



# BRITISH SCHOOLS FILM FESTIVAL #4

## STUDY GUIDE FOR THE FILM **THE RACE**

Ireland/Germany 2009, directed by André F. Nebe

Questions for the class are organized in two categories: before viewing (bv) and after viewing (av). A work sheet with planned activities is also attached.

### **Synopsis:**

The film **The Race** is set on a farm in county Monaghan, in the Northern Ireland of today. The film centres on the young schoolgirl, Mary Kensay (played by Niamh McGirr), her mother Katey Kensay (Susan Lynch), her father Frank Kensay (Colm Meaney), and her best friend, the schoolboy Tom (Jonathan Mason). While life on the farm means Mary has to do lots of chores, like feeding the chickens and the cows, her dream is to become a woman race car driver. Along with her friend Tom, the two try out their self-built go-charts on quiet lanes, seeing who can be faster. Despite some setbacks and a few accidents, this remains her passion. One day Tom takes Mary into the boy's changing room, where it is announced that there will be a go-chart race. The winner gets a trophy and 200 pounds. But is the race open to girls? Despite all the boys laughing, the school bully, Roy (Ciaran Flynn), grudgingly accepts her challenge in the race.

While her mother is very supportive Mary's decision to enter the race, her father, completely overburdened by work on the farm, has little time for either Mary or his wife Katey. With full élan, Mary overhauls her go-kart. Yet, while Mary seems to be getting ever closer to her dream, her parents seem to be growing ever further apart. Saddled with financial worries, Frank tells Katey, "All I know is I'm not selling this farm!" Thinking of Mary as well as of herself, Katey pertinently asks, "What kind of life is it going to be for her?" Clearly, things are not going too well between the two parents. One day Mary sees Katey leaving a restaurant with another man. When Frank finds out, he confronts her. Clearly upset he says, "Maybe you'd be better off with your fancy man McGee...What do people think!" Feeling hurt and confused Katey asks, "Is that all you care about...what other people think?" Surprised by her response, Katey walks off the farm. Right after this, Mary has an accident with her go-kart, while doing a test run. Returning home, Katey feels guilty about not being there, when Mary had her accident. Frank angrily destroys Mary's go-kart, because she broke her promise to him never to drive her go-kart out on the road.

But Mary is head-strong, just like her father. Now giving Mary the time and care she really needs, the two together construct a new and even better go-kart. After all, as Frank's old friend tells him, "You're never too old to fulfil your dreams." Checking out the race route, Frank also gives Mary some good advice. Just like life itself, he tells her, "A big hill like that, speed is not the problem. The problem is staying on the road. If you can stay on the road, you can win. And that's the skill of the driver." Seeing how close Frank and Mary have now become, Katey tells her daughter, "Mary, I'm going to have to leave, and I want you to come with me." Mary asks, "What about dad?" Katey answers, "It's too late for me and your dad, Mary." Troubled Mary answers, "I don't know. Everyone is leaving." Smiling but sad, Katey responds, "Ok...You know, sometimes it's better to leave than keep on fighting." The film ends with a thrilling and at times funny race. Winning the race, Mary and Frank jump for joy, while Katey watches poignantly from afar. She then gets into a taxi and leaves for the airport. When Frank and Mary return home, Frank finds all Katey's clothes gone, while Mary finds a farewell letter. It's a hard moment in the film, as the two hug each other. But the race must go on! In the last scene we see Katey racing against her best friend Tom - two friends spurning each other ever forward!

## Questions:

**bv: What is a go-kart and go-kart racing? Who likes going on the bumper cars in a fun fair? Why is it fun? Who has been on a roller-coaster before? Is it fun or scary (or both)?**

**Who likes building funny simple things like prams, catapults, cranes, perhaps even small cars? What tools do you need? Why is it fun? Is it more a “boys thing” or can girls be equally good?**

**We all like playing or inventing games, where we find out who or what is the fastest. Why is it so much fun?**

**av: What does Mary want to be? Do you think she can be that? What obstacles must she confront? Do her parents support her in reaching her goal?**

**Is Mary happy at home? What does she like and dislike about living on a farm? Would you like to live on a farm? Are Mary and Tom happy in school? Explain.**

**What is your favourite scene in the film? Why? What do you think is the saddest moment in the film? Why?**

## Women’s Role and Family Relations:

It is interesting to note, that the film **The Race** has a number of unusual features. Firstly, the film breaks with certain established clichés. Mary, the main character in the film, wants to study engineering so that she can become a famous race car driver! This is a refreshing change to so many other films about young girls. Head-strong like her father, she follows her dream despite it clashing with other people’s expectations. Setting her sights at winning the announced go-kart race, she reaches her goal through hard work, perseverance and courage - exemplary qualities for both girls and boys. This gives the film a clear positive message.

