

## A FIRST IMPRESSION OF NEW YORK CITY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7dkZLtdK2M>

Nigel Silvester's film "Go – New York City" shows a BMX rider on an unconventional trip through the city.

Describe where he is, describe what you see, what impressions you get of the city, what people look like.



## PREDICTING THE FILM'S CONTENT

In order to get a closer look at the city as it is presented in **Pieces of April**, the following website can be used:

<http://onthesetofnewyork.com/piecesofapril.html>

After looking at the pictures - what do you think about the context of the story? Who could the characters be? How could the story evolve?



## SUMMARISE THE FILM

*Think – pair – share*

How would you summarise the film in one sentence?  
What did you like about it and what did you not like?  
Which character(s) did you like best / least?  
What did you think about the ending?



## LOOKING AT SUMMARIES

Looking at film summaries: Mat No. 6 provides quotes from various sources about the film **Pieces of April**.

Which of these summaries do you agree with most, which one do you not agree with?



## DISCUSSING THE ENDING

Step 1: Open your time capsule:

Which of your predictions came closest to the ending of the film?

Step 2: What does a good ending of a film look like?

(what is satisfying for the audience?). Collect criteria!

Step 3: Look at your predictions again. Apply the criteria for a satisfying ending to the ending of **Pieces of April** and to your own predictions.

Step 4 (optional): Talk about the film director's comments on the ending of the film (Mat No. 7).



## POSSIBLE WHILE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

*As mentioned in the text, this selection of activities can be seen as a menu to choose from, depending on students' background knowledge and viewing experience.*

**1. Predicting during the first scene (stop at 00:01:30):** Students watch the first few minutes of the film until Bobby says to April “this is gonna be your big day” and guess what this big day could be (expected answers: job interview, birthday, wedding day...).

**2. Follow-up questions:** What do you know about Thanksgiving?

- Pieces of April takes place on Thanksgiving Day. What do you know about Thanksgiving as a holiday in the USA? Students take notes on the following questions and compare the answers with another student.
- When is it?
- How do many Americans spend this holiday?
- What else do you know about Thanksgiving in the USA? How did you learn about this?
- Is there a similar holiday in Germany?

**3. Character overview** (see Mat No. 5): This activity can be carried out after most of the cast has been introduced (eg. at 00:09:30). Its purpose is to help students get a quick overview of the main characters in the film, and it can stimulate a discussion of first impressions of the characters. If needed, it can also help clarify questions about the potentially confusing sub-plots (see also Mat No. 3), which can be used as a while-viewing task or post-viewing). The worksheet (Mat No. 5)) can help students remember the characters' names throughout the rest of the film. The character descriptions can be reviewed at the end of the film to see if the characters have evolved, or if students' first impressions of them have changed.

**4. Time capsule:** Predicting the ending of the story can be done at any time throughout the film as it continues to build up a tension towards the Thanksgiving meal. A good moment is the scene in which Evette hands back the half-cooked turkey to April with the words “Good luck” (00:32:10). By this time, viewers know about some of the obstacles on the way towards the dinner, both on April's and on the family's end. Students can be asked about their prediction for the ending of the story: What kind of Thanksgiving will the Burns family have this year? Why do you think so? In pairs, they are to decide on a plausible ending of the film, which they write on a piece of paper. All predictions are collected and put in an envelope, the ‘time capsule’, which will be sealed and opened again after the class has finished watching the film (adapted from Collie & Slater 1994: 31).

## EXPLORING STORYLINES

Create a sequence of the three different storylines, showing the order of key events in each of them on a poster.



Make a note of where and when they cross over.

Cut out and use the screenshots provided to illustrate your timelines. Which events do you consider the most important ones for each of the storylines?

Consider this example:

April		April tries to find help to cook the turkey	Evette and Eugene help April with her turkey	Wayne helps April with his new oven
Bobby	April and Bobby get up in their apartment in NY. They start to prepare Thanksgiving dinner	Bobby rides with his small scooter to get a suit	Bobby meets friends who help him to get a suit	Bobby meets April's ex boyfriend and gets beaten up by him
Burns Family	The Burns family get up in the morning in their middle class suburban neighbourhood	They pick up their grandma to drive to NY	They get really frustrated and talk about turning around to go back home	They finally arrive at April's apartment, where they meet Bobby. They are shocked and drive away

## ANALYSING THE PLOT LINES

For each of the 3 plot lines, select key scenes.

Why are they important?

