

FILM ANALYSIS HANDBOOK

SECOND EDITION

Thomas Caldwell

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▶ innovative ▶ engaging ▶ evolving

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CONTENTS



CHAPTER 1

Introductionv

THE BASICS 1

The first basic rule	1
Basic terminology	2
Film style	4
Narrative	6
Genre	6
Hollywood and arthouse cinema	6

CHAPTER 2

MISE EN SCÈNE 9

Settings	11
Lighting	15
Costumes	26
Acting	31

CHAPTER 3

CINEMATOGRAPHY 37

Exposure	38
Frame rate	42
Focus	43
Perspective	46
Camera position	51
Camera movement	62
Point-of-view shots	69
Aspect ratio	71

CHAPTER 4

EDITING 74

Types of edits	74
Continuity editing	76
Spatial editing	82
Temporal editing	85
Graphic editing	92
Rhythmic editing	94



CHAPTER 5

SOUND 97

- Uses of sound 98
- Sound motifs 102
- Sources of sound 103

CHAPTER 6

NARRATIVE 107

- Story and plot 108
- The classical Hollywood narrative 110
- Narration 119

CHAPTER 7

GENRE 123

- Generic conventions 124
- Subverting generic conventions 128
- Documentaries 129

CHAPTER 8

THINKING OUTSIDE THE FRAME 131

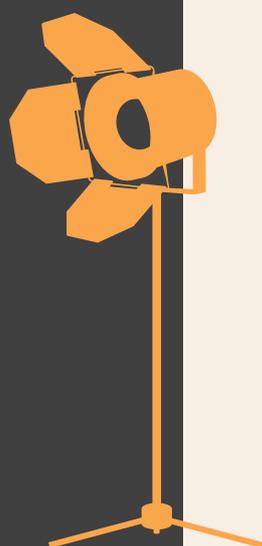
- Parodies 132
- Pastiches 132
- Allusions 133
- Adaptations 135
- Remakes 136
- Film series 137
- Cast and crew 137

CHAPTER 9

WRITING ABOUT FILM 139

- How to acknowledge film authorship 140
- How to write about narrative 140
- How to write about characters 145
- How to write about themes 151
- How to write about social values 156
- How to write a film review 163

- Activity Sheets 171
- Glossary 179
- Recommended websites 186
- Index of films 189
- Index of names and terms 194



Introduction

Deriving meaning from the moving image is something we are all unconsciously accustomed to doing. We have grown up and live in an increasingly media-saturated environment, where watching films, television, commercials, music videos, cartoons, video games and online videos has embedded in us the ability to make sense of visual language with little effort.

Our understanding of how films construct meaning has been informed by centuries of narrative and visual traditions, from Greek theatre to Renaissance art to the classical Hollywood cinema conventions established at the beginning of the last century.

This book is probably not going to tell you anything that you don't already know on an intuitive level, but it aims to provide you with the terminology and structural tools to develop a strong critical interpretation of a film, supported by textual evidence. An awareness of how filmmakers construct and convey meaning is sometimes called 'film literacy'; this has less to do with making value judgements about particular films (i.e. whether or not they are 'good') than with unpacking a film's themes and ideas.

It is important to remember that a film is not a novel and cinema is not literature. You cannot evaluate film purely from a narrative point of view. Knowing the film's story is only one aspect of understanding its meaning. Film is a visual medium that uses elements of style to great effect in order to persuade the audience to feel certain things about the characters and story they are witnessing. Film analysis *must* take visual style into account.

It is also important to understand that film is a construct and never a reliable depiction of reality. Remember, every frame of a film has been carefully manipulated by the filmmakers to convey the illusion of reality they want viewers to accept. This also applies to news reports, current affairs shows and reality television. All forms of media are constructs; they each have an agenda and are designed to be persuasive. There is no such thing as objectivity in filmmaking and there are rarely accidents – there is always, at some point, a person who decides what will or will not go into the film, and there is always a reason for that decision. Even so-called realistic or naturalistic cinema is based on a highly subjective perception of what constitutes reality.

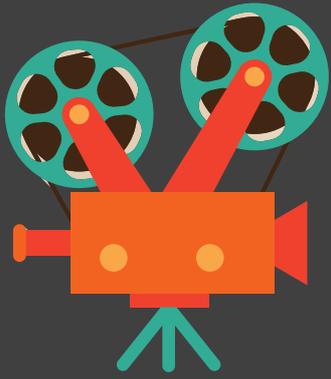
What is different in the new edition?

The main motivation for writing a new edition of this book was to update the film examples used to help describe some of the terminology. Many of the films referenced in the 2005 edition were new releases at the time, but are less relevant for a contemporary audience. For this edition, rather than simply attempting to provide new and more up-to-date film examples, I have gone back into film history to include more references to classic films that are still widely accessible and highly regarded. Where I've included examples from recent films, it is because I believe they will have cultural longevity and be remembered for many years to come.

As well as updating the film examples, I've also updated some of the terminology. When I wrote the first edition, I was heavily reliant on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's highly influential 1979 book *Film Art: An Introduction* (now in its eleventh edition), plus my own studies at university. Since then, some of the terminology I used has become obsolete, so I've updated this edition to best reflect common usage. I have also added new sections, removed others, and rearranged some chapters based on my own experience delivering lectures, which has given me greater insight into what is and isn't useful to students.

This book doesn't aim to be exhaustive or to cover every possible aspect of film analysis (see *Film Art* for that), but it does aim to equip students with the essential tools to write confident, informed and persuasive film analysis.

Thomas Caldwell
2017



THE BASICS

The first basic rule

Cinema is a **visual** art form. Cinema is not literature. A film is not a novel.

A film is a text, just as a play, a poem, a television show or a novel is a text. However, you cannot study films as you would print texts such as novels, short stories and so on, because a film is visual. You can, though, be asked to 'read' a film text, which means that you are being asked to understand, interpret and analyse it. To do so, you need to use appropriate terminology and concepts for discussing the conventions of cinema.

While it is essential to study the film's story, you must not forget to examine the visual style and the use of sound in the film as well. Most of the greatest films ever made combine all elements to generate fascinating themes, powerful emotions and complex characters.



Basic terminology

A shot

A **shot** is a continuous piece of filming without interruption.

- ★ The camera or the subjects being filmed may move during a shot, but the filming is uninterrupted.
- ★ A shot can be as short as a few seconds or as long as the entire film.
- ★ There are no edits or breaks in filming during a shot.

EXAMPLE

When filming a conversation between two people, the conventional method is to have a shot of Person A speaking, followed by a shot of Person B replying, and then another shot of Person A talking. Likewise, a shootout in a western would have a shot of Cowboy A drawing a gun, followed by a shot of Cowboy B drawing a gun, a shot of Cowboy A firing, a shot of Cowboy B firing, and so on. Each action is performed in one single shot.

An edit

An **edit** is a means of joining shots together where one shot finishes and the next begins.

There are four common types of edits (see Chapter 4):

- ★ cuts
- ★ dissolves
- ★ fades
- ★ wipes.

A scene

A **scene** is a collection of shots arranged in a specific order through editing.

- ★ A scene in which two people are talking may be a collection of twenty shots showing the characters from different angles. Likewise, the potentially hundreds of brief shots of various stages of a car chase would be edited together to create a chase scene.
- ★ Although there are particular shots in some films that are extremely important to analyse closely, on the whole we make sense of the story and meaning of films through understanding how shots are edited together into scenes.

- ★ It is debatable sometimes as to when a scene ends or when a scene starts, but it is common to discuss a collection of related action or dialogue as a scene.

EXAMPLE

There may be an action scene in which James Bond escapes from the villains, as distinct from the preceding dialogue scene in which Bond listens to the villains discussing their plan to take over the world.

The frame

The **frame** is literally the border or edge of the screen in the cinema – the physical boundary that contains what the audience sees.

- ★ The frame is the border around the collection of images we see at every moment of a film.
- ★ Characters frequently walk in and out of the frame, and most shots selectively show only certain elements of the scene.
- ★ Unlike still photography and two-dimensional visual arts, in which the artwork exists solely within the frame, the world of a film exists beyond the frame.

EXAMPLE

In a film about an alien invasion, the space of the film may incorporate the entire world, outer space and other planets. However, at any given time we only see specific elements of this story. Aliens may be landing on the Opera House, but the frame might only include images of an office in which world leaders are sitting around a table arguing over what to do. Those world leaders are in the frame of the shot, but they are talking about events happening outside the frame.

Framing

Framing is the art of deciding which images the audience sees within the frame of the cinema screen, and how those images are arranged within each shot.

- ★ Framing creates a sense of 'balance' in each shot by deciding where each figure in the shot should be placed. A shot in which all the actors are on the right of the screen would be unusually framed if the left side of the screen is completely empty.
- ★ Framing is also used to limit and control what images the audience sees in each shot.
- ★ Framing is very important because it is a way of 'withholding' information from the audience.

EXAMPLE

A classic horror-movie technique is to place the monster outside of the frame so that the audience cannot see it. The monster is in the location in which the scene is set, but the framing means that the audience can only see the unaware victims stumbling around. At the crucial moment the camera will move, and hence change the framing, to show that the monster is lurking next to the victims.

Diegesis

The **diegesis** of a film is everything contained within the ‘world’ of that film. Therefore, a diegetic element is an element within the world of the film, while a non-diegetic element is any element outside the world of the film.

- ★ A film’s diegesis includes not only the events depicted in the film, but also events that occur during the film unseen by the audience and events that have occurred before the events shown in the film.
- ★ Diegetic elements include sound in the film that is heard by the characters and therefore exists within the world of the film.
- ★ Non-diegetic elements include sound that is only heard by the audience, such as the music soundtrack, and visual components such as the opening and closing credits.

Film style

Film style describes sound and the visual elements of a film – the ‘language’ of film.

Understanding a film’s style is an essential part of film analysis. As cinema is a multimodal art form, we must be able to understand why filmmakers choose to have their films look and sound a particular way. Just as a writer or a poet uses certain words or styles of writing to move us emotionally or challenge us to think in a specific way, filmmakers use visual elements and sound to evoke ideas or to elicit an emotional response from the audience. It is important for us to identify and understand the various functions of sound and the visual components of cinema in order to analyse them.

COMMENTARY

Visuals in early cinema

Although cinema has a lot in common with other art forms such as literature and theatre, its origins are in visual art forms such as photography and painting. When films were first made in 1895 they were not used to tell stories, but to show off the

latest piece of technology. Most early films were either images of everyday objects and occurrences, or illusions created by magicians. Before cinema was associated with storytelling, it was primarily used to create special effects.

Four elements of film style

Traditionally, four elements comprise film style. How each is used contributes significantly to a film's overall 'look' or 'feel'.

Mise en scène – all the visual elements within the frame (see Chapter 2).

Mise en scène includes:

- ★ setting
- ★ lighting
- ★ costumes
- ★ acting.

Cinematography – the art of capturing images on moving film (see Chapter 3).

Cinematography encompasses:

- ★ exposure
- ★ focus
- ★ perspective
- ★ camera position
- ★ camera movement.

Editing – the art of placing shots together in a specific order to generate a relationship between the shots (see Chapter 4).

Editing creates:

- ★ the space in which the film takes place
- ★ the passing of time in the film
- ★ visual relationships between the different elements in each shot
- ★ the film's rhythm.

Sound – what you hear while viewing a film (see Chapter 5).

Sound contributes to the ways in which we interpret the meaning of any scene. When analysing sound we examine:

- ★ uses of sound
- ★ sound motifs
- ★ sources of sound
- ★ sound bridges.

Narrative

Narrative is the general term used to describe a film's story, often in relation to the film's plot (see Chapter 6).

When discussing narrative, we look at:

- ★ story and plot
- ★ narrative structure (the framework used to organise story elements)
- ★ narration (the process by which plot elements provide or restrict story information).

Genre

A film's **genre** (e.g. western, science fiction, musical) is defined by the set of narrative and stylistic conventions – or 'rules' – that filmmakers adhere to in order to deliver a certain type of film that aligns with audience expectation (see Chapter 7).

When discussing genre, we consider:

- ★ generic conventions
- ★ subverting generic conventions
- ★ the documentary as a genre.

Hollywood and arthouse cinema

Hollywood and arthouse are two useful broad categories of films. These categories are the basis of two contrasting approaches to making and then marketing films.

Classical Hollywood cinema

Classical Hollywood cinema or Hollywood cinema is a style of filmmaking pioneered by filmmakers in the US and is the dominant style of Western cinema today.

Classical Hollywood cinema specifically refers to the films made by the major US studios, such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount and Warner Bros., from the late 1910s to the early 1960s. It is a term commonly used to describe films that:

- ★ use style to create the illusion of realism
- ★ have a linear and logical narrative structure
- ★ do not insist that the viewer actively engages with the film to understand its meaning.

Arthouse cinema

Arthouse cinema is a very general term that is commonly used to describe films with narrative and stylistic conventions that are notably different from those of classical Hollywood cinema.

During the classical Hollywood era, many countries around the world made films that were easily distinguishable from what was being made by the US studios. In many cases, filmmakers from these other countries were actively motivated to make distinctly non-Hollywood films out of a concern that the Hollywood style of filmmaking was too dominant and influential. Consequently, many countries developed strong national styles that went against the conventions of classical Hollywood films. These films – along with art films, experimental films and independent American films (films made without the involvement of an established studio) – are often very generally labelled as arthouse films and some of their broad characteristics include:

- ★ style that draws attention to itself and breaks down the illusion of realism
- ★ narratives that do not always develop in an obvious or logical way
- ★ fewer viewer clues and leads – audiences have to actively engage with the film to fully appreciate it.

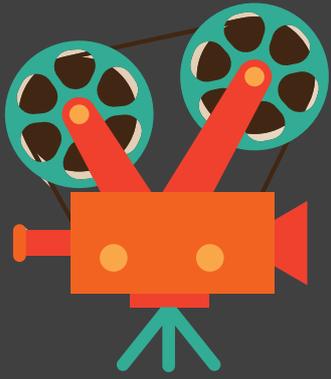
Distinctions between classical Hollywood and arthouse

The traditional differences between classical Hollywood films and arthouse films are outlined in the table on the next page. These differences are not judgements on the quality or authenticity of one type of film over the other. Both types of films are equally valid and important.



	Classical Hollywood	Arthouse
Style	creates illusion of realism serves the story	used to break down realism draws attention to itself and can be more important than the story
Narrative structure	logical chain of events occurring in a cause-and-effect relationship characters with clearly defined motivations closed resolution – nothing is left unresolved once the film has finished, all questions are satisfactorily answered, narrative gives closure objective – the audience experiences the film as a detached spectator, witnessing events more as a third person	events occur that are not always logical or relevant to the plot characters can have ambiguous motivations or none at all open resolution – conflicts are left unresolved or partially resolved at the end of the film, questions remain unanswered, narrative lacks closure subjective – parts or all of the film are characters' dreams, fantasies etc.
Audience roles and responses	passive: the audience members allow the film to wash over them engaged by the story enjoys the film on face value views the film for entertainment enjoys the film as a form of mass entertainment	active: the audience has to decode the film in order to appreciate its artistic merit detached from the story has to interpret the film views the film for appreciation of artistic merit and intellectual content enjoys the film as a personal vision of its director
Famous examples	<i>Casablanca</i> (1942) <i>Gone With the Wind</i> (1939) <i>Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope</i> (1977)	<i>8½</i> (1963) <i>Breathless</i> (1960) <i>Man With a Movie Camera</i> (1929)
Recent examples	<i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> (2015) <i>Spotlight</i> (2015) <i>The Martian</i> (2015)	<i>A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence</i> (2014) <i>Holy Motors</i> (2012) <i>The Lobster</i> (2015)





MISE EN SCÈNE

Mise en scène is a French expression that translates as 'putting on stage'. In film studies, this term refers to all the visual elements within the frame that support the telling of the story: the **setting, lighting, costumes** and **acting**.

- ★ Mise en scène usually works subtly on viewers' emotional and intellectual responses without viewers necessarily consciously noticing how this is being done.
- ★ By learning to look at a film analytically, we can see how each element can be used by filmmakers to 'position' viewers, cueing them into much more than the mere surface meaning of the film.
- ★ Aspects of mise en scène can be used to create symbolism for character traits, themes and social values.





ACTIVITY

What information is provided by the elements of mise en scène in the shot on page 9? Use the table below for discussion purposes; a photocopyable Activity Sheet is on page 172.

Mise en scène element	Information the mise en scène provides	Describe how the mise en scène provides this information
Setting		
Time period		
Country		
Type of location (rural, urban etc.)		
Indoors or outdoors		
Economic situation		
Lighting		
Mood of the scene		
Time of year		
Time of day		
Costume		
Status of characters		
Occupation or interests of characters		
Acting style		
Feelings and thoughts of characters		
Character personality		

Clearly, by examining the four elements of mise en scène – the setting, lighting, costumes and acting style – without any dialogue or movement, we can already obtain a wealth of information. If you observe the mise en scène closely, you will quickly notice how filmmakers consciously use it to ‘manipulate’ viewers.

- ★ Film settings are often used to physically represent aspects of a character’s state of mind. In *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), for example, all the spaces associated with Bruce Wayne – such as the various research and development rooms or the Wayne Enterprises Board Room – are vast, open spaces. This points to the emptiness of Wayne’s life, and suggests that he is emotionally detached and unable to achieve real human connection.
- ★ Filmmakers often use light to illuminate some characters while placing other characters in shadows and darkness, to make them appear mysterious, evil or desperate. In *The Dark Knight* both Batman and the Joker lurk in the shadows, suggesting that they are living similarly dark, sinister lives. In the police station interrogation scene, Batman unexpectedly appears out of the shadows behind the Joker, reflecting the film’s themes of hidden identity and the use of concealment.
- ★ An item of clothing or a particular acting style adds to our understanding of certain characters. Most of the costume design and acting in *The Dark Knight* are relatively nondescript, which contrasts dramatically with the way Batman and the Joker dress and act. Batman’s all-black costume is suited to lurking in

the shadows, and the gravelly voice he adopts is designed to disguise his true identity and strike fear into his enemies. The Joker looks and behaves like a grotesque parody of an old-fashioned villain. The garish colours he wears and his flamboyant behaviour are a statement against conformity and taste, which contrasts dramatically with Batman.

Settings

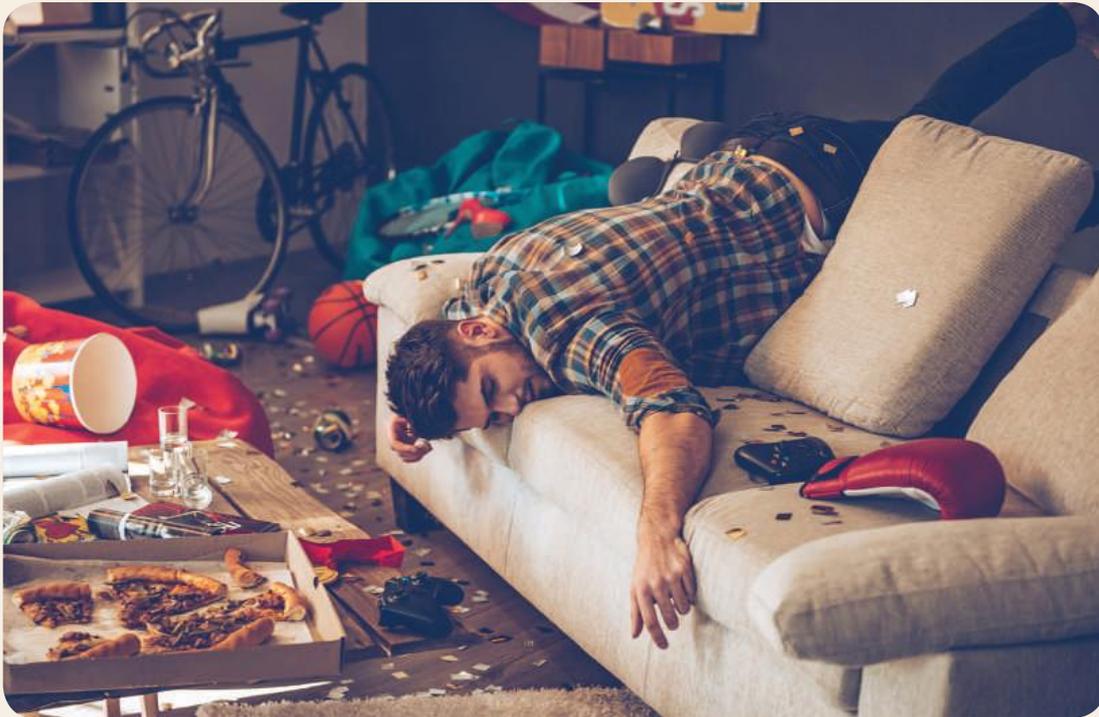
The **setting** is the physical location of the film – the countryside, the city, a room, a futuristic place. Naturally, most films have more than one setting and the various characters travel from one setting to another. The film setting does more than simply physically locate the action of the film.

- ★ A setting can create or express the mood of the film. For example, walking in the rain may convey sadness, whereas basking on a sunlit beach may convey joy.
- ★ A setting can be used to symbolise or represent an extension of a character's state of mind.
 - ✦ A character's cramped and dirty apartment may indicate that they are feeling trapped in their current lifestyle.
 - ✦ The fact that a character's home is a penthouse with big windows overlooking the city might suggest either the person's high status and power over the world below them, or the sterility and loneliness of their position.
- ★ Changes of setting can signal new starts, challenges, disaster, success, loss and so on, thus alerting us to important themes.

Setting 1



Setting 2



ACTIVITY

Compare the settings in the two shots, on page 11 and above, and complete the activity. Use the table below for discussion purposes; a photocopyable Activity Sheet is on page 173.

	Setting 1	Setting 2
Light levels		
(dark or bright?)		
Types of colours used		
(pleasant or ugly, cheery or bleak?)		
Spaciousness		
(cramped or plenty of room?)		
Physical state		
(messy or neat, formal or informal?)		
What is the atmosphere of this setting? What moods and feelings does it evoke?		
What themes does this setting suggest?		
What type of scene would take place in this setting?		
What type of character would inhabit this setting?		
How would this setting affect a character?		
Would you like to be in this setting? Why?		

Props and motifs

Props (taken from the theatrical term ‘properties’) are the objects that appear in the setting. They are often used to provide significant clues about the characters. Props can also reappear from scene to scene, and from setting to setting, developing more significance and importance. Such repeated images are called **motifs**. A bloody knife might be a motif for murder, while a bunch of red roses is often a motif for romance.

- ★ It is always worth noting which props are prominent in each setting and how characters relate to them. The ring that Frodo must destroy in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* films is a crucial motif that tells the audience much about the various characters who come into contact with it. The wise characters know to stay away from it (and are able to do so); the strong characters wrestle with the temptation to give in to their desire to possess the ring; while the weak and flawed characters allow it to possess them through its frightening power.
- ★ A physical object can recur and act as a shortcut clue to a character’s identity or be used to indicate a character’s motivation and intentions. James Bond’s ‘shaken, not stirred’ martini helps to embellish his sophisticated playboy image. Likewise, Indiana Jones’ bullwhip reveals his adventurous and resourceful characteristics.
- ★ Motifs can also represent the themes of a film. In *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) we are told that many characters carry totems that will let them know whether or not they are dreaming. In the case of Dom Cobb, he carries a spinning top. In the final shot of the film, the top is shown spinning, and the scene cuts to the end credits without revealing to the audience whether or not it stops (which would indicate that Cobb is no longer dreaming). Denying the audience this resolution underscores the final message of the film: ultimately it doesn’t matter whether or not the reality Cobb is experiencing is ‘real’, he has found peace.

Motifs with different meanings

A **motif** is anything that is repeatedly used in a film to define or explain a character or to suggest a theme. Sounds or musical phrases can also be motifs.

- ★ For example, the opening scene of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) contains frequent close-ups of a human eye, cluing the viewer in to the theme of perception and the film’s questioning of how we perceive what makes us human. It is also a clue to the fact that the replicants (non-human characters in *Blade Runner*) can be subtly identified by their different eyes.
- ★ The same motif can be invested with different meanings in different films.
 - ✦ One film may use a mirror as a motif for the soul of a character by having that character look searchingly into it, while other films may use mirrors as a motif for a character’s fractured identity or their hidden agenda.

- * A gun may be a symbol of power if used in a film that celebrates violence, or a symbol of weakness if used in a film that is critical of violence and portrays violent characters as flawed and insecure – it depends on the type of film.
- * Cigarettes have been extensively used in Hollywood cinema, and even in contemporary films, to give characters who smoke a sense of elegance and coolness. This is largely because, in the past, tobacco companies paid the studios to represent smoking as a sign of glamour and sophistication. These days, however, cigarettes are more often used to make characters appear sickly, lower class, criminal or flawed.

Prop 1



Prop 2



Prop 3



Prop 4





ACTIVITY

Examine the four props on the previous page and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Prop 1	Prop 2	Prop 3	Prop 4
What is the prop?				
How would it affect a scene?				
In what settings would it look natural?				
In what settings would it look unusual?				
What other props could be associated with this prop? Why?				
Is it a common motif for a particular theme or mood?				
In what type of film would you expect to see this prop?				

COMMENTARY

The motif of the car

In film, cars were originally a common motif to express a sense of freedom, status and sexuality. This motif continues today in films such as the *Fast and the Furious* series. The development of cars and cinema actually occurred almost simultaneously, and cinema has often used cars as a motif for the wonders and excitement of the modern world.

However, many films made in the past thirty years are critical of the modern world. Such films argue that the rapid development of technology has been bad for humanity. These films often subvert the traditional motif of cars as vehicles of excitement and wish-fulfilment; instead, they create the motif of car crashes as a symbol of the fragility of modern life, showing how easily a car can spin out of

control and create destruction. Films such as George Miller's *Mad Max* series often depict violent road trauma to suggest that humanity is destroying itself through its materialism and obsession with technology.

Similarly, the open road is a classic motif suggesting adventure and the unknown. However, in recent cinema the open road has become a more sinister motif to suggest that we are running out of time or rushing headfirst into something terrible. Think of the shots in James Cameron's *Terminator* films where the camera hurtles down the road with increasing speed. The effect is to suggest that time is running out for the human race – that we have effectively signed our own death warrants by developing computer programs that will eventually cause machines to rebel against us.

Lighting

Lighting is the manipulation of light to selectively highlight specific elements in each scene so that they appear in a particular way. This is one of the most complex and powerful techniques that filmmakers use to create atmosphere and meaning. Light generates much of the distinctive mood of a film and can be used to indicate the time of day or night, the seasons or the state of mind of a character, or to enhance a theme.

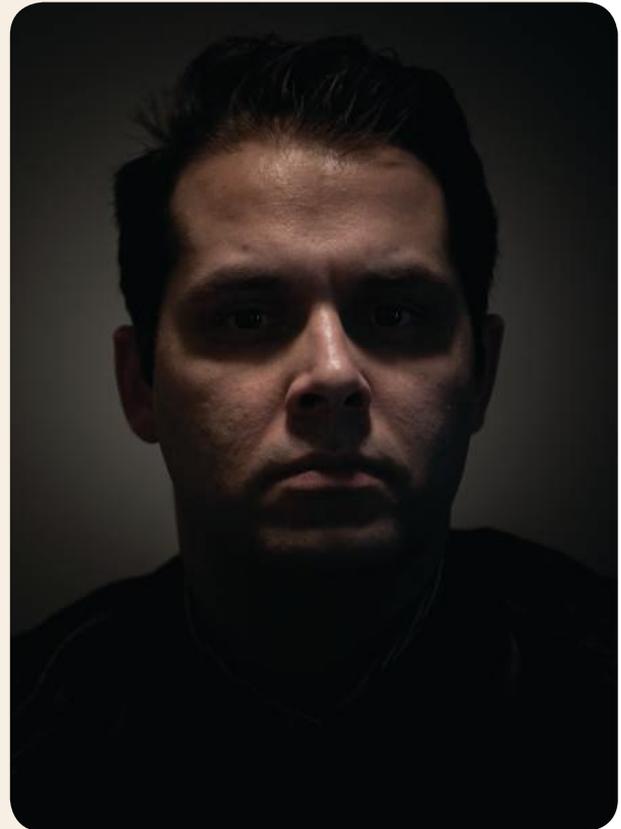
When discussing the use of light we need to consider four elements:

- ★ the colour, intensity and texture of light
- ★ the use of light to frame specific elements in a shot
- ★ the direction that the light comes from
- ★ the absence of light when shadows are used.

Shot 1



Shot 2



ACTIVITY

Consider the lighting of the two characters in the shots above. Which words below would you associate with each shot and why? Use the table below as a guide for your notes.

Shot 1 – word and reason for selecting that word	Word bank	Shot 2 – word and reason for selecting that word
	Sinister Violent	
	Criminal Vengeful	
	Heroic Conquering	
	Depressed Successful	
	Holy Romantic	
	Redeemed Evil	
	Enlightened Mysterious	
	Beautiful Superficial	
	Powerful Corrupt	

Colour, intensity and texture

Filmmakers manipulate the three basic properties of light – colour, intensity and texture – to evoke a particular mood, to suggest the time of day or year, or even to convey the temperature of a scene. Although you probably will never have to talk about these properties individually, you will often have to discuss the overall effects of certain uses of light, so it is important to understand each of these characteristics.

Colour

The **colour** of light can be altered by using different techniques and equipment. It also depends on the source of light and the surface it is shining onto.

Colour can greatly influence the mood of a scene.

- ★ When colour filters are put over a light source, the light becomes the colour of that filter. If you put blue cellophane over a torch, then the beam of light from that torch will be blue, creating a cold and foreboding mood.
- ★ If you shine a white light directly onto an orange wall, then the light reflecting off that wall will have an orange tint, giving the scene a warm and glowing feel.
- ★ A 'naked' light, shone without filters directly onto a setting, creates a very stark light that gives the scene a bleak and uncomfortable feel.

Intensity

The **intensity** of light relates to how bright a light is; that is, how concentrated it is in a specific area.

- ★ On stage, a spotlight that only illuminates a circle with a 1-metre radius is a very intense light because it puts a lot of light into a small area. However, if that same amount of light had to fill an entire room, it would not be so intense.
- ★ Similarly, a 100-watt globe in a cupboard would create a very intense light while a 40-watt globe in a large room would not be intense at all.
- ★ If the filmmaker wants to make the audience aware of the fact that a particular character is extremely vulnerable or quite detached from other people, then that character may be lit with an intense light, making them look a bit like a rabbit in car headlights.

When studying film, it is important to note when the light is particularly intense because this effect is relatively uncommon and is usually created for a specific reason. On the other hand, light that is not intense is not usually mentioned because it is more commonly used. If most scenes were intensely lit, they would draw attention to the light source and disrupt the illusion of realism that the film is creating.

Texture

The **texture** of light relates to how harsh or soft light is. It can be altered by changing the focus of the light and by passing the light through filters.

- ★ If a light is not focused onto a specific spot or is passed through a surface that diffuses the light (such as frosted glass), then the light will be soft and have a fuzzy or grainy appearance. Soft light often gives the scene a glowing or warm feel.
- ★ If the light is tightly focused onto one specific spot, it will have a clearly defined edge and a hard texture, often giving the scene a harsh and cold feel.
- ★ Soft lighting can be used to create a tender mood, such as in love scenes; harsh lighting can be used to create an oppressive feel, such as in scenes where characters are being interrogated in prison.

Putting it all together

As you can see, there are many variables in light. The range of colours is almost unlimited and many levels of intensity and texture are possible. Very few filmmakers will shoot either with completely intense and harshly focused light or with completely unfocused soft light. Filmmakers light most scenes somewhere in between completely intense and completely 'un-intense', between completely hard and completely soft.

Now that you understand how each element of light works, you can start looking at light in films and thinking about the overall effect certain lighting has on particular scenes.

Shot 1



Shot 2



ACTIVITY

The shots above and on the page opposite show the same setting but lit with very different types of light. Answer the following questions about how the setting appears in each shot. Use the table as a guide for your notes.

	Shot 1	Shot 2
What time of day is suggested by the lighting?		
What time of year is indicated?		
What temperature is suggested?		
Identify the mood of each setting and comment on how the lighting helps to create it.		

Framing with light

Light can be used to unite characters and/or objects, or to isolate them from one another. In this way it **frames** characters or groups.

- ★ If only one part of the scene is lit, then the shot appears divided into a well-lit area and poorly lit or unlit areas.
- ★ Whether the light is sharply focused to create a clear separation between the areas in the shot, or blurs the division between the areas, the effect is that lighting can be used to divide characters or unite them.
- ★ A character who is better lit than others will stand out, while a group of characters can appear to be a united force when they are all equally lit with a light that is brighter than the rest of the shot.

Shot 1



Shot 2



ACTIVITY

Look at the shots above and examine how the lighting gives more importance to some props than others, then use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Shot 1	Shot 2
How does lighting give more importance to some props?		
How does lighting suggest some props belong together?		
How does lighting exclude or isolate some objects or people?		

COMMENTARY

Light as a framing device in *Breaker Morant*

In the courtroom scenes in Bruce Beresford's *Breaker Morant* (1980), the defendants are bathed in a box of light while the rest of the courtroom is dimly lit, suggesting how detached the Australian defendants are from the legal process that is run by biased English military officials. Isolating characters with light in this way can give the impression of their being

vulnerable and on display, or alternatively of being glorious and above the dark squalor of the rest of the world. All sorts of film heroes, ranging from the lone cowboy of the western to Jesus Christ in religious epics, are presented in radiant light to give them a glow that elevates them above the rest of society.

Direction of light

Filmmakers create many different moods by carefully deciding from which direction to shine the lights. The standard method of lighting is known as three-point lighting, which is used to generate conventional lighting that audiences are accustomed to. When writing about film you will rarely, if ever, have to comment on the use of three-point lighting because it is so common and therefore offers nothing unique to a scene. Nevertheless, it helps to know exactly what it is.

Three-point lighting

Three-point lighting is a system of three lights with a **backlight** behind the subject, a brighter **key light** closer to the subject to provide the primary source of light, and a **fill light** to provide balance.

A character lit with a three-point lighting system



If filmmakers do not want to use conventional lighting, there are various alternative lighting techniques they can use. These are the lighting techniques to keep an eye out for, as filmmakers usually only use them for specific and deliberate reasons.

- ★ The direction of the light can affect the mood of the scene.
- ★ Shadows can be deliberately created by manipulating the direction from which the light is shone.
- ★ The direction of light can also be used to distort an object or a character's face.

Frontal lighting

This is light shone directly **onto the front** of the subject.

A character lit with frontal lighting



- ★ Frontal light tends to remove all shadows and makes the scene appear flat and featureless, which can be very flattering as it removes wrinkles and blemishes from actors' faces.
- ★ It can give a scene a documentary look, which filmmakers might use if, for example, they want the scene to look very naturalistic.
- ★ Frontal lighting can be used to create a sense of lifelessness if the scene is required to look bleak and possibly miserable. A film about poverty in the city may use this technique to show how ugly and bland life can be for some groups of people.

Side lighting

This is light shone directly **at the side** of the subject.

- ★ Side lighting is a very dramatic style of lighting that can be used on actors to only light half of their face. This can give the impression that the character has a dark side or strikingly different aspects to their personality. It can make them appear mysterious and seductive.
- ★ Side lighting casts hard shadows onto the surrounding setting, and is often used to hide elements of the scene or to suggest that the subject or character being lit somehow dominates the scene, as they literally cast a dark shadow over it.
- ★ Because of how well it generates shadows, side lighting is often used in thrillers, horror films and film noir.

A character lit with side lighting

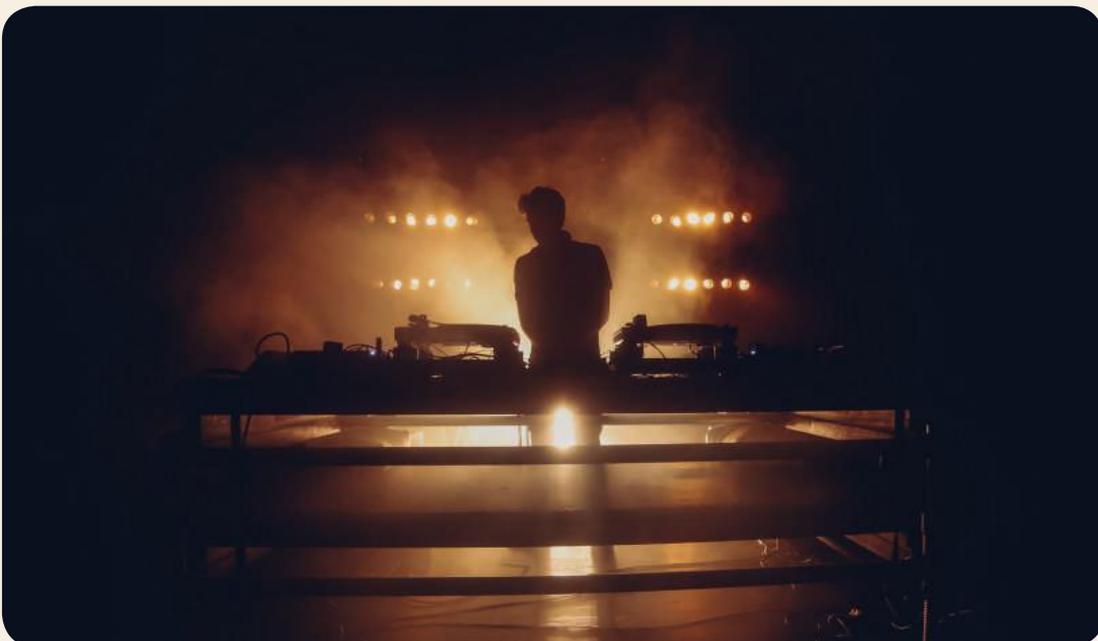


Backlighting

This is light shone from **behind** the subject.

