. Although Rocha (2016) strictly addresses 3D stop motion, while Harryhausen and Dalton talk about the impact the dynamic of stop motion would create when combined with live-action.

While animators around the world, both practicing and literature enthusiasts, have worked with stop motion and cherished the way it communicates to the audience and especially its makers who have held it with high regard, there have been multiple instances in literature where the survival of stop motion is questioned in the world of CGI. They're often compared and contrasted with it.

This can be seen in the case of an article that talks about stop motion being an affection for those who look down upon the digital class. "CGI does a much better, more effective job" (David Cox, 2012). The article puts light on the multiple stop motion animation features released in the year 2012, mainly targeting *Frankenweenie* that comes in the wake of '[The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists](#)' and '[ParaNorman](#).' It talks about how none of these did as well on the monetary front as *Hotel Transylvania*, a CGI animation that became a worldwide hit. "Burton waxes mystical on the craft to which he devoted his formative years. Clearly, he enAs

the process, but this doesn't explain why the rest of us should admire its results.” (David Cox, 2012) Stop motion seems to draw too much unwanted attention to its methodology and Hollywood only bothers with the vast amount of work it takes as it is the cheaper route, are the few opinions concluding this article.

To understand what affects the audience in which way, stop motion can be looked under the light of Freud's psychoanalytic analysis. Shadbolt (2018) sees “stop motion animation as the perfect example for Freud's concept of the Uncanny, where the familiar and understood combine unsettlingly with the repellent and grotesque.”

Stop motion animators like Jan Švankmajer have fully exploited this characteristic. This uncanniness is especially evoked by the films of Quay Brothers, through their puppets and aesthetics that address Freud's ideas of something familiar becoming malicious. (Shadbolt, 2018) The article suggests that stop motion has the power to give magic to something, and this is something that CGI cannot achieve. (Bahn, 2016, as cited by Shadbolt, 2018) It quotes Harryhausen and Dalton talk about finding stop motion more mysterious and compelling aesthetically. (Harryhausen and Dalton, as cited by Shadbolt, 2018)

Stop motion clearly has an impact that goes beyond CGI. A research paper by Bharoto (2015) studies both the animation techniques- 3D stop motion and 3D computer graphic animation for their aesthetic and survival. It talks about how the sets in a frame are transformed by the craft, delicacy, and the physical intervention of human touch. The viewer perceives richer materiality as well as textures that “beg to be touched” because of this transformation that gives a handmade feel in stop-motion animation. (Bharoto, 2015)

Souza also argues about materiality and texture being the key to the “sense of touch” – the haptic look of stop motion animation. Souza convinces “Viewers are both able to be touch and be touched by movies, by their textures and tangible qualities” (Souza, 2012, as cited by Bharoto, 2015)

Bharoto (2015) also talks about the Uncanny, as it mentions the beliefs of Shadbolt that “otherworldliness”, the “otherness” and the “constant visual and spiritual tussle with the qualities of that, which is animate or inanimate” are the true strengths of stop motion animation. “This might be one of the reasons why some horror genre animation involving otherworldly creatures like *Corpse Bride* (2005) and *Frankenweenie* (2012) was done in stop motion.” It also talks about how films like ‘*ParaNorman*’ have made use of technology, which has been misunderstood for attempts to achieve realistic representation and perfection that CGI expresses. However, it has helped to realize the magic of handicraft in storytelling instead. (Bharoto, 2015) This gives significant insight into understanding how an audience is impacted by the narrative that stop motion animation can create.

To understand this better, we can look at the example of *The Little Prince*. Its makers talk about how stop motion was taken as part of a different medium to represent a little girl's imagination. “Stop-motion really evokes the feelings of childhood and so stop motion has been a great technique as it really taps into those earlier feelings of being a child” (Little Prince, 2016). This again tells us that there's much more to stop motion than what Cox (2012) reduces it down to.

