The Shoe-Horn Sonata & Saving Private Ryan

In what ways are people and their experiences represented through distinctively visual elements?

Composers use distinctively visual images in a way that creates valuable experiences and understandings for individuals. These images can influence their perception of and relationships with others in the world. The play The Shoe-Horn Sonata (1996) composed by John Misto explores the distinctively visual acts of injustice against vulnerable groups, the honesty of war and the lost stories of the heroic women involved in WW2. Similarly, the film Saving Private Ryan (1998) directed by Steven Spielberg portrays realistic ideas representing courage, sacrifice and the trust developed in others during war. Both composers utilise distinctively visual elements such as lighting, aural imagery and characterisation to allow the readers to gain insight into unique experiences and raise awareness of the historical injustices committed against vulnerable groups.

In both texts, the protagonists contain the quality of dealing with danger, fear and pain while maintaining the courage to persevere. During Shoe-Horn Sonata we are introduced to the courage that many of the woman had to maintain; Bridie and Sheila had a close relationship and as they retell their story, we are introduced to the courage, loyalty and determination they have together to survive. Through the use of the Shoe-horn at times of need, Stage directions containing moments of vulnerability are shown when ‘Sheila instinctively reaches out to take Brideshand’ and also through the text portraying flashbacks we are able to discover themes and ideas presented. These techniques allow the audience to be faced with people’s experiences and challenged by visual elements how they think. The shoe horn itself represents survival through symbolistic prop usage as ‘Bridie [gave Sheila] gentle taps. With my shoe horn’ in order to get through drowning together. The shoe horn survives the whole war, many years after and even survives the play, which is highlighted by a spotlight at the end, therefore representing survival and the will to live. It also represents the enduring nature of the women’s friendship and love, as Bridie was ‘tapping her shoe-horn to keep the pace’ which enabled her to be a part of this joy. This moment of peace allowed them to ‘forget the japs - [they] forgot their hunger - [their] boils - barbed-wire, everything… a glorious sound that rose… above the war… rose and took us with it. Fifty voices set us free. The women show courage through the act of singing and are able to band together and maintain hope, determination and bravery in the face of war. Through the use of flashbacks in the text Sheila shows resilience when talking about the things that got her through the war. “I’d remind myself I was part of an Empire – and if others could endure it, so could I.” Sheila found courage in the fact that she had a background and that her country would always be there for her. Similarly, during Saving Private Ryan the use of visual elements represents ideas about the soldiers and their experiences. War forces soldiers and family to mature and gain courage at an abnormal pace, courage is portrayed in the film by the soldiers that never stopped fighting and died for their country in the hope that it may benefit those after them. Through close-ups and panning camera shots and characters speech we are able to glean how these soldiers were able to maintain the image of bravery, lighting during various shots also contributes to the way people are represented. Captain Millar shows courage through his continued leadership despite the fact that the stress of combat and responsibility of leadership is physically and emotionally wearing him down which the audience notices through close-up shots where his hand trembles. Sound attributes to give aural imagery to the horrors that are experienced in war, as we hear the gunshots, screams and shouts as well as the imagery of people dropping dead and losing parts of themselves to the destruction that results from war, this is portrayed in the landing at Normandy. They have the courage to face the enemy with the knowledge that it may improve lives after them. The text also gives the idea of doing what is right even when others are against it. A portrayal of courage is through the shots of the argument when Ryan stays to fight after he is told he can go home. Both Shoe Horn Sonata and Saving Private Ryan utilise distinctively visual elements in order to portray the courage people had through their experiences and history.