- ★ Backlighting creates silhouettes so that the audience can only see the outline of the object or actor in front of the light.
- ★ It can give that object or actor a sense of mystery because the audience can see that they are there but not exactly who or what they are.

A character lit with backlighting



- ★ Backlighting makes the object or actor's body stand out from the background, which can give them an almost holy presence: the light streams out from behind, making them appear larger than life.

Under lighting

This is light shone up onto the subject **from below**.

A character lit with under lighting



- ★ Under lighting is used for a classical horror effect, as it usually provides a small amount of light from an unconventional direction, giving the illuminated object a grotesque appearance.
- ★ It also distorts features as the shadows are cast upwards, over the object or actor from below, hence creating unconventional shadows.
- ★ Under lighting can give an actor a monstrous quality when the unconventional shadows cover most of the face except for the eyes, which therefore appear to bulge and seem frightening.

Top lighting

This is light shone onto the subject **from above**.

- ★ Top lighting is an excellent method of pinpointing exactly who or what is the focus of the scene – it works very much like a theatre spotlight.
- ★ It can also be used to glamorously highlight aspects of an actor's face.
- ★ Top lighting used as the single source of light also creates an eerie or sinister atmosphere. Gangster films often use top lighting to reveal the shady mobsters plotting away in the dark.

Characters lit with top lighting



Shadows

When discussing lighting, always remember to mention the use of shadows and pay attention to which characters and objects are frequently covered by shadows or are introduced emerging from the dark. Many filmmakers carefully use the three-point lighting system to remove shadows from their scenes; thus when shadows do appear we can assume that they have been deliberately left in the film and are therefore important.

- ★ For centuries in various cultures, shadows have represented the sinister hidden side of people and of human nature. Little has changed in contemporary film.
- ★ Contrasts between light and dark are often used in film to depict the conflict of good versus evil, innocence versus malevolence.
- ★ Shadows and darkness can be used dramatically to suggest evil, mysteriousness, the dark side of a character, the true identity of a character or the dominance of one character or object over another.

A dramatic use of shadows



ACTIVITY

Look at the use of shadows in the above shot.

- 1 Do the shadows suggest that one character dominates this setting?
- 2 Do the shadows suggest that one or more characters could be in danger?
- 3 Which character appears dangerous or threatening?
- 4 What motives might each character have?

Costumes

Costumes are the clothes, make-up and accessories worn by the characters. Other elements include the colours of the clothes and personal props. Costumes give viewers critical information about characters.

- ★ A character's clothes, and how they are worn, can indicate a great deal about the character's background, attitudes and emotions. Rich and powerful characters often wear expensive suits; a carefree, party-animal character may wear loud clothes such as a Hawaiian shirt; while a depressed or morbid character may wear nothing but black.
- ★ Costumes can act as physical extensions of a character's state of mind or personality. Superheroes with high moral values who fight for justice, such as Superman and Captain America, wear bright and friendly coloured costumes. More edgy characters, such as Batman and Wolverine, who are more violent and often motivated by less noble causes such as revenge, wear dark and menacing costumes.

- ★ Sometimes costumes may indicate that a character is a stereotype or two-dimensional clichéd character. A stereotypical French character would wear a stripy shirt and a beret, while a mad-scientist stereotype would wear thick glasses and a white lab coat. An airhead popular high-school girl stereotype would have bottle-blonde hair, fake tan and be wearing either designer fashion or a cheerleading costume.

Costume 1



Costume 2



Costume 3



ACTIVITY

Look at the different costumes worn by each of the characters in the shots above. Use the table below for discussion purposes; a photocopyable Activity Sheet is on page 174.

	Costume 1	Costume 2	Costume 3
Describe the types of clothes the character wears.			
Discuss how these clothes suggest the character's status and background.			
Describe how they wear their clothes.			
Discuss how this reflects their general attitude and level of self-confidence.			
Describe their make-up.			
How does the character's make-up indicate their state of mind?			
Describe the character's accessories.			
Discuss what these accessories tell us about the character's occupation or interests.			
Describe how the characters interact with their accessories.			
Discuss how this suggests their state of mind.			

Other important elements of costume

Colour

The **colour** of costumes, a basic and simple element, can represent certain moods or character traits.

In many classical Hollywood melodramas, black represents evil or suggests death; white represents innocence; red indicates passion, lust or seductiveness; and brown is earthy and practical. However, these stock colours can be used in many different ways, so don't assume they can simply be learned and applied to all films.

- ★ The colour red is often used, and in strikingly different ways. In older Hollywood melodramas it conservatively symbolises threatening female sexuality or indicates that a woman is no longer a virgin – if, for instance, she previously wore white (innocence) and now wears red (desire/experience). Red can also be used to imply imperialism and fascism, due to its association with blood (think of the Emperor's Royal Guard uniforms in the *Star Wars* films), while it can also imply prestige and wealth (think of the decor in Wes Anderson's 2014 film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*).
- ★ In Victor Fleming's *Gone With the Wind* (1939), Scarlett O'Hara is completely dressed in black at a large social gathering, as her husband has recently died. However, instead of continuing to uphold the appearance of mourning her late husband, Scarlett dances with Rhett Butler. As the disapproving crowd, dressed in bright colours, watches her dance, Scarlett's black costume stops representing death and suddenly becomes a symbol of her fierce independence and her rejection of social conventions.
- ★ Purple has long been associated with royalty and lavish wealth. However, the Joker in the various *Batman* films wears copious amounts of purple to signify his flamboyant evil insanity.

Contrasting or distinguishing costumes

Costumes are used to distinguish certain characters from other characters.

- ★ In the racecourse scene in George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* (1964) everybody is dressed formally in black and white except for Eliza Doolittle, who wears a red flower to symbolise her free spirit. This separates her from the stuffy upper-class people she is mixing with.
- ★ In Steven Spielberg's predominantly black-and-white film *Schindler's List* (1993), one unnamed girl is dressed in a red coat – a rare element of colour in the whole film. This little girl in the red coat becomes a symbol of hope and life amid the misery of the Holocaust. Hence, it is a particularly powerful moment when Schindler sees her dead body, which reflects the horrific extent of the Holocaust.

- ★ In Jocelyn Moorhouse's *The Dressmaker* (2015), Tilly Dunnage is set apart from the residents of the country town to which she returns, by her elegant and modern (for the era) style of dress. The dresses she wears represent a sophistication, confidence and sexuality that make her a source of contempt and envy for the townsfolk, but they also highlight how much she has changed in the years since she left.

Costume changes

Dramatic changes in costume are often used to signal a dramatic change in a character.

- ★ In romantic comedies, shy and awkward people are often dressed very conservatively with glasses and neat hair. But when they fall in love and come out of their shell, their glasses come off, their hair is flung out and their entire wardrobe suddenly changes to reflect the latest trends in fashion.
- ★ In superhero films, dramatic changes in appearance are often used to distinguish between the hero's persona when they are actively using their powers and abilities, and when they are trying to appear normal and blend in with those around them. Some of the more complex characters use this change in appearance to transform into someone entirely new, whether to distance their heroic image from their flawed real-life identity (for example, Iron Man / Tony Stark), or to try to experience a normal life without the burden of their superpowers (for example, Superman / Clark Kent).
- ★ In *Brooklyn* (John Crowley, 2015), which follows Eilis Lacey as she emigrates from Ireland to the United States in the 1950s, Eilis' costumes change throughout the film to suggest she is gradually embracing her new life. At first she is dressed in drab, basic clothes, but her wardrobe becomes increasingly vibrant, fashionable and stylish as her confidence grows over the course of the film.



Costume change

Charlie Chaplin's costume

Charlie Chaplin's famous little tramp costume included pants that were too big, a coat that was too small, a silly little hat perched on his head and a walking stick that he twirled around as he walked. This dishevelled, mismatched costume allowed audiences to automatically identify his character as being extremely poor and on the bottom of the social ladder.

However, the ridiculousness of his appearance also made him immediately appear comical and endearing to the audience – essential attributes because so much of Chaplin's humour derived from the audience feeling sorry for him and then enjoying his mischievous behaviour as he mocked authority figures.

Make-up

Make-up can be used to highlight, distort or hide aspects of a character's face in order to suggest something about their personality.

- ★ Eye make-up is often used to make the eyes of a character appear bigger, which can give the impression of innocence.
- ★ Wormtongue, in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), is made up to appear pale and oily with dirty hair, emphasising his slimy and deceitful nature.
- ★ The appearance of ageing, scars, tattoos, illnesses, baldness, deformities and disfigurements can be achieved convincingly with make-up.



Make-up

Personal props (accessories)

The **accessories** and objects associated with particular characters, and the way characters interact with them, can also suggest aspects of their personality.

- ★ A character flicking a cigarette lighter on and off could be extremely nervous and potentially dangerous, symbolised by the fact that they are always playing with fire.
- ★ Characters who always wear sunglasses, and hence are always hiding their eyes, could be concealing something, hiding their true nature, or refusing to see the world clearly.
- ★ A character constantly shuffling a deck of cards may be a compulsive gambler who allows chance and luck to rule their fate. They could also be a conjuror who is capable either of magical powers or of very skilled deception.



Accessories

Acting

Actors portray the feelings, motives, attitudes and state of mind of characters by manipulating their facial expressions, posture, voice and gestures.

- ★ There is much more to most characters than the dialogue they speak and the actions they perform.
- ★ Films that focus on characters and character development usually employ actors who will flesh out all aspects of the character they are playing. Actors will adopt the facial expressions and body language of that character and it is essential that we pay attention to such detail when analysing a character.
- ★ Some actors are given parts specifically because they always act in a certain way. Arnold Schwarzenegger may not be the greatest actor ever to have lived, but his mechanical acting style brought to life his Terminator character, which was so terrifying in the original film precisely because he was believable as an unstoppable killing machine.

So what do we look for in an actor when analysing film?

- ★ We should discuss anything an actor does that is not actual dialogue or action.
- ★ We need to look for all the subtle, and not so subtle, mannerisms, expressions and body language.
- ★ Although it is impossible to summarise every aspect of what an actor does to flesh out a character, the four key areas to look at are facial expression, posture, voice and gestures.

Facial expressions

Expression 1



Expression 2



Expression 3



ACTIVITY

Look at the different facial expressions in the shots above, and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Expression 1	Expression 2	Expression 3
Expressiveness To what degree does the character's face reveal their thoughts?			
Type of expression What emotions is the character feeling? What might they be thinking about?			
Control of expression Does the character want people to know what they are thinking or feeling?			

Posture

Posture 1



Posture 2



Posture 3



ACTIVITY

Consider the posture of the character in the three shots above. Use the table below as a guide for your notes.

Examine:

- the way in which the character holds their body (upright or slumped)
- elements of body language (such as crossed arms, head tilted to the side, biting nails etc.)
- how relaxed or rigidly they sit or stand.

Which words below would you associate with each shot and why?

Word bank

Confident Bored Dejected Afraid Arrogant Relaxed
Aggressive Pensive Vague Happy Peaceful Anxious

Posture 1 – word and reason for selecting that word	Posture 2 – word and reason for selecting that word	Posture 3 – word and reason for selecting that word

Voice



ACTIVITY

Listen to the way that three different characters speak in a film you are studying, and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

Pay attention to:

- the volume of their voice (loud or soft)
- the speed of their voice (fast or slow)
- the pitch of their voice (high or low).

Also take note of any speech impediments such as stutters, verbal ticks and slurring, and notice how controlled their voice is. Which words below would you associate with each voice and why?

Word bank

Important Sympathetic Wise Angry Meek Unsettled Shy Cunning Childish Bumbling
Disturbed Lying Excited Simple Frightening Refined Graceful Annoying Authoritarian
Commanding Intimidating Calm Forced Unstable

**Voice 1 – word and reason
for selecting that word**

**Voice 2 – word and reason
for selecting that word**

**Voice 3 – word and reason
for selecting that word**

Gestures

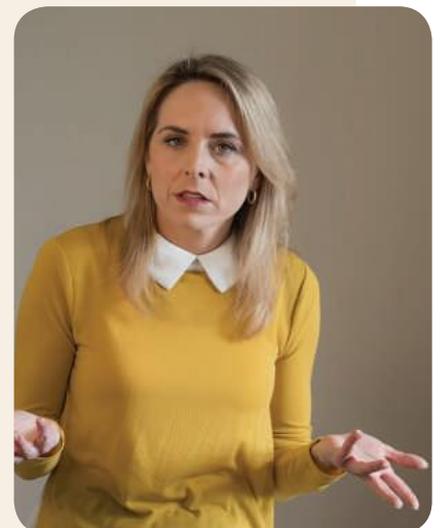
Gesture 1



Gesture 2



Gesture 3





ACTIVITY

Look at the different gestures in the shots opposite and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Gesture 1	Gesture 2	Gesture 3
Describe how the character is holding her hands.			
What does this suggest about her topic of conversation and the emotions she is expressing?			
How deliberate or casual do her gestures appear to be? Discuss how this reflects her level of calmness.			

Changes in acting style

Don't just look at the body language and expressions of a character that remain constant. Unless the character is the Terminator, it would be highly unusual for them to go through an entire film without their gestures, mannerisms and expressions changing or developing to some degree. So, it is important to consider how and why actors change the way their character appears.

- ★ Does a character start acting differently after a particular dramatic event? For example, a character may feel pessimistic and defeated but then suddenly open up, expressing joy and hope when they unexpectedly fall in love.
- ★ Do they behave differently depending on their situation or emotional state? A person may seem at ease with the world when everything is going their way but fall apart and show their weakness when faced with a crisis.
- ★ Do they react differently to different characters? A cowardly character may be submissive and pathetic at work but then become dominating and cruel when interacting with their family.

Stylised acting

Stylised acting is evident when the actor deliberately exaggerates or distorts their acting style. This may be done to draw attention to the fact that they are acting, or because the filmmaker does not want them to appear realistic.

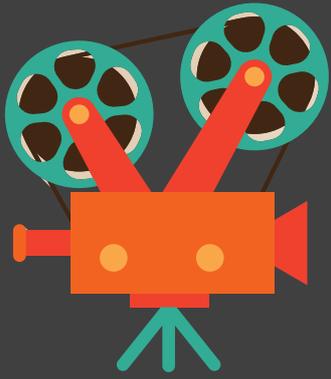
While most films require actors to create a sense of realism, some filmmakers choose to have a stylised method of acting. When we describe acting as 'stylised', we are saying that the actor is deliberately performing in a way that is not natural. They may adopt a strange manner of speaking or exaggerate their body language. The effect is often to draw attention to the fact that they are acting in a manner different from what we perceive as normal.

- ★ Actors give stylised performances when playing non-human characters such as robots or aliens. An example is Michael Fassbender's portrayal of androids in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).
- ★ Comic actors often give stylised performances by exaggerating the way they talk and move. Jim Carrey and Adam Sandler are especially well known for this.
- ★ Entire films can use stylised acting if the film itself is non-realistic or its setting – as in the case of Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997) with its bland, drone-like workers – is meant to feel artificial.

Realistic acting

Realistic acting is an acting style that appears to be natural and does not draw attention to itself.

- ★ It is worth noting that what is considered to be realistic acting has changed significantly throughout the decades. Performances that were once regarded as the height of realistic acting can appear very staged, stylised or even clichéd by today's standards.
- ★ When viewing old classical Hollywood films, keep in mind that understandings of what is realistic and what is not have changed. In less than fifty years' time the popular and acclaimed actors of today will most likely seem over the top or corny as well.
- ★ Remember that some actors, especially action and comic actors, rarely have any intention of acting realistically.



CINEMATOGRAPHY

Cinematography is the art of capturing images on moving film.

- ★ The cinematographer, also known as the director of photography, has one of the most important roles on a film: they are responsible for creating much of the look of the film.
- ★ Cinematography is one of the most significant aspects of film style because it is crucial to what makes cinema a visual art form.
- ★ Cinematography has a significant impact on how characters, themes and social values are presented because the cinematographer decides not only *what* the viewers see, but *how* they see it.



Exposure

The **exposure** of a film depends on how much light the cinematographer allows to pass through the camera lens while filming.

- ★ Usually the cinematographer wants the 'correct' amount of light for the lighting in a scene to be consistent with the audience's expectations. This level of exposure provides enough light for the audience to clearly see everything without being blinded or dazzled.
- ★ The exposure of the film can be manipulated to decrease the brightness of the shot. If a scene begins on a bright sunny day but in the film the weather suddenly turns bad, then the cinematographer would decrease the amount of light passing through the camera to create the impression of dark clouds forming overhead.
- ★ Likewise, the exposure can be manipulated to increase the brightness of the shot. A jailbreak scene may feature fugitives escaping in the dark but when the alarm goes off the cinematographer may increase the amount of light passing through the camera, creating the illusion of a spotlight flooding the area.

Normal exposure



Overexposure

A shot is **overexposed** when too much light has deliberately been allowed through the lens, resulting in the shot looking much brighter than audiences are accustomed to seeing.

- ★ The shot can appear washed-out, creating the impression of intense heat.
- ★ The setting can become flooded with light, making it a very threatening, oppressive environment for the characters to be in.
- ★ Extreme overexposing reduces all the light in a shot to an almost blinding white that gives the actors and objects a glowing quality. This may impart a dreamlike aspect to the scene or exaggerate what is happening.

Overexposure



Underexposure

Underexposing a shot means not allowing enough light to pass through the lens, resulting in a dark image.

- ★ Underexposing is commonly used when shooting night-time scenes during the day, in order to give the illusion that it is dark.
- ★ Scenes in gangster and detective films are often underexposed to make the characters appear shady and mysterious, leaving them only partially lit or covered in shadows.
- ★ Underexposing also creates the moody atmosphere of horror films where the audience cannot quite see what dangers lurk in the darkness.

Underexposure



COMMENTARY

Film noir

The look of the film noir genre/style was developed through underexposing film during the 1940s (film noir literally

translates as 'black film'). This effect was often used to create the atmosphere of the city as a dark and seedy place.

Shot 1



Shot 2



Shot 3



ACTIVITY

Compare the exposures in shots 1, 2 and 3, opposite and above. Use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Shot 1	Shot 2	Shot 3
Does the image demonstrate normal exposure, overexposure or underexposure?			
Based on the exposure, what time of day do you think is represented in the image? What season? What temperature?			
Is the image realistic or stylised?			
Describe the atmosphere generated by the exposure.			
How does the exposure present the character to the audience?			
What type of film might use a shot with this kind of exposure?			

Frame rate

The **frame rate** is the rate at which the small still photographs (known as frames) are shot and then projected in order to create the illusion of movement. This influences the speed and picture quality of a film.

The standard frame rate for films in a cinema is twenty-four frames per second at a constant speed, which gives the impression that the action on screen is moving at a speed that would be considered normal. (There are different frames-per-second rates for television in different parts of the world, but the differences aren't noticeable to the average viewer.) Frames can be shot and/or projected at different rates to affect the speed of the film.

- ★ If the frames are projected at a faster rate than they were shot, the images on screen move in **fast motion**. Fast motion can be used to make screen events more comedic, to create the illusion of speed or to convey a sense of panic. An extreme example of fast motion is **time-lapse photography**, where the filmed frame rate is incredibly low (for example, one frame per minute) so that, when projected at normal speed, huge passages of time flash by on the screen. This technique can be used to portray dramatic changes that we usually don't have time to witness in real life, such as the construction of a building, a plant growing, a dead animal decaying, or cloud formations changing shape over one day.
- ★ If the frames are projected at a slower rate than they were shot, the images on screen move in **slow motion**. Slow motion can be used to stretch out a comedic moment to make it more absurd, to create dramatic tension, or to highlight the physicality of an exciting scene, such as a big dance moment or a martial-arts fight.
- ★ While the number of frames per second is constant in traditional fast motion and slow motion, **speed ramping** involves the rate changing within a shot, making it appear as though the action either suddenly speeds up or dramatically slows down. Speed ramping has become very common in contemporary action films (for example Zack Snyder, director of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, 2016, uses it extensively in his films) ever since Lana and Lilly Wachowski used it in the *Matrix* films, using an extreme slow speed to show bullets slowly flying through the air. As a result of its use in *The Matrix* (1999), this ultra-slow speed is now known as '**bullet time**'.
- ★ Also note that experiments with higher rates of frames per second are currently being undertaken to heighten the quality of digital images by enhancing their definition. In 2012, Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* was shot and projected at forty-eight frames per second, although opinion was divided on whether or not making the footage more detailed, and therefore lifelike, was a positive.

Focus

Focus refers to how clearly and sharply the audience sees the actors and objects in a film. Something is **in focus** when it looks clear and its edges are sharply defined – looking the way that it should. Something that is **out of focus** appears blurred or fuzzy.

- ★ Cinematographers control which elements in each shot they want the audience to notice the most. They do this by using different types of camera lenses to produce focused images of some objects and unfocused images of others.
- ★ When watching a film the audience will naturally look at the elements that are in focus because they are easier to see.
- ★ When analysing a film we should question why some elements in a shot are in focus while others are not. The filmmaker gives importance to the elements in focus and wants us to notice them.

Depth of field

A shot's **depth of field** is the extent to which the objects in the shot, from those in the foreground to those furthest from the camera, are in focus. The more objects in focus, the greater the depth of field.

- ★ Many films will have all elements in the foreground in focus, but the background out of focus. In this way, filmmakers draw the audience's attention to what is happening in the foreground, which is where the important elements of a film, such as lead characters, usually appear.
- ★ When the foreground is out of focus but the background is in focus, the filmmaker wants the audience to look at the background rather than the foreground. For example, a scene may be shot out of a window onto the street below. The edges of the window, in the foreground of the shot, are not as important as what is occurring on the street. Hence, the window sill will be out of focus, while the events in the street will be sharply focused.
- ★ By altering the camera lens, the cinematographer can change what is in focus during a shot. This is quite a dramatic effect: we may be paying attention to something sharply focused when suddenly it becomes blurry and we have to readjust to look at the new element in the shot that is now in focus. This effect is often used when a character in the foreground is talking to a character in the background. As each character speaks they will go into focus, and then out of focus as the other character speaks.

Deep focus

A shot where all elements are in focus, hence having an extremely large depth of field, is a shot with **deep focus**.

- ★ Shots with a deep focus place equal importance on all the elements in the scene. This makes all elements of mise en scène more important because the audience is encouraged to notice them, rather than having certain elements blurred into the background.
- ★ Deep-focused shots often appear stylised or unnatural because audiences are not used to seeing entire scenes in focus – in films or in real life.
- ★ A deep-focused shot may be used to create a strong connection between a character and their setting. Giving equal focus to both character and setting establishes a strong visual link between them, suggesting that the setting reflects or symbolises something about that character.

Deep focus



Shallow focus

A shot with **shallow focus** has an extremely small depth of field, with only one or two elements in focus.

- ★ Shots with shallow focus draw the audience's attention to the one or two objects or characters that are in focus. The lack of focus elsewhere suggests that no other element in that shot should be considered.
- ★ Shallow-focused shots are reasonably common so they often go unnoticed, but they are very dramatic shots. The background elements are often so out of focus that they appear as abstract colourful shapes.
- ★ A shallow-focused shot may be used to create an incredibly strong connection between the two characters in focus. It not only unites them as the only elements on screen that are in focus, but also suggests that, in the moment being portrayed, all external factors around them have no importance. For this reason shallow-focus shots are often used in romance films.

Shallow focus



Shallow focus

Deep focus

Normal depth of field



ACTIVITY

Compare the focus in the shots above and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Shallow focus	Deep focus	Normal depth of field
Which area is in focus (foreground or background)?			
Which characters and/or objects are in focus?			
Which characters and/or objects are given importance?			
Which characters and/or objects are not given importance?			
What do the filmmakers want the audience to notice?			
What do the filmmakers not want audiences to look at?			

Perspective

The illusion of distance between elements in a shot is known as **perspective** and is controlled by the focal length of the camera lens.

- ★ By manipulating the lens on the camera, the cinematographer can control how the distances between the elements of the shot will be represented.
- ★ The perspective can be altered to distort the image and to make objects appear closer to or further away from each other than they really are.
- ★ A zoom lens can be used to change the perspective during the shot.

Middle focal length

Normal perspective is called a **middle focal length** and is achieved using a normal lens.

- ★ The elements in a shot with middle focal length appear to have the same distance between them as they have in reality.
- ★ There is no distortion in the perspective created by the use of a middle focal length.
- ★ Middle focal length is the norm and any deviation from it is a deliberate stylistic effect.

Middle focal length



Short focal length

A **short focal length** is achieved by using a **wide-angle lens** to distort perspective. Distances between elements in the shot appear greater than they really are.

Using a wide-angle lens to create a short focal length has several effects.

- ★ Distorts perspective – films often deliberately use short focal length to make people or objects look grotesque.
- ★ Makes distances between things seem greater – a corridor may stretch out unnaturally behind somebody, or a person’s face in close-up may even appear distorted due to the distance between their facial features seeming to be abnormally large.
- ★ Changes the shape of objects – because short focal lengths exaggerate distances, the objects in the shot often change shape. Short focal lengths produce a ‘rounding’ effect, making straight lines, especially near the edge of the frame, appear to curve. The effect is similar to looking through the spy hole in a front door.

Short focal length



Long focal length

A **long focal length** has the opposite effect to a short focal length, since it flattens out the image and makes distances seem less than they really are.

A long focal length is achieved by using a **telephoto lens**, and has the following effects.

- ★ Distorts perspective – the foreground and background blend into one level so that it is almost unnoticeable when characters move back or forward, from one to another.
- ★ Makes distances between things seem shorter – a person standing 20 metres behind someone else may appear to be close behind them. In Jacques Tati's classic French comedy *Playtime* (1967), a long focal length is used to make an extremely long corridor seem short. Hence, it is a surprise to the audience when a character seemingly takes forever to walk down the corridor towards the camera.
- ★ Changes the shape of objects – because a long focal length makes objects appear to have no distance between them, the scene can appear almost two-dimensional, giving the scene a flat or dull feel.

Long focal length



Changing focal length: zooming

Cinematographers can change the focal length during a shot by using a **zoom lens**. If the camera **zooms in** during a shot, the focal length increases, so that the camera appears to be moving closer to the subjects being filmed. If the camera **zooms out** during a shot, the focal length decreases – the camera appears to be moving away from the subjects being filmed.

- ★ Unlike tracking shots (see ‘Camera movement’ on pages 62–8), the camera does not actually move when zooming.
- ★ Zooming creates the illusion that the camera is moving towards or away from the subject. This can be done rapidly to draw our attention to something important, as if we had just noticed it, or slowly to gradually make us aware that there is something significant we should be paying attention to.
- ★ Changes in perspective during a shot can be emphasised and exaggerated when zooming is combined with the physical movement of the camera – for example, zooming in towards the object while moving the camera away. This effect is known as a **dolly zoom** and it can be quite dramatic since it makes the setting appear to stretch out into the background, giving the audience a disorientated, almost giddy, feeling. This effect is often used to represent the point of view of a character or characters, and it was first used in the opening scene of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) when, during a rooftop chase, Scottie is clinging to a gutter and looks down to see the street below rushing away from him.



Zooming

Short focal length



Middle focal length



Long focal length



ACTIVITY

Compare the perspectives in the shots above and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Short focal length	Middle focal length	Long focal length
Do the elements in the shot seem close together or far apart?			
Are the shapes of the objects distorted?			
What is the atmosphere like in each shot?			
What kind of scene would use this perspective?			

Camera position

When watching a play we view the events on a fixed stage from a stationary seat, so that we witness the entire performance from the same position. When viewing a film, however, we are placed in a different position relative to the action each time one shot finishes and another one begins. For every shot in a film, the cinematographer has to decide where to place the camera in relation to the subject being filmed.

Angle

The three main camera angles are illustrated by the shots below.

Straight-on angle



High angle



Low angle



Straight-on angle

It is most common for the camera to have a **straight-on angle** to the subject. Also known as an **eye-level shot** or a neutral shot, the camera is positioned level to the ground and is filming directly in front of itself.

High angle

A **high angle** occurs when the camera is positioned to film the subject from above.

This camera position produces a dramatic effect, making the audience members feel as if they are looming over what is being filmed. It can create different impressions of the subject, as the following examples show.

- ★ Intimidated – somebody who is being physically threatened may be filmed from a high angle to make them appear vulnerable.
- ★ Belittled – a character being mocked or insulted would appear to be more denigrated if they were filmed from above, as it would make them appear smaller than the person insulting them.
- ★ Weak – to emphasise that somebody is flawed or cowardly, the filmmakers may choose to film them from above so that they appear literally lower in status.

Low angle

A **low angle** occurs when the camera is positioned to film the subject from below.

Audience members feel as if they are looking up at the subject when it is shot from a low angle. This can present the subject in the following ways.

- ★ Powerful – somebody with great power or authority may be shot from a low angle to make them appear dominating and overwhelming.
- ★ Prestigious – a character with high status who commands respect could be filmed from a low angle to make them appear taller and as though they are looking down on the audience.
- ★ Threatening – a low angle can be used to make an object or character appear threatening, as they can appear to loom menacingly over the audience.

Straight-on angle



High angle



Low angle



ACTIVITY

Compare the angles in the shots above and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Straight-on angle	High angle	Low angle
How does the angle present the person?			
What kind of character would be filmed with this angle?			
What kinds of scenes would use this angle?			

Level

Usually films are shot at a fixed level that corresponds to the way we are used to viewing the world when standing or sitting up straight. The film frame is parallel to the ground.

Canted angle

A **canted angle** (also known as a **Dutch angle**) is a shot filmed with the camera either partially or completely on its side.

- ★ Canted angles create a sense of disorientation or giddiness, as they force us to watch the film as if we have our heads tilted to one side.
- ★ If a canted angle is inside a house then it looks as if the floor is sloping in one direction, the walls are about to fall over in the same direction, and all the furniture and people are about to fall in that direction, too. In a canted shot of an outdoor scene, a flat street may look as if it is on a hill, and buildings appear to be leaning over.

- ★ Canted shots are also used to create tension as they present the scene in an uncomfortable way that draws attention to the fact that something is not right. This can have a subtle effect when used sparingly – for example, in Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949); or it can be overused and distracting – for example, in the first *Thor* film (Kenneth Branagh, 2011).

Normal level



Canted angle



Extremely canted angle



ACTIVITY

Compare the levels in the shots above and use the table below as a guide for your notes.

	Normal level	Canted angle	Extremely canted angle
How does the camera level present the setting?			
What type of scene would use this level?			
What type of character would occupy a setting filmed at this level?			

Distance

Knowing how to discuss the distance between the camera and the subject is one of the most important elements when analysing cinematography.

- ★ There is a huge difference between an actor delivering an emotional speech with their face filling the whole screen, and an actor shot from a distance so that we cannot make out all of their facial expressions.
- ★ In general, the closer the camera is to its subject, the more importance and attention that subject is given.
- ★ There are seven basic terms used to describe the different distances that can occur between the camera and the subject it is filming.

Extreme close-up



Close-up



Medium close-up



Medium shot



Medium long shot



Long shot



Extreme long shot



Extreme close-up

An **extreme close-up** is a 'tight' shot that captures one specific aspect of the subject being filmed. It is shot with the shortest possible distance between the camera and the subject.

When used it is extremely significant as it gives a lot of importance to the detail that it captures.

- ★ If the filmmaker wanted to draw attention to an individual word on a page then that single word would be shot in an extreme close-up.
- ★ Extreme close-ups can be used to show us the personal items and props obsessed over by a particular character: for example, the shots of diaries, photo negatives and sinister objects used by the serial killer, shown during the open title sequence of *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995); or the various objects that have been collected and treasured by the lonely rubbish compactor robot that are seen during the opening scenes of *WALL·E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008).
- ★ Extreme close-ups also create tension by giving single objects and small movements a lot of importance. In the famous final shootout in Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), there are multiple extreme close-ups of the guns hanging off the men's belts, with their hands hovering above them. This highlights that the characters' lives very much depend on how quickly they can draw their guns without signalling to the others that they are about to make a move.

An extreme close-up



Close-up

A **close-up** is not as 'tight' a shot as an extreme close-up but there is still very little distance between the camera and the subject.

- ★ Close-ups may be used to draw attention to the significance of an object. For example, an important letter may be shot in close-up so that the audience can read what is written on it.
- ★ Close-ups are usually, and most significantly, of the face of an actor, in order to capture their expression and gestures.
- ★ There is almost no background detail visible, as the subject of the close-up is filmed in such a way that they fill nearly all of the frame.

A close-up



Medium close-up

In a **medium close-up** there is a comfortable distance between the subject and the camera. A medium close-up still captures important detail, but the subject being filmed would not fill the whole frame.

- ★ In a medium close-up, instead of just an actor's face being in shot, their shoulders and upper chest would probably also be visible, as would some of the background behind them.
- ★ Conversations between two people are often shot in a series of medium close-ups.
- ★ A medium close-up is more commonly used than a close-up.

A medium close-up



Medium shot

In a **medium shot** there is a 'natural' distance between two or more subjects and the camera. A medium shot captures slightly less detail than a medium close-up.

- ★ In a medium shot there is much more background in shot than in a medium close-up.
- ★ Often two actors are framed together in a medium shot, which is called a **two shot**. These shots are useful for establishing some kind of connection or intimacy between the two characters in shot.
- ★ Actors in medium shots are usually shown from the waist up.

A medium shot



Medium long shot

A **medium long shot** is achieved with the camera at a distance so that the subject or subjects in the foreground are equally balanced with what is in the background.

- ★ The body of an actor from the knees up is usually visible in a medium long shot.
- ★ A medium long shot shows many of the gestures and mannerisms of the various actors in that scene.
- ★ A medium long shot allows the audience to pay more attention to what is happening in the background, rather than just focusing on the subjects in the foreground.

A medium long shot



Long shot

In a **long shot** there is a very large distance between the subjects and the camera, which allows the subjects to be prominent even though the background dominates the scene.

- ★ Not only would an actor's entire body be visible in a long shot but you would also see a large area of the ground they are standing on and whatever is above their head.
- ★ Long shots are commonly used to introduce characters and to show multiple subjects.
- ★ Characters who are only seen in long shots or medium long shots are usually not very significant in the film, whereas central characters are mostly shot using medium close-ups and close-ups to reveal more about their personalities and motivations.

A long shot



Extreme long shot

Extreme long shots are usually shots of landscapes or cities taken at great distance, so that it is nearly impossible to distinguish specific details or recognise any of the characters. Extreme long shots are often used as **establishing shots**, frequently at the start of a film and before new scenes, establishing the setting for the ensuing action.

- ★ Action and adventure films set in multiple locations, such as the James Bond films or the *Mission: Impossible* series, often begin each new sequence with a series of extreme long shots of a foreign city. These act as establishing shots, alerting the viewer to where the next action scenes will take place.
- ★ Extreme long shots can also be an effective way of indicating that a character is lost or alone in a particular environment, whether they be a tiny speck in the vast Australian outback, or indistinguishable in a busy metropolis like New York.
- ★ Establishing shots can also be used to create mood and suggest the film's themes; for example, the opening shot in *Blade Runner* (1982) shows a polluted, neon-lit Los Angeles, informing the viewer that the film is about a chaotic and bleak future in which nature no longer seems to exist.

An extreme long shot



ACTIVITY

Below is a list of shots, and the effects that a filmmaker wishes to achieve in each shot. Identify which camera distance you think the filmmaker should use to create the desired effect and explain why this camera distance is the most suitable. Use the table below for discussion purposes; a photocopyable Activity Sheet is on page 176.

Shot and desired effect	Best camera distance to use	Explanation for using that camera distance
Crowd of people The filmmaker wants the audience to see a large crowd of people as they walk down a city street.		
Two lovers The filmmaker wants the audience to see both lovers declaring their feelings for each other.		
Two best friends The filmmaker wants the audience to see both friends as they shake hands.		
Engraved ring The filmmaker wants the audience to be able to read the engraving.		
A character hearing bad news The filmmaker wants the audience to clearly see the impact that hearing the bad news has on the character.		
Two people outside a cafe The filmmaker wants the audience to see both the characters and the cafe.		
A farm The filmmaker wants to show the audience the farm where the subsequent scenes will be set.		

Camera movement

Static shots

Often the camera remains perfectly still during the shot. A shot without camera movement, a still shot, is referred to as being **static**.

- ★ Static shots can create a sense of peaceful stillness if they are of calming or soothing objects, such as waves gently breaking on the beach.
- ★ Static shots can be suspenseful if they portray something like a cowboy in a showdown, about to draw his gun. The stillness makes the situation more intense as the audience knows that at any second a gunfight is going to ensue.
- ★ Dramatic intensity can also be created by a static shot if the subject's appearance is disturbing. If the film's hero is killed in a shootout, then to hold the camera still, focused on the hero's fallen body, would be very dramatic, especially if there had been a lot of camera movement capturing the dynamics of the gunfight leading up to that moment.

Long static shots are uncommon as audiences are accustomed to a degree of movement in each shot. Many shots require camera movement to articulate the meaning of the shot. There are three main forms of camera movement.

- ★ The camera can remain in a fixed spot and pivot around on its tripod.
- ★ The camera operator can use the zoom function to create the illusion of the camera moving towards or away from the subject.
- ★ The entire camera can be moved.