However, his point about the animators of the craft being convinced their preference is aesthetically superior might be partially true. Animators like Adam Elliot have very passionately talked about their love for the medium and how frustrating and limiting the process of computer animation would be for them. Elliot talks about the gratification that he gets by making a simple cloud out of wool and compares it to using a ‘software program’ for the same (Kirby, 2011).

While there is a significant amount of literature analyzing the techniques of stop motion films and how far it has come, there are still many questions about how far the medium will survive.

So, we cannot really answer the larger question that Cox (2012) also puts up, that why stop motion is still being made. The craft is widely appreciated all over the world for its magical ways that it brings everyday objects to life (Forno, 2016).

Wells (1998) analyses the empathetic and cathartic effects caused by Disney films to be even more extraordinary when they're looked at as just drawings that do not even attempt to be 'real' like the characters in live-action films. I have reason to believe that when daily objects, materials, toys, etc. that we see in our lives, are used in stop motion animation films that are viewed by the audience, the empathetic and cathartic effects must be even more extraordinary as compared to any other animated movie or any Disney movie. The reality and belief that stop motion creates with its textural perception must be equally extraordinary if nothing more.

There has been significant research on the techniques of stop motion; however, the audience has not been the guiding factor of many of them. My research will explore this gap by studying the visual effects of stop motion animation films on its audience. Although the audio, soundtracks and the music used for stop motion films play a huge role in the way a viewer is impacted, for this research, I won't be looking into that area.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To Understand the preconceptions and knowledge about stop-motion animation among the general audience.
2. To verify the concept of tangibility and materiality among the general audience.
3. To understand the audience's opinion on the relationship between stop-motion and the 'uncanny'.
4. To understand how the technique of stop-motion animation influences the audience's experience of watching a film.
5. To understand whether the knowledge about the technique influences the audience's decision to watch a film

### **Research Method**

The researcher has chosen Qualitative analysis because the topic is such that it would require more detailed and subjective answers. Therefore, the method of data collection will be personal in-depth interviews. These interviews will be conducted and recorded via video call. The research takes account of a general audience which may or may not have much information and knowledge about the technique of stop-motion animation. Therefore, the interviews will be semi-structured. This gives a scope of asking questions, which might be out of the questionnaire, but would help in drawing further insights into the question asked initially. The research sample included nine participants, having some media-related background. They ranged in age from 21 years to 23 years old. The research does not consider their genders for this study; therefore, the use of names and gender has been omitted.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The participants were asked to watch the two films, chosen for this research, before the interview. Having some current or prior media background, the participants talked in great depth about the two films and how they have been impacted by the movies. The participants talked about their experience of watching these films, both as an active and a passive audience. They expressed their familiarity and the unfamiliarity with the technique of stop-motion and the materials used, and the impact and understanding of the two.

### **Preconceptions and Knowledge**

Out of nine participants only one did not like watching animated films and two of them would be watching them occasionally. Two participants, E and F, expressed how animation takes them back to their childhood. Another

participant, I, said that “A lot of people think that animated movies have very childish content, but that’s not true. I like it.”

Participant C talked about liking animated movies, which are usually Disney, probably because of the characters. “When it’s animated, you can have a lot of creativity there...a lot of creative liberty. So, you can create anything in an animated world. And I think they’re really magical and fantastic”

A few of the qualities that stop-motion is also known to bring out uniquely.

Six of the participants did not have knowledge on the different types of animation, and only one of the nine participants had a good idea about stop-motion animation. Almost all participants needed to be explained about stop-motion filmmaking. This was done with by giving a common and unbiased definition to all, with an example, to help them understand and answer the questions better. Only two participants had watched stop-motion films other than the ones given to them and seven participants could not really differentiate between stop-motion animation and CGI animation used in the movie- *The Little Prince*.

David Cox (2012) talks about how stop motion seems to draw too much unwanted attention to its methodology and that Hollywood only bothers with the vast amount of work it takes as it is the cheaper route. In this section I also try to verify whether it’s just the makers of these animations that “wax mystical on the craft” or is the audience also drawn to it, and to what extent.