Interestingly, the film also breaks with another well-established cliché. Namely, towards the end of the film, as Frank and Katey become increasingly estranged, it is the mother who decides to leave the family. Having the mother leave her daughter during a family crisis certainly gives the film an unusual twist. Indeed, the scene where Mary is reading Katey’s farewell letter is quite moving. Although this is clearly a part of today’s reality of the patchwork family, this is rarely shown in film. This is probably due to the fact that it questions the traditional role of the mother, where self-sacrifice for the benefit of the family is seen as an absolute priority.

Secondly, while Mary clearly has a dream, she is not the only one, who has one! Frank and Katey also have their dreams. For example, despite the enormous amount of work and financial uncertainty, Frank enjoys life on the farm. He clearly likes doing things with his hands. For Katey, things are very different. Working her fingers to the bone on a farm with no future is not what she wants. Yearning for more freedom, her dream of happiness obviously lies elsewhere. But what is she to do? As long as Frank is overburdened with farm work, he has little time for either Mary or her. In the family, he is, in effect, largely absent as both a father and a husband. Clearly, Katey cannot follow her own dream and leave, when Frank is not even there as a father. This, however, begins to change. As the film develops, Frank comes closer to Mary, while Katey now sees a way out. That is, at the start of the film, Frank has no time for Mary, and only her mother seems to support her in her dream. By the end of the film, Frank does everything to support Mary in her struggle to win the race, while Katey is now reduced to the status of a spectator, emotionally torn as she takes a taxi to the airport. This subtle shift in family relations is shown in a very sensitive way, giving the film an important emotional depth.

## Questions:

**bv: Name some traditional jobs for men and for women. Can the boys imagine doing some “girls jobs” and the girls imagine they can do some “boys jobs”? Explain.**

**As children, we all need help at times from our parent or parents. Give an example of when you especially need help from them.**

**av: What do you think about Mary wanting to become a mechanical engineer and a race car driver?**

**Does the film have a happy ending? Explain.**

**Do Mary's parents love her? Why then does Katey leave? Explain. Do you think Katey will return?**

### **The Dramatic Structure of the Film:**

As the title of the work seems to suggest, the dramatic structure of the film **The Race** is largely - but not solely - determined by the race itself. The first thirteen minutes of the film are dedicated to establishing all the main characters - especially Mary with her passion by go-kart racing. With the subsequent announcement of a local four mile go-kart race, with its enticing trophy and prize money, the film now gains a clear dramatic direction. From now on, the race gives the film a clear beginning, middle and an end. In other words, Mary's struggle to meet all the conditions of entry and win the race now provides a focus for the whole film. Every setback heightens the drama, while Mary's ability to persevere gives the film an added dynamic. The most dramatic turning point here is in the middle of the film, when Frank actively destroys Mary's go-kart. Refusing to give up, Frank and Mary now join forces to win the race. In short, with the race, Mary is given a clear goal and the period of time in which to reach it. Moreover, the race is also a very convenient way of distinguishing between the various people in the film. It essentially divides people in the film between Mary's contesters (the school bully Roy and Michael McGee), and those who she can trust (her parents and her best friend Tom). For all these reasons, the race gives the dramatic structure of the film very clear parameters.

While the dramatic structure of the film is largely given by the race, André F. Nebe also cleverly adds another underlying tension to the story - namely, the shifting relationships within Mary's family. It is important to note that throughout the film Mary is quite happy with her parents, who both love her dearly. The problem is that her parents are not so happy with each other. While Frank likes working with his hands and steadfastly refuses to sell the farm, Katey wants to start life anew, away from all the daily drudgeries of the farm. As the film develops, their dreams increasingly clash. In one scene, Frank even accuses Katey of having a "fancy man". Turning tenderly to Mary, Katey gives her a kiss, saying quietly to her, "See you later", and then walks out the door, leaving the farm. Is this a foreboding of things to come? Although Katey returns home, nothing is resolved. Ironically, it is only after Frank destroys Mary's go-kart, that the two, Frank and Mary, come closer together. Moreover, although Mary doesn't quite understand it all, Frank finally goes to the solicitor, having to face up to the fact that he is going to lose the farm. Giving up his dream (at least for now), he begins to support Mary in achieving her own dream. This is a wonderful twist in the film, because "You're never too old to fulfill your dreams." Frank and Mary work together to win the race, while Katey now realizes that she too has a chance to reach her dream. This shift in family relations gives the film its happy, but also a little bit sad ending. Mary wins the race and has a father, who is now fully there for her. Katey, though sad, must now let go in order to find a new life. And although there is a farewell letter for Mary, Katey writes "...Until we are together again...remember, you are Mary Kensay...our beautiful daughter..."