Thus the angle, distance and level can be changed during a shot to capture multiple elements of the shot. Often camera movements are simply performed to adequately capture what is happening in a scene, but they are always worth thinking about, especially when they stand out and do not appear 'natural' – making them deliberate stylistic devices.

Horizontal movement

When the camera is fixed on its tripod and points from side to side, this is known as a **pan**.

- ★ A panning camera creates the sensation of moving your head from side to side.
- ★ Pans are a very common type of movement as they are the means of showing all the elements of a scene or of following the action in a horizontal direction.
- ★ Pans only move in one direction at a time – a pan to the left or a pan to the right.



← Panning left



Panning right →



Vertical movement

The vertical version of the pan, where the camera points up and down on its tripod, is known as a **tilt**.



↑
Tilting up

★ Tilting creates the sensation of nodding your head up and down and is used to move between high and low angles.



★ The technique is very common. It can be used to show the height of a tall building by tilting up its walls, or to reveal an object at somebody's feet by tilting down the body until the camera is filming the floor.



↓
Tilting down

★ Tilts only move in one direction at a time – a tilt up or a tilt down.

Tracking shots

In a **tracking shot**, the entire camera moves (conversely, pans and tilts are the result of changing only the direction in which the camera points while fixed to a tripod). To ensure smooth movement, the camera is usually mounted on a moving platform known as a dolly; thus these shots are referred to as **dolly shots**.

- ★ The effect of a tracking shot is a smooth gliding sensation as the camera moves horizontally to film the action. Unlike a pan, which changes the angle of the shot, a tracking shot keeps the same angle. The technique is an excellent way of capturing long sequences of movement.
- ★ Tracking shots can create a dreamlike sensation as the effect can make the audience feel as if they are floating through the scene.
- ★ A tracking shot could also be used to travel towards or away from the subject, thus changing the distance of the shot. This is different from using a zoom lens to change distance since the use of a zoom will change the focus and perspective.



← Tracking left



Tracking right →



Tracking in

Crane shots

As in a tracking shot, the entire camera moves in a **crane shot**; it is connected to a mechanical arm that can lift it above the ground.

- ★ Compared to a tracking shot, which usually only moves in one predetermined direction, a crane shot is much less limited in its movement.
- ★ Crane shots are usually used for the very dramatic effect of having the camera appear to be swooping through the scene. They can create the sensation of flying and are often used in establishing shots to soar through or over the setting that is being introduced to the audience.
- ★ Mounting a camera on a crane, or mechanical arm, also allows the filmmakers to film from great heights that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

A crane shot



Aerial shots

As the name suggests, an **aerial shot** is taken when the camera is flown in a helicopter, plane or drone to film from far above the action.

- ★ Aerial shots are often used to film extreme long shots for establishing shots, since they can cover much more distance than a crane shot.
- ★ Prior to drone technology, aerial shots were almost always moving shots. The camera was attached to a moving airborne vehicle as it flew above the landscape or cityscape, giving the audience a birds-eye view of the action. Drone technology now allows for aerial shots to be static, as a drone can hover. This type of shot was used very effectively in the Indigenous-themed Australian film *Goldstone* (Ivan Sen, 2016), where the shots of the Australian landscape, taken from a drone, resemble Indigenous dot paintings.

- ★ Aerial shots taken by drones have also allowed filmmakers to better mimic crane shots, as it is now possible to follow the action up, over and around objects for long distances. Drones were used in Sam Mendes' James Bond films *Skyfall* (2012) and *Spectre* (2015) in key action sequences.

An aerial shot



Handheld shots

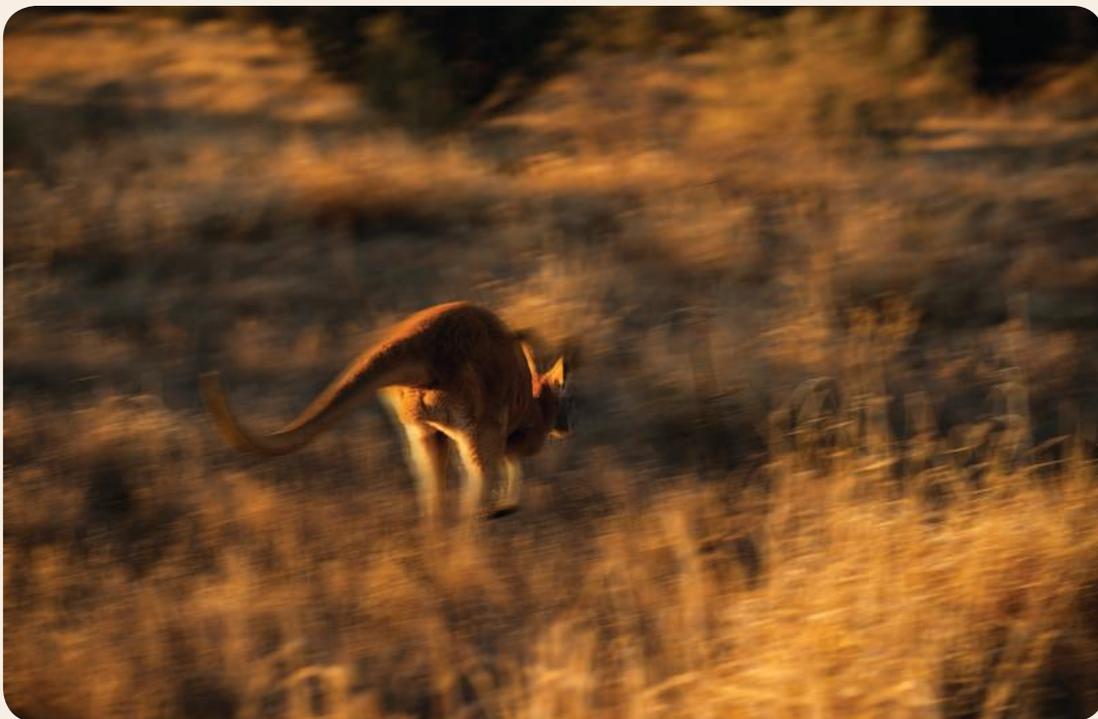
Handheld shots are literally shots where the camera is not mounted on a stable object, such as a tripod, dolly, crane or drone, but instead is held in the hand, or given the appearance of being held in the hand.

While the other types of camera movement usually create a smooth sense of motion, handheld shots are mostly used to produce a jerky and bumpy look. This effect gives scenes a very unsettling feel, and is sometimes known as shaky cam.

- ★ The effect is often used to create a sense of realism, as in reality people do not view the world as if attached to a fixed object like a camera tripod. Handheld shots also evoke the style of filming that people associate with news reports or documentaries, heightening the illusion of reality. The science-fiction film *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) uses a combination of shots that look like news stories or surveillance footage and handheld shots, to suggest that what we are seeing is real (even though it clearly isn't, as the film is about an alien settlement in South Africa).

- ★ Handheld shots can generate a sense of panic and quick movement. For example, the films in the Jason Bourne series directed by Paul Greengrass are shot with a handheld camera to give the films their edgy and paranoid feel. Like the shaking camera, the situations that Jason Bourne faces are always threatening to get out of control.
- ★ Films that pretend to consist of recovered documentary footage (for example, the 1999 horror film *The Blair Witch Project*) or found home-movie footage (for example, the monster movie *Cloverfield*, 2008) are filmed almost entirely with handheld cameras. This gives the film an immediate and raw feel, creating the illusion that the footage is of real events. Audiences today are more accustomed to viewing such films but, at the time of their release, the shaky camera work in both *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield* gave some audience members motion sickness.

A handheld shot

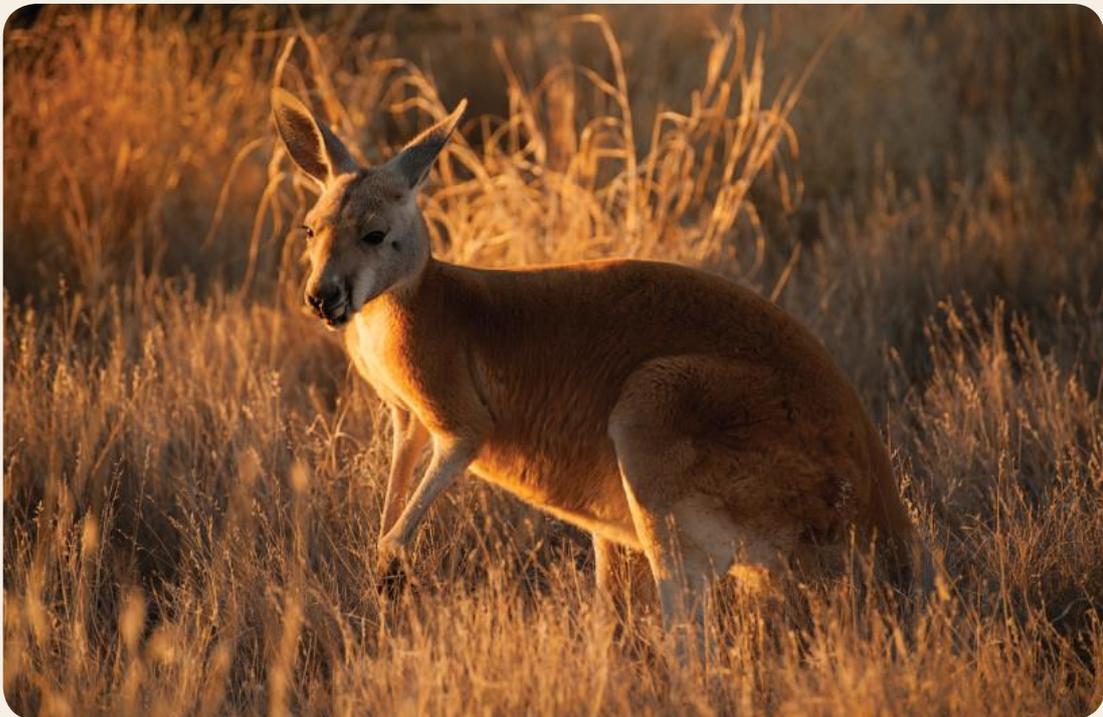


Steadicam shots

Complex tracking shots that use camera stabiliser technology to create a smooth effect are referred to as **Steadicam shots**, named after the Steadicam brand of camera stabiliser that was introduced to the film industry in 1975. While they are often filmed using handheld cameras, these shots do not have a shaky or jerky look; the technology allows them to appear smooth and stable. (There are now many different types of cameras and camera stabilisers used to create these types of shots, but they are still referred to as Steadicam shots.)

- ★ Early uses of Steadicam can be seen in the 1976 films *Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby), *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger) and *Rocky* (John G Avildsen). However, one of the first major innovations in the use of Steadicam shots was in Stanley Kubrick's 1980 horror film *The Shining*, where a lowered Steadicam was used to follow Danny Torrance riding his tricycle around the corridors of the deserted haunted hotel. These shots are eerie and unsettling, as the smooth effect of Steadicam shots can give the impression of an unnatural stillness or calmness, even though they are filming movement.
- ★ Handheld shots create a sense of realism by using the camera to mimic how a person in the scene of the film might view what is going on around them. Steadicam shots are similar but have a different emotional impact. They are far more graceful and serene than handheld shots so, rather than evoking panic or immediacy, they suggest more a sense of occasion or gravitas. For example, in Joe Wright's *Atonement* (2007), the Steadicam shot on the beach in Dunkirk during World War II conveys the growing despair felt by the characters as the camera tracks their grim passage along the beach, suggesting their increasing awareness of the magnitude of the events they are witnessing.
- ★ Because Steadicam shots provide an unusual smoothness and weightlessness, they can also achieve the opposite of realism, and are used to evoke a dream-like sensibility. The use of Steadicam in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) to follow the various characters from behind visually suggests the film's themes of memory, evolution and spirituality by mimicking a ghostlike presence witnessing the events on screen.

A Steadicam shot





ACTIVITY

Below is a list of shots, and the effects that a filmmaker wishes to achieve in each shot. Describe the kind of camera movement you think the filmmaker should use to create the desired effect and explain why this camera movement is the most suitable. Use the table below for discussion purposes; a photocopyable Activity Sheet is on page 177.

Shot and desired effect	Best camera movement to use	Explanation for using that camera movement
<p>A disorientated character attempts to walk down the street The filmmaker wants the audience to experience the disorientated feeling of the character.</p>		
<p>A well-dressed character The filmmaker wants to show in detail the clothes the character is wearing, from head to toe.</p>		
<p>A football game The filmmaker wants to show various aspects of a football game, including close-ups of the players, the fans in the stands and the managers in the boxes.</p>		
<p>A racing car The filmmaker wants to show a racing car speeding into frame from one direction and then speeding away in another direction.</p>		
<p>An assembly line The filmmaker wants to smoothly show all the different elements on a long assembly line in a factory.</p>		
<p>A forest canopy The filmmaker wants to show the top of a forest in which the subsequent scenes are going to take place.</p>		
<p>A ghost The filmmaker wants to smoothly follow a ghost as it glides up and down stairs and in and out of rooms in a haunted house.</p>		

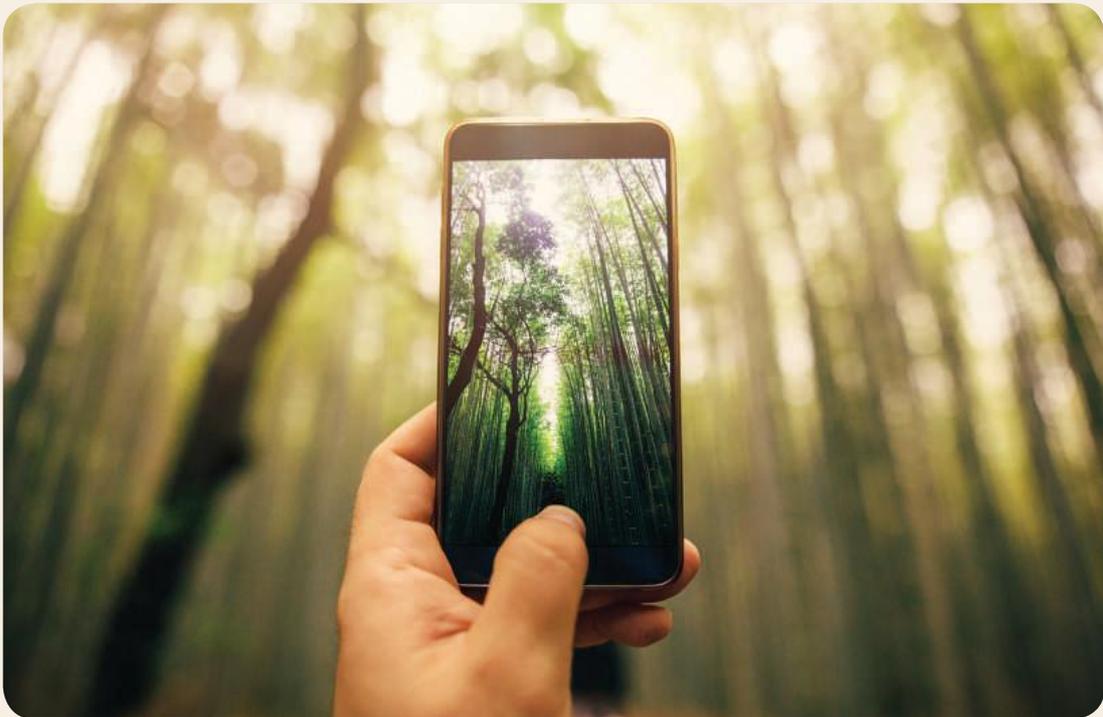
Point-of-view shots

A **point-of-view** shot represents what a character would see. It is a first-person or subjective shot that lets the audience see through the eyes of a particular character.

- ★ A point-of-view shot often involves a shot of the character's eyes or face followed immediately by a shot of what they are looking at. This is a very subtle way of suggesting we are viewing something through the eyes of the character, which can influence the way the audience feels about what is being observed. For example, at the end of *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) we see shots of Special Agent Dave Kujan staring in shock at the items on his pin board, followed by extreme close-up point-of-view shots of these items, which encourages the audience to view them as Kujan views them: as vital clues to the identity of the man he is trying to catch.

- ★ More elaborate point-of-view shots can involve moving the camera the way the character's head would move and using other stylistic devices to indicate the audience is seeing the world through the eyes of the main character. This is often done to help us empathise with the character, as we share their perspective on the world. For example, in *Gattaca* (1997), when Vincent has to cross a busy road while he's not wearing his contact lenses, the out-of-focus shots of the road convey his blurry eyesight and, by extension, the dangerousness of what he is doing.
- ★ Less common are films with substantial sequences that contain point-of-view shots (for example, the 1947 film *Dark Passage* and the 1995 film *Strange Days*), or films that are entirely made up of point-of-view shots (for example, the 1947 film *The Lady in the Lake*). With some exceptions, these extended point-of-view sequences in contemporary cinema are mostly found in action films and often evoke the exhilaration of playing computer games, where first-person-shots are far more common.

A point-of-view shot





ACTIVITY

Think about how the elements of cinematography (exposure, speed, focus, perspective, camera position and camera movement) can be used to create a point-of-view shot. Below is a list of point-of-view shots that a filmmaker wishes to achieve. Describe the elements of cinematography you think the filmmaker should use to create the desired point-of-view shot and explain why you have chosen these elements. Use the table below for discussion purposes; a photocopyable Activity Sheet is on page 178.

Point-of-view shots	Elements of cinematography	Explanation
A person suffering from a fear of heights		
An intoxicated person		
A person suffering from sunstroke		
A person falling in love		
A person witnessing a car crash		
A visually impaired person		
A person whose life seems to be rushing past them		
A person who is seasick		
A person who is frightened and nervous		

Aspect ratio

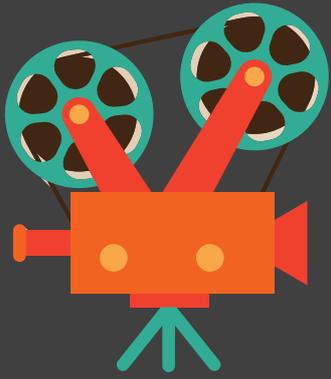
The **aspect ratio** of a film is the ratio of the width of the frame to the height of the frame.

The most common aspect ratio for contemporary widescreen Hollywood films shown in a cinema is 1.85:1, which means that the width of the screen is 1.85 times longer than the height. Another common aspect ratio is 1.78:1 (or 16:9), which is the standard for HD videos and, to the untrained eye, is not dramatically different to 1.85:1. However, there are many other aspect ratios that have been used during the history of cinema and that are used in other countries, and some are worth noting for the way they influence how a film is received.

- ★ Another common widescreen format is the much wider 2.39:1 aspect ratio (prior to 1970 it was 2.35:1 and is still often listed as 2.35:1), which tends to be used for films with a grand sense of scale, such as historical or fantasy epics. It allows for much more detail to be included along the film's horizontal axis, increasing the scope for things such as large-scale battle sequences. When such films are shown on television or online, black bars are inserted at the top and bottom of the frame to maintain this extra-wide aspect ratio. Many people regard this as looking more cinematic, which is also part of the appeal of the 2.39:1 aspect ratio.
- ★ Until the 1950s, Hollywood films mostly had the far narrower 1.33:1 (or 4:3) and 1.37:1 aspect ratios. This was also the standard for most television sets until fairly recently when digital widescreen televisions became the norm.

In fact, Hollywood started making widescreen films in the 1950s in order to differentiate itself from television. A major downside of this was that, when these films were screened on television or made available on VHS, they needed to be cropped so that their widescreen frame would fit the far narrower television screen. These days films use the 1.33:1 or 1.37:1 aspect ratio to either evoke earlier periods of filmmaking (for example, *The Artist* in 2011) or to create a more intimate frame where the only thing within shot is the face of one character (for example, *Son of Saul* in 2015 and *American Honey* in 2016).

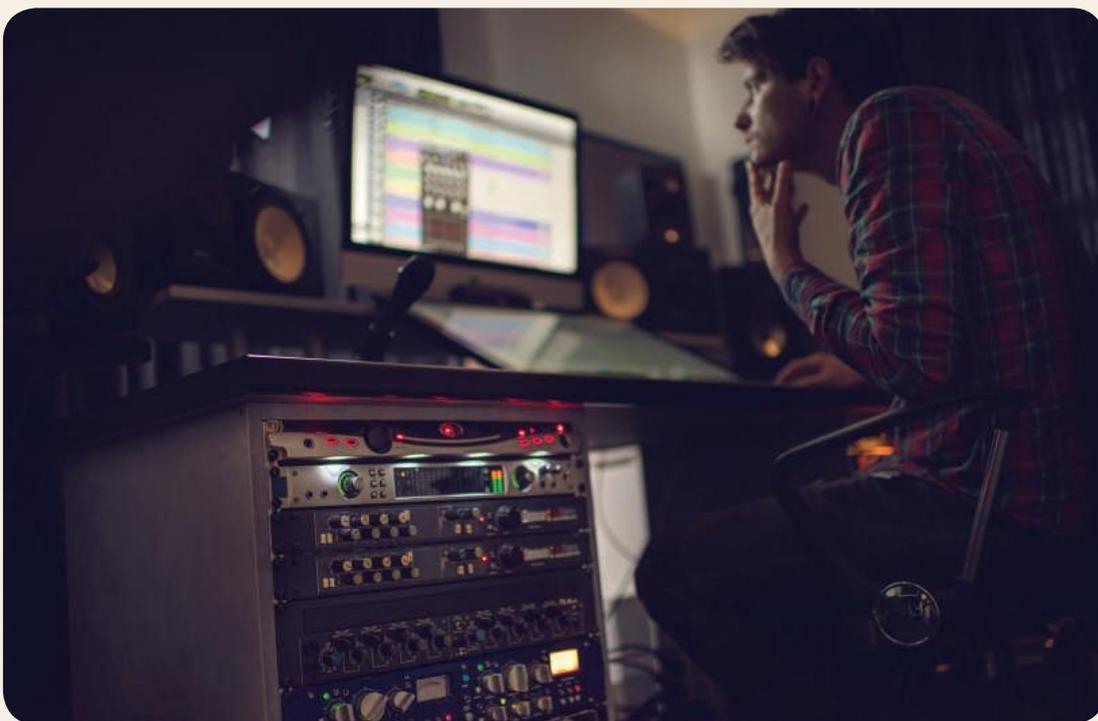
- ★ While most films commit to one aspect ratio for the duration of the film, some filmmakers like to change the aspect ratio as a stylistic effect. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), Wes Anderson changes the aspect ratio throughout the film to reflect the different time periods that the film is set in. In *Mommy* (2014), Xavier Dolan uses the very unconventional box-shaped aspect of 1:1 to suggest the confined and trapped world in which the characters live, and only expands the width of the film in key shots to indicate the moments when the characters briefly experience a sense of freedom.



EDITING

Editing is the art of placing shots together in a specific order to generate a meaningful relationship between the shots.

- ★ The editor of a film is the person who selects, trims and joins together the shots that make up each scene. The editor strongly influences how the audience will experience a film, as they decide *when* the audience will see each shot, *how long* they will see each shot for and *if* they will see a particular shot at all.
- ★ The order in which the editor places the shots not only establishes the shots' relationship with one another, but also contributes to their meaning, as every shot influences the audience's interpretation of the shots that will follow.
- ★ Films are edited very carefully to create and maintain the illusion that the various shots making up a scene relate to each other and flow on naturally from one to the next.



Types of edits

Cuts

The **cut** is the most common edit and the standard way of separating one shot from another. One shot ends and the next begins immediately.

- ★ Cuts often go unnoticed because they are so common.
- ★ There is no overlapping of the images during a cut.
- ★ Sound can continue over a cut. One shot may cut to another but the sound usually continues without a break, making the cut even less noticeable.



Cut

Dissolves

A **dissolve** is a brief overlap of one shot into the next. The shot that ends 'dissolves' into the next shot.

Dissolves are a relatively common type of edit, although they were more popular in classical Hollywood cinema than they are today.

- ★ Dissolves can be used simply to connect one shot to another and give meaning to this connection. For example, if two characters are discussing a third person, and the scene then dissolves into a shot of another person, we would assume that this is the person being discussed by the two original characters.
- ★ Dissolves can indicate the passage of significant periods of time. A shot of a plane taking off from Melbourne which dissolves into a shot of the same plane landing in Alice Springs conveys the passing of time without the filmmakers having to literally show the entire trip.
- ★ Dissolves are also used to signal the beginning of a dream sequence. If a close-up of a person lying in bed asleep dissolves into an image of monsters attacking them, we would assume that the shot of the monsters is the person's dream. Likewise, if a shot of a person obtaining the love of their life and all the

riches in the world dissolves into a shot of that person looking wistfully up at the sky, we would assume that the character is simply daydreaming.



Dissolve

Fades

Fades are dissolves to or from black. A **fade-out** is when the shot ends by dissolving into black; a **fade-in** is when the screen starts as black and then dissolves into the next shot.

- ★ Fading interrupts the smooth flow of edits created by cuts, as fades are much more noticeable and often feel as if they are slowing down the pace of the film.
- ★ Fade-outs are commonly used to conclude a major segment (or 'chapter' of a film), or even to conclude the film itself.
- ★ Fade-ins often occur after a fade-out to start a new segment of a film. During the time between a fade-out and a fade-in, the audience may be left in darkness for a few moments. This can be a deliberate strategy to ensure viewers are made to contemplate what they have just seen before moving on to the next part of the film. This technique can be either comforting or unsettling, depending on the preceding shot.



Fade

Wipes

A **wipe** is an unusual type of edit in which an actual dividing line appears on screen and passes over the first shot, ‘wiping’ it away and replacing it with the next shot.

Think of the effect, often in older films, when two characters are talking on a phone and a line divides the screen to show the characters in separate shots. Now imagine that line quickly passing over one shot to replace it with another: that would be a wipe.

- ★ There can be vertical, horizontal or diagonal wipes, depending on the direction the line moves in. If the line passes from left to right on the screen, removing the image on its right to replace it with the image on its left, this is a horizontal wipe.
- ★ Wipes can be used to overtly link the shots they are separating, or to indicate a passing of time or a change in location.
- ★ Wipes stand out more than the other types of edits and are associated with classical Hollywood films, where they are more commonly used. Contemporary filmmakers often use wipes to create a sense of nostalgia. The *Star Wars* films use wipes to give them the feel of the old adventure serials from the 1930s and 1940s that the *Star Wars* franchise was originally inspired by.



Diagonal wipe

Continuity editing

The main purpose of film editing is to create a flow between shots that logically conveys the physical space of the shots and the passing of time.

Continuity editing is the art of arranging shots into a sequence that allows the viewer to make sense of what is going on without being actively aware that what they are watching has been carefully edited.

Continuity editing doesn't draw attention to itself, making it a skill of concealment – the better a film is edited, the less the audience notices the editing.

- ★ Continuity edits are nearly always straightforward cuts, since a cut is a conventional editing technique that does not draw attention to itself. Other editing techniques, such as dissolves, fades and wipes, stand out and are noticeable edits often used to indicate that a scene has ended. Cuts, on the other hand, are barely noticeable as they separate shots within a scene, and audiences tend to focus on complete scenes rather than individual shots.
- ★ Continuity edits are 'logical' edits linking shots that seem to belong together. In other words, the audience does not question that the two shots are logically connected and therefore does not notice the edit that links them. For example, an edit from an establishing shot of Melbourne's skyline to a shot inside a Melbourne office would go unnoticed, as it makes sense to place a shot of the interior of a building after a long shot of that location.
- ★ Taking advantage of the fact that audiences do not notice most edits, filmmakers place shots together that are actually unrelated in the real world. The shot of the 'Melbourne' office that follows the shot of Melbourne's skyline may in fact have been filmed in Sydney but, because they have been edited together in the film, the audience is led to believe that the office is in Melbourne.

Consider the following example of how editing links shots together to generate meaning. Imagine that shot 1 is of a person happily smiling.

- ★ If the following shot (shot 2) is of a child, we might assume that the person in shot 1 is the child's parent, and is probably a decent person since they derive joy from seeing their child.
- ★ However, if shot 2 is of a dying animal then we would assume that the smiling person in shot 1 delights in an animal's suffering, and is therefore a cruel and cowardly person.
- ★ Note that the shot of the person smiling takes on a totally different meaning depending on the nature of the shot that follows it.



ACTIVITY

Consider how you would interpret shot 1, below, depending on whether it is followed by shot 2a, 2b or 2c (on the following page).

Shot 1



Shot 2a



Shot 2b



Shot 2c



Use the table as a guide for your notes.

	Shot 2a	Shot 2b	Shot 2c
What is the character thinking and/or feeling?			
What kind of person does she seem to be?			
In what kind of film would these shots be placed together?			
What kind of story could be told by placing these shots together?			

Common continuity editing techniques

Most of the techniques used to create seamless, unnoticeable and ‘invisible’ edits are not commonly discussed in film analysis because they are rarely stylistically noteworthy – despite the talent and skill required to make such edits. However, there are some common techniques worth mentioning and the terminology associated with such techniques is important to know, if you ever need to describe the way a sequence of shots has been edited together.

Shot/reverse-shot

When a film continually cuts back and forth between two series of shots in a way that suggests the shots are happening in the same place, at the same time, with the elements in the shots relating to each other, this is known as **shot/reverse-shot** (or **shot/countershot**).

- ★ The shot/reverse-shot pattern of edits is commonly used for dialogue scenes. The **original shot** shows the first person speaking, then cuts to the **reverse shot** of the second person in the conversation, before cutting back again to the **original shot** – hence ‘shot/reverse-shot’. However, it could also be used, for example, in a scene where one person is describing an object such as a building. The reverse shot would then show the building, indicating that it is the building being described.



Shot/reverse-shot

- ★ A key element of establishing a connection between characters having a conversation in scenes edited in the shot/reverse-shot pattern is to create an **eye-line match**. This means that the actors look out of frame to where the person they are speaking to would be, and in a direction that suggests they are looking each other in the eye.



Eye-line match

- ★ Another crucial element to making sure reverse-shot edits appear seamless is for editors and cinematographers to follow the **180-degree rule**. This is a convention in which it is imagined that a straight line, called the **axis**, is running along the ground to connect the two characters (or objects) that are the focus of the scene. The cinematographer then only shoots both characters from one side of the axis. When the shots are edited together, the first character will always appear facing in the same direction, with the second character always appearing facing in the other direction – the end result is that it looks as if the characters are facing each other. Crossing the axis, and therefore breaking the 180-degree rule, means that a character who initially appeared to be looking towards the right of the frame will suddenly appear to be looking left. This risks breaking the suspension of disbelief that is so crucial to continuity editing.



180-degree rule

Match on action

Editing so that a movement of an object or character in one shot is continued in the second shot is a **match on action**.

Matches on action are essential in creating 'invisible editing' as the audience focuses on the movement rather than the editing. If somebody falling over is to be filmed in two shots, the first shot would show them falling part of the way then the second shot would show the rest of the fall, from a different angle, beginning at the exact point where the first shot finishes. Likewise, a shot inside a car of a driver about to turn right would be matched with a shot of the car completing a right-hand turn.

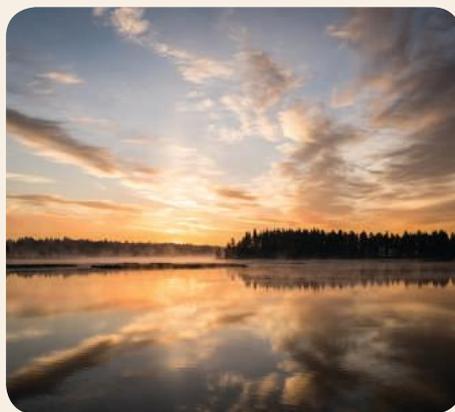


Match on action

Cutaway shots

A shot that contains something that is removed from the main action is known as a **cutaway shot**.

Unlike the reverse shot in a shot/reverse-shot sequence, cutaway shots are usually one-off shots that are not part of the main scene. Depending on what is depicted in the cutaway shots, they are often a seamless part of the scene. For example, a shot of somebody stepping onto the road they are about to cross, followed by a cutaway shot of a car driving down the street, followed by a shot of the person reaching the footpath, conveys the action of somebody crossing the road without having to show the entire action in real time.



Cutaway shot

However, cutaway shots can also be jarring, for example, when they are used to show us something that is thematically symbolic rather than something we would expect to see. Cutting to a shot of something that doesn't exist within the world of the film is a non-diegetic insert.

Split edits

A **split edit** occurs when the audio track containing the sound for the film is edited at a different time to the visual shots.

Split edits are a common technique for creating a smooth transition between shots; they create **sound bridges** that ease the audience through the visual edits. The sound from the original shot may carry into the second shot (known as an **L cut**) or the sound from the second shot may start early in the original shot (known as a **J cut**). Often this goes unnoticed, but it is useful for suggesting the way the events from one scene may influence the following scene. For more details refer to Chapter 5 on sound.



Spatial editing

One of the core functions of continuity editing is to seamlessly and logically arrange shots to construct the space of the film so that audiences can make sense of where everything takes place. While most editing techniques are used to simply facilitate smooth transitions between shots, there are some notable techniques relating to the construction of cinematic space that are worth mentioning.

Crosscutting

Cutting back and forth between scenes, and thus linking the space of those scenes, is known as **crosscutting**.

- ★ Crosscutting is often used to suggest that the events depicted in each set of shots are happening simultaneously. For example, in the finale of *Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016), the film continually crosscuts between the rebels breaking into the base on Scarif, the rebels who are fighting on the planet's surface and the rebels who are fighting above the planet in space. The actions of each group influence what happens to the other groups, so crosscutting is used to tie all the action together.

- ★ Crosscutting can also link together scenes from different time periods that are not literally occurring at the same time but that the filmmaker wants to establish as strongly relating to each other. This can be used for very literal purposes, such as in Rian Johnson's time travel film *Looper* (2012) where crosscutting is used to reveal how events occurring in one time period have an immediate effect on events in future time periods. Another example is in films set over two time periods (such as Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Godfather: Part II*) or several time periods (such as the 2012 film *Cloud Atlas*, directed by Tom Tykwer and Lana and Lilly Wachowski). In these instances, crosscutting is used to create thematic links, making sure the audience views the events from one time period in the context of events taking place at another time.
- ★ The climactic scene from Coppola's *The Cotton Club* (1984) of a tap-dancer performing in a club and a gangster being machine-gunned to death shows how crosscutting can create a meaningful relationship between two otherwise unrelated scenes and establish a symbolic link between them. The rhythmic similarity between the machine-gun fire and the dancing tap shoes further symbolically links the scenes so that, at the climax of both scenes, which are rapidly crosscutting from one to the other, it becomes difficult to distinguish the sounds of the tap-dancing from the sounds of the machine-gun fire.

Scene 1



Crosscut to scene 2



Crosscut back to scene 1



Crosscut back to scene 2



Non-diegetic inserts

A **non-diegetic insert** is a shot of something unrelated to the narrative elements of a film, intercut with other shots.

Since the diegesis of a film is everything contained within the world of that film, a non-diegetic insert is a shot of something not in the space of the film. The shot will still have symbolic relevance that the audience needs to be aware of, as such inserts influence the way audiences think and feel about what is happening in the film.

- ★ Non-diegetic inserts are usually images that have a symbolic or metaphorical significance but are otherwise unrelated to the events depicted by the film. For example, the shot of the sheep at the start of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) is a non-diegetic insert since the sheep don't actually have any relevance to the story. However, they have symbolic relevance since they are graphically and rhythmically matched to the shot of the workers, and hence reflect the drone-like lack of individuality that Chaplin believed characterised the modern world.
- ★ Non-diegetic inserts can indicate the mood or feelings of a character. A scene may depict a person receiving bad news. To emphasise how devastating this news is, a non-diegetic insert of a plane crashing to the ground may be used, suggesting that the person's dreams have collapsed.
- ★ Non-diegetic inserts can also allude to activities that, for various reasons, the filmmakers do not want to show explicitly (or cannot, due to censorship). Love scenes, for instance, may use a non-diegetic insert of exploding fireworks to indicate the passion the two characters have for each other.



Non-diegetic insert





ACTIVITY

Think of possible non-diegetic inserts that could be inserted at some point in the different scenes described below. Explain your choice of non-diegetic insert and its effect on the scene. There are no right or wrong answers, so be creative! A famous example used in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is provided. Use the table as a guide for your notes.

Scene	Non-diegetic insert	Explanation for your choice of non-diegetic insert
Soldiers open fire on revolutionaries	<i>Three lion statues – one sleeping, one awakening and one fully alert</i>	<i>The three statues edited together in sequence generate the mood of the people 'awakening' in outrage at the violence that has been inflicted upon them by their own country.</i>
A group of friends enthusiastically gossips about the misfortunes of somebody they know		
A struggling student discovers they have come top of their class		
A manager bullies and intimidates their staff		
A person with a life-threatening illness discovers that they can be cured		

Temporal editing

Editing affects how time, as well as space, is perceived in a film. A coherent and logical sense of time is created when the shots are arranged in an order consistent with the passage of time. For example, if a scene involves somebody building a house, we would expect the shots of the person laying the bricks to come before the shot of the completed house. Reversing the order of these shots would make no sense.

Changing the order of events

Flashbacks

Flashbacks occur when scenes portraying earlier events follow scenes that portray more recent events.

Flashbacks are often used to fill in the gaps of a story or to reveal an important event in the past that affects events in the present.

- ★ Murder mysteries often use flashbacks at the end of the film to show the murder and to reveal the killer's identity.
- ★ The concept of the flashback is presented quite literally in Pete Docter and Ronnie del Carmen's 2015 feature animation film *Inside Out*, when the core memories of eleven-year-old Riley are played back by the emotion characters

who live inside her mind, to reveal how events from the past formed aspects of her personality.