Act them out or create a freeze frame which symbolises the relationships between the characters in the scene.



## OPEN AND CLOSED DOORS

April knocks on many doors in her building –

Imagine there are other scenes which have been left out of the final version of the movie. What could be other 'types' she meets?

What could be their reactions to her request?



Act out dialogues in small groups.



## THANKSGIVING

Possible further activities:

### 1. Follow up on the initial question “What do you know about Thanksgiving”:

Students should brainstorm what they learned about the holiday through the film, and what their questions are. The graph below “Thanksgiving as a cultural phenomenon” can be used on the board/a poster/by students individually on worksheets to add notes whenever they find out more through Thanksgiving-related tasks. Alternatively, it can be used at the end to collect students’ acquired knowledge, any comments and open questions they want to add after their explorations of Thanksgiving history and traditions.

### 2. Thanksgiving, a great American holiday, its origins and controversies

Additional resources from the internet and/or printed materials can be used to explore different aspects, such as:

- The history of Thanksgiving as a national holiday: Grace & Bruchac (2004), through its combination of photographs of re-enacted scenes and texts, can provide stimuli for discussion. Philbrick (2008) offers a historical review, written for young adult readers. A short clip such as ‘Bet you didn’t know – Thanksgiving’ available at: <http://goo.gl/DzSZSr> can be used as a starting point to create questions, which can then be researched on websites such as [http://www.scholastic.com/scholastic\\_thanksgiving/](http://www.scholastic.com/scholastic_thanksgiving/)
- Thanksgiving as a “Day of Mourning” for Native Americans ([www.uaine.org](http://www.uaine.org), <https://www.teachervision.com/thanksgiving/history/2558.html>)
- Thanksgiving and animal rights groups (see Material No. 4).

### 3. Discussing the scene in which April tries to explain Thanksgiving (58:38):

- How well does April explain the holiday to her Chinese neighbours?
- Write a better script for April and have her explain it to the Chinese children who do not know about American history.
- Would this explanation also be a good one for German children, given that a Sunday in the Christian church calendar is called *Erntedankfest*?

### 4. Thanksgiving holiday in other films / sitcoms (available online or on DVD):

*Pieces of April* is by far not the only film which centres around Thanksgiving. Other Thanksgiving scenes (e.g. *The Blind Side*), or episodes of sitcoms (e.g. *Modern Family*, *How I met your mother*) can be used to explore recurrent themes such as family reunions with high expectations, which often end in disappointment or even disaster.

