
Study Guide

Speed Racer



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in the *Speed Racer* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

Plot synopsis: *Speed Racer* is the second of three sons in the racing-obsessed Racer family. His decision to decline a large corporation's sponsorship threatens to destroy his career and his family. He must decide between obeying his father and following his drive to expose the corruption in the racing industry.

A. Beyond the Screen Beginnings

Viewers who have seen the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix Trilogy* and *V for Vendetta* will be able to use their prior knowledge of these movies when watching *Speed Racer*. Both of these movies involve the rebellious actions of innocent men who have been victimized by large corporations. The connections are so strong that the same actor (Roger Allam) portrays the oppressive corporate leader in both *V for Vendetta* and *Speed Racer*. What OTHER similarities do you notice in the three movies' stories?

Consider the roles played by women in each movie.

Consider the impacts of the heroes' actions on their societies.

Speed Racer is a movie adaptation of an animé story. That means that its styles and forms are Japanese comic books. The animé influences are the movie's violent struggles between good and evil.

How might the movie reveal its comic book beginnings?

B. Speed Racer and Story Telling

1. Speed Racer and myth

Speed Racer is the story of a talented young person who discovers corruption in the activity he cherishes most in life. He must choose between joining the corruption or fighting it. His decision defines who he is and his success or failure will change his society.

Speed Racer is a new version of an old, mythic story. Mythic stories are stories that societies repeat to themselves because their themes and characters are important and help to define their values and behaviours. If you reflect for awhile, you will recall many stories that fit the above story description, including *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and *The Matrix*. What additional stories can you name?

As part of its mythic quality, *Speed Racer*'s main characters might be imagined as aspects of one personality—the personality of the viewer. Pops might symbolize the viewer's strength, wisdom and integrity. Royalton might symbolize the viewer's temptation to be powerful and affluent but corrupt. Mom might symbolize the viewer's appreciation of personality and effort. Spritle might symbolize the viewer's silly side.

What aspect of viewers' personalities might be symbolized by Rex?

What aspects of their own lives might viewers think about when they watch the scenes between Rex and Pops?

2. Speed Racer and Time

Speed Racer presents a very multi-layered story. Some of its events occur in the present, but many of them occur in the past and the future. There are very subtle clues to tell viewers when events are past, present or future.

What is the connection between the frequent flashbacks and flashforwards in *Speed Racer* and its animé and comic book heritage?

Why might animé or comic book readers find *Speed Racer* easier to understand?

How might this blending of past, present and future entertain and keep viewers interested?

How might the blending confuse viewers?

What advice would you give to someone so that they might more effectively distinguish between past, present and future in *Speed Racer*?

C. Editing and Cinematographic Style

Speed Racer is innovative in at least two ways: its rapid editing and blur-less cinematic style. Both of these techniques can be traced to the story's animé heritage.

1. Editing

There are a great many short shots, whether during action or dramatic moments. Short shots enhance the dynamic feeling of a movie because the audience must continually re-orient its position with each new shot.

The short shots might also be the cinematic equivalent of the frames on a comic book page. This feeling is enhanced by the constant use of a transition called a wipe or a push. Rather than cuts or dissolves, wipes move new images onto the screen from side to side as they push old images off the screen. Wipes occur in a wide variety of styles in *Speed Racer*, sometimes as the traditional straight lines moving left to right, but also as characters' faces or objects moving across the frame and pushing old images off as they drag new images on screen.

2. Depth of field

Camera lenses have depth of field, meaning that some of the recorded image will be in focus while other parts are often out of focus. Cinematographers can use depth of field to direct viewers' attention to or away from objects or people because the human eye is drawn to whatever is easiest to look at. In other words, we prefer to look at things that are in focus, so we pay attention to in-focus people or objects and ignore out-of-focus objects or people.

Speed Racer layers its images so that objects and people are rarely out of focus, like an animé frame. This full-focus frame gives the movie a very different look. Viewers have to decide what parts of the frame to look at because all of each frame is in focus.

Did you find it difficult to decide where to look when watching the movie?

Do you think that the rapid editing and blur-less images made the movie more exciting?

Which audience members might find the editing and cinematic qualities of *Speed Racer* hard to watch?