### **Questions:**

**bv: What do you need to do in order to organize an official race? Why is being in a race so exciting?**

**av: At the beginning of the film, Frank does not want to help Mary build her go-kart. By the end of the film, however, he does everything he can to help Mary succeed in the race. This is a big change. When does this change happen in the film?**

**Are Mary's parents, Frank and Katey, happy with each other? Give examples and explain.**

**Was Mary's father, Frank, right when he decided to destroy her go-kart? Why did he do it?**

## **The Camera Work:**

Unlike in a number of children's films today, in **The Race**, film director André F. Nebe uses a camera which rarely moves. By making the camera remain largely still, Nebe cleverly enables the viewing audience to easily take on the view of a neutral observer.

André F. Nebe uses a variety of conventional camera shots in his film. Although we may not consciously recognize a lot of these camera shots, many of them are in fact quite well known to us as an audience. First there is what is called a whole shot, total shot or full shot, which pictures the main characters of a specific scene from head to foot. A whole shot is often used at the beginning of a film sequence in order to give the audience the required orientation it needs in order to follow a certain action. This opening shot is frequently called an establishing shot, because it establishes the parameters of the scene for the audience. Many establishing shots are used in the first ten minutes of the film, where all the main characters and their corresponding locations are first established. The first establishing shots are made during the opening credits of the film. Here we see a school bus travelling down small country lanes. This awakens our curiosity as viewers. Then we see a schoolgirl getting off the bus and going to a farm. Character, time and location are now firmly established.

Once on the farm, another type of camera shot is frequently used - the so-called half-shot. These shots normally picture the main characters of a specific scene from head to the about waist or shoulders. These shots are normally used when the audience already has become acquainted with the time and location of the specific action. Unlike the whole shot, the half-shot gets closer to the figures, making the scene more intimate. Here now we are introduced to Mary and her parents Katey and Frank. A very good example of the importance of half-shots is when all three are eating at the table. These are intimate and sometimes very emotional scenes in the film. Also when we first meet Tom, Mary's best friend, they are shown in a very intimate way. The use of the half-shot emphasizes this intimacy.

Another very important location for the film is Mary's school. In introducing the audience to this new location, Nebe uses a number of very interesting camera shots. It begins with an establishing shot of the school bus arriving at the school. Many pupils get off the bus, including Mary and Tom together. The camera now travels at eye level with Mary and Tom. This is followed by a sequence of half-shots alternating with quite unusual subjective camera shots. Rarely used in film, the subjective camera is an approach where the camera work directly tries to visualize the inner feelings or emotional state of a character. It is like the inner-eye of the character. This can be best explained by an illustration. As Mary and Tom walk through the groups of school children, the audience sees what Mary and Tom see - namely, the other school children looking critically, even hostilely, at them (i.e. looking at the camera), shouting rude remarks. This inner-perspective is used to underline the insecurities and apprehension the two younger pupils feel. The rapid sequencing between half-shots and subjective camera as Mary and Tom walk down the school corridor further emphasizes the tense inner-feelings the two "outsiders" have towards their various schoolmates. In this way, the audience directly sees what Mary and Tom feel. It is as if the audience itself has become the object of hostility in the scene.

Although rarely seen in the film, another camera shot used by André F. Nebe is the close-up. In this type of shot, the audience normally sees only the face of the main figure or figures in the scene. This is an extremely intimate and emotionally intense shot because the camera is literally very close to the characters and their action. The best example here is the very poignant scene in Mary's bedroom the night before the race, where Katey tells her, that she wants to leave Frank. All the close-ups are shown in a shot-counter-shot format. That is, first there is a close-up of Katey. Then there is a close-up of Mary followed again by a close-up of Katey. By showing the different close-ups alternately, Nebe is able to highlight the intimacy of this dialogue.