- ★ One of the most celebrated uses of flashbacks in film history occurs in the 1950 Japanese film *Rashômon* by the director Akira Kurosawa. Throughout the film four different characters describe a murder and, each time, the film uses a flashback to depict the murder as described by each character. What makes these flashbacks so interesting is that, although they are used to show the same thing, they show it in a different way depending on how the different characters remember it, or choose to remember it. This is a powerful example of how truth can be distorted by memory, opinion and subjectivity.

Flashforwards

Flashforwards occur when scenes portraying events that occur at a point in the future precede the scenes depicting events leading up to that point.

- ★ Some films start with a flashforward of the final scene, so that for the entire film the audience is wondering how events are going to unfold to arrive at that final scene. For example, at the start of both Brian De Palma's *Carlito's Way* (1993) and Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) we see the final scene, in which a lead character dies. For the rest of the film we are anxiously waiting for that event to happen. It is a surprisingly suspenseful technique, as throughout the course of the film the audience becomes sympathetic towards the lead character and cannot help but hope that somehow their tragic end will not occur.
- ★ Flashforwards can also be used to deliberately mislead viewers, when they don't realise that the scene that starts the film is actually an event that takes place much later. Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* from 2004 begins with a sequence in which the two lead characters meet – though it is later revealed that they have met before and have since had their memories erased. Denis Villeneuve's 2016 science-fiction film *Arrival* also begins with a sequence of events that is later revealed to be a flashforward. The revelation that what we see happening to the lead character at the start of the film is actually yet to happen to her changes the way we perceive her throughout the film.
- ★ An extreme example of flashforwarding is the back-to-front organisation of scenes in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000). Every scene in this film is effectively a flashforward because the events in each scene occur immediately before the events in the preceding scene, so the narrative effectively unravels backwards. This is not a typical method of portraying time at all, but it is highly effective in *Memento* since the lead character has no short-term memory. Therefore, by showing the scenes backwards, the filmmakers ensure that the audience, like the lead character, has no idea what has occurred prior to any given moment.

Decreasing time

Decreasing time in a film is known as **elliptical editing**. It's the process of removing parts of the event so that the audience doesn't have to experience the action happening in real time.

The following are some common elliptical editing techniques.

- ★ A simple editing technique such as a cut, dissolve or fade is used to join a shot depicting the start of an action (for example, somebody leaving their house to go to school) with a shot of the end of the action (the same person arriving at school). This conveys the scene of a person travelling from home to school without showing the entire journey.
- ★ A cutaway shot is placed between the two shots being linked: for example, a cutaway shot of a train could be inserted between the shots of somebody leaving their house and arriving at school. This would not only condense the time of that trip, but it would suggest that the person used a train to make the journey.
- ★ A **montage**, in which shots from many different points in the plot are edited together, can suggest that time is passing. For example, to show a person travelling to school every day over an entire year, a series of different shots of them leaving home and arriving at school could be used, each showing them wearing different clothes and performing different actions in different weather conditions, to convey that each shot is from a different day.





Montage

Jump cuts

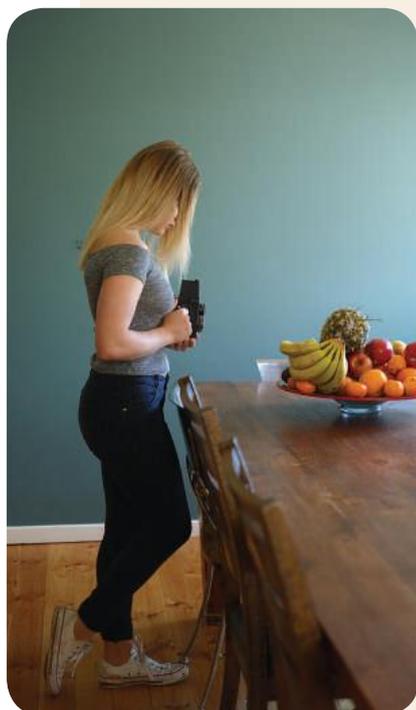
A **jump cut** is a stylised edit that condenses time by affecting the time and space of the scene. The subject of the shot remains in the same position in each scene, while everything else in the scene changes, creating a jarring sensation of that subject jumping forward into the next scene.

Jump cuts result from breaking the 30-degree rule of editing, which states that a sequence should only include shots in which the camera has moved at least 30 degrees in relation to the subject. Breaking the 30-degree rule means that the edit won't be seamless or invisible. Jump cuts are deliberately jarring, time-decreasing edits because they are highly noticeable to the audience. They can be used to draw attention to the fact that cinema is constructed and not real. More commonly today, they are used to provoke the audience into feeling bewildered, amused or anxious.

- ★ If the camera is stationary at a train platform and randomly turned on and off, then the resulting footage would be of the same train platform with people 'appearing' and 'disappearing' throughout the scene. This is an example of a series of jump cuts in the same setting. The scene in Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) in which Richie cuts his hair and shaves in the mirror is an example of using jump cuts: Ritchie's head stays still as he stares into the mirror, but in each shot he has less hair and his hands are in a different

position. The unchanging position of his head, combined with actor Luke Wilson's unchanging, sad expression, makes this act of grooming mechanical and melancholic.

- ★ Director Jean-Luc Godard is usually credited with making jump cuts popular in *Breathless* (1960), a key film from the French New Wave (a highly influential 1960s arthouse movement). In one scene Godard shoots a conversation between the lead characters, Patricia and Michel, in a moving car, using a series of jump cuts. The camera stays on Patricia and is not moved between shots. However, because the car is moving continually, the background is different for each shot. The conversation flows as normal between the cuts but the background keeps changing throughout the scene. The different settings appear to be 'jumping' in and out of the background rather than being smoothly incorporated into each shot.
- ★ *The Tree of Life* (2011) uses extensive jump cuts to transition between characters who remain in the same position, and even to cut within a scene without the use of a cutaway shot. While the use of jump cuts in *The Tree of Life* is jarring, it is used so frequently that the audience becomes used to it as part of the film's aesthetic, which presents memory as something fleeting and fragmented, missing random pieces of information and details.



Jump cut

Increasing time

Overlapping editing

The time that a particular action takes can be increased by using **overlapping editing** to quickly show shots of the same event from different angles.

An event that might last only a few seconds can be stretched out to last much longer on film when overlapping editing is utilised.

- ★ Overlapping editing can create a sense of spectacle in action films. Car crashes and explosions are often shown in quick succession from many different angles and distances, giving the audience the full sensory experience that is expected from action cinema, to emphasise the importance of a particular action. For example, the importance of the verdict of a trial may be reinforced by using overlapping editing to show the judge slamming their hammer down from several angles. The sound of the hammer hitting the desk and the judge announcing 'Guilty' may also be repeated in each shot.
- ★ Overlapping editing can also be used to give the audience the point of view of a character who feels as if time has stopped. For example, imagine a child falling off play equipment as their parents watch in horror. To create the parents' sensation of time almost standing still, overlapping editing could be used to show the falling child from various angles, making this action seem to take a much longer time.



Overlapping editing

Freeze frames

A **freeze frame** occurs when an image is frozen and becomes a still image on screen.

- ★ One of the earliest known and most iconic uses of the freeze frame is the final shot of François Truffaut's 1959 French New Wave film *The 400 Blows*. The shot focuses on the face of the film's main character Antoine, a troubled young boy growing up in Paris. The film ends with a final freeze-frame shot of Antoine looking into the camera (the camera also zooms in on this freeze frame). It's a deliberately ambiguous way of ending the film, forcing the audience to linger on Antoine's face and ponder what may happen to him in the future.
- ★ The last shot of George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) depicts the two outlaws running into a hail of bullets. This shot is then frozen to give the pair a dramatic sense of timelessness – although they are about to die, they have etched themselves into American history forever. This final shot was inspired by *The 400 Blows* but, while that film used the freeze frame to create ambiguity, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* uses it to reinforce the fate of the characters.
- ★ Brief freeze frames can also be used during films to capture a moment that may go unnoticed, such as the expression on a character's face during an action sequence. Longer freeze frames can be used to effectively pause the film, which is a technique often employed when the film uses a voice-over to explain to the audience the significance of a moment. When Mark Baum in *The Big Short* (Adam McKay, 2015) realises the world's economy is about to collapse, for example, the moment is captured with a freeze frame of the horrified look on his face, with the voice-over explaining this realisation.



Freeze frame

Graphic editing

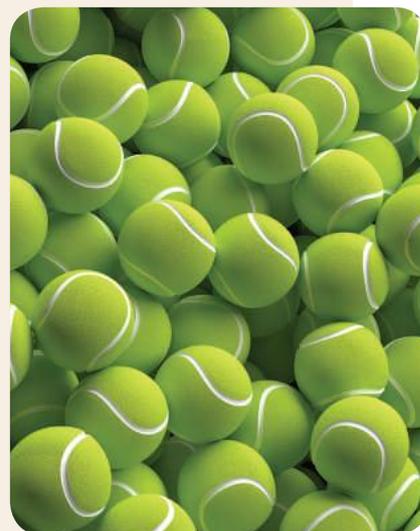
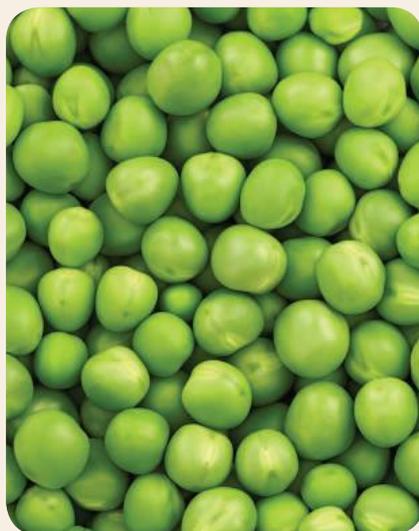
As well as making sure the shots make sense in terms of the story and dialogue, the editor also makes stylistic choices based on visually matching various elements in a shot with corresponding elements in the following shot. Such edits are commonly referred to as **match cuts**.

Graphic matches

Graphic matches are more overt match cuts whereby the shots are edited together based on the more blatant visual similarities between them. A graphic match may be based on colours, on a prominent object or on actors who have a similar shape.

Often match cuts go unnoticed, and are used to create a smooth transition from one scene to the next. However, editors can use graphic matches to highlight the graphic similarity of the two shots. This can simply be a stylistic device, or it can be used to link the matched objects or actors together in a way that the audience may not otherwise have considered.

- ★ Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) contains one of the most famous graphic matches in cinema history, in which a shot from millions of years ago, of a bone thrown into the air by an ape, then cuts to a shot from the future, of a cylindrically shaped satellite floating in space. The graphic match between the bone and the satellite creates the link between a tool used by humanity's ancestors and a tool used by humans in the future, thus establishing two of the film's themes: evolution and the passing of time.
- ★ The three different characters from three different time periods (1923, 1951 and 2001) in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* (2002) are linked together through the use of graphic matches. During the film's opening sequence, graphic matches of each of the characters waking up in bed, tying back their hair, looking in the mirror and moving a vase of flowers are used to ensure the audience realises that the three different stories are interconnected, and that the three characters need to be understood in relation to one another.
- ★ The graphic match in Jordan Vogt-Roberts' *Kong: Skull Island* (2017) of a soldier falling into Kong's mouth, followed by a close-up of another soldier biting into a sandwich, is a darkly comedic way of suggesting the grisly fate of the soldier in the first shot without showing it explicitly. However, this graphic match also suggests the idea that, while Kong is devouring soldiers, they were the initial aggressors who had come to symbolically 'devour' his environment.



Graphic match



ACTIVITY

Think of possible graphic matches to link together the following shots. There are no right or wrong answers so be creative! Use the table as a guide for your notes.

Shot 1	Object	Shot 2	Graphic-matched object
A primitive human discovers the use of tools	<i>A bone thrown into the air</i>	Technology of the future	<i>A cylindrically shaped satellite floats through space</i>
A murder is committed		The murder victim's family finds out about the crime	
A child secretly reads a book about a fantasy world instead of studying		The characters from the fantasy world hide from a monster	
A parent prepares their family's dinner		The parent is also a secret agent on a dangerous mission	
Roman gladiators fight to the death		A football player, who is a descendent of a gladiator, plays in a Grand Final	

Rhythmic editing

The number of edits in a scene influences the rhythm of the scene. To give each scene a particular rhythm, the editor varies the time between edits – in other words, the length of each shot. Changing the rate at which edits occur can create various sensations for the audience.

Quick edits

Quick editing is editing brief shots together so that no shot lasts for too long before the film cuts to the next shot.

- ★ Having many quick edits can add pace or tension to a scene. Many contemporary action films are entirely composed of very quick edits – in other words, the length of each shot is no more than two or three seconds. This gives the whole film the sense of pace that is so crucial for generating the on-the-edge-of-your-seat excitement of action films.
- ★ Quick editing can create the sensation of bewilderment and confusion, since the audience is unable to see everything that is happening. For example, quick edits are often used in war films to re-create the feeling of chaos and panic experienced by soldiers under fire.
- ★ Quick edits can also be used in horror and suspense films to give the audience only a glimpse of whatever is terrorising the characters. This is a highly effective device for exaggerating the impact of a threat.

Slow edits

Slow editing allows shots to continue for a long time before they cut to the next shot.

- ★ Slow edits allow the audience to more thoroughly absorb each image and perhaps contemplate more carefully what is happening in the scene.
- ★ Sometimes filmmakers deliberately let an image linger for what seems a little too long. This often reaffirms the importance of that shot, or it can be a device for making the audience members feel uncomfortable with what they are looking at.
- ★ Slow editing can be used to capture big-spectacle sequences such as choreographed dance routines, where the visual pleasure is in watching the dancers perform.



ACTIVITY

Consider the scenes described in the table below and decide whether quick or slow editing would be most effective in such a scene (again, there are no right or wrong answers so be creative!). A famous example used in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) is provided. Use the table as a guide for your notes.

Scene	Quick or slow edits	Explanation
Townfolk are caught in the crossfire between bank robbers and the lawmen ambushing them	<i>Very quick edits</i>	<i>Quickly cutting from one shot to the next creates a sense of confusion and terror as the violence erupts.</i>
A character in court confesses to a horrible crime		
A team of contemporary dancers performs in the final of a street dance competition		
A monster stalks a character who is not aware that they are in danger		
Two martial arts experts fight		

Long takes

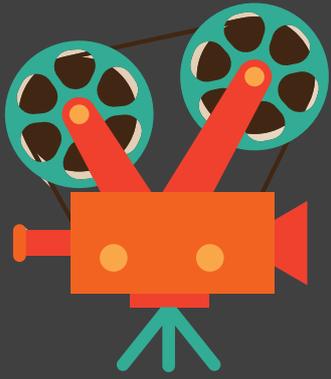
A long take is a shot that continues for longer than usual without edits or breaks in the filmmaking.

Most scenes are composed of multiple shots edited together. Thus long takes are generally quite obvious. Indeed, the absence of edits is unusual and unconventional; therefore, depending on how they are used, long takes can be jarring or create anxiety. On the other hand, they can be dreamlike and mesmerising. Usually they give the scene a heightened sense of energy as, without edits, there is no release from the feelings associated with what is being filmed.

- ★ Long takes can be used as an elaborate establishing technique. For example, the opening shot in Robert Altman's 1992 Hollywood satire *The Player* is a long take in which the camera roams in and out of various offices at a Hollywood studio. This shot sets the scene as it gives the audience snippets of dialogue from the offices where filmmakers pitch and negotiate their latest films. However, as well as effectively establishing the setting for the film, the opening long take also establishes its off-kilter mood, with viewers continually encouraged to be aware that the film they are watching resembles various films that the characters are talking about – there is even a moment during the opening long take when a character talks about long takes! It also introduces the film's theme of Hollywood being cynical, artificial and manipulative.
- ★ Long takes can also be used to create tension. One of the most famous long takes is the start of Orson Welles' 1958 classic *Touch of Evil*. A crane shot focuses on a car driving through a city. Without a single cut or break, the camera swoops over and around the buildings to follow the car and the people walking near it. The effect is one of terrific suspense as the audience is waiting for the car to explode and wondering who is going to be near when it finally does. Some contemporary examples of using long takes to create tension

are the opening scene of Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015), when the trappers' camp is attacked, and the opening shot in Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013) when the astronauts are servicing the telescope and begin to be bombarded with debris. Both shots create anxiety and excitement as the long takes create a sense of relentlessness in a high-stakes situation.

- ★ Digital technologies have now made possible one-shot feature films, in which the entire film is a single long take. The 2002 film *Russian Ark*, directed by Alexander Sokurov, was a one-shot film, and the technique gives the film a dreamlike quality. The camera floats through the Winter Palace of the Russian State Hermitage Museum in an extended shot from the point of view of the unseen narrator, who watches the history of Russia play out before him in the various rooms.
- ★ There are also films that are not actually one-shot films but mimic the aesthetic of being a long take. Such faked one-shot films include Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* from as long ago as 1948 (when the technology at the time made it impossible to do a one-shot film for real) and, more recently, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014): a lot of what happens on screen here would have been impossible to achieve with a long take. For film analysis purposes, it is almost irrelevant whether the long take is real or not; the point is how it influences the way the film is received by the audience.



SOUND

Although sound is not a visual element, it is a significant source of meaning for the visuals in a film. Sound is a very important but often neglected aspect of film style.

- ★ Listening to sound in a film can be similar to watching the editing – we hardly notice it unless we specifically pay attention to its presence, which is what we must do when analysing a film.
- ★ Sound is nearly always present in film, whether it consists of dialogue, sound effects or music. Even silent films were accompanied by some form of live music.
- ★ It is worth noting when silence is used in films, since it is actually very unusual and, as a result, can have a very powerful effect.



Uses of sound

Sound is used to give meaning to the visuals, to direct the audience's attention towards specific visuals, and to create expectations in the audience about what is going to happen next.

Creating visual meaning

Sound works very closely with the other elements of style to draw attention to particular aspects of a shot, and to make the meaning of the visuals more definite.

- ★ A shot of a car being started accompanied by the sound of a motor furiously revving could suggest that the car owner is a macho petrolhead. However, if the sound is of a motor spluttering and failing to start, we might think that the car owner is unable to afford to have their car fixed.
- ★ A shot of a bar with lots of noise and music could indicate that the bar is a happy and fun place. On the other hand, complete silence could suggest that the bar is closed or struggling to attract people and therefore not a good place to be.
- ★ A shot of a dog with the sound of snarling on the soundtrack would give the dog a sense of menace, whereas the same shot accompanied by a whimpering or howling sound would evoke sympathy for the dog.



Music

Music strongly influences how a particular scene affects the audience. Filmmakers carefully select certain pieces of music to give scenes their distinctive meaning, mood or atmosphere.

- ★ The exhilarating and rousing music score in Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and the other *Indiana Jones* films creates a sense of excitement and adventure.

- ★ George Lucas' 1973 film *American Graffiti* used an extensive range of pop songs from the late 1950s and early 1960s to help create the film's 1962 setting and youthful, energetic mood. It helped to establish the convention of using contemporary popular music of the era in teen films. Often songs selected for such films have lyrics that comment on aspects of the film. An example from *American Graffiti* is the final song by the The Beach Boys titled 'All Summer Long'. The lyrics of this song capture the sombre mood at the end of the film, which sees the characters enter adulthood during a tumultuous period in American history, their fun and carefree days over.
- ★ The use of Johann Strauss II's waltz *The Blue Danube* in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) during the shots of spacecraft floating through space gives these giant constructions a graceful quality: it is as if they are performing a giant mechanical ballet in outer space.

Ironic uses of music

Sometimes filmmakers deliberately accompany an image with 'inappropriate' music in order to create a juxtaposition of sounds and visuals. This can have a number of dramatic effects.

- ★ A happy pop song could accompany a scene depicting extreme violence. The striking contrast between the misery caused by violence and the cheerfulness of the music would make the violence seem even more perverse. Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino are four directors who have frequently used this technique.
- ★ Bob Dylan's counter-culture anthem 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', which is often associated with the civil rights movement, was used ironically during the opening titles of Zack Snyder's 2009 film *Watchmen*. The title sequence depicts an alternative version of history in which America is much more cruel, violent and repressive – contrasting with the values and associations of Dylan's song. It's similar to the final scene from Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* from 1964, in which Vera Lynn's version of the song 'We'll Meet Again' – a song of hope and optimism popularised during the World War II era – is played over a montage of atomic bombs detonating.
- ★ Ironic music is also frequently used for humorous effect. For example, the 1968 song 'Born to Be Wild' by Steppenwolf has been associated with free-spiritedness, coolness and rebelliousness due to the way it was first used in cinema in Dennis Hopper's 1969 motorcycle film, *Easy Rider*. Ever since, the song has appeared ironically on soundtracks, often in scenes where characters ride motorcycles, to highlight just how uncool the characters are. Often this is done affectionately, such as in the flashback scene in the 2014 film adaptation of *Paddington* directed by Paul King, when Henry and Mary Brown ride a small motorbike on the way to the hospital where Mary is about to give birth.

Directing the audience's attention

Sound is used to highlight aspects of the visuals that the filmmaker wants the audience to focus on. Actors and objects that we are meant to pay attention to will emit a sound of some kind, to grab the viewer's attention.

- ★ The audience will pay attention to a character speaking, rather than look closely at the setting.
- ★ A ticking bomb will hold an audience's interest more than any other props that may be in the shot.
- ★ A shot of a house accompanied by the sound of a car screeching to a halt will make the audience immediately look for a car. If there is no car in shot then the audience will expect to see one in the next shot.

Creating expectations

The power of sound to anticipate visuals is often exploited by filmmakers to create a sense of expectation in the viewer.

- ★ In horror films, audiences know that, when sinister music begins to play and becomes louder, something awful is about to happen.
- ★ The sound of footsteps can indicate that somebody is approaching. If the audience cannot see which character is making the sound then the effect can be very suspenseful.
- ★ The sound of glass smashing indicates that something has just been broken. If viewers suddenly hear a loud, unexpected crash, it will give them a jolt and suggest that a dramatic, unseen event has occurred.

Creating false expectations

Filmmakers can deliberately create false expectations to fool the audience.

- ★ In the above example of the house and car, imagine that the first shot of the house with the car noise is followed by a shot containing no car at all. The source of the noise would be unexplained, creating confusion or mystery.
- ★ If dramatic music builds throughout a horror film but nothing horrific ever happens, the effect could be humorous, a relief, or simply annoying, since our expectations are shaped by the music.
- ★ In a shot of a mysterious package in a room, there may be the sound of loud ticking to suggest that the package is a bomb. If the sound of the ticking is suddenly replaced by the sound of a cuckoo clock, then viewers might think they have mistaken the ticking of a clock for that of a bomb.

Shot 1



Shot 2



Shot 3



Shot 4



ACTIVITY

Consider the shots above then describe the possible effects of the following sounds on an audience, thinking about the following questions. Use the table below as a guide for your notes.

- How would each sound affect the mood of the shot?
- Would the sound be appropriate, inappropriate or ironic?
- What would the sound make an audience pay attention to?
- What would the audience think is going to happen next?

Type of sound	Shot 1	Shot 2	Shot 3	Shot 4
Techno music				
Gunfire				
Classical music				
People laughing				
A person crying				
Sirens				
A saxophone				
Screaming				

Sound motifs

Sound motifs are recurring sounds that are associated with specific visuals, themes or moods.

Sound motifs can alert the viewer to what is about to happen, or they can be subverted, making the viewer even more surprised or amused by the film's turn of events.

- ★ The shrieking violins used to create the 'sound' of the knife in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is a sound motif that has become commonly associated with psychotic behaviour or violence.
- ★ The four-note whistle that is featured in the *Hunger Games* films becomes more and more meaningful and symbolic during the series. Initially created by the character Rue to sing at the end of her work day, when she teams up with Katniss in the arena it becomes a communication tool, making it a symbol of solidarity and defiance against the Capitol (because people from different districts are supposed to fight each other, not join forces). Over the course of the films, the people of Panem also adopt the simple song and it becomes a symbol of rebellion for both the characters in the film and the audience watching the film.
- ★ One of the most famous sound motifs in cinema is the music that announces the presence of the killer shark in Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). Every time we hear those repetitive notes played on the bass instruments, both in the film and in its numerous parodies, we know that danger is imminent.





ACTIVITY

Consider the recurring elements (characters, themes, props etc.) from each film scenario described in the table below and indicate the sound or sounds you think would make a good sound motif for this element. A famous example from Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) is provided. Use the table below as a guide for your notes.

Recurring element	Sound motif	Explanation
Peaceful aliens communicate with Earth	<i>Simple and repetitive five-note tune</i>	<i>The playful yet haunting tune gives the aliens an aura of mysteriousness and benevolence.</i>
The hero appears to save the day		
The monster stalks its next victim		
The lovers reunite		
Another murder victim is found		

Sources of sound

Diegetic music

When the source of sound, including music, is located in the world of the film and can therefore be heard by the characters, it is known as **diegetic sound**. On the other hand, when only the audience can hear the sound it is **non-diegetic sound**.

The audience does not have to see the source of music for it to be diegetic; we just have to understand that the characters can hear it as well.

- ★ All the 1950s and 1960s music in *American Graffiti* comes from various radios on set, and therefore all the music in the film is diegetic – which is unusual.
- ★ A humorous way of introducing diegetic music into a film occurs in *Ant-Man* (2015), directed by Peyton Reed, when Ant-Man and Yellowjacket have shrunk themselves and are fighting in a briefcase. Ant-Man accidentally activates Siri on an iPhone and then Yellowjacket yells, 'I'm going to disintegrate you!' Siri responds by playing the album *Disintegration* by The Cure on the iPhone. The rest of the fight scene then takes place with the audience and the characters being able to hear 'Plainsong', the first song on *Disintegration*.
- ★ In order to suggest that the events in the 2016 film *Swiss Army Man* (directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert) may all be taking place in the head of the lead character, the filmmakers blur the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic music by having the characters in the film singing along to the film's music score. The singing is diegetic since it exists in the world of the film, while the instrumental score is non-diegetic because it is presumably something that only the audience can hear.



Diegetic music

Non-diegetic music

The most common non-diegetic sound is the film's music soundtrack.

- ★ The characters cannot hear the creepy music in horror films.
- ★ Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, like the shark victims in *Jaws*, cannot hear the famous pieces of music that are such an integral part of the audience's cinematic experience.
- ★ The music played during the opening and closing credits of a film would rarely be heard by the characters.

Other non-diegetic sounds

Non-musical sounds can also be non-diegetic.

- ★ Often, for comic effect, there is the sound of a cash register when a character thinks about money. That sound does not exist within the world of the film.
- ★ If a character is suddenly alarmed, the non-diegetic sound of alarm bells ringing could be used to highlight their anxiety.
- ★ When a film's narrator is not one of the characters, their voice is non-diegetic. However, if the film is narrated by a character, as in the case of classic detective films such as Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), then their voice is diegetic. Even though no other character can hear the narrative voice, the fact that it belongs to a character makes it diegetic. The same rule applies to internal monologues.



ACTIVITY

As we have seen, music has an extremely significant impact on how the audience experiences each scene in a film. Consider the scenes described in the table below and suggest a piece of music you could use to accompany each scene. Indicate whether the music would be diegetic or non-diegetic, ironic or non-ironic, and explain the overall effect the piece of music you have chosen would have on the scene. A famous example from *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* is provided. Use the table below as a guide for your notes.

Scene	Piece of music	Diegetic?	Ironic?	Explanation
A nuclear bomb explodes, destroying civilisation	Vera Lynn's popular 1940s song 'We'll Meet Again'	No	Yes	The contrast between the hopeful wartime song and the images of the devastating explosion creates a very black comic effect that suits the satirical tone of the film.
Two lovers meet for the first time				
A gunfight erupts in a city street				
A submarine dives to the bottom of the ocean				
A detective searches for clues				

Sound bridges

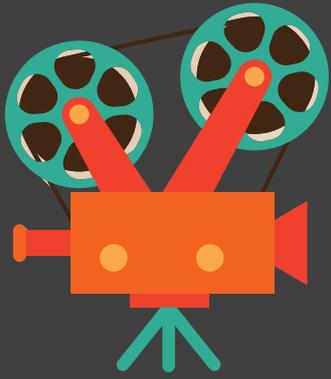
Through the use of split edits, sound can continue from the original shot to the second shot (L cut) or sound from the second shot can start early in the original shot (J cut). The sound that continues over the two shots is known as a **sound bridge**.

Continuing a sound from one scene into the next can create a symbolic link between otherwise detached scenes, even if the sound is heard only briefly in one of the scenes.

- ★ Sound bridges can be used to establish the space of a scene. For example, imagine a shot of a battlefield that is accompanied by the sounds of explosions and gunfire. If the following shot depicts a house in which generals are plotting their next move, the filmmakers could continue the sounds of explosions and gunfire in a sound bridge to suggest that the house is very close to the battlefield.
- ★ A sound bridge could indicate a flashback. In *Gattaca* (1997) we see a shot of Vincent in the 'present' day with his voice-over telling us that things are not what they seem. His voice-over continues into the following shots, which depict his childhood and the events leading to his infiltration of the Gattaca Corporation. The fact that his voice-over continues over the visual edits, acting as a sound bridge, links the shots together and informs the viewer that the flashback relates to Vincent. Sound bridges of this nature are also often used to indicate the end of a dream sequence by introducing a sound from the real world (such as an alarm clock or a person saying 'Wake up!'), before cutting to a shot of the dreaming character waking up in the real world.

- ★ A more inventive use of sound bridges is when they are used to thematically link shots or to create a relationship between shots that may not otherwise be apparent. In Mike Nichols' classic 1967 film *The Graduate*, the main character Benjamin Braddock is shown in bed with his girlfriend's mother. The next scene features his father asking him what he is doing with his life. An interesting sound bridge is created by his father's dialogue, 'Ben, what are you doing?', being heard during the shot of Benjamin in bed – Benjamin even glances up as if his father is in the scene. This sound bridge thus effectively links Benjamin's guilt and anxiety about his affair with Mrs Robinson with his father's questioning of him.
- ★ Consider the two shots below. The first shot would be accompanied by the sound of the fire engine's siren. The continuation of the sound of the siren into the next shot, showing the bushfire, would indicate that the fire engine had arrived on the scene.





NARRATIVE

The **narrative** of a film is the series of connected events presented in ways that make sense according to the internal logic of the film. Narrative includes elements of **story** and **plot**, and relies on **cause and effect**.

- ★ Like the majority of novels, plays and fictional television shows, most films are driven by a narrative.
- ★ The narrative structure ensures that the events are placed in the correct order to make sense and create meaning for the audience.
- ★ Some films, especially experimental or surrealist films, deliberately contain no narrative. However, this is very uncommon.



Story and plot

There are differences between a film's story and its plot, and the distinction helps with understanding a film's narrative structure and how a film provides narrative information.

- ★ All events that are depicted by the film *and* are viewed by the audience belong to both story and plot.
- ★ Story only – all events that happen in the 'world' of the film (diegesis), whether or not they happen on screen for the audience to see.
- ★ Plot only – all events that happen on screen for the audience to see, whether they are part of the diegesis or not.

Story

The **story** is the overall world of the film containing the general concepts and ideas that constitute the film's meaning.

- ★ If you were to quickly tell a friend what a film is about, you would describe its story. You might describe just the beginning of the film and how it ends, as well as giving some general details about the characters and themes.
- ★ The story includes the events depicted in the film as well as all the implied events that the audience does not need to see, but that are still part of the world of the film for the characters. For example, in *Logan* (2017, directed by James Mangold) we don't see all the events from the previous *X-Men* films that help us to understand what is happening, but those events do contribute to our understanding of the film, and therefore those events are part of *Logan's* story. Similarly, a film set during a war does not need to show all the historical and political factors that lead to the beginning of that war, but those historical and political factors are still part of the film's story.

Plot

The **plot** is the specific details of the film that take you from point A to point B to point C and so on.

- ★ If you were to describe the plot of a film to somebody, it would take some time, as you would have to describe how each event in the film then allowed the next event to happen, until you were able to explain why the film ended the way it did. In this sense, the plot is often what we mean when we talk about the film's storyline.
- ★ Many films have similar stories, so it is vital that the plot details are different enough to make each film interesting and unique. For filmmakers, fleshing out a rich and satisfying story is important, but so is ensuring the plot maintains interest, plausibility and logic.

- ★ The plot also includes the events depicted in the film, but more specifically it comprises all the elements that move the story forward. This can include elements that exist outside of the world of the film and its characters, which are therefore only accessible to the audience. Non-diegetic elements, such as the film's credits, soundtrack music or non-diegetic inserts, can be considered part of the plot as they develop the storyline. For example, the close-ups on the face of actor Kim Novak and the abstract images seen during the opening titles of *Vertigo* (1958) are not part of the story, but establish the themes of paranoia, obsession and anxiety that drive the plot. Similarly, the music that accompanies the appearance of the shark in *Jaws* is not part of the story as the characters cannot hear that music, but the audience can and it drives the next key plot points of the shark having taken another victim.



ACTIVITY

- 1 Consider the following example of the second film in a series about treasure hunters. The opening scene shows a group of characters discovering a treasure map. In the scenes that follow, they search for the treasure, have various adventures, and then find the treasure. These details are all considered elements of story *and* plot.
From the list below, identify the points that would be considered plot elements only and those that be considered story elements only.
 - The treasure being hidden (unseen by the audience)
 - Images of the map and the dangers associated with it, illustrated in the film's opening credits
 - Events from a previous film in the series
 - Information about how and why the map was created
 - Music used to signal that the characters are about to wander into danger
 - A voice-over provided by a narrator who is not a character in the film
- 2 Select a film you are studying and identify three elements that belong to the story only, three elements that belong to the plot only, and three that are considered part of both the story and the plot.

Cause and effect

- ★ Characters are the most common elements involved in cause-and-effect relationships. One character has a goal; they have to act in a certain way to achieve their goal and their actions affect the other characters. For instance, in Patty Jenkins' 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, Diana Prince's goal is to find and kill Ares, the god whom she believes is responsible for World War I – this is the film's story. As Diana pursues her goal, her actions affect other characters, including the people she fights with and against, and her character evolves as she discovers more about humanity and the complexity of war. The chain of events initiated by Diana's goal to defeat Ares includes the plot points that propel the narrative, as each action results in an outcome that then triggers the following action.

- ★ Other elements that may be involved in a cause-and-effect relationship include historical forces, political situations, economics, nature and supernatural occurrences. For example, an erupting volcano could be a causal element, the effects of which include the actions of the characters trying to escape.
- ★ The cause-and-effect relationship is what engages and interests audiences in a narrative. At each moment, audiences contemplate what happened previously to cause the present situation, and then wonder about what effect that moment will have on later events. In *Wonder Woman*, for example, we see the effect of Diana rescuing crashed pilot Steve Trevor: she finds out about World War I, which then causes her to want to leave with Steve so she can fight Ares. The effect of this action is that Diana becomes involved with Steve's mission to prevent the creation of a deadly gas, which then causes her to travel to the Western Front and see the horrors of war, which has the effect of diverting her from her main mission so she can liberate an occupied village, and so on. These are just some of the major cause-and-effect plot points; there are also many smaller points that simply move the film from one scene to another.

The classical Hollywood narrative

The **classical Hollywood narrative** is the most common and dominant narrative form. The cause-and-effect relationship is facilitated by a motivated, goal-oriented character creating change by overcoming the obstacles standing between them and the attainment of their goal.

It is known as the classical Hollywood narrative because it is nearly as old as cinema itself and was most substantially developed in American studio films, even though it is the common narrative in most non-American films as well.

Characters

In a classical Hollywood film the narrative is centred on the actions of the **characters**. Usually there is one character that drives the narrative. This character is known as the **protagonist**.

- ★ Characters are complex elements of a film. They are made up of various desires, emotions, psychological profiles, attitudes, beliefs and experiences.
- ★ The protagonist acts in a certain way; the other characters are then influenced by those actions and react to them accordingly.
- ★ In a classical Hollywood film the characters are active – their actions directly generate the chain of narrative events.

Motivation

The actions of the protagonist, which drive the classical Hollywood narrative, are generated by the protagonist's **motivation**.

The protagonist acts according to what they desire or need. In particular, the protagonist typically has an ultimate goal that motivates their actions.

- ★ The protagonist may be motivated to travel to another place, perhaps to find a precious or significant object or achieve something in a specific timeframe. In *Skyfall* (2012), James Bond must travel from London to Shanghai to Macau to locate a computer hard drive containing top-secret details of undercover agents, before it falls into the hands of the enemy.
- ★ Protagonists can be motivated by the pursuit of love, happiness, wealth, knowledge, power, fame, revenge, experience or simply the preservation of their own lives. In the 2014 film *Paddington*, for example, Paddington Bear is motivated to find a new family and to fit into English life. Theodore in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) is motivated to end his loneliness by finding companionship in an advanced talking computer-operating system. In *Birdman* (2014) Riggan is motivated to gain praise and recognition for being a serious actor, after having spent most of his professional acting career playing a superhero.
- ★ Traditionally, the motivation of the characters in a classical Hollywood narrative is obvious and completely explained.

Conflict

Dramatic tension in the classical Hollywood narrative is generated by the presence of an obstacle that prevents the protagonist from attaining their goal. **Conflict** ensues as the protagonist struggles to overcome the obstacle.