D. Speed Racer's Audiences

The relationships between audiences and sports is important in *Speed Racer*. There are at least three audiences present: the sports reporters, the grandstand audience and the audience watching the movie. Each of these audiences influences the movie's meanings.

1. Sports Reporters

Sports reporters play a large role in *Speed Racer*. The movie uses them often. Sometimes they respond to the racing, sometimes they provide background information to a race, and sometimes they predict what might happen in the future.

What did the frequent shots of the sports reporters help you understand about racing?

Does their presence support Royaltan's opinion that racing is a sales business or Speed's opinion that racing is a romantic pursuit?

How might they support BOTH opinions?

2. The Grandstand Audience

There are many shots of the grandstand audiences reacting to the races' thrills and spills. The shots present the grandstand audiences as a large, enthusiastic group. How important are these audience shots in the movie? How would the viewing experience change for you if there were NO audience shots?

Does their presence support Royaltan's opinion that racing is a sales business or Speed's opinion that racing is an artistic or romantic pursuit?

How might it support BOTH opinions?

3. The Movie Audience

People might watch *Speed Racer* for many reasons. They might be Wachowski fans who want the same entertainment they experienced with the *Matrix Trilogy* and *V for Vendetta*. They might be manga or animé fans who are interested in seeing how those printed forms have been adapted for the screen. They might be fans of the *Speed Racer* comics or TV shows and want to enjoy the characters and stories as a movie. They might be fans of the many action movies that combine live actors and CGI animation.

Which of these reasons has drawn you to *Speed Racer*?

How has the *Speed Racer* movie experience changed your appreciation of the Wachowskis, animé and/or the previous *Speed Racer* stories?

If you watched *Speed Racer* in a movie theater, how did the responses of the other audience members influence your understanding and appreciation of the movie?

If you watched *Speed Racer* at home, how did your friends or family influence your understanding and appreciation of the movie?

If you watched *Speed Racer* alone, how did you react to the exciting and dramatic moments in the story?

Which of your previous Wachowski, movie, animé or comic book experiences did you use to better understand and enjoy the movie?

4. Fathers and Sons

How might male and female audience members watch *Speed Racer* differently? The Racers have three sons but no daughters. Rex leaves home because he has disappointed Pops, and Pops tells him that if he leaves, he cannot return. Speed defies Pops by lying—saying that he has gone skiing but is really racing in the rally that killed Rex. These are very tense moments, especially for viewers who are sons and might relate to the rejection and anger that the defiant acts receive from Pops. At the end of the movie, Pops tells Speed, “I’m proud of you, son!”

How might male viewers respond to Speed’s relationship with Pops?

How might female viewers see themselves reflected in the father-son relationship?

What might *Speed Racer* help viewers understand and appreciate about the relationships between fathers and sons?

E. Speed Racer as Social Commentary

Early in the movie, Royalton tells Speed the real meaning of racing. He tells him that racing is NOT a romantic pursuit or an art form, but power and money. He explains that the history of racing is the history of the car business, and that the world league was created to sell cars first, and promote racing second.

Do you think that Royalton’s statements apply to real professional racing organizations?

Do corporations sponsor racing teams for the purpose of drawing attention to and selling their cars or related products?

Do Royalton’s statements apply to other professional sports?

Might professional baseball or hockey be corporate strategies for selling beer?

Speed’s mother tells him that his driving is an art that takes her breath away.

Do you think that she is blind to the business side of racing?

How might a professional sport be both an art and a business?

F. Matrix Trilogy

The unfinished stories and conflicts at the end of *The Matrix* provided opportunities for the other movies in the trilogy. The additional movies provided additional employment for the movie makers and additional income for the movie studio.

Reflect on the ending of *Speed Racer*. What events or conflicts were not resolved? Consider Royalton, Rex Racer, Racer X, Taejo Togokahn, his sister and button G. Imagine how these characters and their stories might create opportunities for a sequel.

Speed Racer is an entertaining movie, but it might also be used to promote products and services. Consider the action, audience and themes of the movie.

What food products or restaurants might partner with the movie makers?

How might they use *Speed Racer* to promote their products?

What toys might be promoted using the movie?

Could toys for boys and girls be equally successful?

How many different games might be based on the movie?

What ages would these games be targeted to? Why?

For more information on *Speed Racer*, visit <http://speedracermovie.warnerbros.com/>