

HOW DID THEY DO THAT?

vega-epub-frame

As part of our 'behind the scenes' collection, Tony Walters wonders: How did they do that?

It's impossible, isn't it? An actor fluently speaking nine languages in a new film? OK. Maybe 'unlikely' is the word. And yes, surprise, surprise, he isn't actually speaking those languages, it's yet another clever technique developed for video using AI. It makes us believe the impossible.

What is really impossible is trying to keep up with the latest technological advances that affect our viewing experiences. Special effects have come a very long way since the 'stop trick' which was first used in 1895 when filming Mary Queen of Scots. The director came up with the idea of stopping the cameras just before the execution and substituting a dummy. (I'm sure the actor was relieved!) In those early days the effects were all created physically, with make-up, different backgrounds, models and trick photography. **(1)** _____ 'How did they do that?' they asked. The question the film companies want us to keep asking.

Then digital got involved. Performance capture (performance what?) dazzled cinemagoers with films like The Polar Express (2004), where magically, it seemed Tom Hanks' expressions and movements were superimposed on an animated character. **(2)** _____ Performance capture is the combination of acting with computer animation and gives us remarkably human characters in an animated world. Think of the animals and birds in The Lion King. Some think that the creations are now almost too realistic to be called animations any longer.

In addition to this, high-tech fakery can allow real characters to do any actions they want. **(3)** _____ What allows this magic to happen is 'green screen'. This is where actors perform in front of a vividly-bright green background which can later be replaced digitally by almost anything from battle scenes to the interiors of exploding planets! The only limitation is the director's imagination.

And it is not only the technology that is changing and advancing. It is also the skills of the actors involved. Gone are the days when film actors used costume, make-up and interaction with other actors to create a believable character. **(4)** _____ Or for performance capture, an actor could be dressed in a skin-tight lycra suit with strange tiny balls stuck all over it to record individual muscle movements. He will again be depending on his imagination, this time perhaps to remember, for example, to touch the brim of an imaginary hat.

(5) _____ This uses 'face manipulation' technology to match lip movements with words so that we're convinced that the person is speaking. It is awesome in the real sense of the word and its potential for dubbing foreign language films is enormous. Remember that awkward mismatching of lips and sounds? Soon to be long gone.

But what next? I'm writing this in the present tense, but I know full well that what I record as revolutionary and new will soon become outdated. **(6)** _____ Will we ever stop asking 'How did they do that?' Or maybe there will be an unexpected plot twist and we'll turn our backs on technology and return to the early days of film. What do you think?

EXAM TASK

6 **Read the web article again. Six sentences have been removed from the article. Choose from the sentences A–G the one which fits each gap (1–6). There is one extra sentence which you do not need to use.**

A For example, they can fly, ride on performance captured monsters or interact with giants in any location imaginable.

B In other words, there will be newer and more incredible ways to make the impossible possible.

C Gollum, in Lord of the Rings (2001) is another unforgettable creation – a faded, slimy creature that uses Andy Serkis' gestures and stares with the actor's haunting eyes.

D Frustratingly for many, today they may be alone in front of a green screen interacting with people or creatures in a location that is all completely imaginary.

E Audiences gasped as fires raged through office blocks or tsunamis towered over towns and people.

F They are often badly produced and intelligent cinemagoers become bored very quickly.

G So, we come back to the revolutionary technique that allows the actor to do the impossible and talk in nine languages.

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