All participants, except one, talking in context to the two films, thought about the efforts that must have went behind making films like that. Participant A even wondered that, “It’s the efforts that make the movie. Especially with stop-motion, where your efforts are tripled or 5 times or even 10 times”

Similar to the experience of any other film, Participant B says something that portrays what most of the participants feel about watching the movies: “As a viewer, I was not thinking of anything about what goes behind making it, but they were so beautifully done on the screen that I really thought of how much effort it would have taken”

Participant D also talks on similar lines to say that: “The first time I watch a film, it’s mainly for entertainment purpose or to understand the story. So, I didn’t think about what went behind it.”

While other participants shared mutual feelings about the idea of attention shifting to the technique and efforts behind the film, participant F noticed something different: “BTS in the credits were showing how the things were created, so yes, at that time I realized that it takes a lot.”

Here, what Cox says is right when he talks about filmmakers drawing attention to films with the technique. Or as Shadbolt (2018) talks about the sequences to be touching on many ideas like the labour of production, the inclusion of the animator, and the agency of the characters both inside and outside the narrative.

Participant also draws attention on this aspect by saying: “I think about the efforts, what softwares were used, were wires used to do all that, how were the objects manipulated, and how things were edited out, I pay attention to these things.

However participant C’s statement would counter the argument when she talks about the similar effects of any other Disney movie: “I do think about how they create these characters. While watching these particular movies, as well as other Disney movies that I watch, I wonder how each movement that they create, how long it must have taken...how each frame must have been made. And sometimes I get distracted by that as well.”

Based on all of the examples and statements collected above, the First Finding is that films have not really portrayed themselves in a way that they attract attention on their technique. Both the films have treated the technique as a way to tell a story that the participants later reveal to have engrossed them well. In the opinion of the researcher, one cannot talk about a stop-motion film just for its story. Especially once someone gets familiar

with the process; it is inevitable to appreciate the art, just like it would be with any other technique of filmmaking.

### **Tangibility and Materiality**

In this section, the researcher tries to verify the extent of materiality and tangibility a viewer feels while watching a stop- motion film. As mentioned previously, many researchers and academic pieces have talked about this aspect of stop motion. Different participants express how this aspect impacts them.

Participant A was surprised to know that things were made out of paper. He did not think about the materials or felt any relation to the textures. In fact, it seemed difficult for him to identify the materials. This question was mainly included to stimulate a certain thinking pattern where a participant would become conscious about what they're seeing in order to reveal what they felt while watching the films.

All the participants were able to identify with different materials used in the films and understand what they must feel like, to some extent.

Bharoto (2015) talks about the viewer perceiving richer materiality as well as textures that "beg to be touched" because of this transformation that gives a handmade feel in stop-motion animation. Statements given by some participants also support this.

Participant H, while answering about differentiating between the two animation techniques in 'The Little Prince', says: "You get a very paper-y feel in the stop motion parts, like art and craft and story books, like someone has actually made them with their hands or drawn them.

All the participants have also talked about the boxtrolls feeling very real. Participant E could also feel the different textures and sense a hand-made feel of brushstrokes in 'The Little Prince'. While trying to figure out the materiality of objects, participant A expressed: "I really can't differentiate between what is stop-motion and what is CGI. For a viewer, I don't think it really matters if a film is made with CGI or stop- motion. It's just animation for a viewer."

Participant C also expresses that she wasn't thinking about the materials, not while watching the film. In the CGI parts, she couldn't really feel the textures. Participant H also feels the same as she says that "CGI would not be touchable."

The researcher thinks that participant A had difficulty in figuring out the aspects of tangibility in stop motion. Based on what other participants also felt, the Second Finding is that tangibility of stop- motion is not that evident for everyone. It is quite subjective in nature.

Participant A wishes the worlds he saw in the films to be real, and feels nostalgia and emotional connect with the movies, especially in the Little Prince; he strongly resonates with the story and the messages it puts across: "We live in a world that is nothing but robots; which specifically the old man tells us not to be. We try to be grown ups, even when we're kids, we try to be grownups. And when we're grownups, we want to be kids. But we can't be. So that childishness should always be there. And that's one thing that I really wish that should be in this world too!"