### 5. Thanksgiving Parade in New York City:

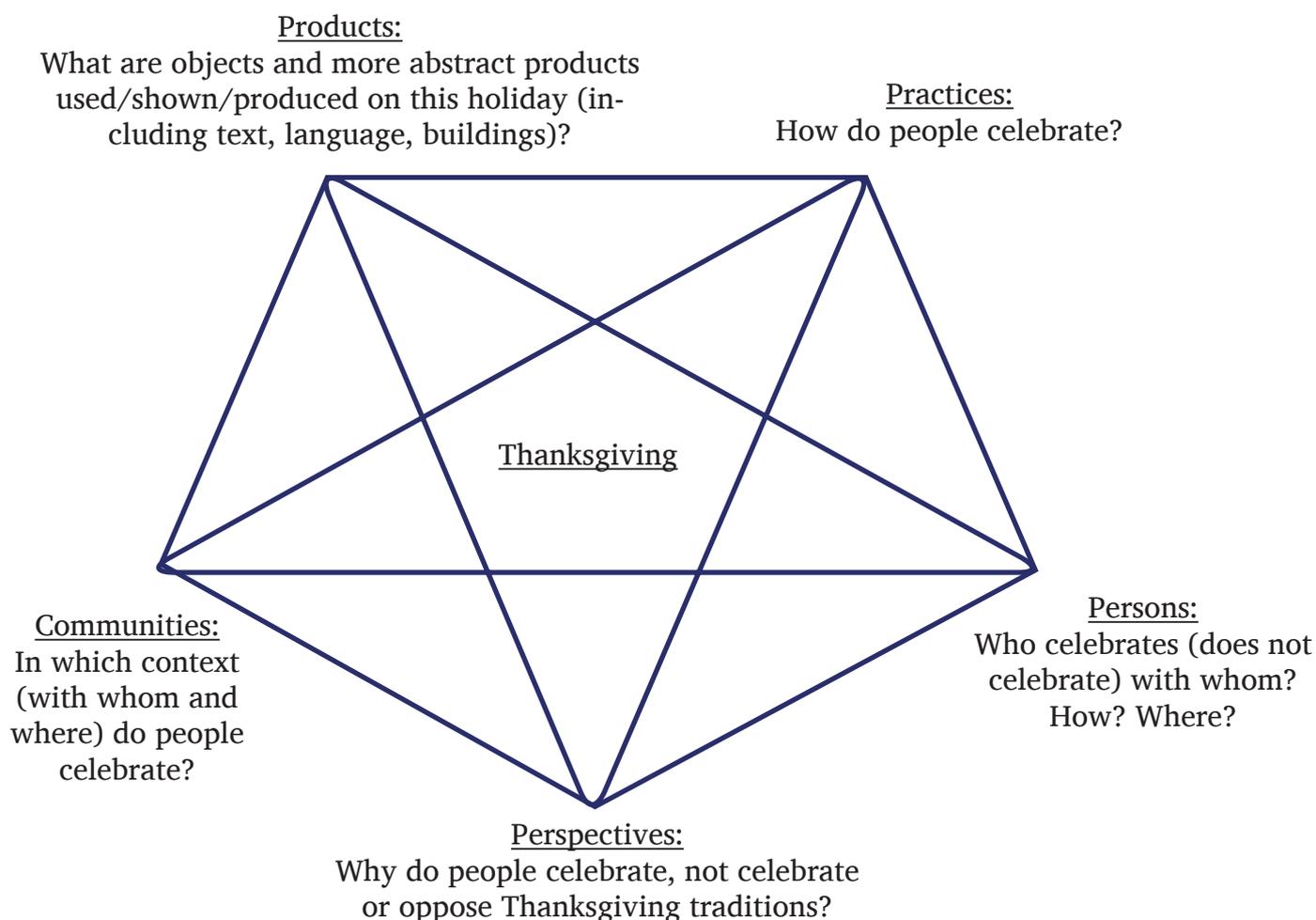
Neither the Burns family, nor their neighbours, go out to watch the traditional ‘Macy’s parade’. Imagine you are planning a trip to New York City in November. Find out about the parade and decide if you would like to see it. [http://www.nyctourist.com/macys\\_map.htm](http://www.nyctourist.com/macys_map.htm)

## DIMENSIONS OF THANKSGIVING

Moran (2001) defines culture as “the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts.”



His model for analysing cultural phenomena has been adapted in the graph below to show dimensions of Thanksgiving.



## THANKSGIVING CONTROVERSY

Tish, one of April's neighbours, is a vegan and refuses to help April with the cooking of the turkey. Watch the scene again (00:32:18) and focus on what she says to April. What are her reasons for not cooking the traditional Thanksgiving meal?



## ABOUT PETA

Like Tish, there is a growing number of Americans who do not agree with the traditions of eating turkey on Thanksgiving. Can you imagine why? Collect arguments with a partner.

Then, go online and find posters and commercial produced by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) on the subject of Thanksgiving. What is their message? Can you imagine why some of their ads have been banned, i.e. they are not shown on TV in the USA?

Useful websites to start your search:

<http://www.peta.org/features/thanksgiving-grace/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjKRxa7ZyMs>



## CREATIVE TASK

Imagine you are part of an animal rights group, planning this year's Thanksgiving campaign. In teams, create a poster for the campaign.



## MAIN CHARACTERS

In the chart below, you will find pictures of the main characters in the film. Write their names next to the pictures and describe how they relate to April (example: Joy, April's mother).



Then, choose three adjectives from the box which you find most useful for describing this person. Of course, you can also use your own words.

Finally, compare your results in small groups. Discuss the words you found for describing the characters and decide which of them fits the character best. Write it in the last column of the chart and present your results to the other groups.

## SOME LANGUAGE SUPPORT

Here are some adjectives you can use for describing the impression you have of this person

sensitive, sociable, gentle, passive, bitter, humorous, happy, bold, nervous, open-minded, anxious, careful, loyal, giving, cheerful, messy, independent, moody, talkative, sceptical, thoughtful, impulsive, carefree, pessimistic, peaceful, optimistic, reserved, reliable, balanced, thoughtless, active, dominant, exact, adventurous, unhappy, imaginative, hot-blooded, ambitious, well-organised, .....



# PIECES OF APRIL

Mat No | 5

NAME	RELATION TO APRIL	3 ADJECTIVES	GROUP RESULT

Source: Screenshots from Pieces of April

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## DISCUSS YOUR SUMMARIES

Read the film summaries below. Underline the elements which you consider as important for talking about **Pieces of April**. Which of them do you like most/least?