Characterisation during both Shoe Horn Sonata and Saving Private Ryan allows us to see the sacrifices made by those involved in war and its devastating effects on people and how they experience life. During the Shoe Horn Sonata we see how Bridie and Sheila have been impacted from the war and the sacrifices they made then and continue to endure fifty years later. We
experience these sacrifices through the use of lighting, sound effects and the characterisation through the use of the text and speech they make while they talk of their pasts. The Shoe-Horn Sonata begins on a dark silent set, which evokes in the audience the darkness and pain of the characters memories as well as suggesting their stories have been hidden for too long. ‘Darkness. And out of the silence comes the voice of Bridie’ as now, out darkness will come true, and it will be finally brought to light. Through the use of voice over combined with speech we discover that Sheila gives her body away, and therefore her dignity and self respect, to the Japanese soldiers for Quinine for Bridie. Bridie later presents Sheila’s sacrifice as an act of heroism by a brave young woman in a place of war through the interview. Bridie trying to comfort Sheila is visually represented by ‘Bridie reach[ed] out and squeezed Sheilas hand’. There is then an emotional climax as Bridie states that “They don’t give medals for stuff like that”, and we as an audience are confronted with the idea that this is just one story from the women’s war and there are many more. Similarly, Saving Private Ryan utilises distinctively visual elements through imagery of the sacrifices made by soldiers. Sacrifices are expected of soldiers during war, as it is a soldiers duty to sacrifice himself for the greater good. We are confronted with these sacrifices through panning and wide shots of men being killed and losing body parts, characterisation of the mother when receiving the notice that her sons are dead and aural techniques of gun shots, bombs and men in pain. We are shown through the entirety of the movie various shots such as tracking, wide and point-of-view shots of a squad of men deep in enemy territory to save the last son of a family. This was a compassionate act and resulted in the death of all but two of the squad, These shots and the aural accompaniments such as the sounds of bullets, bombs and mens screams result in the audience being struck with shock and despair at how much havoc war makes. During the film, viewers are shocked with the inhumane experiences people had to endure, and are struck with the realisation that freedom is never free. Through the utilisation of distinctively visual elements, both texts present the blatant truth of what war really is, and the things that people involved had to endure.

War is a central element to both Shoe-Horn Sonata and Saving Private Ryan, as they both cover the impact the gruesome experience has on individuals and how it stays with them throughout their life. During the Shoe Horn Sonata we are shown the stories of Bridie and Sheila and we experience the ways that they have been impacted by their history and experience from war. Their story is shown through characterisation, lighting in which ‘Bridie stands in a spotlight [alone]’ and ‘Sheila stands, fixed by a spotlight [alone]’ to symbolise the distance between them and the use of stage directions. Through the direction that ‘Spotlight. Bridie and Sheila are sitting side by side… Bridie hesitates and looks at Sheila’ we are able to discover how Bridie and Sheila are attempting to become closer after all of the history and pain they have been through together. As an audience, we realise how war affects people for the rest of their lives as shown when Sheila states ‘No. Never got around to marrying actually’. The Australian Governments advice to ‘keep smiling’ shows how they had little care for the women in POW camps. Through the line “The Japs would come around and beat us for the fun of it, ‘useless mouths’ they used to call us.” Shows the disregard shown toward Bridie, Sheila and the rest of the women as well as how much they were shown to matter. As there was a view that, until recently, war was a male adventure, macho and patriarchal. Whereas women played a large part and have shown their heroic prowess. Saving Private Ryan carries similar ideas about the impact war and its experiences can have on people. As during this film we are exposed to the horrific nature of war and the life long imprint it can have on its participants. Through scene shots, aural imagery and camera angles we are able to envision the impact war has on everything it comes into contact with. A disregard for human life is shown during the movie, as shown when the entire squad shows no sympathy for the one live soldier from Germany. Camera shots show soldiers who never stopped fighting and died for their country. The flag shown at the beginning and end represents freedom, and all of the lives that were lost in battle for it. It shows us that men and women in the past have cared enough for others to sacrifice their life and future to ensure it's safety. The lifelong commitment war has on people’s lives and memories is accurately represented through distinctively visual elements in both Shoe Horn Sonata and Saving Private Ryan.