Participant B, D, E, F, I and H also felt a connection with the two stories and talked about it in detail. Diving further into the aspects of materiality, participant B draws similarities between the visuals made with CGI and stop- motion in 'The Little Prince.

"The aviator and the girl had a very clean texture throughout the film. Also the part with the little prince, where he meets people and the rose; the texture there is also very smooth. When it comes to how it feels, it was very smooth. But in boxtrolls, the texture of things feels really rough and mostly dusky, also ugly-yes; we can call it that also. They were actually a bit disturbing."

Participant E also expresses a similar opinion, saying she's actually scared of the boxtrolls. She uses humour to express this opinion which can be related to the 'Uncanny' in stop-motion.

Participant C says: "Story part didn't feel real. It felt like something from your imagination; something you would imagine."

Stop-motion serves an entirely different purpose here. Even the makers of the Little Prince also talk about stop-motion giving the feeling of a fantasy and how it's like having your toys come alive. The third finding, which falls in line with the second finding, would be that what Shadbolt (2018) says about stop motion having very strong and distinctly varied effects, no matter what form it takes, seems to be true here. Visuals from a stop-motion films being related to those with CGI shows the varied effects stop-motion can have.

Participant F talks about the sets and characters being real and touchable: "I'll be pretty shocked and amazed. It's like something that was imaginary that became real; so, I'll be really shocked, honestly. Because throughout the film, I felt like all these characters won't be real, they'll be imaginary. But to be able to touch them and see them would be very shocking."

This was an unpopular opinion among the sample only supported by participant D who thought this to be beyond imagination.

### **Relationship between Stop-motion and the 'Uncanny'**

To understand the 'Uncanny' in regard to stop-motion animation, it would be most appropriate to refer to the following concept: The subject of the "uncanny" undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread. Yet we may expect that it implies some intrinsic quality which justifies the use of a special name.

Participant B talked about the stop-motion parts in 'Little Prince' to be mechanical, and not real: "The visuals are extra-ordinary in The Little Prince. For example, the rose moving; it's so smooth. I just know that it can't be real."

Almost all the participants identified materials like paper, cardboards, clay cotton, wood, etc. being used in the film to make the characters, sets and props. The participants acknowledged that these materials had come alive on their screen; however, only two participants felt that the materials and objects that they see in the film should not be moving. Participant G and F expressed concern over what can be said as the inanimate becoming animate. The seven other participants directly related this motion to the process behind it.

Participant H appreciates the beauty of how The Little Prince brings everything to life. "It's crazy how people just see something...to us, it's just paper that we've written stuff on, it's lifeless. But to bring it to life, it's such a beautiful process and I'm just heavily impressed by the thought process that has gone into it.

The fourth finding is that the Freud's idea of uncanny, where something familiar becoming unfamiliar, or Shadbolt's (2018) idea of creating intellectual uncertainty to conjure the uncanny- creating a doubt- does not apply to the two films in context. The sense of dread or something unsettling has been used in the Boxtrolls, however, the participants do not feel a resonance with it.

### **Influence of Technique**

The researcher thinks that maybe the audience doesn't appreciate the mechanisms and techniques an animated film uses. As mentioned previously, a lot goes behind making a film good and appealing for the audience to

appreciate without caring about the processes behind. Here, the researcher wants to understand that what are these techniques and crafts that the audience might not notice but is affected by them and how does that happen.

Talking about *The Little Prince*, participant H expressed how she liked the way that stop-motion brings out a story-in story effect and how the film uses CGI and stop-motion together to show this concept. According to participant H

“The technique of stop-motion added a different dimension to it. It also differentiated between the time periods really well.”