- ★ Conflict may be created if more than one character is motivated by a goal that can only be achieved or obtained by one character. Possessing the ring in the *Lord of the Rings* films is an example of such a goal.
- ★ Alternatively, the actions of one character trying to achieve their goal may create an obstacle for another character trying to achieve a different goal. In Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995), the goal of expert thief Neil McCauley is to perform one final job, while the goal of the detective, Lieutenant Vincent Hanna, is to uphold the law and prevent thefts from taking place. While the men may have been best friends under different circumstances, the actions they take to achieve their own goals create obstacles for each other.
- ★ Non-character elements can also be the source of conflict as there are numerous natural, economic, political or social forces that can put obstacles in a character's path. In Ken Loach's 2016 drama *I, Daniel Blake*, the main source of conflict for the characters is the economic hardship in which they are living and the inflexible and overly bureaucratic government social services that prevent them from getting the help they need.



Change

The classical Hollywood narrative is developed through the protagonist **changing** an aspect of their lives or the world around them in order to overcome conflict and remove obstacles.

- ★ The protagonist may change their location if their goal is a physical place and the obstacle facing them is the distance to this goal. For example, at the end of *Gravity* (2013), Dr Ryan Stone achieves her goal of landing back down on Earth, overcoming the many life-threatening obstacles she faced while in space.
- ★ The protagonist may change how another character feels about them if their goal was to make that other character perceive them differently. This is a very common outcome in romantic comedies, where often the protagonist has to prove their love for another character in order to achieve their happy ending. Or, in the case of Taika Waititi's 2016 New Zealand comedy/drama *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, teenager Ricky Baker is able to change the way his cantankerous foster father Hec feels about him. There are many more tangible and external goals that motivate Ricky throughout the film, such as avoiding capture by the authorities, but his ultimate goal is actually to find a sense of belonging and, by changing Hec's attitude towards him from one of annoyance to one that is caring and paternal, Ricky achieves this goal.
- ★ The protagonist may change the way they view the world if their goal is to be successful and the conflict they must overcome is the fact that they are filled with doubt and insecurities. For example, Babe, in Chris Noonan's *Babe* (1995), must overcome his feelings of insecurity and inferiority to realise that, although he is a pig, he can still achieve great things. By transcending his defined role as a mere farm pig to win a sheep-herding contest, Babe achieves personal change by overcoming his self-doubt and winning the respect of the other farm animals.

Resolution

The conclusion of the classical Hollywood narrative has a strong sense of closure, whereby every narrative issue is **resolved**.

Classical Hollywood narratives usually do not contain any 'loose ends'; therefore, by the time the film finishes, the audience will know:

- ★ whether or not the protagonist achieves the goal that motivated them
- ★ if the protagonist overcomes the obstacles facing them and what the outcome of any conflict is
- ★ how the change initiated by the protagonist impacts on the other characters and the non-character elements in the film.



ACTIVITY

Closely examine the narrative structure of a film you are studying and complete the following activities.

TITLE OF THE FILM: _____

ACTIVITY A: CHARACTERS

Step 1: Identify the main characters.

Character 1	
Character 2	
Character 3	
Character 4	

Step 2: Analyse the relative importance of the characters.

For each character, discuss/consider the following questions.

- How much time does the character spend on screen?
- How is the character usually shot in terms of their distance from the camera (close-ups, medium shots, long shots)?
- Is the audience encouraged to care about and feel sympathy for the character?
- How complex is the character? How much detail is the audience given about their background, attitudes and desires?
- Which character most directly influences the narrative development?

Step 3: Identify the protagonist.

If you think that your film has more than one protagonist, simply select one for this exercise and write their name below.

Protagonist: _____



ACTIVITY B: MOTIVATION

Step 1: Identify what motivates the protagonist.

What motivates the protagonist to act the way they do? (Note: there may be fewer or more factors than in the table below.)

Factor 1	
Factor 2	
Factor 3	

Step 2: Identify the significance of motivational factors.

Consider/discuss the following questions in relation to each motivating factor for your protagonist.

- Do they want to achieve a long-held dream or an immediate desire?
- Do they need to do something extremely important?
- Do they need to act urgently?
- Is their motivation due to self-interest or are they motivated to help others?

Step 3: Identify the protagonist's goal.

Your protagonist will probably have several goals, but what is the goal they **most** desire?

Goal: _____



ACTIVITY C: CONFLICT & OBSTACLES

Step 1: Identify obstacles.

Identify the main factors, situations and characters that are sources of conflict for your protagonist.

Obstacle 1	
Obstacle 2	
Obstacle 3	
Obstacle 4	

Step 2: Discuss obstacles.

Look at the above list of things that create conflict for your protagonist as they attempt to achieve their goal. Consider the following questions:

- Is the source of conflict something easily identifiable, such as another character or a physical circumstance, such as a dangerous environment?
- Is the obstacle due to something less obvious (but equally significant), such as political or cultural forces that threaten the protagonist?

- Is something about the protagonist the cause of the conflict? That is, are they flawed physically, emotionally or intellectually in a way that prevents them from achieving their goal?
- Is conflict created because the character wants something that other characters do not want them to have?

Step 3: Identify the most significant obstacle.

Select what you think is the most significant or the most difficult obstacle that the protagonist must overcome.

Obstacle: _____



ACTIVITY D: CHANGE

Step 1: Identify major changes.

Identify what the protagonist does to overcome the most significant obstacle, then identify how these actions create change within the world of the film.

How obstacle is overcome	Change

Step 2: Consider/discuss the significance of the changes.

Look at the above list of actions taken by the protagonist to overcome the obstacle and the changes that follow. Consider the following questions in relation to each change.

- How significant is the change?
- Who and what is affected by the change?
- How has the change brought the protagonist closer to their goal?
- Are there any more obstacles that the protagonist must overcome to achieve their goal?
- Has this change created new obstacles that did not exist before?

Step 3: Identify the most significant change.

Different ways of overcoming obstacles create different degrees of change. What is most significantly changed during the course of the film, due to the actions of the protagonist attempting to reach their goal?

Most significant change: _____



ACTIVITY E: RESOLUTION

Step 1: Identify the impact of change on the protagonist's goal.

How does change bring the protagonist closer to their goal by the end of the film? Consider whether the protagonist:

- achieves their goal
- partially achieves their goal
- fails to achieve their goal
- redefines their goal.

Step 2: How does the outcome tie up loose ends in the narrative?

Step 3: State the film's resolution.

Film's resolution: _____

Narrative structure

The **narrative structure** of a film is the framework, template or formula used to present the plot in terms of the cause-and-effect principles, and the way the plot relates to time and the film's setting.

If a film (or any story-based text or art form) did not have a narrative structure, its events would occur randomly, there would be no character development and the film would have little meaning.

- ★ Most films, especially those with a classical Hollywood narrative, use a **linear narrative** where all the events are shown on screen in the order in which they take place. There may be some that contain flashbacks or even flashforwards, but essentially the plot is revealed to the audience according to traditional cause and effect, and in chronological order.
- ★ Films containing genuinely **nonlinear narratives** are less common, but include those where the majority of the action takes place in flashbacks that appear out of sequence; for example, in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) Jamal remembers key events from his childhood while being a contestant on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* However, other nonlinear narratives simply show the scenes out of order, as is the case in *The Tree of Life* (2011) and Marc Webb's *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). Then there are films such as *Last*

Year at Marienbad from 1961 (directed by Alain Resnais) that are deliberately enigmatic (or incomprehensible, depending on who you ask!), where all cause and effect, traditional narrative structure, plot and story logic, and coherence of time and setting is deliberately abandoned.

- ★ Less common are films whose scenes are presented in reverse chronological order, such as *Memento* (2000). Also rare are films where the narrative seems to be circular; one example is Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), in which the final scene appears to be identical to the opening scene, suggesting that the whole story is about to start up again (or perhaps that nothing ever really changes).

Other common narrative techniques

While nonlinear narratives provide many opportunities for filmmakers to tell stories in creative ways, there are also techniques that can be used within linear narrative structures to enhance storytelling. Often these techniques are concerned with plot information. One of the main characteristics of arthouse cinema is that the cause-and-effect relationship is often partially absent or obscure, making character motivation ambiguous, leaving questions unanswered and making the overall narrative more challenging (and hence often more rewarding) for the viewer. However, classical Hollywood films also subvert the cause-and-effect relationship. Three common ways they can do so are considered below.

Cause and effect reversed

Some narratives reverse the order in which cause and effect are shown. This essentially creates a mystery for the viewer, so this technique generates the narrative structure for any mystery film.

- ★ In a detective film the effect (the murder) occurs at the start of the film, prompting a detective to attempt to discover its cause (that is, the identity of the murderer and the nature of the events leading up to the murder). The cause-and-effect relationship has to be reversed – otherwise there would be no mystery.
- ★ In the opening of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), Kane's last word before he dies is 'Rosebud'. Why he utters such a strange word before dying is a mystery that is not explained until the final shot in the film.
- ★ Films opening with a flashforward (see page 86) reverse cause and effect because the audience sees how the film ends without knowing what caused such an ending. Billy Wilder's classic 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard* begins with detectives rushing to a murder scene. This opening scene shows the effect of all the events leading up to it that caused the murder to happen. However, we won't know the cause until the very end of the film. Thus we view the events of the film with the knowledge of how they will ultimately be resolved.

Open-ended conclusions

Some films end without showing all the effects of the causes or the outcomes of the changes. This is known as an **open-ended conclusion** because the film does not create the sense of closure that occurs when everything is explained and accounted for.

Although uncommon in classical Hollywood films, open-ended conclusions can be a powerful way of encouraging debate, allowing the opportunity for a sequel to be made, suggesting that convenient happy endings are impossible, prompting audiences to think for themselves about what might occur, or implying that the story of the film continues after the plot of the film has finished.

- ★ While the original 1982 release of Ridley Scott's science-fiction / film noir classic *Blade Runner* contained an unsatisfyingly happy and improbable resolution, the 1992 Director's Cut and 2007 Final Cut versions have restored the open-ended conclusion that was originally intended. Instead of showing police officer Rick Deckard driving off into the countryside with the replicant (artificial human) he was supposed to kill but instead fell in love with, it shows him fleeing his apartment with her, unsure of whether or not she really does only have four years to live as he has been told. Furthermore, the question of whether or not Deckard himself is a replicant is left unanswered.
- ★ *The Graduate* (1967) famously ends on an enigmatic note when Benjamin, the protagonist, 'rescues' his girlfriend from being married to another man. The couple boards a bus and sits at the back as the bus drives away. Instead of looking happy and speaking words of love to each other, they apprehensively stare ahead, completely unsure of the future and of whether they have done the right thing. The audience is also left to wonder what lies ahead, as the film does not give any definite resolution.

Twists

A dramatic moment in the narrative that occurs without the audience expecting it is referred to as a **twist**.

A successful twist will be something that the audience does not anticipate but nevertheless finds to be a convincing narrative development.

- ★ Twists can exist simply to advance the narrative into its next phase. The revelation in Irvin Kershner's *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father advances the narrative, which is then developed in Richard Marquand's sequel *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (1983). The revelation in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) that Dil, the female romantic interest, is actually male completely changes the dynamic between the two lead characters for the remainder of the film.
- ★ Twists may be used to resolve the narrative. The twist at the end of Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995) is that the character being interrogated by the police, Roger 'Verbal' Kint, is actually Keyser Söze, the psychopathic criminal who masterminded all the events depicted in the film. This twist

resolves the film's narrative by revealing the identity of Söze, although it also leaves the audience unsure as to whether or not any of the film's events really happened or were simply invented by Söze while under interrogation.

- ★ Some twists demand that the audience rethink the entire film. The revelation at the end of M Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) that the lead character, Malcolm Crowe, is dead, is one such twist, since it forces the audience to reflect on all the film's events and reconcile them with this fact. The audience may even choose to rewatch the film to look for the subtle clues that anticipate this twist, such as the fact that throughout the film Malcolm only communicates with the boy Cole Sear, who can see dead people.



Narration

The distribution of a film's narrative information, or the degree to which the plot reveals story information, is known as the film's **narration**. The narration determines how much information the audience receives at any given moment in the film.

- ★ Filmmakers strategically decide how and when to give the audience various pieces of narrative information.
- ★ Flashbacks and flashforwards can be used to give the audience narrative information from earlier or later in the story.
- ★ Some films withhold certain narrative information to create mystery or tension.

Narrative information

Filmmakers often strategically decide the points at which they allow the audience to know more than the characters in the film. The plot of the film can be used to give the audience all the information about the film's story, including information characters don't have, resulting in the audience having **unrestricted information**. Horror films often give audiences unrestricted information, when we see that something terrible is about to happen to the unsuspecting characters before they

realise they are in danger. Alternatively, the plot of the film may be used to withhold story information so that the audience only has the same story information as the characters. This is known as having **restricted information** and it is common in detective films where the audience discovers the truth about what has happened at the same time that the detective does.

- ★ When viewers have unrestricted information, they are godlike and omniscient, as they know more about what is going on in the film than any of the characters. The use of unrestricted information can create suspense and tension when the audience knows something is about to happen and the characters do not.

COMMENTARY

In a famous interview between the French film critic and filmmaker François Truffaut and the American filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock (known as 'The Master of Suspense'), Hitchcock described suspense by giving an example of a scene that begins with the audience seeing a bomb being planted under a table and timed to go off at a quarter to one. The scene then continues with two people having a conversation at the table, without knowing the bomb

is there. During the scene the audience watches the people having an innocent conversation, and all the while the clock in the background is getting closer and closer to a quarter to one. The resulting suspense is due to the audience having unrestricted information; the audience knows that if the characters don't stop talking and leave soon, they will be caught in the bomb's explosion, while the characters themselves are blissfully unaware.

- ★ When the audience has restricted information, it knows only what the characters know, or possibly even less. Films using unrestricted information are often more sophisticated than those using restricted information; however, filmmakers tend to use restricted information more often, as it allows them to more easily manipulate the audience by withholding information about what is going to happen.
- ★ Most films combine unrestricted and restricted information to some degree, depending on what the director wants to achieve on a scene-by-scene basis. Often films trick audiences into thinking they have unrestricted information, before later introducing a key story detail, revealing to viewers that they in fact had restricted information the entire time. Twists only work when viewers think they know all there is to know about the film, only discovering at the very end that there were crucial details that had been hidden from them.

Character point of view

The ways that characters experience the events of a film strongly influence how the narrative presents these events to the audience. A key aspect of the film's narration is the degree to which it shows events from the point of view of specific characters, or leaves some characters' points of view unknowable.

The audience can be shown the external actions and behaviour of the characters, or be shown the world through the eyes and ears of a character, or experience the world through the mind of a character.

Objective point of view

In the majority of films, for most of the time, the audience only has an **objective point of view** of the characters, meaning the audience sees the characters' external actions and behaviour but does not share their perceptions of the events and world surrounding them.

- ★ Objective views are conventional in classical Hollywood films as they allow the audience to experience the film as an external spectator. This means that the audience is not required to enter the inner world of a character's thoughts and feelings.

Subjective point of view

If the audience experiences an event in a film from the perspective of a character, then the audience has a **subjective point of view** of that event. The audience sees and hears only what the character would at that moment.

- ★ Point-of-view shots are most commonly used to convey subjectivity because the camera is filming as if through the eyes of the character. Some other common point-of-view techniques include the film cutting to black when a character is knocked unconscious, or a loud ringing sound being heard on the soundtrack when a character has been exposed to a loud noise and their hearing is damaged. These are all forms of sensory subjectivity that give audiences a basic understanding of how a character experiences the world.
- ★ Another type of character subjectivity is when a film conveys the mental state of a character by portraying the world around them in the unique way that they experience it – due to them remembering it incorrectly, being mentally ill, hallucinating or dreaming.
 - * The fragmented editing and dreamlike camera movements in *The Tree of Life*, for example, convey the way the adult character remembers only small isolated moments of his childhood.
 - * In a scene in Ben Stiller's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), Walter appears to have stood up to his bullying boss while they are in an elevator, resulting in a fist fight that then spills out onto the street. Their fighting becomes increasingly ludicrous and, just when Walter is about to land the winning punch, the film takes us back to the elevator where we realise Walter has imagined the whole thing. This is slightly different to the scene in *Birdman* where Riggan snaps his fingers and suddenly the street he is walking on becomes the setting for an elaborate action sequence. Riggan is not so much daydreaming, in the way Walter is, but seeing the world augmented through the prism of his imagination.
- ★ Some films are entirely subjective, to the extent that several elements of film style are used to convey the perspective of the protagonist. The cartoonish gothic mise en scène in Tim Burton's films (for example, *Edward Scissorhands* in 1990 and *Sleepy Hollow* in 1999) often conveys the imaginative yet troubled minds of Burton's misunderstood characters. In films such as the Italian arthouse

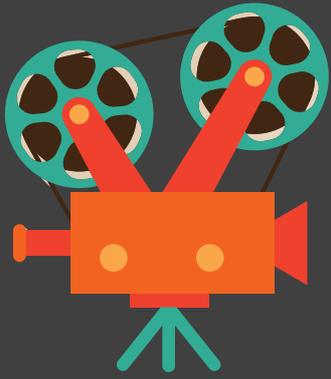
classic *8½* (1963) by Federico Fellini or American cult classic *Eraserhead* (1977) by David Lynch, objects appear grotesque, surreal and exaggerated, to depict the troubled minds of the lead characters. Both Fellini and Lynch are masters of creating subjective cinema, with both directors often making films that resemble dreams (or, in Lynch's case, nightmares!).

Narrators

A voice-over that directly informs the audience about aspects of the film is known as a **narrator**.

Narrators are used extensively in some films to give important information about the narrative to the audience. The narrator can be either one or more characters in the film or an external voice that does not belong to a character and is only present to externally communicate with the audience.

- ★ Usually, a film's narrator is also its protagonist. Detective films from the classical Hollywood period of filmmaking, such as *The Big Sleep* (1946), frequently have the main character talk directly to the audience. This gives the audience a greater understanding of the character's thoughts and feelings, as well as giving the filmmaker a useful mechanism for explaining aspects of the narrative that are too complicated to reveal in any other way. Note that, while narrators are often the protagonists, they can also be secondary or minor characters. For example, in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) the main character is Monsieur Gustave, but his story is told by Zero Moustafa who is the film's narrator. Also note that films can have multiple narrators who take turns providing narration: for example, the various characters in *All About Eve* (directed by Joseph L Mankiewicz, 1950) who tell the story of Eve's cunning and deception.
- ★ Sometimes the narrator is completely absent from the world of the film and functions more as a godlike being who delivers important information to the audience. However, it is more common for detached narrators to be minor characters who make cameo appearances in the film, and who may even look into the camera and address the audience directly, as *The Stranger* does in Joel and Ethan Coen's film *The Big Lebowski* (1998). A more deceptive example is the narrator in *Sunset Boulevard*, who at the end of the film is revealed to have been one of the main characters all along, narrating the film from beyond the grave.
- ★ Narrators can also be unreliable, giving the audience false information due to either their own deceitfulness or an inability to comprehend the real world. Nick and Amy Dunne in David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014) prove to be unreliable narrators who not only lie to each other and other characters, but also lie to the audience through their narration. Likewise, the narrators in films such as *The Usual Suspects* and *Atonement* (2007) are revealed to have fabricated large segments of the story they are telling, causing the audience to doubt everything they have said. On the other hand, characters suffering from mental illnesses in films like Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010) and Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) are also unreliable because, through no fault of their own, their version of events does not correspond with what has actually happened in the real world.



GENRE

Genres are based on a set of narrative and stylistic ‘rules’ that filmmakers adhere to in order to deliver the type of film that is expected by the audience.

- ★ By making a film in a specific genre, filmmakers enter into a kind of deal with the audience in regard to the elements that are present in the film.
- ★ Films are often publicised as belonging to a specific genre to let audiences know what to expect.
- ★ Genres can be distinguished by a number of different elements, such as subject matter, mise en scène, narrative conventions and time period.



Generic conventions

The **generic conventions** of a film are the characteristics that identify it as belonging to a specific genre.

- ★ Each genre has its own set of generic conventions.
- ★ The filmmaker deliberately follows these conventions, and the audience expects to see them expressed in any film clearly belonging to a specific genre.
- ★ Most classical Hollywood films made before the 1960s adhere to the conventions of one particular genre.

Some of the more famous genres and their general conventions are listed in the following table.



Genre	Style	Narrative	Examples
Western	Set on the American frontier (the 'Wild West') in a small town. Guns feature extensively and cinematography is used to capture the excitement of gunfights.	A lone male hero (cowboy or lawman) protects a small town community from external hostilities (Native American Indians, outlaws). Violence is used to restore social order and the lone hero usually rides away once his job is done.	<i>Stagecoach</i> (1939) <i>High Noon</i> (1952) <i>Shane</i> (1953) <i>The Searchers</i> (1956) <i>Rio Bravo</i> (1959) <i>The Magnificent Seven</i> (1960 and 2016) <i>The Good, the Bad and the Ugly</i> (1966) <i>True Grit</i> (1969 and 2010) <i>Unforgiven</i> (1992) <i>Django Unchained</i> (2012)
Horror	Moody and atmospheric lighting is used to create shadows and to give menace to the darkness. Music creates and heightens suspense. The film is designed to scare the audience.	A small group of people are threatened by a frightening and dangerous force such as a monster, psychopath or killer animal. One by one, people fall victim to the murderous force until it is discovered and conquered. Often the monster/enemy reflects the darkest fears of its victims, or social anxieties such as fear of outsiders.	<i>Nosferatu</i> (1922) <i>Bride of Frankenstein</i> (1935) <i>Creature from the Black Lagoon</i> (1954) <i>Psycho</i> (1960) <i>The Exorcist</i> (1973) <i>Halloween</i> (1978) <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> (1984) <i>Paranormal Activity</i> (2007) <i>The Babadook</i> (2014) <i>Get Out</i> (2017)



Musical

Brightly lit, with colourful costumes and sets. Music dominates scenes as characters sing and dance.

Often set in a theatre and often about a theatre company trying to put on a show. However, the only narrative convention of musicals is that the narrative frequently stops so that the characters can burst into a song and dance routine.

- Top Hat* (1935)
- Singin' in the Rain* (1952)
- West Side Story* (1961)
- The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964)
- The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)
- Little Shop of Horrors* (1986)
- Moulin Rouge!* (2001)
- Hairspray* (2007)
- Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007)
- La La Land* (2016)

Science fiction

Set in the future, in outer space or on another planet. Costumes and props have a 'futuristic' look. Often, stylised acting is used to portray aliens and robots.

No hard-and-fast narrative conventions, although science fiction is often concerned with encounters with aliens, travel to other planets, future societies and future technologies. Science fiction often uses futuristic stories as parables for contemporary society.

- Metropolis* (1927)
- The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951 and 2008)
- Forbidden Planet* (1956)
- 2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)
- Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977)
- Blade Runner* (1982)
- The Matrix* (1999)
- Avatar* (2009)
- The Martian* (2015)
- Arrival* (2016)

Romantic comedy

Lighting is used to give flattering appearances to two lead characters. Otherwise, all stylistic elements are hidden and unobtrusive.

Male and female characters who have nothing in common, but are attracted to each other, are placed together in a situation by coincidence. Either through their own prejudice or random events, they are unable to reveal their love for each other until the very end of the film, when they often get married.

- It Happened One Night* (1934)
- His Girl Friday* (1940)
- What's Up, Doc?* (1972)
- When Harry Met Sally...* (1989)
- Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994)
- The Wedding Singer* (1998)
- Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001)
- Knocked Up* (2007)
- Crazy, Stupid, Love.* (2011)
- The Big Sick* (2017)

Film noir

Dark, moody lighting; heavy use of shadows; and representation of the city as a violent and seedy place.

A 'down-and-out' younger man, usually an ex-criminal or struggling detective, is influenced by the seductive yet beautiful woman (femme fatale) to harm an older male figure who is often the woman's husband or father. Themes are usually very bleak and violent.

- The Maltese Falcon* (1941)
- Double Indemnity* (1944)
- Gilda* (1946)
- The Big Sleep* (1946)
- The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)
- Sunset Boulevard* (1950)
- Chinatown* (1974)
- Bound* (1996)
- Drive* (2011)
- Inherent Vice* (2014)



Not every film belonging to a particular genre will be consistent with every single convention associated with that genre. For example, many films described as film noir only contain the stylistic conventions of the genre, but use other narrative structures.

Genres with specific characteristics

Some very diverse films can be grouped into a genre because of just one or two generic characteristics that they have in common.

- ★ Films can be assigned to specific genres because of a dominant theme. Films where the theme of revenge is central in the narrative are often described as revenge films. The motivation for revenge, the outcome of the revenge or the type of revenge may vary between films, but the fact that revenge drives the narrative means they all belong to the revenge film genre.
- ★ Some films are assigned a genre based entirely on where they are located. For example, prison films, submarine films and courtroom dramas are all genres that are defined by their main setting. The themes, time period, narrative, stylistic conventions and types of characters may be completely different, but all the films belonging to one of these genres share a particular setting.
- ★ Some genres are specific to certain countries. For example, the western is an American-specific genre defined by its 'Wild West' *mise en scène* and narrative involving a lone gunman restoring social order through violence. However, if you take the same narrative and give it the *mise en scène* associated with feudal Japan then you get the samurai film. Likewise, if you put the same narrative into colonial Australia then you have the bushranger film.

Hybrid genres

Films with a mixture of generic conventions belong to more than one genre, and can therefore be described as belonging to a **hybrid genre**.

Since the late 1960s it has become increasingly common to mix genres, and most films today are a mix of genres, so it is increasingly difficult to assign them to one specific genre. For example:

- ★ *Wonder Woman* (2017) is a war film and a superhero film.
- ★ *The Dressmaker* (2015) is a comedy/drama with elements from film noir and westerns.
- ★ *Get Out* (2017) is a horror/comedy hybrid.

Sub-genres

Genres can be subdivided to create **sub-genres**, which contain more specific generic conventions.

Films belonging to broad genres, such as comedy, drama or thriller, can usually be identified as belonging to a particular sub-genre.

- ★ Some of the sub-genres that comedy can be broken down into include satires, where humour is used as a form of social commentary, often by ridiculing powerful people or institutions; parodies (or spoofs), which make fun of the conventions of other genres or other films; or black comedies, where the subject matter is usually not considered suitable, or in good taste, as a source of humour.
- ★ Horror films have many sub-genres including supernatural horror, where the source of horror is some kind of creature or force that defies science or our logical understanding of the world; the slasher film, where the threat is in the form of a human serial killer; or psychological horror, where the scares are less about graphic onscreen violence and more about creating a mood of dread, uncertainty and paranoia.
- ★ Different types of action films include the disaster film, where the action sequences are constructed around the characters trying to survive some kind of massive natural or human-created disaster; martial arts films, where the characters predominantly use hand-to-hand combat while fighting; or the superhero film, where characters have some kind of enhanced powers.

COMMENTARY

The difficulty with genres and *The Truman Show*

It is a simple matter to assign many films to a specific genre or a mixture of genres. However, for many other films the genre they belong to is debatable. This is due to the fact that not only do people have different interpretations of each film, but they can also have different opinions on the definition of particular genres.

For example, most people would agree that Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) is a mix of comedy and drama, but would you also agree that it is science fiction?

It depends on your definition of science fiction. If you argue that science fiction is about futuristic technology, outer space and battling aliens then no, *The Truman Show* is not science fiction. However, if you believe that science fiction is about using scientific fact to predict a possible future in order to make political, social or even philosophical comments about the society of the film's time then yes, *The Truman Show* is science fiction.

Subverting generic conventions

Films that 'break the rules' of the genre, and therefore do not meet audience expectations, are **subverting generic conventions**.

Filmmakers often deliberately characterise their film as belonging to a specific genre so that they can then completely surprise the audience by developing the narrative in a way that contradicts generic expectations. This can frustrate, confront or entertain the audience and is often done to challenge the arbitrary conventions of a particular genre.

- ★ Often, filmmakers are best able to subvert expectations during the film's resolution. For example, while it is common in romantic dramas for the two lovers not to end up together, usually in romantic comedies or musicals they do. Therefore, films like the romantic comedy *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), the comedy/drama *(500) Days of Summer* (2009) and the musical *La La Land* (2016) all go against generic expectation by having resolutions in which the characters don't end up with the person they wanted to be with. One of the best recent examples of going against the convention of the lovers living happily ever after is in the Disney animated film *Frozen* (2013), where the 'act of true love' required to save Anna is not delivered by a romantic love interest, but by Elsa, as an act of sisterly love.
- ★ It is less common for generic expectations to be undermined earlier in a film; however, a recent example of this occurs in *The Dark Knight* (2008) when Rachel Dawes is killed. While killing off major characters is not completely unheard of in a superhero film, it usually happens towards the end, forming part of the film's finale. Rachel's death is therefore completely unexpected when it happens much earlier – all the more so because the film had previously seemed to be setting her up as a major cause of conflict between Harvey Dent and Bruce Wayne, who both love her. By killing Rachel and subverting expectations about how a film usually treats the protagonist's major love interest, the filmmakers demonstrate that the Joker is capable of outsmarting Batman, thus suggesting that nobody in the film is guaranteed to live. This raises the stakes and the level of excitement in the film.
- ★ An extreme example of subverting generic conventions occurs in *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016) when the film completely changes genres. It begins as a psychological thriller about a woman who has been kidnapped and held in an underground bunker by a mentally unstable man, who claims something devastating has happened to the planet that makes it too dangerous to return to the surface. For the most part, the film is about the woman and another man in the bunker attempting to outsmart and escape their captor. It is a small-scale film with limited sets and a cast of three. However, when the woman does escape to the surface, the big reveal is that aliens have invaded Earth and she must now fight for her life. *10 Cloverfield Lane* unexpectedly transforms into a science-fiction/action film, with a style and thematic development completely different from what was presented at the beginning of the film.

Documentaries

All the genres discussed in this chapter fall under the broad category of belonging to narrative fiction cinema. **Documentary films** are distinctively different as they are nonfiction films designed to document some aspect of reality.

It is important to note that a documentary is not a literal recording of real life, but a constructed version of reality – with different degrees of subjectivity, depending on the film – designed to present a version of the truth. This constructed version of reality can be created from archival footage, interviews with the subjects of the films, new footage taken for the purpose of the documentary, and/or re-enactments of events that sometimes blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction. Some documentaries rely on narrators or the audio recordings of interviewees to direct the audience's attention throughout the film, while other documentaries are more observational and present the footage without commentary in order to allow the audience to draw its own conclusions.



A documentary is not a literal recording of real life, but a **constructed reality** that presents a version of the truth.

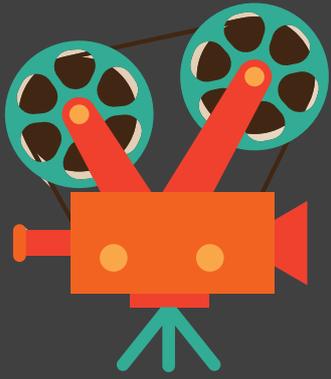
- ★ Documentary filmmakers often film hundreds of hours of footage, which are then edited down to the length of a feature film and ordered in a particular way. The footage that the filmmakers choose to show the audience strongly influences how the audience will respond to the subject matter. For instance, a documentary filmmaker may want the audience to sympathise with one of the people in the film, so they may decide not to show the footage of that person doing and saying things that present them in a bad light.

- ★ Documentary filmmakers also make conscious decisions on how the footage is presented to the audience. For example, music can be used to evoke a particular feeling, archival footage and real-life or computer-generated re-enactments can be inserted between scenes, and voice-overs can be used to describe the context of the footage.
- ★ Even when filming, the documentary filmmaker can influence how the audience will respond. For example, when filming an interview, the filmmaker makes several choices such as: whether or not the person being interviewed looks directly into the camera or offscreen at the interviewer; whether or not to allow the person to choose where they are to be interviewed; and whether the person should be interviewed alone or with other people. All these factors will influence how that person comes across on camera.

Objectivity and ‘truth’

Documentaries are not works of objectivity. Consciously or unconsciously, the documentary filmmaker’s personal bias is going to influence their decisions and hence documentaries are rarely – if ever – objective. However, this does not mean that documentaries are ‘untruthful’.

- ★ Increasingly, documentary filmmakers acknowledge their bias and attachment to the material in order to make their documentaries more authentic. Having the documentary filmmaker’s personal views clearly on display is arguably more truthful than having the filmmaker conceal their point of view and pretend that their film is objective and unbiased.
- ★ Some documentary filmmakers, such as Michael Moore (director of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004) Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*, 2004) and Louis Theroux (*My Scientology Movie*, 2015) mark their work as personal visions by putting themselves into their films. They do so by including footage of their interactions with the subjects of their documentaries.
- ★ Even more personal are documentaries that are specifically about the person making the documentary. While filmmakers like Moore, Spurlock and Theroux put themselves into their films when discussing bigger issues, other personality-driven documentaries focus specifically on the filmmaker. In the case of the extremely personal documentary *Stories We Tell* (2012), filmmaker and actor Sarah Polley examines the relationship between her parents by using a combination of archival footage, contemporary interviews and re-enactments that may or may not reflect the ‘truth’ of events. By exploring her family history in this way, Polley made a film that is both specific to her while also being a wide-reaching examination of the nature of truth, authenticity and memory in filmmaking, therefore demonstrating the potential and scope of documentaries.



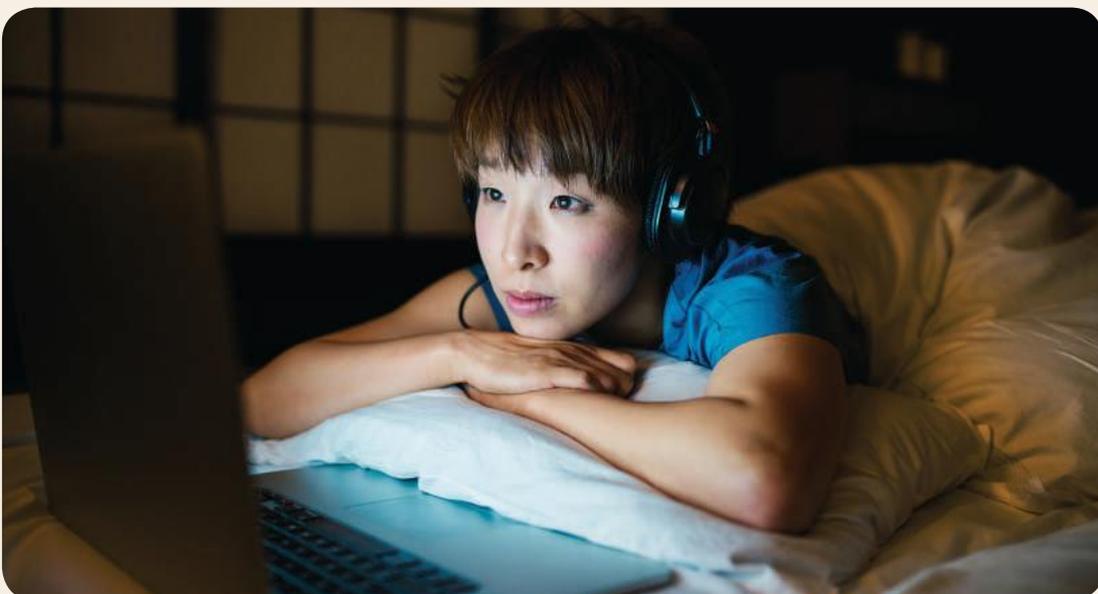
THINKING OUTSIDE THE FRAME

Films don't exist in a cultural vacuum where they are viewed by audiences without context. Instead, they are a product of the time and place in which they were made, and any meaningful analysis must take that into account. When discussing a film it is important – and often essential – that you take into consideration the political and social influences of the time period in which the film was produced. Similarly, it is important to be aware of the way films often form relationships with other films and other pieces of culture.

For example, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017) relies on the audience being aware of:

- ★ the fifteen other films that came before it in the Marvel Cinematic Universe
- ★ the origins of the Spider-Man character, as has been depicted in previous *Spider-Man* films and the original comics
- ★ the conventions of teen films, especially those from the 1980s such as John Hughes' *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), which *Spider-Man: Homecoming* references.

Whether referencing previous films or relying on the audience's knowledge of the film's source material, these elements give an extra dimension to a film by making the audience compare and contrast the film they are watching with what has come before.



Parodies

Parodies (or spoofs) are humorous versions of films in which the conventions of particular genres or specific films are imitated and made to appear ridiculous for comic effect.

Parodies are a comedy sub-genre, deriving their humour entirely from making fun of other films. Clearly, then, viewers' enjoyment of parodies depends on their knowledge of the films and generic conventions that are being sent-up in the spoof.

- ★ Entire films can be parodies where a large number of scenes are comedic re-creations of scenes from other films. For example, the *Scary Movie* series (originally created by the Wayans brothers) began by humorously re-creating scenes from 1990s teen horror films such as Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) and Jim Gillespie's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), while more recent films in the series parody newer horror films such as the *Paranormal Activity* series (originally created by Oren Peli).
- ★ More commonly (and arguably more cleverly) parody films ridicule the general conventions, clichés and stereotypes of entire genres. For example, Chris McKay's *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017) affectionately sends up superhero films; Greg Tiernan and Conrad Vernon's *Sausage Party* (2016) mocks animated family films (by containing content that is completely unsuitable for family entertainment); and Jake Kasdan's *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007) relies on the audience's knowledge of the conventions of music biography films for its jokes to work.
- ★ Films also sometimes parody other films in just one or two scenes, without being considered overall a parody. For example, in Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich's *Finding Nemo* (2003), Bruce is a shark who is attempting to abstain from eating fish. When he breaks through a door after Nemo and Dory he says, 'Here's Brucey!' This is a parody of a classic scene from the horror film *The Shining* (1980), where the main character – a recovering alcoholic – bursts through a door and says, 'Here's Johnny!' This itself was a reference to the catchphrase used to introduce Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show* from the early 1960s through to the 1990s.

