

Educational material

I (Don't) Believe / Helena



CLASS DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION: 6th grade

TEACHING AREA: Culture and media

TEACHING UNIT: *I (Don't) Believe / Helena*

CLASS TYPE: Analysis of short documentary films

DURATION OF A TEACHING UNIT: 45 minutes

I (DON'T) BELIEVE

Dr Ivan Novak Primary School Media Group, Macinec, 2023

MOTIVATION

Conversation with the students

1. What are the most famous superstitions?
2. Are you superstitious?
3. Do you have any rituals that you believe in? For example, before a big exam or an important sporting event? Give an example.
4. What do you know about Roma communities and their customs?

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE FILM

You will watch a short film *I (Don't) Believe* produced by Dr Ivan Novak Primary School Media Group, made in 2023.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR WATCHING

1. How many protagonists do we meet during the film? What do they talk about?
2. What are the characteristics of a documentary film present in this film?
3. What kind of music can we hear in the film? What is its function?
4. Who believes and who doesn't? Connect the name of the film to its topic.

WATCHING THE FILM

EXPRESSION OF STUDENT IMPRESSIONS

Did you like this film? Why?

Having seen the film, what do you think about superstition?

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FILM

1. Describe the beginning of the film.

The film begins with naming some superstitions (a broken mirror, yellow and red ladybugs, hiccups, a chimney sweep). The superstitions are named by various protagonists, children and adults, in a medium shot.

2. What do the opening credits look like, what can we see and hear?

After the introductory statements (the cold open), there is a wide shot of a street in a Roma community, accompanied by non-diegetic Roma instrumental music (on an accordion) and the name of the film *I (Don't) Believe*. The Roma music suggests that a Roma community is the subject of the film, or rather their beliefs.

3. Which protagonists do we meet during the film?

Throughout the film we meet a number of protagonists, some of them Roma, some of them not. Some are children, some adults, some are women, some are men. We don't learn any of their names, but it becomes clear that they are talking about their personal convictions and beliefs and that they are somehow connected to the Roma community.

4. What kind of shot prevails in the film?

Medium close-ups and medium shots prevail. A medium close-up shows a person from the top of their head to their chest, while a medium shot shows a person from the top of their head to their waist. Such shots are often used during interviews.

5. In what way i.e. by what method, common in documentary films, do we learn information from the protagonists?

The protagonists share with us their thoughts through the interview method. During filming, the person behind the camera asks questions, and the protagonist in front of the camera answers them, very often in full sentences. Later, during editing, the questions are cut out and only the answers/statements remain in the film.

6. What else is shown in the film, apart from the protagonists' statements?

There are also scenes that were acted out. Such a procedure in documentary film is often called the reconstruction method. While one of the protagonists talks about a spell, custom or belief, someone else acts it out and shows what must be done according to custom to remove a spell. For example, the sequence about fetching water and putting ashes in it.

There are also descriptive shots in the film, which introduce us to the story we are listening to. For example, while the protagonist talks about Roma customs during a funeral, the film shows extreme close-ups of tombstones and flowers.

7. What can we hear in the film?

We can hear all elements of sound in the film. In addition to the interlocutors' voices (speech), we hear non-diegetic music, the same composition on two occasions, during the opening credits (the film's name being written out) and at the very end of the film during the end credits. Diegetic noises can be heard occasionally (pouring water from a well, putting ashes in water, shuffling cards).

8. How does the film end?

The film's interlocutors say that some beliefs are no longer as strong among the Roma community and are being forgotten. The sentence that remains in memory is "Bit by bit, little by little, it's all being forgotten." With these final statements, the film ends.

9. Explain the film's name.

The ambiguous meaning of the film's name directly suggests that people change and that not all people believe in the superstitions and customs of their ancestors and/or community anymore. Some protagonists directly say that they only believe in what happens to them and that they're not interested in what once was.

HELENA

“Zlatna dolina” Cinema Club, Pleternica, 2023

MOTIVATION

Conversation with the students

1. Are we prejudiced against people with disabilities?
2. What challenges do people in wheelchairs face on a daily basis?
3. Do you know someone in a wheelchair?
4. Are your schools adjusted for students with disabilities? What is adjusted in your schools, and what do you think still should be done?
5. Is there public transport in your area adjusted for people in wheelchairs? Can people in wheelchairs pass through the streets without obstacles like parked cars, high steps, narrow sidewalks?

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE FILM

You will watch a short documentary film *Helena* produced by “Zlatna dolina” Cinema Club from Pleternica in 2023.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR WATCHING

1. How does the film begin? What do we see and hear first?
2. List the interlocutors in the film. What do they talk about?
3. List the topics that appear in the film.
4. Pay attention to when and how the name of the film appears.

WATCHING THE FILM

EXPRESSION OF STUDENT IMPRESSIONS

Did you like this film? Why?

Did you learn anything new thanks to this film?