Participant B feels that it creates a feeling of looking at a piece of imagination, but she felt like she was in that imagination. For her, stop-motion created that effect. Participant C also feels that the visuals in the imagination part of the story were something that might have been sketched out. Participant A also shared mutual feelings about this. He also felt that CGI is better as it is more viewer-friendly but explained how stop-motion had better visuals in *The Boxtrolls*. Participant F felt that stop-motion parts in *The Little Prince* connected him to the story. “It was something different and it kept me hooked.” Although Participant E felt the technique was not smooth yet she acknowledged how it brings the characters and the setup to life.

In case of *The Boxtrolls*, participant H relates the story with the concepts of English aristocracy and the representation of the concept of upper caste and lower caste. The visuals seemed very real to her when she noticed them during the interview but didn't think anything was extraordinary. She found them to be just like any other animated movie. According to H: “This seems like a child's play. Like kids have a train set or a toy set and there's a whole city so it gives me that childhood experience.

With this, participant H also taps into the aspect of materiality and tangibility that stop-motion creates; a feeling of being able to “touch and be touched by the movies, by their textures and tangible qualities” (Souza, 2012, as cited by Bharoto, 2015)

Participant I notices how the lighting and colours in the *boxtrolls* have been used very well. She also gives instances of how lighting has been used well in the scene where Eggs' father has been kept chained: “You can see the lights crossing from both the sides and you can actually detect a source”

Participant C also shares a mutual opinion: “The lighting in the entire film felt very real. The entire frames felt very real. If it would happen in real life, this exactly how it would look. It was very natural.”

Participant C also talked about the visible dimensionality in the sets and characters. This gave her a more immersive experience and a realistic feeling of the visuals. Participant F felt stop-motion had more lively visuals too, as compared to CGI.

While others could talk about the technique in great detail, three of the participants- D, B and G- could not talk about any special characteristics of stop motion. However Participant D expressed her preference of the visuals in *The Boxtrolls* despite not being able to tell that it was made with stop-motion.

The fifth finding could be that a majority of participants unknowingly noticed the technicalities that go behind making a stop-motion film. A majority notices an enhanced sense of the spaces in them, use of realistic lighting and hence shadows, and a connection with the world that's shown.

### **Influence of pre-knowledge of Stop-motion Technique**

In this section, the sixth finding is pretty easy to arrive at. The participants claim that the knowledge of the process behind making a stop-motion film seems to be shifting the focus from the story to the technical aspects



of it. The researcher doesn't view this in a bad light because the participants claim to be more engrossed in the same films. They develop a deeper connection and liking with the story and the films.

Participants F and I express that they would have a different viewpoint because the creative process makes them wonder. Participant I even talked about wishing to leave the interview to go and search all about this medium of filmmaking immediately.

## **Conclusion**

The tangibility of stop-motion is not that evident for everyone. It is quite subjective in nature. What Shadbolt (2018) says about stop motion having very strong and distinctly varied effects, no matter what form it takes, was verified in this research and can be concluded to be true here. Visuals from a stop-motion film being related to those with CGI shows the varied effects stop-motion can have. The researcher does not aim to draw comparisons between the two techniques as they cannot be weighed against each other. The research merely uses CGI animation as a more familiar context, with the help of which the participants could talk about stop-motion.

The Freud's idea of uncanny, where something familiar becoming unfamiliar or Shadbolt's (2018) idea of creating intellectual uncertainty to conjure the uncanny does not apply to the two films in context. The sense of dread or something unsettling has been used in the Boxtrolls, however, the participants do not feel a resonance with it. The technique of stop-motion has many other aspects to it. The participants talked in great detail about how the stop-motion part in 'The Little Prince' took them back to their childhood and gave the feel of being part of world that is being imagined.

A majority of participants unknowingly noticed the technicalities that go behind making a stop-motion film. A majority noticed an enhanced sense of the spaces in them, use of realistic lighting and hence shadows, and a connection with the world that's shown. The audience might not focus on these aspects, unless brought to their attention, but they significantly add to the audience's viewing experience. The participants claim that the knowledge of the process behind making a stop-motion film seems to be shifting the focus from the story to the technical aspects of it. The participants claim to be more engrossed in the same films, and develop a deeper connection and liking with the story and the films.

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