Pastiches

A **pastiche** is a film that openly imitates other films or distinctive elements of film style that are associated with specific eras of filmmaking.

Pastiche is different from parody, and usually serves a more sophisticated purpose, as it is done out of respect rather than to simply mock. It is also different from plagiarism, which is when filmmakers copy elements of other films and try to pretend they are their own. Many contemporary filmmakers, such as Quentin Tarantino, heavily rely on pastiche, openly taking elements from older films to create their own.

- ★ Edgar Wright's heist/action film *Baby Driver* (2017) is a pastiche of many older action films featuring car chases, especially crime films from the late 1960s and 1970s such as Walter Hill's *The Driver* (1978) and Peter Yates' *Bullitt* (1968). However, it is also a pastiche of classical Hollywood musicals in that the film is edited and the action choreographed in time to the film's soundtrack, as if the characters are performing elaborate dance routines.
- ★ Often pastiche is used in cinema to create a **homage** to another film or filmmaker. Homages deliberately evoke other films in order to show respect to that film and filmmaker. Brian De Palma's 1987 gangster film *The Untouchables* contains a very famous cinematic homage: there is a scene on the steps of a train station in which, during a shootout, a pram containing a baby rolls down the steps, coming dangerously close to the bullets. This image of a baby's pram rolling down steps and caught in the crossfire was originally, famously, filmed in 1925 by the influential Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, in *Battleship Potemkin*. By re-creating this famous image, De Palma pays tribute to Eisenstein's extraordinary prowess as a filmmaker capable of creating compelling and enduring images.
- ★ Pastiche can also be used in **revisionist films**, which are films that belong to traditional genres, but subvert or revise the conventional themes and narrative development of those genres to critique and challenge social values. For example, filmmaker Todd Haynes used pastiche by mimicking the style and themes of classical Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s (especially Douglas Sirk's 1955 film *All That Heaven Allows* and his 1959 film *Imitation of Life*) to create his 2002 revisionist melodrama *Far From Heaven*, which critiqued 1950s attitudes concerning interracial desire and homosexuality using a modern and progressive perspective.

Allusions

Deliberately imitating an aspect of another film in order to evoke the audience's memory of that film is known as an **allusion**.

Like homages, allusions do not copy or plagiarise other films but deliberately evoke a previous film to create meaning. Unlike homages, which are simply tributes to the original film, allusions prompt the audience to interpret the new film based on what they already know about the original film.

- ★ An example of using allusion to link the themes of two films is the setting and cinematography at the start of *Blade Runner* (1982). The city is designed to look very similar to that of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), a classic example of German expressionism (a distinctive style of filmmaking in the 1920s characterised by distorted shapes and the heavy use of shadows). There is even one shot of the city in *Blade Runner* that is identical to a shot from the earlier film. *Metropolis* is famous for, among many other things, its depiction of an oppressive future in which the majority of workers live below the city and are oppressed by the elite minority who live above. These issues are extremely

relevant to *Blade Runner's* portrayal of squalor and chaos on the streets while a gigantic corporate building houses people who have the power to create life and control memories.

- ★ While Todd Haynes used pastiche in *Far From Heaven*, he used an allusion in his 2015 film *Carol* to reference David Lean's 1945 film *Brief Encounter*. Both films begin and end in the same way: a flashforward at the start of the film showing the audience the couple having a seemingly detached conversation; then seeing that same scene again at the end, with the audience now aware of how much is at stake during the conversation. By alluding so overtly to *Brief Encounter* – a film about an adulterous relationship between two married people – Haynes makes a statement about the forbidden nature of the relationship in *Carol*, which is between two women at a time when this would have been widely socially condemned.
- ★ An example of alluding to something other than another film can be found in arguably the most famous scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The American soldiers play 'The Ride of the Valkyries', from Richard Wagner's opera *The Valkyrie*, as they attack a Vietnamese village in helicopters. Ever since World War II, Wagner's music, in particular 'The Ride of the Valkyries', has been associated with the German Nazis due to Hitler's love of Wagner. Hence, by alluding to Wagner's music, Coppola draws a parallel between the brutality of the Nazis during World War II and the brutality of the Americans in the Vietnam War.



Adaptations

A **film adaptation** is a film that is based on another source of art and/or entertainment such as literature, television, theatre, comic books or computer games.

When viewing and writing about films adapted from other sources it can be useful to have an awareness of the original text. However, it should not be essential, as the merit of a film depends on how well it works in its own right. It is therefore also important not to evaluate the film on how well it replicates or remains faithful to the source material. Nevertheless, it can be an interesting exercise to look at how films have been adapted and what changes are made to the original source material in order to make it work as a film.

- ★ The average film is ninety to 120 minutes long and therefore cannot accommodate every single plot point within a typical novel, much less all the plot points that occur in a long-running comic series. Therefore, by necessity, films have to change, condense, merge and discard aspects of the source material. Looking at the choices made about what does and doesn't stay in the film indicates what the filmmaker feels is essential.
- ★ Point of view in literary art forms such as novels is expressed through language, while in cinema, a visual art form, it is expressed through film style. It can be fascinating to see which elements of *mise en scène*, cinematography, editing and sound are used in film adaptations to convey character subjectivity and perspective, which had previously only been described in writing.
- ★ There are some techniques that cannot be directly transposed from one medium to another. Novels are able to play with tense and reveal the inner thoughts of characters, while films can use music and montages to evoke particular moods. Dialogue in films is often more functional than in novels, where it can often be implied and used more strategically to suggest subtext. On the other hand, novels have to describe all the elements of *mise en scène*, while films can simply show it.



ACTIVITY

Select a film that is an adaptation of a novel and answer the following questions.

- 1 In a novel, a protagonist's point of view is expressed through language. How do the filmmakers convey this visually in the film? Give specific examples of film style.
- 2 Were any important scenes from the novel omitted or substantially altered in the film adaptation? Argue for or against the filmmaker's changes.
- 3 How do the filmmakers establish tone in the film? Do you think the tone of the novel and the film differ? If so, how?
- 4 Identify a major theme in the novel. How is it expressed visually in the film adaptation?
- 5 Compare the endings of the novel and the film adaptation. In what ways do they differ, and what is the effect?

Remakes

A **remake** is a film that uses a previous film as its source material, adapting it for a new audience.

Remakes are almost as old as cinema itself; in the twenty-first century they have become a major part of the film industry. As with films adapted from other sources, remakes should ideally be evaluated as works in their own right without preconceived judgements. Nevertheless, depending on the type of analysis being written, it may be useful to compare remakes with their original films in order to question why the changes were made, especially if the remake originates from a different time period or country from the original.

- ★ One of the main reasons filmmakers produce remakes is to improve upon an older, possibly lesser-known film that never reached its full potential. Alfred Hitchcock did this to one of his own films: the 1934 film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, remade in 1956. Otherwise, remakes are often done to update an older film for contemporary audiences or to capitalise on the popularity of a foreign film by making a version in the language of the target audience. For example, Akira Kurosawa's 1954 Japanese samurai film *Seven Samurai* was remade in Hollywood for an English-speaking audience as the 1960 western *The Magnificent Seven* (directed by John Sturges), which was then remade again in 2016 for contemporary audiences.
- ★ While some remakes stick very closely to the source material – for example, Gus Van Sant's 1998 *Psycho* was almost a shot-by-shot remake of Hitchcock's original 1960 film – most remakes change major elements of the source material, including key plot points, settings, time periods and themes. These are usually the changes that are of most interest when doing film analysis. *Seven Samurai* and the two versions of *The Magnificent Seven* demonstrate the extent to which elements of a remake can vary.
- ★ While the terminology is not as established, remakes are now sometimes also marketed as **reboots** or **reimaginings**. Broadly speaking, a reboot is a film that takes the characters and scenario of an established series and effectively starts the story again. Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and Jon Watts' *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) are both considered reboots, for example, as the core character and ideas are the same as the *Spider-Man* films from the 2000s, but both films essentially relaunch the Spider-Man character with no continuity with the films that have come before. Films described as reimaginings tend to be even looser remakes where only the spirit and core concept of the original film is maintained. Tim Burton's *Planet of the Apes* (2001) is considered a reimagining because, apart from the basic premise, it has little to do with Franklin J Schaffner's original 1968 film.

Film series

A **film series** (or a **film franchise**) is a collection of films that are related to each other.

Again, as with adaptations and remakes, be careful not to prejudge films belonging to a series simply because they are not original in terms of concept. Unlike adaptations and remakes, however, it is not always possible to evaluate films belonging to a film series on their own terms, as often a film in a series only makes sense if viewed in the context of the films before it.

- ★ The most common element of a film series is the **sequel**, which continues the story that had begun in a previous film. Every film in the *Harry Potter* series is a sequel to the film/s that came before it (except for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which is the original film). Less common are **prequels**, which portray events that occur before the original film, even though they are made afterwards. For example, *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017) are prequels to the original *Alien* film series (1979–99).
- ★ While films that belong to a series such as the *Harry Potter* franchise often have a lineal narrative structure that is similar to a serialised television show, the contemporary notion of the **shared universe** is a bit more complicated. A shared universe is a type of film series in which the films mostly function as standalone films, but are interlinked through common characters, settings and themes. The films in the Marvel Cinematic Universal are examples of a shared universe that consists of standalone films such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Doctor Strange* (2016), along with more elaborate films that combine characters from several previous films, such as *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).
- ★ An example of how elaborate a film series can be is the *Star Wars* series, which began with the original 1977 film, which was followed by two sequels in the 1980s. Next, there were three prequel films in the late 1990s and 2000s; then, since 2010, the series has evolved into a shared universe with new sequels (such as *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* in 2015 and *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* in 2017), as well as prequel films such as *Rogue One* (2016) that feature new characters who are involved in events established by the original films.

Cast and crew

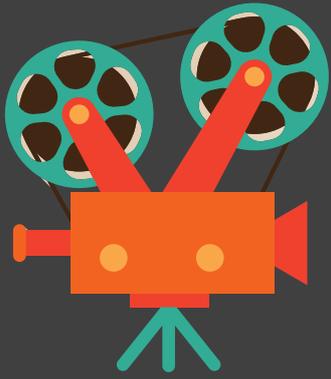
While filmmaking is a collaborative process, often the personalities and artistic vision of key members of the **cast and crew** – usually directors and actors – stand out and can influence the way a film is regarded.

- ★ Often actors are associated with specific types of roles, which means that audiences expect them to play certain types of characters in specific types of films. This influences the way a film is received, especially if the actor plays

a part that is dramatically different. During the classical Hollywood era, the major studios often created public personas for their stars under a process known as the **star system**. While this officially ended several decades ago, it still occurs unofficially. For example, the *Expendables* film series is built upon the audience's awareness of the fact that most of the actors involved are associated with action films from the 1980s and 1990s.

- ★ Ever since the 1940s, film directors have often been regarded as the single 'author' of their films, especially those who make films with recognisable recurring themes and stylistic devices. Such directors are known as **auteurs**, and examining their films as an ongoing body of work is known as **auteur theory**. A recognisable modern auteur is Wes Anderson, whose films include *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). Anderson's films are all stylistically similar – with his use of highly formal camera movements, symmetrical framing and pop-art mise en scène – and they all have a similar blend of comedy, melancholy and whimsy.
- ★ The problem with the star system and auteur theory is that they often neglect the work of other key crew members such as cinematographers, editors, production designers, sound designers, writers and producers. While other film personnel often don't have the same amount of public recognition as actors and directors, there are sometimes notable exceptions. For example, writers such as Aaron Sorkin – *The Social Network* (2010), *Moneyball* (2011) and *Steve Jobs* (2015) – and Charlie Kaufman – *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation.* (2002), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) – are often credited over directors as the people whose artistic visions have had the biggest influence on the films they have worked on, and audiences expect a certain type of film from both writers.

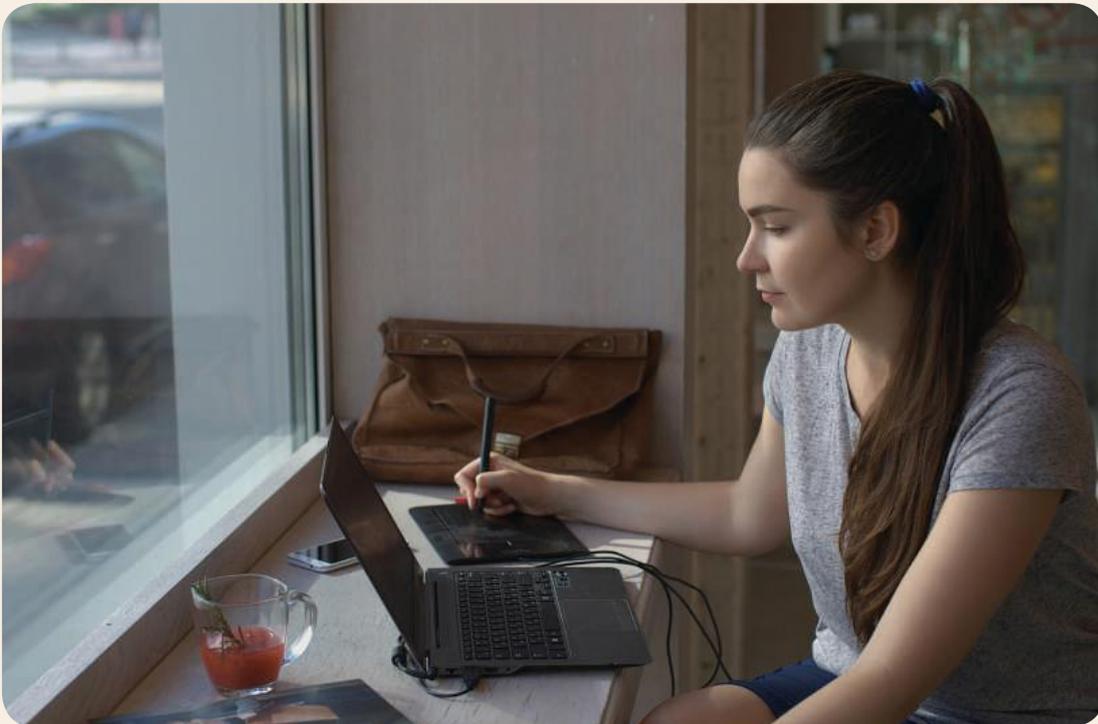




WRITING ABOUT FILM

This chapter looks at how we use terminology to discuss a film's style and narrative in order to construct an argument about an element of a film. Whether you are demonstrating your understanding of the film's narrative structure, analysing a character, discussing a theme or examining the social values set forth in a film, you need to seamlessly incorporate into your writing the terminology associated with film analysis.

When writing about a film you must have a point to make. It is not enough to merely summarise either the film's narrative or stylistic techniques and simply describe the presence of these elements in the film. You need to use your knowledge of the film's style and narrative as evidence for a particular argument that you are making about the film.



How to acknowledge film authorship

When writing about film, it is standard practice to refer to the **director** of a film in much the same way as we refer to the **author** of a literary text under analysis.

There are various ways to do this.

- ★ Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) continually cuts between three different stories.
- ★ *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan) is divided into three different stories that the film continually cuts between.
- ★ Christopher Nolan continually cuts between the three stories that comprise his film *Dunkirk*.

Keep in mind that, although the director of a film instructs the actors how to perform and usually oversees all the technical aspects of filmmaking, there are many other people (writers, producers, actors, editors, composers etc.) who also are crucial to the making of a film. This is why we often use the term 'filmmakers' – to acknowledge the collaborative nature of the artform.

How to write about narrative

When writing on narrative you do not need to describe the story or the plot; rather, you must demonstrate an awareness of how the narrative of a film is constructed. Your analysis should include – if only indirectly – the answers to the following questions.

- ★ WHO is the protagonist?
- ★ WHAT is the goal that motivates the protagonist?
- ★ WHAT are the obstacles that create conflict for the protagonist?
- ★ HOW does the protagonist overcome those obstacles?
- ★ WHAT is the resolution?

In order to describe the narrative structure you will need to discuss:

- ★ how the protagonist is established
- ★ how the key scenes (in which the goal is identified, the obstacle is encountered and the resolution achieved) are given importance
- ★ how time is structured in the film to make the unfolding narrative both understandable and interesting.

Discussing how the protagonist is established

The most obvious indicator of the protagonist's identity is that this character appears in every scene and/or the narrative revolves around them. However, when writing

about the protagonist it is important to discuss how both style and narration are used to establish and confirm the character's identity.



ACTIVITY

Practise writing about how style establishes the protagonist in a film you are studying. You may wish to discuss style elements such as:

- costume
- focus
- lighting
- music motifs
- point-of-view shots.

Practise writing about how the narration establishes the protagonist through the use of:

- restricted information
- subjective points of view
- a narrator.

Discussing key scenes

The key scenes are moments in which significant narrative development takes place, such as the protagonist identifying their goal, facing an obstacle or overcoming the obstacle, and the resolving of the issue or situation.



ACTIVITY

Practise writing about the key scenes in the film you are studying by including discussion of how stylistic techniques enhance the significance of those scenes. You may wish to discuss:

- an elaborate setting where the action takes place
- dramatic lighting such as top lighting
- dramatic acting
- unusual cinematography, such as overexposure, slow motion, dramatic changes in focal length during a shot, extensive use of close-ups and extreme close-ups, point-of-view shots, handheld shots and long shots
- dramatic editing such as quick edits
- editing techniques that symbolically link shots, such as graphic matches and crosscutting
- unconventional editing techniques such as jump cuts and non-diegetic inserts
- editing that extends the time duration of a scene, such as overlapping editing and freeze frames
- music.

Discussing the structuring of time

When discussing how time is structured in a film you will primarily have to describe the relevant editing techniques, but cinematography and sound are also used for this purpose.

Many narratives have a linear development whereby narrative events are shown in chronological order in a normal time frame. However, others are constructed with the scenes out of order and with the lengths of scenes altered. Describing the manipulation of time in such instances will help you to understand the significance of time structure to narrative.



ACTIVITY

1 Flashbacks and flashforwards

Describe how the following techniques may be used to indicate flashbacks or flashforwards:

- dissolves
- sound bridges
- images going out of focus
- close-ups on a character's face
- non-diegetic subtitles
- voice-overs.

Describe the effect that changing the order of events has on the audience. What types of narratives are suited to a change in the order of events?

2 Decreasing time

Describe how a film may use the following techniques to decrease time:

- fades or dissolves
- a cutaway shot
- quick edits, dissolves and music to create a montage
- fast motion.

Describe the effect that decreasing time has on the audience. What types of scenes would decreasing time be most suited to?

3 Increasing time

Describe how a film may use the following techniques to increase the length of a moment of time:

- quick edits and multiple camera angles to create overlapping editing
- freeze frames
- slow motion.

Describe the effect that increasing time has on the audience. What types of scenes would increasing time be most suited to?

Example of writing about narrative: *Life of Pi*

The first sentence identifies the film's director and source material.

The visual pleasures delivered by Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012) are so immense that it is difficult to believe the source material was a written text: the 2001 bestselling novel of the same name by author Yann Martel. In an era of filmmaking where blockbusters seem to be released almost once a week, *Life of Pi* stands out for delivering genuine spectacle and awe. Digital, 3D and CGI technologies may have once impressed audiences simply by being present in a film, but now it takes true mastery of cinematic style to dazzle cinema-goers.

Lee is not simply showing off the new cinematic technology, but using it to deliver an emotionally engaging spectacle. The 3D imagery boasts some of the most impressive depth-of-field to date, but otherwise key sequences have an almost stripped-back feel to them. Major scenes unfold with neither heavy signposting nor shock tactics. The editing is restrained: the onscreen action never becomes incoherent and the editing does not draw attention to itself with excessive long takes. Music cues are strategically held back to complement rather than coax the emotional response from the audience. *Life of Pi* is not a film asking to be marvelled at, it is a film that immerses you in its beauty and excitement without you even realising it.

This paragraph discusses cinematography, editing and music, demonstrating thorough knowledge of the film and of filmic techniques.

The narrative and style of *Life of Pi* is heavily indebted to magic realism, where elements traditionally seen as being outside known reality are incorporated seamlessly into the text. In cinema such a technique is often used to heighten the way character subjectivity is expressed as well as suggesting the distorted nature of memory. *Life of Pi* uses magic realism to do both these things, not to suggest some kind of interior reality or to comment on the nature of perception but to overtly create an alternative reality in contrast to what is commonly accepted. This dynamic is then extended to comment on the nature of religion and how people relate to it.

This paragraph considers narrative point of view and how it is used to emphasise the film's main theme.

The writer identifies the main setting, the film's protagonist and the main obstacle facing the protagonist.

After a lengthy prologue to establish the character Pi, who is played by Suraj Sharma for the majority of the film, the main action takes place on a lifeboat adrift at sea. As the sole survivor of a shipping disaster, Pi is stranded with a small collection of animals from his father's zoo: most notably, a full-grown tiger named Richard Parker. Told in flashback by a much older Pi (Irrfan Khan), there are two versions of what happens to

The writer considers the director's use of flashbacks and how they are used to present different points of view in the film.

Pi during his time at sea. One version is magical, takes up the majority of the film and is told predominantly with the film's stunning visuals. The other version is far bleaker and only spoken during a scene that takes less than five minutes. It's not difficult to see which version the film privileges.

Similar to Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* (2002) – in a scene that playfully paraphrases John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) – where the audience is directly told 'When you have to choose between the truth and the legend, print the legend', *Life of Pi* favours the legend. Furthermore, it depicts the power of storytelling as an explanation for the attraction towards religious belief, in what could easily be mistaken as the film taking a pro-religious stance. By presenting the comforting way that stories can make sense of the world around us, *Life of Pi* demonstrates the allure of religion. The film doesn't necessarily endorse the type of religious belief/storytelling that it gloriously depicts, but it reveals how attractive it is and how under some circumstances it is completely necessary. In this regard the film offers a very sophisticated and compassionate understanding of the importance of faith to some people.

The writer includes relevant comparisons to other films with similar themes.

This paragraph discusses the film's main themes with reference to setting, point of view (subjectivity) and important motifs.

As somebody enamoured of three different faith systems, Pi as a child is often in conflict with his pragmatic father who represents science, medicine and modernity. A key conflict is when the pair argue about the nature of Richard Parker – is the tiger an animal who only acts on instinct or does he have a soul? Cold pragmatism tells us one thing while a strong spiritual belief tells us something else. This tension is explored throughout the film, most interestingly through the visuals depicting the natural world. Nature is continually represented as something both beautiful and dangerous. So many moments of visual wonder are then contrasted with reminders that the natural world can be indifferent and cruel, even during an extended dream/hallucination sequence where the film visually provides an 'all things are connected'–type message. The repeated motif of figures floating in crystal-clear water, which reflects the sky so vividly that the figures seem to be drifting in space, suggests that humanity is part of a bigger whole, but also that every one of us is ultimately alone.

The main argument is further developed.

Nature as beautiful or nature as indifferent, bleak facts or magical stories, science or faith, connected or alone – these are the dynamics explored by every aspect of *Life of Pi*. Even though the film ultimately favours a magical version of events, certainly in relation to what happens to Pi, it still comes with two important lines of dialogue towards the start of the film designed to keep things in perspective: ‘Decide for yourself what you’ll believe’ and ‘Don’t let the spectacle and pretty lights fool you’.

The conclusion reiterates the film’s main themes with reference to key lines of dialogue.

How to write about characters

When writing about a character there are three steps.

- ★ Identify their characteristics (attitudes, values, feelings and behaviour).
- ★ Identify the key narrative moments *when* their characteristics change and describe *how* their characteristics change.
- ★ Discuss how the *mise en scène* of the film represents these characteristics and their changes.



Identifying characteristics

The **attitudes**, **values**, **feelings** and **behaviour** of a character are reflected in their relationships, actions, desires and dialogue.

Although many characteristics are obvious, some may be more subtle. On the next page is a list of questions for you to answer in relation to a character you are analysing, to help you gain a more substantial understanding of that character.



ACTIVITY

Relationships – how the character relates to other characters

- Do they have close relationships and friendships or are they emotionally distant?
- Do they care for other people or are they self-centred?
- Do they relate passionately to anybody through love or hate, or are their relationships less intense?

Actions – how the character responds to change and unforeseen occurrences

- Do they initiate the change or are they simply swept along by what happens around them?
- Do they adapt and cope with change or are they unsettled and upset?
- Do they stand to benefit from a particular change or is it a threat to them?

Desires – what the character dreams of and fears

- What do they most want and what do they most dread? Why?
- Do they do anything to achieve their dreams or to avoid their fears, or are they passive?
- Are they hopeful and ambitious, or doubtful and defeatist?

Dialogue – what the character says

- How does the character speak about themselves and other people? What does this say about the kind of person they are?
- What past events does the character talk about? How does the way a character talks about those events indicate something about their personality?
- What kind of language does the character use? Are they well-spoken or do they use a lot of slang? What does this say about the kind of person they are?



Identifying key narrative moments

Key narrative moments change particular attributes of a character so that the character develops during the course of the film.

You will need to identify key narrative moments so that you can discuss why and how the character is developed. These are usually:

- ★ the moment when the character identifies their goal and develops the motivation to pursue that goal
- ★ the moments at which obstacles are placed in the way of the character and conflict is created
- ★ the moments of resolution when the character overcomes or is defeated by the obstacles facing them.

Below are examples of key narrative moments for three different characters and the effects of these experiences on the characters.



Character	Shy person living alone	Ambitious businessperson	Soldier
Characteristics at start of film	Insecure, lonely, depressed	Ruthless, smug, dishonest	Patriotic, naive, enthusiastic
Key narrative moment (goal)	Meets somebody they fall in love with and want to be with	Discovers a promotion that they want	Goes to war to achieve personal glory
Key narrative moment (obstacle)	Doesn't know how to express love due to anxieties	Discovers another work colleague wants the same promotion	Horrors of war prevent the achievement of heroic deeds
Key narrative moment (resolution)	Overcomes anxieties and successfully declares their love	Spreads lies about colleague but is discovered and fired	No longer believes in achieving glory through war and quits the army
Characteristics at end of film	Confident, happy, content	Shattered, humbled, humiliated	Disillusioned, angry, confused



Discussing mise en scène when writing about characters

Incorporating discussion of the mise en scène associated with characters is an excellent approach to character analysis. Mise en scène can be used to support the information provided by the narrative about the character and to identify character traits that are not explicit in the narrative.



ACTIVITY

Practise character analysis by writing about these aspects of the film.

- **Setting** – describe the setting most associated with the character (e.g. their home or workplace) as if it is an extension of their mind.
- **Motifs** – identify an object that is important to the character. Describe how they interact with this object and what that says about the way they interact with the world around them.
- **Lighting** – describe how different ways of lighting the character change their appearance and how this affects the audience's feelings about them.
- **Framing using light** – indicate whether the character is united with or separated from any other characters by light.
- **Shadows** – comment on how the character is presented to the audience when they are emerging from or covered by shadows.
- **Costumes** – describe how the clothes, make-up and hair style of the character externalise their personality and emotions.
- **Acting style** – list the ways in which the actor playing the character uses expressions, posture, voice and gestures to give the character meaning beyond that of their dialogue.

Example of writing about characters: *A Separation*

The first sentence identifies the main characters; the paragraph immediately progresses to discuss characters' goals and the obstacles facing them.

Simin (Leila Hatami) wants her husband, Nader (Peyman Moaadi), and their eleven-year-old daughter, Termeh (Sarina Farhadi), to leave Iran with her. Nader wants to remain to look after his father (Ali-Asghar Shahbazi) who has Alzheimer's disease. The pair cannot find a compromise so Simin has requested a divorce that Nader is refusing to give. *A Separation* opens with a continuous shot of Simin and Nader in a family court in Tehran. The camera is fixed in position to look at the pair so that the audience takes the role of the unseen judge hearing their case. In contrast to the fixed and formal opening shot, the rest of the film has a constantly moving camera to suggest a sense of turmoil in the lives of the characters. The camera frequently films through doorways or around corners to also give the viewer a sense of voyeuristic access into their private lives.

The writer effectively discusses cinematography.

However, throughout *A Separation*, writer/director/producer Asghar Farhadi continues to place the audience in the judge's chair, challenging viewers to make judgements about the characters and to acknowledge that nothing is clear cut or easy to evaluate.

The writer identifies the film's director, and discusses point of view.

In this paragraph, the writer discusses a second set of characters in relation to the film's broader themes.

Initially, *A Separation* appears to be about the breakdown of the marriage between Simin and Nader, but the film explores other types of separations when it introduces Razieh (Sareh Bayat) and her husband Houjat (Shahab Hosseini). Razieh is hired by Nader to care for his father while Nader is at work, and a resulting incident becomes a pivotal point that leads to another court case where the actions, motivations and morality of the various characters are challenged and questioned. Even viewers have to think twice about what they witnessed during the key scene, and which characters' interpretation of events best matches their own. The resulting conflicts explore the bigger separations in the film between the middle class and presumably non-devout Simin and Nader, and the 'regular class' and religious Rzieh and Houjat.

The writer discusses the use of props to symbolise a main theme.

A Separation introduces the themes of social divisions during the opening credit sequence where shots of passports being photocopied suggest the bureaucratisation of identity whereby people are reduced to a series of statistics. This opening obviously also suggests Simin's imminent travel, which is then denied in the first scene and not pursued again for the rest of the film. Instead this sequence suggests how notions of age, gender, occupation and religion separate people. Like *Carnage* (Roman Polanski, 2011), *A Separation* explores how presumed social norms are extremely tenuous and how threats to these almost illusory ideas can threaten our sense of personal security.

The writer compares *A Separation* to another film with similar themes.

In this paragraph, the writer discusses acting, writing and setting, as well as genre and film nationality.

Perhaps this is why *A Separation* has resonated so strongly throughout the world. It has received extraordinary acclaim since its first February 2011 screenings (its Australian theatrical release arrived extremely late) and seems to have attracted a much broader audience than most other Iranian films. The actors are professional, the film is tightly scripted, the setting is urban, the characters are recognisable white- and blue-collar workers, and the film incorporates elements of domestic drama, courtroom drama and even suspense/mystery film. *A Separation* stylistically, thematically and narratively appeals to Western sensibilities, and yet none of these elements detract from the film nor dilute its identity as an Iranian film; in fact they do the opposite.

In this paragraph, the writer discusses the film's major themes and characters' behaviour in relation to these themes.

Through its tense and intriguing narrative, not only are class and religious divisions explored but it also provides a critique of the inequality between men and women in Iranian society. Partly to avoid political censorship and partly to make an accessible yet complex film, Farhadi doesn't provide a direct condemnation of the way women are restricted, but the entire film expresses the limited options faced by Iranian women. Simin never gives a clear reason as to why she wants to leave Iran with her daughter, but it becomes clear that, as an intelligent and aspirational woman, her opportunities at home seem small. The male characters in the film are not bad people – they are highly flawed like all the characters in the film, but they are not bad. Houjat is hot-tempered, but his physical aggression towards Nader is understandable (if not excusable) and his real outbursts are saved for himself. During a scene at a petrol station, Nader appears to actually be pushing his daughter Termeh into acting more assertively, even if that defies social conventions. And yet, these men still have control over the women in their lives. They may not consciously wield this power but it is nonetheless bestowed upon them by social values and the law.

The writer introduces additional themes and discusses them in relation to the characters.

Tellingly, there are points in the film where the separations between all the characters appear to be removed. Razieh and Houjat's daughter, Somayeh (Kimia Hosseini), and Termeh exchange glances across a room to communicate their shared distress and confusion at what is happening between their parents. This suggests that children are often the ones who suffer the most in family conflict, which becomes the final message the film leaves the audience with. Graphic matches of both Simin and Razieh putting on their hijab headscarves link the women during a moment when they are attempting to find a solution, only for it to be undone by the men soon after. In this way, issues of honour, religious obedience and family are continually defined by the male characters in the film to the detriment of their loved ones. As a result, social norms that are supposed to bring people together are slyly critiqued as part of a deeply ingrained patriarchal culture that divides and separates not just women and children, but men too.

The writer identifies a film technique (graphic matches) and discusses it in relation to character relationships, in order to comment on themes.

How to write about themes

A film's **theme** is what the film is essentially about. The theme of the film is conveyed through its narrative, the behaviour of the characters and the style of the film.

When writing about a theme in a film you should identify the background and context of the theme, and then discuss how the following components contribute to that theme.

- ★ Narrative – what themes are presented to the audience through the narrative? In other words, how do the characters and the situations in which they find themselves raise and explore the themes?
- ★ Style – what stylistic elements of the film are used to present the theme to the audience? In other words, how does the look of the film enhance the narrative's exploration of the theme?
- ★ Genre – does the film rely on the audience's awareness of generic conventions or of other films in order to establish and develop its theme?

How the narrative presents themes

Some films may directly explore specific themes through their narrative, while others indirectly explore a theme. Essentially, then, there are two ways the narrative of a film conveys the film's themes to its audience: literally and metaphorically.

Literally

A film presents its themes **literally** when it directly explores them.

- ★ The theme of a romance film might be the joy and heartache of love.
- ★ The theme of a film set during a war would likely concern the insanity, folly and horrors of war.
- ★ A film about gangsters is often a film about the betrayals, violence and twisted codes of honour that characterise gangsters.

Symbolically

A film may indirectly explore its themes by using **symbolism**.

- ★ A science-fiction film about humans conquering a race of aliens may symbolically be about colonisation.
- ★ A period film about a restrictive society may be a parable for contemporary society and its restrictiveness.
- ★ A horror film about a monster threatening a community may symbolically be about the hidden evils of a community.

How style enhances themes

The style of a film can emphasise a theme in many different ways, but the two main ways that style expresses themes are through creating an atmosphere and by creating motifs.

Atmosphere

The mood, feel or atmosphere of a film can greatly enhance its presentation of a theme.

- ★ To emphasise the theme of love in a romance film, romantic music, soft lighting and close-ups on the lovers' faces may be used.
- ★ To highlight the theme of war as hell, bleak lighting, sets filled with the bodies of dead soldiers and quick editing that creates a feeling of panic may be used.
- ★ To accentuate the theme of horror lurking behind the surface of a 'normal' community, heavy shadows, sinister music and gruesome make-up may be used.

Motifs

Recurring images of particular props or costume elements, or a repeated sound or piece of music, can be used throughout a film to suggest broader ideas.

- ★ A hat blowing in the wind after its owner has been shot dead could be a motif for violence and betrayal in a gangster film.
- ★ A set of chains binding the hands and feet of a conquered race of aliens could be a motif for colonisation in a science-fiction film.
- ★ A veil covering the face of a woman, who is thus prevented from expressing how she really feels, could be a motif for social restrictions in a period film.

How references to other films enhance themes

The film you are writing about may be relying on a film-literate audience in order to present its themes. If this is the case then you will need to describe the ways in which the film contains references to other films.

- ★ A romance film could contain a scene of exaggerated romantic clichés such as gushy music, the couple running together in slow motion and contrived romantic dialogue. Such a scene could draw attention to the fact that our idealistic notions of what love is have been influenced by the cinema, whereas in reality love is much more complicated than its many superficial representations on film.
- ★ A gangster film could become a revisionist gangster film if its resolution reveals the forces of law and order to be as corrupt and unscrupulous as the gangsters. Instead of the gangster being defeated and social order being restored, a revisionist gangster film would suggest that crime does pay after all, and that in modern society the gangsters are not necessarily worse than the authorities trying to bring them to justice.

- ★ A horror film about a monster, representing the unspoken evils of a small community, may allude to one of the several famous horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s that had the same theme. It may contain allusionism by re-creating the set, lighting and framing of a famous scene and filming it with similar camera positions and angles.



ACTIVITY

Practise writing about how cinematic techniques are used to convey themes in a film you are studying. You may wish to discuss:

- the events of the narrative
- stylistic elements such as *mise en scène*, cinematography, editing and the use of sound
- generic conventions
- whether themes are explored literally or symbolically
- the mood, feel or atmosphere of the film
- motifs
- references to other films or artforms.

Example of writing about themes: *The Hunger Games*

The first paragraph summarises the film's story and core concept, and identifies the main protagonist and key supporting characters.

The catchphrase 'May the odds be ever in your favour' is spoken by the powerful elite in *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012). It strategically provides a glimmer of hope (but, importantly, not too much) to the oppressed and poor citizens who are subject each year to a brutal televised game in this futuristic parable. The phrase is uttered before the reaping, where one girl and one boy from the twelve districts are selected by lottery to take part in the game, and it is also uttered during the preparation and then right before the contest, where the twenty-four children are expected to fight to the death. It's a taunting and cruel catchphrase because it implies the fate of the children is to do with luck, when in fact the games are really a ruthlessly orchestrated public event designed by the ruling class to keep the non-ruling classes distracted and fearful. When Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) volunteers to become a 'tribute' for her district in place of her sister, she and her district's male tribute Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson) join the twenty-two other tributes in the Capitol where they are taught to kill, to survive and to put on a good show.