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FILM

1. **How does the film begin? What is the camera like in the first shot?**

The film begins with a wide shot of a street in which we see a white van and a woman opening the back door and lowering a ramp. The camera is dynamic, handheld, and approaches the woman and follows her actions. The woman lowers a wheelchair from the van via the ramp and then, in a full shot, takes a girl from the back seat and places her in the wheelchair.

The handheld camera allows for quick tracking of individual actions and changing the shot size and angle, and often enhances the impression of authenticity of the recorded material. As the woman (Helen's mother) pulls

the ramp out of the van, the camera approaches her, which makes the viewer focus on what's important, which, in this case, is pulling out the wheelchair and then placing the girl in it.

2. Describe what happens before the opening credits and what is the function of those shots.

The cold open of the film follows Helena's arrival at school: her mother comes with her in a van, places her in a wheelchair, and then her assistant comes to pick her up. Helena drives the motorized wheelchair herself, the assistant follows her and helps her with the door of the elevator that takes them to the floor of Helena's classroom. The cold open serves to point out the physical challenges that Helena faces on a daily basis i.e. every day she comes to school.

3. Which editing transition connects the film's cold open and the name of the film?

A fade out. This is an editing transition in which a shot gradually darkens, frame by frame, or "disappears" until it's completely black. In this case, the shot in which Helena and her assistant exit the elevator fades to a black shot in which the name of the film *Helena* is written in white letters.

4. In what kind of shot were the protagonists' statements filmed? What kinds of shots were used to film the school?

The protagonists' statements were filmed in medium shots. The school was filmed in wider shots, in this case mostly in wide and extreme wide shots (a wide shot of the staircase in front of the school, a wide shot of the elevator, a wide shot of the classroom, an extreme wide shot of the hallway at the end of the film).

5. What do we call a shot in which we see two people? Give an example from this film.

Helena's statements are filmed in a two shot with Paola. They're both sitting in a room with a colourful wall in the background. The assistant sits at a school desk with Helena (in a two shot) while she gives her statement.

6. If it's a two shot, do both people have to be in the same kind of shot?

No. One person can be closer to the camera and thus be filmed in a closer kind of shot compared to another person who can be in a wider kind of shot. A good example from everyday life is taking selfies: the person holding the phone and taking the photo is closest to the camera and will be photographed in a close-up, while the person standing behind them will be, depending on the distance from the lens, somewhere between a medium and full shot.

7. What makes Helena special? Why was this film made about her?

Helena is a girl who suffers from spinal muscular atrophy and is forced to use a wheelchair to be able to move around and go to school. Helena is also a student who, along with her classmate Paola, wrote the fable *The Little Writer*, which was later officially published. Despite everyday challenges, Helena inspires those around her (like her assistant).

8. What is the inspiration for and the message of *The Little Writer*?

Helena and Paola found inspiration for the fable in embracing young people's ideas and, since they believe that children and young people should be listened to more, that is the fable's message.

9. List the interlocutors in the film. What is the name of the method that was used to film their statements?

It's called the interview method. Statements in the film are given by: Helena, her assistant, Paola (Helena's friend and co-author of the fable) and a student from her class who helps Helena open the classroom door.

10. What do we call hearing the voice of a person we cannot see, like hearing Helen's voice but not seeing Helen in the shot?

Off camera voice. For example, Helena talking about her fable while we see only the book in the shot.

11. Are Helen's statements always shown in continuity?

No, her statements are shortened (edited). After the first statement, in which she introduces herself and tells us her date of birth, there is a “jump” in the image before she begins to tell us what illness she has in the next shot. A similar process is repeated in her later statements. Given that Helena is in the same kind of shot and in the same location in both statements, and that the camera angle hasn't changed, it is possible to conclude that these two shots are actually the same shot (Helena's statement was probably shortened or the question to explain her illness was cut out). In a continuous display of such shots, the viewer will notice that there is some kind of twitch at the cut between the two shots. Such a procedure is called a jump cut.

A jump cut can be defined as a procedure in which a slight discontinuity occurs within one shot in an otherwise continuous scene.

12. Which elements of sound are present in the film?

We can hear speech, i.e. the voices of the protagonists answering questions, noises (and the atmosphere of school hallways), such as doors opening and tables moving, but the film has no music.

13. Besides the interlocutors talking into the camera, what else do we see in the film?

There are descriptive shots in the film, shots that describe what someone is talking about. For example, while Helena is talking about her fable, we see shots of Helena and Paola leafing through the fable, or, while Helena is talking about the challenges of a wheelchair, we see a shot of Helena sitting at a school desk in a wheelchair.

14. How does the film end?

In a medium shot, Helena talks about her wishes for the future. As she talks about the future, a cut leads to an extreme wide shot of the school hallway and Helena from the back as she goes into the classroom with her assistant. As she disappears into the background, the film fades out and ends with the end credits (white letters on a black screen).

EVALUATION

- monitoring student activities while watching a film
- checking the understanding of the film by asking questions
- teaching sheet (quiz)

THE TEACHING SHEET (QUIZ) is available on the Film EDUCation website.