Get together with a partner and compare your results.



## WHAT IS A GOOD SUMMARY?

As a whole group, find out which of the summaries most people liked. Discuss criteria for a good film summary.



## EXTENSION TASK

In pairs, write a summary of the film which includes all the aspects you find important. You can borrow ideas from the examples given, but try to use your own words to express them.

Of course, you should add everything about the film which you did not find in the summaries. Make sure you end up with a coherent text.



## SAMPLE SUMMARIES I

This film is the story of a young woman of about 20, who is living on her own in a small rundown apartment in New York City. April has never gotten along well with her middle class family, who live in a suburb of New York, but one day she decides to invite them all over for a Thanksgiving dinner that she will prepare herself, even though she doesn't really know how to cook.



April's family is very hesitant to travel to her apartment, because none of them get along with her. Joy is the most nervous, partly because she is already very weak from fighting cancer, and partly because she doesn't believe she can ever understand her out of control daughter. Beth is also very much against going to New York, but Jim feels there is always hope for a new beginning, and Timothy would simply like to take photos of whatever happens. Meanwhile, April is going to try and make it work, and with the help of Bobby and various neighbors, she's determined to show that any family, no matter how dysfunctional (broken), can join together for at least one warm and special meal.

Source: [www.eslnotes.com/movies/pdf/pieces-of-april.pdf](http://www.eslnotes.com/movies/pdf/pieces-of-april.pdf)

In a very poor zone of New York, April Burns and her boyfriend, the Afro-American Bobby, are preparing to receive April's family for a thanksgiving dinner. While Bobby tries to borrow a suit for him, April realizes that her stove is broken and she tries desperately to find a neighbor that can let her cook the turkey, since she does not want to fail (again) with her family. Meanwhile, in a suburb of Pennsylvania, her dysfunctional family is preparing to travel to New York. While driving in the road, the relationship between the Burns and the black-sheep April is disclosed through the conversations between her father Jim, her resented mother Joy, her brother, her sister and her grandmother.

Source: <http://onthesetofnewyork.com/piecesofapril.html>

Peter Hedges' „Pieces of April,“ this year's Thanksgiving movie, ends prematurely and has a side plot that's a distraction and a cheat, but it contains much good humor and works, anyway. It consists of 2.5 parallel stories. Story 1: The Burns family is driving from the suburbs to New York to have Thanksgiving dinner with a troublesome daughter. Story 2: The daughter, who has never cooked a Thanksgiving dinner before, is trying to cope despite a broken oven. Story 2.5: Her boyfriend disappears on a mission that is unnecessary, distracting and misleading.

Source: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/pieces-of-april-2003>

## SAMPLE SUMMARIES II



April Burns is a wild, 21-year-old young woman with a very big problem. Against her own better judgment, she's invited her estranged, straight laced family for Thanksgiving dinner.

Her boyfriend, Bobby, wants to help, but she banishes him from the apartment while she attempts to cook the meal.

To make matters worse, she then discovers that her oven doesn't work. So, while April is forced to ask her eccentric neighbors for help in cooking her fifteen pound turkey, the Burns Family begins a reluctant journey from suburban Pennsylvania toward New York City's Lower East Side. April's Dad, Jim Burns tries to convince the family that the day will be beautiful. However, her mom, Joy, has her doubts and freely voices them. April's teenage sister and brother are squeezed between Grandma Dottie, and a bag of snacks in the back seat, as the Burns' family car hurtles toward Manhattan-and what will most likely be disaster.

*Source: [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/pieces\\_of\\_april/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/pieces_of_april/)*

April Burns, the eldest daughter in a highly dysfunctional family, lives in a small tenement apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with her boyfriend Bobby. Although estranged from her family, she opts to invite them for Thanksgiving dinner, probably the last for her mother Joy, who has breast cancer.

The film focuses on three journeys: the family's arduous trek from suburbia to New York City, punctuated by stops for Krispy Kreme doughnuts, bagels, Joy's frequent need for a restroom or a joint to ease her pain, a burial service for an animal they hit, and various arguments and recriminations, as well as discussions of their disappointment in April; Bobby's efforts to find a suit so he can make a good impression on his girlfriend's relatives; and April's preparations for the meal, a near disaster when she discovers her oven is broken. With the help of various neighbors, she manages to assemble dinner, while learning to appreciate the importance of family and making some new friends in the process.

*Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieces\\_of\\_April](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieces_of_April)*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Director's comment on Scene 153 (ending):  
(Source: *Hedges 2003: 103/4*).



Tami Reiker (director of photography) had the idea to shoot the end in two different ways.

Sam Levy, who operated our second camera, took still photographs with the Sony PD-150 video camera. Tami shot actual footage. I didn't understand why until she explained that it would be good to have options. I'm really grateful she did because it made the final montage a much more compelling sequence. We cut many versions of the ending. The one constant was the lovely moment between Beth and April when they hug and Beth tries not to cry. The script suggests that the last shot be of April and Joy, but this felt too easy and obvious. Also, at some point we settled on the reprise of the camera timer – and its incessant tick – and the final click leading us to a black screen. Gary Winick pushed for a more economical sequence and he was right. Originally we used the Three Dog Night song, as scripted, but at the persistent, gentle urging of John Lyons (producer), I met with several composers, the last being one of my favorite musicians in all the world, Stephen Merritt. We showed him the film and he liked it except for the “Pieces of April” song. He felt it was too sentimental, sappy. So he wrote something for us, which he played on his ukulele. The song is perfect.

One final note: More often than not, as we tried to set up *Pieces of April*, studio executives and money people would argue that the ending was insufficient. “We need to have a scene between April and Joy. We need to hear them reconcile, or whatever.” We knew this was not the case. The whole journey of this movie is not toward some exchange of words. The story is about a girl trying to cook a turkey for her dying mother and a dying mother who'd rather be anywhere else than with her estranged daughter. It's not about what they say to each other. It's about getting to a place where they can speak to each other. That they're in each other's presence – and for one moment, there is grace – that's all that matters. Then we cut to black – because even moments of grace can't last forever.

## BEHIND THE SCENES

Film is a visual medium. In an interview, Peter Hedges, the film's director, stresses the importance of elements of film language (e.g. camera angles, lighting) but also the actors' body language in **Pieces of April** (Hedges in Feld 2003:135).



The director's comments below show how he and his team filmed and edited a key scene of the movie over and over again until they thought it was perfect.

## SILENT VIEWING

Watch Scenes 130-131 with the sound turned off. In this scene, the Burns family arrives in front of April's apartment and drive away.



Focus on elements Peter Hedges could have meant when he said "Film is a visual medium". Read these guiding questions before you watch the scene:

- What is the setting of the scene? What is the effect on the viewer (and on the Burns family)?
- What about Bobby's appearance? How does he act?
- What do we learn about the members of the Burns family? How do they show their emotions? What is their body language?
- What about the editing in this part of the film? How are the scenes cut and sequenced? What is the effect of this decision of the director?

After watching the scene, exchange your impressions with a partner. Together, complete the following sentence: "The Burns family drive off because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_."

Now, watch the scene with the sound. What is the additional information you get through the sound track?

Finally, read the director's comment below. Which visual elements in this scene does he point out? What are the visual techniques he used to help his audience understand the story?

## DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

Scenes 130-131 (Source: director's comment, p. 100-101)



We decided to break up scene 131. We play the first part of the scene where the family sees April's building for the first time.

They're all horrified. Jim says under his breath, "Goddamit, April." Then we cut to Scene 130 where the repaired turkey is revealed by the Chinese Family. Then we cut to Beth screaming. Bobby arrives, all bloody, saying, "Welcome, welcome." [...]. It's an extremely delicate moment. Minutes later the family will be driving off. And why? Because Bobby is black? Because they're scared? Racist? I didn't want it to feel like they were fleeing because of race. So we did many takes of this scene because I wanted options when we edited. Derek did angry versions and sweet versions and every other kind of version in between. Another reason for the numerous takes was that I started to pare away the text. I'd written lines wherein Bobby professed his love for April. "I'm Bobby. The Bobby who loves your daughter. The Bobby who would do anything for her." These lines were not necessary. They are a great example of a writer not trusting his story. It's much better to see how Bobby loves April earlier in the film than to hear him explain it later. Here's an obvious thought: Film is a visual medium. When we started to shoot, and Derek was "bloodied up" for the scene, it became exceedingly clear why the Burns family would flee, and why not a lot of words were needed. We'd watched Bobby spend a big part of the movie trying to get an outfit to look nice when he meets her family. They show up, his clothes are torn, his lip is bloody.

What's terrific in Derek's performance is the purity of heart and the lack of self-pity.