Presumably one of the challenges with making a film adaptation of Suzanne Collins' popular 2008 Young Adult novel *The Hunger Games* was how to present the novel's critique of violent spectacle without the film itself providing a violent spectacle. Other similarly themed films, where a futuristic incarnation of the ancient Roman gladiator contests was fused with reality television, have faced a similar problem. *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) and *Series 7: The Contenders* (Daniel Minahan, 2001) are all set in either the future or an alternative reality where disenfranchised people are forced to take part in a violent competition and fight for their survival. *The Running Man* is the simplest of the abovementioned films as it contains a strongly defined 'good guys versus bad guys' narrative, and the film unapologetically provides violent spectacle for cinema audiences. Similar to *The Hunger Games*, *Battle Royale* contains a scenario where the delineations between good and bad characters are not so simplistic, since they are all teenagers from a randomly chosen school class and forced to fight to the death in a large outdoor area until there is only one survivor. *Battle Royale* also provides moments of violent spectacle, but in a far more uncomfortable way than *The Running Man*, as the presentation of violence in *Battle Royale* juxtaposed with the film's social critique does compel viewers to ask themselves what it is they are enjoying.

However, the film with the most in common with *The Hunger Games* is the lesser-known *Series 7: The Contenders*, since both films undermine the voyeuristic appeal of the violence presented. *The Hunger Games* spends close to an hour establishing the world of the film, its characters and the film's themes before the first scene of conflict. This is now considered an almost old-fashioned approach to narrative development, where the film spends its time building up to the main action rather than cutting to the chase as soon as possible. A film that was more overtly focused on providing the audience with a thrilling action-packed ride would have included an action scene much earlier to establish the tone. Instead, *The Hunger Game* waits and, when it delivers, it does so with disorientating quick edits and muted sound to create the sensation of the violence being sickening and confusing. For the rest of the film, the acts of violence, which are crucial to the film's

The writer includes relevant comparisons to films with similar themes.

A discussion of the process of adaptation is used to introduce one of the film's main themes: violence as spectacle.

The writer discusses narrative development in relation to one of the film's main themes.

The writer includes a discussion of editing and sound in relation to a main theme.

narrative, are sudden and blunt, frequently off-screen and never glorified. Thus, *The Hunger Games* effectively establishes itself as a drama about the spectacle of violence rather than being a spectacle of violence itself.

The production design combines modern and classic motifs and references in order to make several statements about class, exploitation and social inequity. The scenario of a populace having to sacrifice its young to appease a higher authority occurs in many ancient legends, including the Ancient Greek myth of the Minotaur who was sent youths to devour. The modern-day version of this myth as depicted in *The Hunger Games* is the lottery-based reaping, which could also be viewed as a parable for young people being conscripted or manipulated into fighting in a foreign war started by the older generation. However, *The Hunger Games* also explores the sacrificed-youth theme by looking at the way in which young people are groomed to conform to an idealised image so that their youth and beauty can be commodified and exploited. Not only are the tributes trained in how to kill and survive, but they are coached to be media savvy in order to project the type of image that will earn them sponsorship. They are constantly being looked at and scrutinised and the very tight cinematography often creates a claustrophobic effect by only shooting in close-up and medium close-up. Shots from a greater distance are often filmed from the corner of a room, giving an impression of closed-circuit television surveillance.

The ceremonial aspects of the games are a mixture of Ancient Roman and Nazi German iconography with modern-day red-carpet events. The vast open spaces, eagle insignias and neoclassic design captures the appearance of a totalitarian state attempting to awe its people with displays of power, while the focus on the clothes worn by the tributes echoes the vacuous commentary that takes place during events such as award ceremonies. The combined effect is like that of the gladiators of Ancient Rome and modern-day reality-show contestants. The tributes are – briefly – huge celebrities, designed to win the favour of the public in the short term until they are disposed of. It's a highly subversive critique of mass entertainment that expresses Noam Chomsky's argument about how the hype surrounding spectator sport is used to distract people from engaging in issues of real importance, therefore keeping them subservient through ignorance.

The first half of this paragraph discusses the theme of exploitation with reference to motifs and allusions to classical mythology.

The second half of this paragraph discusses the theme of exploitation with reference to cinematography.

The writer discusses the theme of mass entertainment with references to historical allusions, symbolism and cultural theory.

The theme of class division is considered with reference to setting and costuming.

The representation of class divisions is overt, with the wealthy members of society living in the opulent Capitol city while the poorer members of society, who are selected for the games, come from the surrounding districts. The bleak and impoverished rural settings contrast with the high-tech and garish world of the Capitol, where the dominant fashion is a grotesque fusion of Max Headroom-type designer punk and the Rococo-style fashion favoured by the French aristocracy before the French Revolution.

The final ingredient making *The Hunger Games* so compelling is Katniss. Unlike the heroes of many other Young Adult novel and film franchises, she has not got any natural gifts or special powers that have been magically bestowed upon her, nor is she simply driven by a romantic crush – the film even self-reflexively includes a romantic subplot to comment on audience expectations. Katniss is completely self-made; the skills she possesses are the result of experience; and she undermines the machinations of the games by using ingenuity, cunning and humanity to survive and care for others. The overall combination of smart social commentary, compelling narrative, clever yet unobtrusive film style and the integrity to avoid succumbing to the very qualities it critiques, results in a very impressive film.

The writer includes a brief reference to the way in which the film manages to subvert generic expectations.

The writer concludes with a close analysis of the film's protagonist.

How to write about social values

Social values are the opinions, attitudes, arguments and beliefs that are promoted or questioned in a film. Films are a product of the social, political and cultural climate in which they are made, and hence they are heavily influenced by the social values of their time.

When writing about the representation of social values in a film you need to analyse:

- ★ how the narrative identifies different characters, social groups or institutions with particular social values
- ★ how the style of the film portrays those characters, social groups or institutions in order to persuade the audience to form a particular opinion about the social values that they represent
- ★ how the narrative's resolution 'rewards' or 'punishes' – or arouses the audience's sympathy or outrage towards – the various characters, social groups or institutions and the social values they stand for.

Identification

The narrative of the film will identify specific social values with specific characters, social groups and institutions. The audience then aligns that character, social group or institution with the film's representation of a social value.

- ★ A character who constantly talks about being vegetarian and the importance of saving the environment could be identified as representing environmental values.
- ★ A group of Indigenous Australians who are marching in protest outside Parliament House could be identified as representing anti-discrimination social values.
- ★ A large company that causes smaller companies to go out of business could be identified as representing capitalist values.

Representation

Once a film establishes particular social values as belonging to specific elements in the film such as characters, social groups and institutions, the narrative and style then represent those elements in a particular way. The film thus seeks to persuade the audience to have a certain attitude towards those social values. In general, the more sophisticated a film is, the more complexly it presents social values; however, many films simply present social values as black-and-white issues.

When writing about a social value, identify which elements of the film that social value is attached to, and then discuss how those elements are represented. For example, imagine a vegetarian character who represents environmental values and consider the following.

- ★ If the film contains a strong environmental message then this character will be important to the narrative. Moreover, this character would be represented in a flattering way by being played by an attractive actor and always lit with warm lighting.
- ★ If the film is anti-environmental then this character would either provide comic relief or be an obstacle in the narrative. They would probably be played by an actor who makes the character appear foolish and annoying.
- ★ If the theme of the film is environmentalism but the filmmakers wish to explore this theme without imposing particular values on the audience, there would probably be a variety of characters with different ideas and opinions on the importance of the environment. The film may not use stylistic devices to portray these characters in any specific way, but instead could highlight the complexity of an issue such as environmentalism by developing a narrative that explores and respects the many differing opinions.





ACTIVITY

Look at how the film you are studying represents basic elements such as a crowd of people or an individual who stands outside the crowd. Use the following clichés and stereotypes to examine how some basic elements are represented and discuss how such representations are used to persuade the audience to adopt certain social values.

Crowds of people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hysterical, stupid or violent, mobbish, do not know what is best for them • bland, unquestioning, conformist • decent, noble, the foundation of society
Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brave and honourable, heroic, saving the day, know what is best • dangerous, maverick, think they know what is best, threaten society • creative, artistic, oppressed by society • freakish, eccentric, a burden on society
Figures of authority (e.g. police and military personnel)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • honourable, brave, self-sacrificing, patriotic • misguided, violent, stupid, corrupt • overworked, underappreciated and frustrated
Politicians and professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • corrupt, greedy and self-serving • self-sacrificing, ethical and wise • out-of-touch, naive and comical
Workers and the poor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aggressive, uneducated and a burden on society • oppressed and constantly struggling to survive • wise, happy and proud
Different racial groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comical and a source of humour • ignorant, savage or criminal • oppressed, disenfranchised and needing help • successful, confident and happy • completely absent • completely integrated into the film so that racial differences are not noticeable
Outsiders (e.g. aliens, fantasy creatures, people from different cultures)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benevolent, peaceful and of value to society • dangerous, violent and a threat to society • unique, mystical and embodying values we would like our own society to have
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • heroic, tough, strong and silent • flawed, vulnerable and confused • violent, drunk and aggressive • clumsy, stupid and comical • camp, overly sensitive and fussy
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nurturing, gentle and doting • vampish, dangerous and wild • nagging, hysterical and aggressive • desirable, unthinking and passive • innocent, naive and vulnerable

Resolution – punishment and reward

The resolution of the film's narrative often provides further evidence of the filmmaker's approval or criticism of particular social values. By either 'punishing' or 'rewarding' an element such as a character, social group or institution, the film is punishing or rewarding the social values represented by that element. Likewise, by encouraging the audience to feel sympathy or outrage towards an element, the film is persuading the audience to feel those emotions towards the social value being represented.

Punishment

- ★ A character representing social values that the film does not support will be punished by the narrative by not achieving their goal. For example, they may:
 - * fail to achieve something, be demoted or lose wealth
 - * lose credibility and status by being exposed to look foolish or evil
 - * die.
- ★ The audience will be encouraged to enjoy the fact that the character is being punished in this way.
- ★ If such a character does achieve their goal (and is therefore not punished) then the audience will be encouraged to feel outrage and anger towards that character.

Reward

- ★ A character representing social values that the film supports will be rewarded by the narrative by achieving their goal. For example, they may:
 - * achieve wealth and/or love
 - * gain recognition, status or acclaim from their peers
 - * achieve personal happiness and fulfilment.
- ★ The audience will be encouraged to be delighted by the fact that the character is being rewarded in this way.
- ★ If the character does not achieve their goals (and is therefore not rewarded) then the audience will be encouraged to feel sympathy and sorrow for that character.



ACTIVITY

- 1 Discuss how the narrative in a film you are studying either 'punishes' or 'rewards' characters through the resolution.
- 2 Discuss how stylistic techniques such as music, camera position, lighting and acting style encourage the audience to feel sympathy or outrage towards certain characters.
- 3 Discuss how the narrative and style of the film are used to promote certain social values.

Example of writing about social values: *The Dark Knight Rises*

The Dark Knight Rises (2012) is a fine piece of cinema that successfully mixes outlandish comic book scenarios with a gritty realism that gives the proceedings an alarming plausibility. Curiously, it doesn't deliver the adrenalin-rush moments that were present throughout *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008). It's a much bigger film in scope, with more at stake, bigger set pieces, grander themes and a far more complex narrative, but the results offer a different level of engagement than a mythical origins story or a showdown between two extreme personalities with more in common than one of them would like to think. *The Dark Knight Rises* is a tonally different film that successfully establishes a scenario of complete despair, where much of the action seems futile. Within this bleak context, the biggest spark of life is Anne Hathaway as Selina Kyle (better known as Catwoman in the original comics), who is not only involved in the film's most exciting fight sequences but becomes an ethically dubious anti-hero in a film exploring complex ethical terrain.

The writer acknowledges previous films in the *Batman* series to comment on differences in themes, narrative complexity and tone.

The first sentence describes the film's mix of cinematic styles.

Similar to *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012), this is a film where the superhero persona takes second place to the 'real life' persona of the protagonist. While Peter Parker learning to reconcile his identity as Spider-Man is a coming-of-age narrative, Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) coming to terms with what Batman stands for becomes a story of the old guard making way for the next generation. Wayne begins the film as a physically and psychologically damaged man and spends a good deal of the film grappling with how useful Batman is to his own sense of self and to the community of Gotham City. Characters from the previous films and important new characters express a variety of opinions, contributing to the film's intriguing exploration of individualism versus social cohesion, and truth versus myth.

An analysis of the film's protagonist is included in order to introduce a discussion of social values.

The writer discusses one of the film's main themes with a comparison to another film.

The political arena that unfolds offers an enticing range of arguments about how to interpret the downfall of Gotham City, which is overtly linked to various recent American crises such as domestic and international terrorism, the global financial crisis and the Occupy movement.

The writer identifies contemporary events that the film references.

On the one hand, *The Dark Knight Rises* could be read as a hysterical, conservative vision of socialism. The film's villain Bane (Tom Hardy) is identified early in the film as a super-terrorist with quasi-fundamentalist religious zeal. His plans to obliterate the rule of law, undermine the financial sector and return Gotham to the people results in a nightmarish scenario that plays upon every fear perpetrated by plutocrats who feel that their power base may be threatened. Bane and his followers are a disturbing fusion of fundamentalist terrorism and a perverse version of a people's revolution.

The writer puts forth an argument that supports a reading of the film using one set of social values.

The writer identifies a potential counterargument to support a reading of the film using a different set of social values.

And yet, the film is not that simple. The oppressive collectivism that Bane offers is one of mob rule that exploits the simmering hatred and resentment that is the result of the zero-tolerance approach to crime initiated by the late Harvey Dent. Furthermore, Dent has been given near-sainthood status, his psychotic and homicidal behaviour suppressed in order to maintain his myth. He is presented as a visionary leader despite having ended up as the Gotham equivalent of a war criminal. When a population places unquestioning faith in the false prophet who is a charismatic leader guilty of vast sins, the resulting order will eventually be undermined. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane is the figure who does the undoing. He is not an external threat, but the product of a civilisation that is sick to the core.

Furthermore, this is not a film where a lone individual defends the population against a socialist-style enemy. Bruce Wayne does not act alone in *The Dark Knight Rises* and the intertwining storylines within the film exist to facilitate an ensemble of characters working together to fight back, using brains, brawn and the ideal of Batman. The most interesting character in the film is Selina Kyle, who is able to undermine Wayne physically and intellectually, as well as challenge his life of material privilege in a world of inequality. While Hathaway's Kyle possesses the same moral uncertainty that the character does in the comics, she is still a sympathetic character in the film. Her anti-one-percent attitude is represented as markedly different to Bane's criminality and exploitive manipulation of a population's discontent. If anything, *The Dark Knight Rises* could be regarded as a warning for how radicals with dreams of puritanical world domination get what they want by manipulating the corporate and financial sectors, and hijacking technology.

The writer discusses character development and relationships in support of their argument concerning social values.

The writer uses references to the previous films in the series, to summarise their argument in support of the set of social values they believe the film endorses.

The Dark Knight Rises is about an older generation accepting their mistakes and maintaining as much dignity as possible while facing the consequences. The 'rise' of the title becomes a literal plot point that also serves as a symbolic rebirth: Wayne re-enters a new world where the people deserve the truth instead of faith in symbols. If *Batman Begins* was an independence story about a city rejecting the rule of an exploitive criminal class, and *The Dark Knight* was a war film about sacrificing liberty to combat an unimaginable threat, then *The Dark Knight Rises* is a film about the need to return to a more civilised time now that the war (or perceived war) is over. Otherwise, that civilisation will turn against itself and reproduce the destructive elements that it was once fighting against. The time of symbolism and individualism is over and the generation that identifies with such notions needs to clean up any mess they have left behind and then move on. Gotham is no city for old costumed vigilante men as a new dawn approaches.



How to write a film review

A film review is a persuasive piece of writing that essentially aims either to convince people to go and see a film or to discourage them from seeing it. There are many different types of film reviews and many varied approaches that professional critics can use when writing a review. This section covers some of the basic elements of a film review, and provides a good starting point from which you can develop your own style of reviewing.

Writing a film review is very different from writing an analytical essay about a film.

- ★ A film review usually involves a less formal style of writing.
- ★ Effective film analysis requires you to be somewhat detached from the film in order to write objectively about it. Film reviews, on the other hand, contain more personal thoughts and feelings.
- ★ Film reviews are read by a wider and more diverse audience than the readership for analytical film writing.

When writing a film review you should aim to do the following things.

- ★ Inform readers about what they can expect from the film.
 - * Does the film belong to a recognisable genre? Audiences will usually immediately know what to expect from genres such as horror, action, science-fiction or romantic comedy.
 - * Is it directed by somebody who has a distinctive and recognisable style?
 - * Does it feature actors who are usually associated with specific types of films?
- ★ Give readers enough information for them to assess whether it is the kind of film that they will wish to see. For example, if a film is particularly violent then you need to acknowledge this, as some people have a strong aversion to violence. Likewise, some people find overly moralistic or superficial films completely offensive, so you need to indicate if the film contains strong family values or a contrived feel-good narrative.
- ★ Convey *your* opinion about whether or not the film is worth seeing and provide evidence and arguments for your opinion.

Who to mention

While you would usually mention only the director of a film when doing analytical writing, a film review often requires you to also mention actors and occasionally other crew members such as writers, cinematographers, editors and/or composers.

Directors

Always mention the name of the director and make some reference to their background.

- ★ For some directors this may only require a brief description, such as: 'Get Out is the debut feature film of writer/director Jordan Peele, who was previously best known for his work in television comedy.'
- ★ Where relevant, it is often a good idea to list some of the director's recent and/or well-known films. For example: 'The Grand Budapest Hotel is the latest film from Wes Anderson, who is best known for the dry humour and whimsy that characterises his previous films *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *Rushmore* (1998).'
- ★ Directors with a substantial body of work may require additional discussion of their previous films, especially if the director has a distinctive style. For example: 'While Martin Scorsese is most associated with making gangster films, period films or biopics, his 2011 family film *Hugo* still possesses the strong sense of nostalgia and love for cinema that is expressed in his previous films.'

Actors

It is common to mention key actors when writing a film review, especially the actors who occupy lead roles in the film or give particularly good or poor performances.

- ★ Extremely well-known actors (movie stars) are already familiar to audiences, so you would usually only include their name and not all their other films. For example, if you were reviewing the recent *Mission Impossible* film, you would naturally mention that Tom Cruise is the lead actor, but you would not need to list his previous films as readers will already be familiar with Cruise's work.
- ★ You probably should mention the background of actors who are not major stars and are therefore less known to the general public. For example: 'The stoic civilian mariner Mr Dawson in *Dunkirk* is played by Mark Rylance, whom most audiences will know from his Academy-Award-winning performance as the noble USSR spy Rudolf Abel in Steven Spielberg's 2015 film *Bridge of Spies*.'
- ★ As well as praising or critiquing a particular performance, you may also want to acknowledge an actor in a role that is substantially different from the types of characters that they usually portray. For example: 'Steve Carell is almost unrecognisable in Bennett Miller's 2014 drama *Foxcatcher*, delivering a performance bursting with still and mannered menace that is far from the endearing and comedic roles Carell is mostly known for.'

Other filmmakers

It is not just the director and actors who should be credited for making a film. Several other people have a major impact on the final product and it is often a good idea to mention their contribution. Here are some examples.

- ★ 'For *Baby Driver*, director Edgar Wright once more worked with regular cinematographer Bill Pope who, outside of working with Wright, is best known for shooting the *Matrix* films and many of Sam Raimi's films. In *Baby Driver*, he again delivers a vibrant almost pop-art sensibility to his frame, which is full of colour and movement without ever feeling overwhelming.'

- ★ 'Hans Zimmer's score for *Dunkirk* is not unlike his score for Christopher Nolan's previous films in the way the music almost becomes part of the sound design and articulates the heightened emotional state of the characters. In the case of *Dunkirk*, the repeated motif of the ticking clock significantly contributes to the film's tension and the sensation that time is running out.'
- ★ 'The quick-paced dialogue in Danny Boyle's 2015 biopic *Steve Jobs* is distinctly recognisable as belonging to screenplay writer Aaron Sorkin. Sorkin is less interested in making his characters sound realistic than he is in having characterisation and thematic riches expressed in rapid banter, and it's an approach that works in this case.'

Describing the narrative

You should provide a brief description of the narrative, usually towards the start of your review. Most reviewers will quickly describe the protagonist, their goal and the major obstacle that they face, before going on to discuss the more interesting intricacies of the film.

The amount of space that you dedicate to describing the narrative is proportionate to the length of the review. A full-page review may require a whole paragraph to discuss the narrative while a shorter review may only require one or two sentences. Here are some examples.

- ★ '*Wonder Woman* charts Diana Prince's journey from the secret island of Themyscira, where she grew up, to the Western Front in Belgium during World War I, where she is convinced she will meet and defeat Ares, the god of war.'
- ★ '*Lion* is based on the true story of Saroo Brierley who, as a five-year-old boy, was accidentally separated from his Indian family, sent to an orphanage and adopted by an Australian couple. After twenty-five years in Australia, Saroo sets about trying to find his birth family back in India.'
- ★ '*Moana* is the story of a Polynesian girl on a quest with a demigod, and it delivers an exciting hero's journey story with strong musical numbers, fun gags and inventive animation.'

There are three things you must never do when describing the narrative of a film.

- ★ DO NOT spend the entire review describing what happens in the film.
- ★ DO NOT give away any twists, jokes or revelations about how the film ends.
- ★ DO NOT describe minor details such as subplots, secondary characters or any other aspects that may be important to the film but not essential for the purposes of a film review.

Discussing style

A significant part of many film reviews will be a discussion of the film's stylistic elements, as the enjoyment of a film largely depends on how well crafted it is technically, how it conveys the narrative and how it functions as a work of art. You should also mention film style in order to justify your opinion of the film and to demonstrate to the reader that you do have an understanding of filmic conventions. Here are some examples.

- ★ 'Throughout *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, the overcast, grainy and colour-drained visuals emphasise the cold emptiness experienced by the intelligence operatives. Characters are frequently filmed boxed in by their surroundings, framed by small windows and other rigid geometric shapes. Their world is one of restrictions, deceitfulness and moral ambiguity.'
- ★ 'The light and colour of the production design for *Hugo* are heightened to create an expressive fairytale world, which nevertheless remains grounded in a recognisable reality without ever slipping into overt whimsy or magic realism. The true visual flourishes occur when the audience is taken "behind-the-scenes of the station", into the hidden passages and rooms occupied by the orphaned boy Hugo Cabret.'
- ★ 'The unconventional editing in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* weaves Eva's memories in with the present-day scenes, and the ironic music is genuinely chilling as it provides the soundtrack to a mild-mannered suburban community that will never be the same. Close-ups on particular visual details and amplified sounds create a pattern of recurring visual and sound motifs that are effectively atmospheric, but then become emotionally charged when their full significance is revealed. In this way, the motifs also function as sensory memories for Eva, further demonstrating the extent to which what the audience experiences is filtered through her interpretation of events.'

Stating and arguing your opinion

Once you have provided readers with information about the filmmakers, summarised the narrative and commented on the film's stylistic qualities, you can then move on to the main part of a film review – discussing what you thought of the film.

The bulk of any good review should indicate whether the film is good, mediocre or bad and then give your argument for why you feel this way. These are some of the elements you might want to discuss.

- ★ How engaging or developed are the characters and the narrative? Does the film make you care about the characters?
- ★ Does the film deliver the type of experience that you expect from it? For example, a romance film where the romance is not convincing or an action film where the action scenes are poorly constructed would be likely to disappoint, as they fail to deliver what they promise.
- ★ What issues are raised in the film and how does it represent those issues? Is it a sophisticated film that explores serious themes, or does it rely on stereotypes and black-and-white portrayals of themes that deserve closer scrutiny?

Finally, allow your passion for films to influence your writing so that your reviews will be engaging to read. If you really have loved a film then let your readers know why you love it so they will be inspired to see it as well. Likewise, if you have really disliked a film then justify why and do not hesitate to express your opinion.

- ★ *'Stories We Tell* is a remarkably accomplished film by a deeply talented and courageous filmmaker. Despite – or because of – all the questioning and exposing of the mechanics of documenting the past, the results are a heartfelt tribute to family and personal identity.'
- ★ *'The Great Gatsby* is so close to being a great film, let down by its own refusal to exist in the moment, either reminding the audience it is told as a flashback or moving too quickly onto something else, as if a few moments into the future is always far more important than the present.'
- ★ *'The Twilight Saga: New Moon* is not only a poorly structured and badly paced slog but it contains at its core an incredibly regressive message about male violence and the need for women to accept it.'

Example of writing a film review: *Gravity*

The first paragraph contextualises the writer's argument and provides background information.

In his 1986 article 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', Tom Gunning looks at the power of early cinema to 'show something'. That is, to break the illusion of reality that would come to dominate narrative cinema, to instead offer something visual for the audience to marvel at. *Gravity* fits within Gunning's 'cinema of attractions'. It encompasses both the traditions of the films by the Lumière brothers, where the marvels of the modern age were displayed on screen, and that of Georges Méliès, who provided the kind of magical illusions that were only possible through cinema.

Gravity delivers a display of modern technology that leaves the viewer breathless from the experience, marvelling at the craftsmanship behind it. The beauty and emotional engagement that comes from watching *Gravity* is not just due to being invested in the drama on-screen, but by also being aware of how skilfully the filmmakers have constructed the spectacle.

The basic story that is present in *Gravity* functions as a subservient element that facilitates the visual magic of the film. As Gunning says in relation to Méliès' 1902 classic *A Trip to the Moon*, 'the story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema'. And, in keeping with the idea that the cinema of attractions breaks the illusion of reality, the narrative used in *Gravity* relies on recognisable tropes and archetypes.

The second paragraph refines the writer's main argument, which is developed in the subsequent paragraph.

The writer identifies the film's genre.

Gravity is a survival-against-the-odds story where a disaster occurs and then one thing after another threatens the survival of the characters. Dr Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) is an engineer on her first mission into space and Matt Kowalski (George Clooney) is an astronaut on his final mission. The rookie and the veteran are 'shipwrecked' in space when everything that could go wrong does. It sounds simplistic, but this rudimentary narrative and the stock characters are designed to never overwhelm the focus of the film, which is its groundbreaking visuals.

The writer introduces the film's main characters, summarises the story and identifies the main obstacle to be overcome by the film's protagonist.

In this paragraph, the writer identifies the film's director and discusses their previous film and stylistic characteristics. They also incorporate a discussion of a cinematic element (the long take) into their analysis.

Director Alfonso Cuarón has demonstrated a flair for visual style on his previous films, but in 2006's narrative-driven dystopian science-fiction film, *Children of Men*, he displays a remarkable command of special-effect-heavy long takes. As with *Children of Men*, the extended long takes in *Gravity* cannot conceivably have been filmed in a single take, and are likely to have been created through composite elements. However, the end results are seamless and powerful, entralling the viewer by holding tension and energy on-screen, and somehow also captivating them with the technical wizardry.

Furthermore, Cuarón creates the outer-space setting with remarkable aptitude. Whether computer generated, models, sets or a combination of several visual-effect techniques, all the space hardware looks tangible and moves in a way that adheres to the physics of outer space – or at least maintains a plausible suspension of disbelief.

The writer incorporates a discussion of setting into their analysis.

The writer incorporates a discussion of the filmmakers' use of sound into their analysis.

While many filmmakers in the past have applied sound effects to scenes set in space, Cuarón works brilliantly within the limitations of space not actually having any sound. Instead, the audience only hears the sounds from within the characters' spacesuits, which creates an eerie urgency. As chaos occurs in the soundless vacuum of space, all that can be heard is the increasingly heavy breathing and panicked voices of the characters inside their suits.

Perhaps the greatest technical accomplishment is how Cuarón and his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki use the weightless environment to its full potential. The extent to which cinema has been able to convey visual depth has always been limited, although innovators throughout cinematic history

have continually found ways to convey cinema space beyond the surface of the screen by using deep focus, zooms, tracking shots and, more recently, 3D. However, *Gravity* achieves shots that truly liberate cinema from its flat surface in a way that even goes beyond some of the more recent and successful attempts at immersive 3D.

The writer identifies and discusses the techniques used by the cinematographer.

As there is no up, down, left or right in space, the camera has complete freedom to travel anywhere. Elements on-screen are shot from all 360 degrees, and Cuarón's artistry (or trickery) even allows the camera to go inside the helmets of the characters. In some moments, it is even as if the camera has gone inside the characters' minds to deliver astonishing point-of-view shots. Such shots give the film an emotional and thematic depth. The characters may be based on recognisable types, and the narrative may be straightforward, but the combination of Bullock's and Clooney's acting along with the masterful visuals means that *Gravity* is more than just a series of thrills. The links established between the lonely and hostile space environment and the few bits of background information provided about the characters mean that *Gravity* is not just about physical survival but also about psychological survival.

Gravity takes the viewer into Dr Ryan Stone's mind to deliver to the audience the same rollercoaster of emotions that she experiences, oscillating between despair and euphoria. The music score by Steven Price also contributes to conveying the emotional journey that Stone undergoes, as does the inclusion of one scene in which the film threatens to lurch into incredibility before cleverly snapping back into place to reassure the audience that the film is not taking any narrative shortcuts.

The writer discusses the film's score and how it is used to convey meaning.

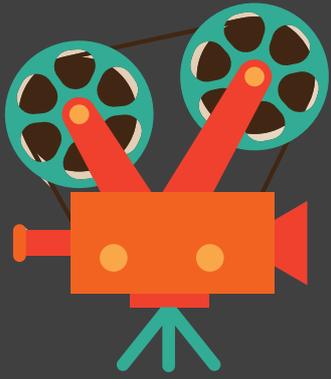
Perhaps most impressive are comparative shots of Stone throughout the film that, in one instance, have her floating like an unborn child and, in another scene, shoot her from a low angle to show her standing tall. As well as the balletic quality that Cuarón gives to some of the objects in space, these moments of evolutionary and developmental symbolism are what best visually recall Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an obvious comparative film to *Gravity*.

The writer elaborates on one of the film's major themes by comparing its treatment with that of another well-known film.

While *2001: A Space Odyssey* contains an ambiguous but nevertheless cynical message about humanity's role in the universe and lack of free will, there is something much more triumphant about *Gravity*. Not only is *Gravity* a celebration of what cinema in the current era can achieve but it is a celebration of what humans are capable of, not as all-conquering heroes who have come to tame the final frontier of outer space but as resourceful and resilient individuals who are wise and humble enough to fear and respect the indifference of the most hostile environment humanity has ever experienced.



The writer concludes by reiterating the film's major themes.



ACTIVITY SHEETS

The following Activity Sheets can be photocopied for classroom use.

ACTIVITY 1 – Mise en scène.	.172
ACTIVITY 2 – Settings.	.173
ACTIVITY 3 – Costumes.	.174
ACTIVITY 4 – Use of computer-generated imagery.	.175
ACTIVITY 5 – Camera distance.	.176
ACTIVITY 6 – Camera movement.	.177
ACTIVITY 7 – Point-of-view shots.	.178

ACTIVITY 1 – Mise en scène

What information is provided by the elements of mise en scène in the shot on page 9?
Fill in the table below. This is also a useful activity for any film you are studying.

Mise en scène element	Information the mise en scène provides	Describe how the mise en scène provides this information
Setting Time period		
Country		
Type of location (rural, urban etc.)		
Indoors or outdoors		
Economic situation		
Lighting Mood of the scene		
Time of year		
Time of day		
Costume Status of characters		
Occupation or interests of characters		
Acting style Feelings and thoughts of characters		
Character personality		

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ACTIVITY 2 – Settings

Compare the settings in the two shots on pages 11 and 12 and complete the activity below. This is also a useful activity for any film you are studying.

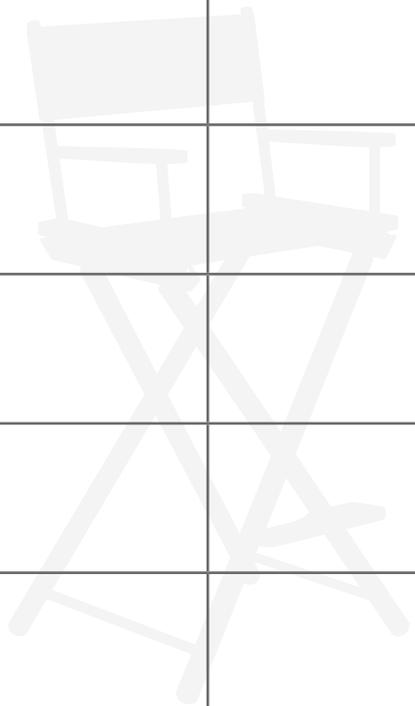
	Setting 1	Setting 2
Light levels (dark or bright?)		
Types of colours used (pleasant or ugly, cheery or bleak?)		
Spaciousness (cramped or plenty of room?)		
Physical state (messy or neat, formal or informal?)		
What is the atmosphere of this setting? What moods and feelings does it evoke?		
What themes does this setting suggest?		
What type of scene would take place in this setting?		
What type of character would inhabit this setting?		
How would this setting affect a character?		
Would you like to be in this setting? Why?		

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ACTIVITY 3 – Costumes

Look at the different costumes worn by each of the characters in the shots on page 27 then fill in the table below. This is also a useful activity for any film you are studying.

	Costume 1	Costume 2	Costume 3
Describe the types of clothes the character wears.			
Discuss how these clothes suggest the character's status and background.			
Describe how they wear their clothes.			
Discuss how this reflects their general attitude and level of self-confidence.			
Describe their make-up.			
How does the character's make-up indicate their state of mind?			
Describe the character's accessories.			
Discuss what these accessories tell us about their occupation or interests.			
Describe how the character interacts with their accessories.			
Discuss how this suggests their state of mind.			



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ACTIVITY 4 – Use of computer-generated imagery

For fun, think about how CGI is used in various films and debate whether or not it has improved the quality of cinema.

Use of CGI	Film example	How is CGI used?	In your opinion, does CGI improve the film or not?
Creating epic battle scenes	<i>The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies</i> (2014)		
	<i>300</i> (2006)		
Generating whole characters	Caesar in the <i>Planet of the Apes</i> films		
	The Na'vi characters in <i>Avatar</i> (2009)		
Making human actors appear to be doing incredible stunts	The <i>Captain America</i> films		
	The <i>Matrix</i> films		
Creating entire settings	The recent <i>Star Wars</i> films		
	The <i>Lord of the Rings</i> films		
Creating monsters and aliens	The dinosaurs in <i>Jurassic World</i> (2015)		
	Groot in the <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> films		
Giving the appearance of actors transforming into creatures	Bruce Banner transforming into the Hulk in the <i>Avengers</i> films		
	Hank McCoy transforming into Beast in the <i>X-Men</i> films		
Making the impossible possible	The 'city bending' sequence in <i>Inception</i> (2010)		
	The collapse of the Millennium Bridge in <i>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</i> (2009)		
Making entire films	<i>Up</i> (2009)		
	<i>The Lego Movie</i> (2014)		

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ACTIVITY 5 – Camera distance

Below is a list of shots, and effects that a filmmaker wishes to achieve in each shot. Identify which camera distance you think the filmmaker should use to create the desired effect and explain why this camera distance is the most suitable.

Shot and desired effect	Best camera distance to use	Explanation for using that camera distance
<p>Crowd of people The filmmaker wants the audience to see a large crowd of people as they walk down a city street.</p>		
<p>Two lovers The filmmaker wants the audience to see both lovers declaring their feelings for each other.</p>		
<p>Two best friends The filmmaker wants the audience to see both friends as they shake hands.</p>		
<p>The moon The filmmaker wants to show the audience a detailed shot of the moon for a science-fiction film.</p>		
<p>Engraved ring The filmmaker wants the audience to be able to read the engraving.</p>		
<p>Blood cells The filmmaker wants to show the audience individual blood cells in a documentary about the human body.</p>		
<p>A character hearing bad news The filmmaker wants the audience to clearly see the impact that hearing the bad news has on the character.</p>		
<p>Two people outside a cafe The filmmaker wants the audience to see both the characters and the cafe.</p>		
<p>A farm The filmmaker wants to show the audience the farm where the subsequent scenes will be set.</p>		

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ACTIVITY 6 – Camera movement

Below is a list of shots and effects that a filmmaker wishes to achieve in each shot. Describe the kind of camera movement you think the filmmaker should use to create the desired effect and explain why this camera movement is the most suitable.

Shot and desired effect	Best camera movement to use	Explanation for using that camera movement
<p>A disorientated character attempts to walk down the street The filmmaker wants the audience to experience the disorientated feeling of the character.</p>		
<p>A well-dressed character The filmmaker wants to show in detail the clothes the character is wearing, from head to toe.</p>		
<p>A football game The filmmaker wants to show various aspects of a football game, including close-ups of the players, the fans in the stands and the managers in the boxes.</p>		
<p>A racing car The filmmaker wants to show a racing car speed into frame from one direction and then speed away in another direction.</p>		
<p>An assembly line The filmmaker wants to smoothly show all the different elements on a long assembly line in a factory.</p>		
<p>A forest canopy The filmmaker wants to show the top of a forest in which the following scenes are going to take place.</p>		
<p>A ghost The filmmaker wants to smoothly follow a ghost as it glides up and down stairs and in and out of rooms in a haunted house.</p>		

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ACTIVITY 7 – Point-of-view shots

Think about how the elements of cinematography (exposure, speed, focus, perspective, camera position and camera movement) can be used to create a point-of-view shot. Below is a list of point-of-view shots that a filmmaker wishes to achieve. Describe the elements of cinematography you think the filmmaker should use to create the desired point-of-view shot and explain why you have chosen these elements.

Point-of-view shots	Elements of cinematography	Explanation
A person suffering from a fear of heights		
An intoxicated person		
A person suffering from sunstroke		
A person falling in love		
A person witnessing a car crash		
A visually impaired person		
A person whose life seems to be rushing past them		
A person who is seasick		
A person who is frightened and nervous		

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Glossary

180-degree rule: a convention to maintain continuity, where the camera only shoots from one side of an imaginary axis that runs between the two main objects in shot.