Finally, there may be some questions asked about whether Mary actually drives the go-kart in the film. The answer - perhaps disappointingly for some younger viewers - is no. Really racing a go-kart is quite hazardous. Racing a go-kart down bumpy country lanes is even more precarious. The scenes where Mary is racing her go-kart are shot in the following way. First there are whole shots taken of Mary (sometimes together with Tom), showing viewers what is about to happen. Still as a whole shot, we then see Mary starting to roll down a country lane. There is then a cut followed by a half-shot of Mary sitting in her go-kart, racing down the lane. The half-shot is used to emphasize to audiences the exhilaration Mary feels as she races. Nevertheless, Mary is not really driving her go-kart. Rather, her go-kart is being

pulled by a moving vehicle, on which the camera is also placed. The lens of the camera is facing towards the back of the vehicle, filming Mary on her go-kart. This quick half-shot is often followed by a subjective camera. Here, the lens of the camera is now facing towards the front of the moving vehicle, filming the on-coming road, with all its obstacles (i.e. like a cow on the lane etc.). To emphasize the speed and excitement of the racing, Nebe quickly alternates between these half-shots of Mary and the subjective camera. With this visual technique, Nebe allows audiences to feel what Mary feels. The result is a very dynamic and emotionally intense thrill.

### Questions:

**bv:** What is a close-up shot? What are close-up shots used for? What's the opposite of a close-up shot? What could these shots be used for?

How many of you have take photographs or perhaps have even done some short videos? Elaborate.

If you wanted to shoot a go-kart race, how would you do it? Where would you put the camera? How would you make the race look exciting?

**av:** Does Mary really drive her go-kart in the film? If yes, how was it filmed? If no, how was it filmed?

When Mary and Tom first enter the school, it is a harrowing experience. The two are constantly tormented by their schoolmates. How is this shown in the film?

In the scene, where Katey tells Mary she is going to leave Frank, the camera uses close-up shots. Why are close-up shots important in this scene?

### The Language – Some Key Words Explained:

**Ink attack:** In the film, this is when someone in class opens an ink cartridge and then sends it flying to the targeted pupil (i.e. Mary), where it lands, covering everything in ink.

**Lass:** A lass is an informal expression for a girl or young woman.

**Pit:** In car racing, the place beside the race track, where refuelling, quick repairs, change of wheels etc. are carried out. From pit comes the word "pit stop", a quick stop during a race, when all the above activities are done, so that the driver can rapidly return to the race.

**Slut:** A very harsh term which means a prostitute or a woman, who acts like one. In the film, an older schoolgirl calls Mary's mother a slut, but Mary doesn't know what it means.

**Wellies:** An informal shortened version of the word "wellingtons", which are rubber boots. This expression is relatively unknown in the US, which uses simply the word rubber boots.

### THE RACE

Ireland/Germany 2009, 84 minutes

Director: André F. Nebe

FSK: 6, recommended age: 8+

English with German subtitles

Themes: family/family conflicts, friendship, mobbing, being a girl in a boys' sport, competition, dreams and ambitions

Study Guide by Julian Name, 2010

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## WORK SHEET FOR THE FILM **THE RACE** BY ANDRÉ F. NEBE

### 1. Comparison of **THE RACE** with Children's Films

In class, generally discuss the film, letting the people make comparisons with other films they may know. What are the similarities and differences between the film **The Race**, and these other films? Write these similarities and differences as two separate categories on the board. What do the similarities tell us about the structure of a children's film? What do the differences tell us about this particular film by André F. Nebe?

### 2. Characterisation

Identify and describe the main characters in the film. For younger pupils this could be done together in class. For older pupils, they can work together in groups, writing down key words which best describe each main character. The main characters in the film are, of course, Mary, Katey, Frank and to a lesser extent Tom. The groups can then discuss their points in class.

Once this is done, the next step is to visualize the relationships between all these main characters at the beginning of the film and at the end of the film. Draw four circles on the board, with the circle marked "Mary" located in the center. Then decide (in class for younger pupils, but in the same groups for the older children) how near or far the other three circles should be located to Mary. The nearer the circles are, the "closer" the relationship. The farther away the circles are placed, the "looser" the relationship. The circles should be arranged for the beginning of the film and for the end of the film. Now discuss in class the different positions of the circles. What do these changes mean for Mary and the other characters? When do these changes start to occur in the film? Of course, if for any reason there are no changes in the positions of the circles, this should also be explained.

### 3. Mary's Journey: Help and Obstacles

Identify and discuss in class or in small groups what obstacles Mary has to overcome before she can enter and finally win the race. Which obstacles are the most difficult for her to confront? How does she overcome them? What does she have in her favor (loving parents, tools, a good racing friend, perseverance etc.)? Rank the obstacles in a scale from difficult to most difficult. Rank her positive points from important to most important. For younger school children, this can be done on the board in class. For older children, they should work in groups and then discuss their rankings in class.

### 4. Imagine Mary's Future

In class or in groups, chose the scene which best reflects Mary's character. Which character traits are shown in the scene? Try and imagine how Mary's life continues. Will she be looked in the way as before in school? How will her relationship to her father and her mother develop? Can you imagine a sequel to this film?