30-degree rule: a convention wherein the camera moves at least 30 degrees in relation to the subject between shots to facilitate a seamless edit.

acting: the portrayal of characters' feelings, motives, attitudes and state of mind by actors who manipulate their facial expressions, posture, voice and gestures.

adaptation (film adaptation): a film that is based on another source of art or entertainment such as literature, television, theatre, comic books or computer games.

aerial shot: a moving shot where the camera is filming from above the action.

allusion: deliberately imitating an aspect of another film in order to evoke the audience's memory of that film.

arthouse cinema: general term usually used to describe films with narrative and stylistic conventions that are notably different to the conventions of **classical Hollywood cinema**.

aspect ratio: the ratio of the width of the frame to the height of the frame. Before 1953, films, like television screens, had an aspect ratio of 4:3. Films made since 1953 commonly have wider aspect ratios, ranging from 1.66:1 to 2.35:1.

auteur: a filmmaker whose stylistic influence and artistic control is so great that they are considered the single 'author' of their films, which often include recurring recognisable themes and filmic devices.

axis: An imaginary straight line running between the two main objects in shot, which guides the cinematographer as to where the camera can be positioned.

backlight: a light placed behind the subject being filmed.

backlighting: light shone from behind the subject.

'bullet time': an extreme **slow-motion** effect that is named for the way in which it can show bullets flying through the air.

canted angle: a shot with the camera either partially or completely on its side.

cause and effect: the relationship between an element of the film that causes change and the elements that are affected by that change. The **narrative** is developed as a chain of causes and their effects.

cinematography: the art of capturing images on moving film.

classical Hollywood cinema: a style of filmmaking pioneered by filmmakers in the US and the dominant style of Western cinema today.

classical Hollywood narrative: the most common and dominant **narrative**. The cause-and-effect relationship is facilitated by a motivated, goal-oriented character creating change by overcoming the obstacles standing between them and the attainment of their goal.

close-up: a shot where there is very little distance between the camera and the subject.

conflict: what ensues in a **classical Hollywood narrative** as the protagonist struggles to overcome an obstacle that prevents them from obtaining their goal.

continuity editing: arranging shots into a sequence that allows viewers to make sense of what is going on, without them being actively aware of the editing.

costumes: the clothes, make-up and accessories worn by the characters.

- crane shot:** a shot where the camera is attached to a mechanical arm so it can be lifted above the ground and moved in all directions while filming.
- crosscutting:** cutting back and forth between scenes, thus linking the space of those scenes.
- cut:** the most common edit and the standard way of separating one shot from another. One shot ends and the next begins immediately.
- cutaway:** a shot of a contrasting element inserted between two principal shots to break them up.
- deep focus:** a shot where all objects are in focus.
- depth of field:** the extent to which the objects in the shot are in focus. The more objects that are in focus, the greater the shot's depth of field.
- diegesis:** everything contained within the world of the film.
- diegetic element:** an element within the world of the film.
- diegetic sound:** sound that originates from a character or object within the film.
- dissolve:** an edit which briefly overlaps one shot with the next. The first shot 'dissolves' into the second.
- documentary:** a nonfiction film designed to document some aspect of reality.
- dolly:** a wheeled platform on which a camera is mounted, allowing it to be moved around smoothly.
- dolly shot:** another name for a **tracking shot**; named after the equipment (dolly) used to create tracking shots.
- dolly zoom:** an effect created when the camera is moved away from the subject while zooming in on the subject.
- Dutch angle:** another name for a **canted angle**.
- edit:** a break in the film where one shot finishes and the next shot begins.
- editing:** the art of placing shots together in a specific order to generate a meaningful relationship between them.
- elliptical editing:** decreasing time in a film by editing out events.
- establishing shot:** an extreme long shot that introduces the setting of a scene.
- exposure:** the amount of light that passes through the camera lens while filming.
- extreme close-up:** a 'tight' shot that captures one specific aspect of the subject. It requires the distance between camera and subject to be as short as possible.
- extreme long shot:** a shot of a landscape or city taken at great distance, so that it is nearly impossible to distinguish specific details or recognise any of the characters.
- eye-level shot:** another name for a **straight-on angle**.
- eye-line match:** an editing effect used during a shot/reverse-shot pattern to further establish the relationship between the two shots. The actors look out of frame to where the person they are speaking to would be.
- fade:** an edit where the shot dissolves to or from black.
- fade-in:** a fade where the shot begins by dissolving from black.
- fade-out:** a fade where the shot ends by dissolving into black.
- fast motion:** when the frames are projected at a higher rate than they were shot at, making the film appear to be moving faster than usual.
- fill light:** light used to provide balance to the subject being filmed.
- film noir:** a style or genre of film marked by a mood of fatalism, in which dark moody lighting and heavy shadows are used.
- film series:** a collection of films that are related to each other.
- film style:** the sound and the visual elements of a film (sometimes referred to as film 'language').
- flashback:** a scene or scenes portraying earlier events than those depicted in previous scenes.

- flashforward:** a scene or scenes portraying events that occur at a point in the future, edited to precede the scenes depicting events leading up to that point.
- focal length:** a property of the camera lens that determines the depth of field and magnification of the filmed images. Different lenses have different focal lengths and hence affect how perspective is represented.
- focus:** the degree of clarity and sharpness with which the audience sees the actors and objects in a film.
- frame:** the border or edge of the projected image.
- frame rate:** the number of frames that are shot and projected per second in order to create the illusion of movement.
- frames:** the small still photographs that are recorded on film and then projected onto the cinema screen, usually at a rate of twenty-four per second, to create the illusion of continuous movement.
- framing:** the art of deciding which images the audience sees and how those images are arranged within the frame of each shot.
- freeze frame:** an image that is frozen; a still image.
- frontal lighting:** light shone directly onto the subject from the front.
- generic conventions:** the characteristics of a film that identify it as belonging to a specific **genre**.
- genre:** a 'type' of film (e.g. **western, science fiction, musical**) with a set of narrative and stylistic 'rules' that filmmakers adhere to, and with which audiences are familiar.
- graphic match:** an editing technique whereby shots are edited together based on a visual similarity between them. A graphic match may be based on colours, a prominent object or actors with a similar shape.
- handheld shot:** a shot where the camera is not mounted on a stable object like a tripod, dolly or crane, but instead is held by a person, creating a jerky and bumpy movement in the shot.
- high angle:** the camera is positioned to film the subject from above.
- homage:** an aspect of a film that deliberately evokes another film or filmmaker to show respect to that film or filmmaker.
- horror:** genre of film that aims to create a sense of fear, panic, alarm or dread in the audience.
- hybrid genre:** films with a mixture of generic conventions.
- in focus:** appearing clear and sharply defined.
- ironic use of music:** accompanying a scene with 'inappropriate' music in order to create a juxtaposition between sound and visuals.
- J cut:** occurs when the sound from the subsequent shot is heard in the previous shot.
- jump cut:** a stylised edit that occurs when the subject of the shot remains in the same position in each scene while everything else in the scene changes, creating a jarring sensation of that subject jumping forward into the next scene.
- key light:** a light close to the subject being filmed; provides the primary source of light.
- L cut:** occurs when the sound from a shot carries into the subsequent shot.
- lighting:** the manipulation of light to highlight specific elements in a scene so that they are presented in a particular way.
- linear narrative:** all the events are shown on screen in chronological order.
- long focal length:** a flattened-out perspective that makes the distances between objects appear less than they are.
- long shot:** a shot in which there is a large distance between the subjects and the camera; the background dominates the scene although the subjects are still prominent.
- long take:** a shot that continues for longer than usual without an **edit**.

- low angle:** the camera is positioned to film the subject from below.
- make-up:** used to highlight, distort or hide aspects of a character's face in order to suggest something about their personality.
- match on action:** an editing technique in which a movement of an object or character in one shot is continued in the second shot.
- medium close-up:** a shot which has a comfortable distance between the subject and the camera. A medium close-up captures important detail, but the subject being filmed does not fill the **frame**.
- medium long shot:** a shot in which the subject or subjects in the foreground are equally balanced with what is in the background.
- medium shot:** a shot which has a 'natural' distance between two or more subjects and the camera.
- middle focal length:** normal perspective.
- mise en scène:** all the visual elements within the frame – **setting, lighting, costumes** and **acting**.
- montage:** a sequence of **shots** used to depict long passages of time. A montage sequence is traditionally composed of a series of quick shots edited together by short dissolves and accompanied by music.
- motif:** anything that is repeatedly used in a film to define or explain a character, or to suggest a **theme**. Sounds or musical phrases can also be motifs.
- motivation:** the reason(s) why the **protagonist** acts to achieve their goal in a **classical Hollywood narrative**.
- musical:** a genre of film in which songs, sung by characters in the film, are interwoven into the narrative, sometimes accompanied by dancing.
- narration:** the process by which **plot** elements provide or restrict the **story** information received by the audience.
- narrative:** the series of events that are connected to each other in ways that make sense within the internal logic of the film.
- narrative structure:** the framework, template or formula used to present the plot in terms of **cause-and-effect** principles, and the way the plot relates to time and the film's setting.
- narrator:** a voice-over that may or may not belong to a character in the film; the narrator directly addresses the audience.
- non-diegetic element:** an element, such as a title or background music, that exists only for the audience and not within the world of the film.
- non-diegetic insert:** a shot of something that does not belong to the narrative of a film and which is intercut with other shots.
- non-diegetic sound:** a sound that exists beyond the world of a film; it can be heard by the audience but not by the characters.
- nonlinear narrative:** the majority of the film's action takes place out of sequence (i.e. in reverse chronological order, or through the use of **flashbacks** and **flashforwards**).
- objective point of view:** the audience sees the characters' actions but does not share their perceptions of events and the world surrounding them.
- one-shot feature films:** a film that consists of one long take.
- open-ended conclusion:** a conclusion lacking the conventional closure that occurs when everything in the narrative is explained and accounted for.
- out of focus:** appearing blurred or fuzzy.
- overexposed:** describes a shot that is too bright, due to more light than usual being allowed to pass through the camera lens during filming.
- overlapping editing:** an editing technique which creates the illusion that time is 'stretched out'; a series of shots show the same event from different angles.

- pan:** a camera movement that changes the horizontal angle of a shot during filming by moving a fixed camera from side to side.
- parody:** a humorous version of a film in which the conventions of particular **genres**, or specific films, are imitated and made to appear ridiculous for comic effect.
- pastiche:** a film that openly imitates another film or distinctive elements of film style that are associated with specific eras of filmmaking.
- perspective:** the illusion that the elements in a shot are at varying distances from the audience, even though they are viewed on a two-dimensional screen.
- plot:** the specific details of the film that take you from point A to point B to point C and so on.
- point-of-view shot:** a first-person or subjective shot that represents what a character would see.
- prequel:** a film containing narrative events that occurred before those depicted in the original film, though it is produced afterwards.
- props:** objects that appear in the **setting** and/or interact with characters.
- protagonist:** the major character driving the **narrative**.
- quick editing:** a sequence of very brief shots.
- realistic acting:** an acting style that appears to be natural and does not draw attention to itself.
- reboot:** a film that takes the characters and scenario of an established series and effectively starts the story again.
- reimagining:** a loose remake of a previous film, wherein only the spirit and core concept of the original film are maintained.
- remake:** a film that uses a previous film as its source material, adapting it for a new audience.
- resolution:** the conclusion of a **narrative**.
- restricted information:** the audience's knowledge is limited, restricting it to only what one character or a small group of characters who are central to the narrative know, or possibly even less.
- revisionist film:** a film that belongs to a traditional genre but subverts or revises the conventional themes and narrative development of that genre to critique and challenge social values.
- romantic comedy:** a genre of film in which a love story is told in a light-hearted and humorous way, with a happy ending.
- scene:** a collection of shots arranged, through editing, in a specific order.
- science fiction:** a genre of film characterised by stories involving conflicts between technology and human nature, speculative science and/or social organisation in futuristic or fantastical worlds.
- sequel:** a film that continues the story that had begun in a previous film.
- setting:** the physical location of the film's story.
- shaky cam:** an informal name for a **handheld shot**.
- shallow focus:** a shot where only one or two elements are in focus.
- shared universe:** a film series in which the films can stand alone, but are interlinked through common characters, settings and themes.
- short focal length:** a distorted perspective that makes the distances between objects appear greater than they are.
- shot:** a continuous piece of filming without interruption or edits.
- shot/countershot:** another term for **shot/reverse-shot**.
- shot/reverse-shot:** when the film continually cuts back and forth between two series of shots in a way that suggests the shots are happening in the same place, at the same time, with the elements in the shot relating to each other.

- side lighting:** light shone directly at the side of the subject.
- slow editing:** editing that creates longer shots than usual.
- slow motion:** when the frames are projected at a slower rate than they were shot at, making the film appear to be moving slower than normal.
- social values:** the opinions, attitudes, arguments and beliefs that are promoted or questioned in a film.
- sound:** what is heard during a film.
- sound bridge:** a sound effect that links scenes together. Sounds can be heard before the scene featuring the source of those sounds begins, or they can continue after the relevant scene has finished.
- sound motif:** a recurring sound that is associated with specific visuals, themes or moods.
- speed ramping:** when the frame rate changes within a shot, making it appear as though the action either suddenly speeds up or dramatically slows down.
- split edit:** occurs when the audio track containing the sound for the film is edited at a different time to the visual shots.
- star system:** a method used by major film studios during the classical Hollywood era to create and promote movie stars.
- static shot:** a still shot without camera movement or change in focus.
- steadicam shot:** a complex tracking shot that uses camera stabiliser technology to create a smooth shot, named after the Steadicam brand of camera stabiliser.
- story:** the broad overall world of the film, containing the general concepts and ideas that constitute the film's meaning.
- straight-on angle:** a neutral shot where the camera is positioned level to the ground and films directly in front of itself.
- stylised acting:** an unrealistic style of acting that is deliberately exaggerated or distorted.
- sub-genre:** a specific category of films that forms a subset of a broader genre.
- subjective point of view:** the audience experiences an event in a film from the perspective of a character.
- subverting generic conventions:** 'breaking the rules' of the genre and therefore not meeting audience expectations.
- telephoto lens:** a camera lens with a long focal length; distorts perspective by making the distances between objects appear less than they are.
- theme:** what a film is essentially about. The theme is conveyed through the narrative, the behaviour of the characters and the style of the film.
- three-point lighting:** a system of lighting that uses a **backlight**, a **key light** and **fill light** to provide conventional lighting.
- tilt:** a camera movement that changes the vertical angle of a shot by rotating a fixed camera up and down.
- time-lapse photography:** extreme fast motion; the filmed frame rate is incredibly low so that, when projected at normal speed, huge passages of time flash by in a short amount of screen time.
- top lighting:** light shone onto the subject from above.
- tracking shot:** a shot produced by mounting the camera on a **dolly** to move smoothly in a straight line as it follows the action.
- twist:** a dramatic moment in the narrative that the audience does not anticipate; often brought about by an unexpected revelation.
- two shot:** a medium shot in which two actors are framed together.
- under lighting:** light shone up onto the subject from below.
- underexposed:** a shot that is dark, due to less light than usual being allowed to pass through the camera lens during filming.

unrestricted information: makes the audience godlike and omniscient, as it knows more about what is going on in the film than any of the characters.

voice-over: a non-diegetic voice that comments on the action and/or characters; the voice-over narrator is often also a character in the film.

western: a genre of film characterised by stories set in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the American Wild West.

wide-angle lens: a camera lens with a short focal length; distorts perspective by making the distances between objects appear greater than they are.

wipe: a type of edit in which a dividing line appears on screen, passes over the first shot 'wiping' it away and replaces it with the next shot.

zoom lens: a camera lens that can change **focal length** during a shot; allows the filmmaker to alter the perspective while filming.

zooming in: increasing the **focal length** during a shot so that the camera appears to be moving closer to the subjects being filmed.

zooming out: decreasing the **focal length** during a shot so that the camera appears to be moving away from the subjects being filmed.

Recommended websites

Although there is an endless supply of film-related websites, they are not always particularly useful or relevant for film analysis. The websites listed in this section are widely regarded as reputable, and I regularly use many of them myself. These websites were stable at the time of publication and most of them contain annotated links to other websites.

Database/reference websites

Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

<http://www.imdb.com/>

This well-known online database of films is a terrific resource for finding information, but be aware that, as with Wikipedia, users can submit and edit material, so all information found on IMDb should be cross-checked.

AllMovie

<http://www.allmovie.com/>

Another useful online film database that is a good alternative to IMDb.

Rotten Tomatoes

<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/>

While primarily a film review aggregator site, it also functions as a decent film database.

Australian cinema databases

Australasian Cinema

<http://australiancinema.info/>

BONZA

<http://www.bonzadb.com.au/>

OZ movies

<http://www.ozmovies.com.au/>

Film essays and long form reviews

There is no shortage of film-review websites and blogs offering personal opinions but, for more rigorous and analytic writing on films, these are some recommended online journals from Australia:

Senses of Cinema

<http://sensesofcinema.com/>

One of the first and still one of the leading online film journals.

4:3

<https://fourthreefilm.com/>

An online film magazine focusing on Australian film festivals.

Filmed in Ether

<http://www.filmedinether.com/>

A film website focusing on Asian cinema.

Screening the Past

<http://www.screeningthepast.com/>

A free online journal dedicated to the academic analysis of cinema.

Some recommended international English-language journals include:

Bright Lights Film Journal

<http://brightlightsfilm.com/>

An online journal offering film analysis from a politically progressive perspective.

cléo

<http://cleojournal.com/>

An online journal offering film analysis from a feminist perspective.

Little White Lies

<http://lwlies.com/>

The website component for the bi-monthly print magazine of the same name.

Notebook

<https://mubi.com/notebook>

An online magazine attached to MUBI, an arthouse streaming service.

Sight & Sound

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine>

The website component for the monthly print magazine of the same name.

Film news and reviews

Below are some more traditional film websites that are also worth a look:

AV Club

<http://www.avclub.com/>

Cut Print Film

<http://cutprintfilm.com/>

Birth.Movies.Death.

<http://birthmoviesdeath.com/>

Fandor

<https://www.fandor.com/>

IndieWire

<http://www.indiewire.com/>

Vague Visages

<https://vaguevisages.com/>

Variety

<http://variety.com/>

And, finally, you can check out some of the writing by the author of this book over on his blog, Cinema Autopsy: <https://blog.cinemaautopsy.com/>

A big thank you to Alexandra Heller-Nicholas for helping to compile these resources.

Index of films

This index lists all the film titles that appear throughout the book. The name of the film's director and the year of the film's first general release are given in brackets, followed by the page numbers on which the film is referred to. Initial articles such as 'A' and 'The' in the film's title are placed at the end of the title.

- 10 Cloverfield Lane* (Dan Trachtenberg, 2016) 128
- 2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) 92, 99, 125, 169–70
- 24 Hour Party People* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002) 144
- 300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) 175
- 400 Blows, The* (François Truffaut, 1959) 91
- (500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009) 116, 128
- 8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963) 8, 122
- A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (Roy Andersson, 2014) 8
- Adaptation.* (Spike Jonze, 2002) 138
- Alien* series 137
- Alien: Covenant* (Ridley Scott, 2017) 36, 137
- All About Eve* (Joseph L Mankiewicz, 1950) 122
- All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) 133
- Amazing Spider-Man, The* (Marc Webb, 2012) 136, 160
- American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) 99, 103
- American Honey* (Andrea Arnold, 2016) 72
- Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015) 103, 137
- Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) 134
- Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016) 86, 125
- Artist, The* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) 72
- Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007) 68, 122
- Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) 125, 175
- Avengers* series 175
- Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) 137
- Babadook, The* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) 124
- Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995) 112
- Baby Driver* (Edgar Wright, 2017) 133, 164
- Batman* series 28, 160
- Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) 160, 162
- Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) 42
- Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) 154
- Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) 85, 133
- Beautiful Mind, A* (Ron Howard, 2001) 122
- Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) 138
- Big Lebowski, The* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998) 122
- Big Short, The* (Adam McKay, 2015) 91
- Big Sick, The* (Michael Showalter, 2017) 125
- Big Sleep, The* (Howard Hawks, 1946) 104, 122, 125
- Birdman* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014) 96, 111, 121
- Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) 13, 60, 118, 125, 133–4
- Blair Witch Project, The* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999) 67
- Bound* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1996) 125
- Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby, 1976) 68
- Bourne* series 67
- Breaker Morant* (Bruce Beresford, 1980) 20
- Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) 8, 89
- Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) 124
- Bridge of Spies* (Steven Spielberg, 2015) 164
- Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001) 125
- Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) 134

- Brooklyn* (John Crowley, 2015) 29
- Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968) 133
- Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969) 91
- Captain America* series 175
- Captain America: Civil War* (Joe and Anthony Russo, 2016) 137
- Carlito's Way* (Brian De Palma, 1993) 86
- Carnage* (Roman Polanski, 2011) 149
- Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) 134
- Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) 8
- Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) 168
- Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) 125
- Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) 117
- Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) 103
- Cloud Atlas* (Tom Tykwer and Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 2012) 83
- Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) 67
- Cotton Club, The* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1984) 83
- Crazy, Stupid, Love.* (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, 2011) 125
- Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) 124
- Crying Game, The* (Neil Jordan, 1992) 118
- Dark Knight, The* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) 10, 128, 160
- Dark Knight Rises, The* (Christopher Nolan, 2012) 160–2
- Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) 70
- Day the Earth Stood Still, The* (Robert Wise, 1951) 125
- Day the Earth Stood Still, The* (Scott Derrickson, 2008) 125
- District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) 66
- Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) 124
- Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) 137
- Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) 125
- Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) 99, 105
- Dressmaker, The* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 2015) 29, 126
- Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011) 125
- Driver, The* (Walter Hill, 1978) 133
- Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017) 68, 140, 164, 165
- Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) 99
- Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990) 121
- Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977) 122
- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) 86, 138
- Exorcist, The* (William Friedkin, 1973) 124
- Expendables* series 138
- Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004) 130
- Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Wes Anderson, 2009) 138
- Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002) 133, 134
- Fast and the Furious* series 15
- Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986) 131
- Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, 2003) 132
- Forbidden Planet* (Fred M Wilcox, 1956) 125
- Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) 125
- Foxcatcher* (Bennett Miller, 2014) 164
- Frozen* (Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, 2013) 128
- Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997) 36, 70, 105
- Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) 124, 126, 164
- Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) 125
- Godfather: Part II, The* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) 83
- Goldstone* (Ivan Sen, 2016) 65
- Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014) 122
- Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, Sam Wood and George Cukor, 1939) 8, 28
- Good, the Bad and the Ugly, The* (Sergio Leone, 1966) 56, 124

- Graduate, The* (Mike Nichols, 1967) 106, 118
- Grand Budapest Hotel, The* (Wes Anderson, 2014) 28, 72, 122, 138, 164
- Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) 96, 112, 167–70
- Great Gatsby, The* (Baz Luhrmann, 2013) 167
- Guardians of the Galaxy* series 175
- Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) 137
- Hairspray* (Adam Shankman, 2007) 125
- Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) 124
- Harry Potter* series 137
- Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (David Yates, 2009) 175
- Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001) 137
- Heat* (Michael Mann, 1995) 111
- Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) 111
- High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) 124
- His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) 125
- Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey, The* (Peter Jackson, 2012) 42
- Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies, The* (Peter Jackson, 2014) 175
- Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012) 8
- Hours, The* (Stephen Daldry, 2002) 92
- Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011) 164, 166
- Hunger Games* series 102
- Hunger Games, The* (Gary Ross, 2012) 153–6
- Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (Taika Waititi, 2016) 112
- I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016) 111
- I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie and Kevin Williamson, 1997) 132
- Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) 133
- Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) 13, 175
- Indiana Jones* series 98
- Inherent Vice* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2014) 125
- Inside Llewyn Davis* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2013) 117
- Inside Out* (Pete Docter and Ronnie del Carmen, 2015) 85–6
- It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) 125
- James Bond* series 60
- Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) 102, 104, 109
- Jurassic World* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015) 175
- Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007) 125
- Kong: Skull Island* (Jordan Vogt-Roberts, 2017) 92
- La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) 125, 128
- Lady in the Lake, The* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) 70
- Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) 116–17
- Lego Batman Movie, The* (Chris McKay, 2017) 132
- Lego Movie, The* (Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, 2014) 175
- Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012) 143–5
- Lion* (Garth Davis, 2016) 165
- Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz, 1986) 125
- Lobster, The* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015) 8
- Logan* (James Mangold, 2017) 108
- Looper* (Rian Johnson, 2012) 83
- Lord of the Rings* series 13, 175
- Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, The* (Peter Jackson, 2002) 30
- Mad Max* series 15
- Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015) 8
- Magnificent Seven, The* (John Sturges, 1960) 124, 136
- Magnificent Seven, The* (Antoine Fuqua, 2016) 124, 136
- Maltese Falcon, The* (John Huston, 1941) 125

- Man Who Knew Too Much, The* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1934 and 1956) 136
- Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The* (John Ford, 1962) 144
- Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) 8
- Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976) 68
- Martian, The* (Ridley Scott, 2015) 8, 125
- Matrix* series 42, 164, 175
- Matrix, The* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) 42, 125
- Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) 86, 117
- Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) 125, 133
- Mission Impossible* series 60, 164
- Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016) 165
- Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936) 84
- Mommy* (Xavier Dolan, 2014) 72
- Moneyball* (Bennett Miller, 2011) 138
- Moonrise Kingdom* (Wes Anderson, 2012) 138, 164
- Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) 125
- My Best Friend's Wedding* (PJ Hogan, 1997) 128
- My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964) 28
- My Scientology Movie* (John Dower, 2015) 130
- Nightmare on Elm Street, The* (Wes Craven, 1984) 124
- Nosferatu* (FW Murnau, 1922) 124
- Paddington* (Paul King, 2014) 99, 111
- Paranormal Activity* series 132
- Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007) 124
- Planet of the Apes* series 175
- Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J Schaffner, 1968) 136
- Planet of the Apes* (Tim Burton, 2001) 136
- Player, The* (Robert Altman, 1992) 95
- Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967) 48
- Postman Always Rings Twice, The* (Tay Garnett, 1946) 125
- Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012) 36, 137
- Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) 102, 124, 136
- Psycho* (Gus Van Sant, 1998) 136
- Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) 98, 104
- Rashômon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) 86
- Revenant, The* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2015) 96
- Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959) 124
- Rocky* (John G Avildsen, 1976) 68
- Rocky Horror Picture Show, The* (Jim Sharman, 1975) 125
- Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016) 82, 137
- Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) 96
- Royal Tenenbaums, The* (Wes Anderson, 2001) 88, 164
- Running Man, The* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987) 154
- Rushmore* (Wes Anderson, 1998) 164
- Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002) 96
- Sausage Party* (Conrad Vernon and Greg Tiernan, 2016) 132
- Scary Movie* series 132
- Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) 28
- Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) 132
- Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995) 56
- Searchers, The* (John Ford, 1956) 124
- Secret Life of Walter Mitty, The* (Ben Stiller, 2013) 121
- Separation, A* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011) 148–50
- Series 7: The Contenders* (Daniel Minahan, 2001) 154
- Seven Samurai* (Akira Kurosawa, 1954) 136
- Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) 124
- Shining, The* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) 68, 132
- Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010) 122
- Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952) 125
- Sixth Sense, The* (M Night Shyamalan, 1999) 119
- Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012) 66, 111
- Sleepy Hollow* (Tim Burton, 1999) 121

- Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008) 116
- Social Network, The* (David Fincher, 2010) 138
- Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015) 72
- Spectre* (Sam Mendes, 2015) 66
- Spider-Man* series 131, 136
- Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017) 131, 136
- Spotlight* (Tom McCarthy, 2015) 8
- Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939) 124
- Star Wars* series 28, 76, 137, 175
- Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) 8, 125
- Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) 118
- Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983) 118
- Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (JJ Abrams, 2015) 137
- Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017) 137
- Steve Jobs* (Danny Boyle, 2015) 138, 165
- Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012) 130, 167
- Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) 70
- Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) 117, 122, 125
- Supersize Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2004) 130
- Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (Tim Burton, 2007) 125
- Swiss Army Man* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2016) 103
- Terminator* series 15
- Third Man, The* (Carol Reed, 1949) 54
- Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) 54
- Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (Tomas Alfredson, 2011) 166
- Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935) 125
- Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) 95
- Tree of Life, The* (Terrence Malick, 2011) 68, 89, 116, 121
- Trip to the Moon, A* (George Méliès, 1902) 167
- True Grit* (Henry Hathaway, 1969) 124
- True Grit* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2010) 124
- Truman Show, The* (Peter Weir, 1998) 127
- Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995) 86
- Twilight Saga: New Moon, The* (Chris Weitz, 2009) 167
- Umbrellas of Cherbourg, The* (Jacques Demy, 1964) 125
- Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992) 124
- Untouchables, The* (Brian de Palma, 1987) 133
- Up* (Pete Docter, 2009) 175
- Usual Suspects, The* (Bryan Singer, 1995) 69, 118–19, 122
- Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) 49, 109
- Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Jake Kasdan, 2007) 132
- WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) 56
- Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009) 99
- We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011) 166
- Wedding Singer, The* (Frank Coraci, 1998) 125
- West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961) 125
- What's Up, Doc?* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1972) 125
- When Harry Met Sally...* (Rob Reiner, 1989) 125
- Wild Bunch, The* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) 95
- Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017) 109, 110, 126, 165
- X-Men* series 108, 175

Index of names and terms

30-degree rule 88
180-degree rule 80

A

accessories 26, 27, 30–1, 174
 see also personal props
acting style 10, 31–6
 changes in 35
 realistic 36
 stylised 35–6
 see also facial expression, gestures,
 posture, voice
action films 42, 60, 70, 90, 94, 127, 133
adaptations 135
aerial shots 65–6
'All Summer Long' (song) 99
allusions 133–4, 153
Anderson, Wes 72, 138, 164
arthouse cinema 6–8
 and art films 7
 and experimental films 7
 and subverting the cause-and-effect
 relationship 117
aspect ratio 71–2
atmosphere 15, 24, 39, 40, 98–9, 152
audience expectations 124, 128
auteur theory 138
authorship 140

B

backlight 21
backlighting 23–4
Bayat, Sareh 149
Beach Boys, The 99
black comedies 127
Blue Danube, The 99
Bond, James 3, 13, 66, 111
'Born to be Wild' (song) 99
'bullet time' 42
Bullock, Sandra 168
Burton, Tim 121
bushranger films 126

C

camera angle 51
 high angle 51–3
 low angle 51–3
 straight-on angle 51–3
camera distance 55–61
camera height 65
camera level 53–4
camera movement 62–8
 horizontal 62–3
 vertical 63
camera position 51–3
canted angle 53–4
Carrey, Jim 36
cars in cinema 15
cause-and-effect relationship 8, 109–10,
 116–17
changing focal length 49
Chaplin, Charlie 30, 84
character points of view 120–2
characters 10
 and acting style 31–6
 and cause-and-effect relationships 109–10
 and costumes 26–7
 and film speed 42
 and lighting 15, 19, 20, 21–5, 39
 and motifs 13–14
 and narrative structure 116
 and point-of-view shots 69–70, 120–2
 and props 13, 30–1
 and setting 11
 and social values 157
 and temporal editing 94
 and the classical Hollywood narrative 110
 writing about 145–50
 see also protagonists
Chomsky, Noam 155
cinematographers 37, 38, 43, 46, 49, 51,
 80, 164–5, 168
cinematography 5, 37–73
classical Hollywood cinema 6–8, 28, 36,
 74, 76
classical Hollywood narrative, the 110–19
Clooney, George 168–9
close-up 55, 57
comedies 127, 132
 see also humour, romantic comedies

computer-generated imagery (CGI) 130, 143, 168
 conflict in narrative structure 8, 111–12
 see also protagonists
 continuity editing 76–82
 common techniques of 78–81
 Coppola, Francis Ford 134
 costumes 10–11, 26–30, 152
 courtroom dramas 20, 126, 148–9
 crane shots 65, 95
 crosscutting 82–3
 Cuarón, Alfonso 168
 Cure, The 103
 cutaway shots 81
 cuts 74
 and invisible editing 78–81
 see also jump cuts, non-diegetic inserts

D

De Palma, Brian 133
 deep focus 44–5, 169
 depth of field 43–5, 143
 normal depth of field 45
 detective films 39, 117, 120, 122
 see also film noir
 dialogue 79, 97, 106, 135, 145, 165
 diegesis 4, 108
 diegetic elements 4
 diegetic music 103–4
 diegetic narrators 104
 diegetic sounds 4, 103
 directors, how to acknowledge 140
 disaster films 127
Disintegration (album) 103
 dissolves 74–5, 77, 87
 documentaries 66–7, 129–30
 Dolan, Xavier 72
 dolly shots 64
 dolly zoom 49
 domestic dramas 148–50
 dreams and dreamlike sequences 13, 39, 64, 68, 74–5, 95, 96, 105, 121–2, 144, 167
 Dutch angle 53
 Dylan, Bob 99

E

early cinema 4
 editing 5, 74–96, 142, 143, 154, 166
 editors, role of 73, 92

edits 2, 74–6
 definition of 2
 see also editing
 Eisenstein, Sergei 133
 elliptical editing 87
 establishing shots 60, 65, 77
 exposure 38–40
 normal exposure 38
 overexposure 38–9
 underexposure 39–40
 extreme camera distances 55–6, 60–1
 extreme close-ups 55–6
 extreme long shots 55, 60–1
 eye-line matches 79

F

facial expression 31–2, 55
 fades 75, 77, 87
 Farhadi, Asghar 149–50
 Farhadi, Sarina 148
 Fassbender, Michael 36
 fast motion 42
 Fellini, Federico 121–2
 fill light 21
 film franchise see film series
 film ‘language’, see film style
 film noir 22, 40, 125
 film reviews, how to write 163–70
 film series 137–8
 prequels 137
 sequels 118, 137
 shared universe 137
 film speed 42
 film style 4–5
 see also acting style, lighting, mise en scène, settings, sound
 flashbacks 85–6, 105, 116, 119, 144
 flashforwards 86, 116, 117, 119
 Fleming, Victor 28
 focal length 46–50
 long focal length 48
 middle focal length 46
 short focal length 47
 focus 43–5, 64
 frame 3
 frame rate 42
 framing 3–4
 with light 19–20
 freeze frames 91

French New Wave 89, 91
 frontal lighting 22

G

gangster films 24, 39, 152, 164
 generic conventions 124–6
 subverting 128, 132
 genre 6, 123–30, 151, 163, 167
 German expressionism 133
 gestures 34, 57
 Godard, Jean-Luc 89
 graphic editing 92–3
 graphic matches 92–3
 Gunning, Tom 167

H

handheld shots 66–8
 Hardy, Tom 161
 Hatami, Leila 148
 Hathaway, Anne 160–1
 Haynes, Todd 133, 134
 Hitchcock, Alfred 120, 136
 homages 133
 horror films 4, 22, 24, 39, 67–8, 119, 124,
 127, 151, 153
 music in 100
 and quick editing 94
 Hosseini, Kimia 150
 Hosseini, Shahab 149
 humour 127, 132
 see also comedies
 Hutcherson, Josh 153
 hybrid genres 126, 127

I

ironic uses of music 99, 166

J

jump cuts 88–9

K

Kaufman, Charlie 138
 key light 21

Khan, Irrfan 143
 Kubrick, Stanley 99

L

Lawrence, Jennifer 153
 lighting 15–26, 152
 colour 17
 direction 21–5
 intensity 17
 texture 18
 see also backlighting, frontal lighting,
 shadows, side lighting, three-point
 lighting, top lighting, under lighting
 linear narratives 116–17
 long shots 55, 59–60
 long takes 95–6, 143, 168
 Lumière brothers, the 167
 Lynch, David 99, 122
 Lynn, Vera 99

M

make-up 30, 152
 martial arts films 127
 matches on action 80–1
 medium close-up 55, 57–8
 medium long shots 55, 59
 medium shots 55, 58
 Méliès, George 167
 melodramas 28, 133
 mise en scène 5, 9–36, 121, 126, 135, 138
 and character 148–50
 and genre 124–5, 126
 see also acting style, costumes, lighting,
 settings
 mixed genres *see* hybrid genres
 Moaadi, Peyma 148
 montage sequences 87–8, 99
 Moore, Michael 130
 motifs 13–5, 144, 152, 155, 165, 166
 see also sound motifs
 motivations of the protagonist 8, 13, 111–
 12, 113
 ambiguity in 117, 149
 music soundtrack 4, 98, 99, 104, 109, 121,
 133, 166
 musicals 125, 128, 133

N

narration 119–22, 140–1
 narrative 6, 107, 124–5, 151, 154
 and how it presents themes 151
 and key moments 147
 and non-diegetic inserts 84
 describing the 165
 writing about 140–5
 narrative information 119–20
 narrative resolution 8, 13, 113, 118, 128,
 147, 156, 159
 see also open-ended conclusions
 narrative structure 8, 86, 110–13, 116–19
 see also classical Hollywood narrative
 structure
 narrators 104, 122, 129
 Nolan, Christopher 140, 165
 non-diegetic elements 109
 non-diegetic inserts 81, 84, 109
 non-diegetic music 104
 non-diegetic narrators 104
 non-diegetic sounds 104
 nonlinear narratives 116–17
 Novak, Kim 109
 novels, film adaptations of 135, 143–5,
 153–6

O

objective point of view 121
 open-ended conclusions 118
 overexposure 38–9
 overlapping editing 90

P

pans 62, 64
 parodies 127, 132
 personal props 30–1
 see also accessories
 perspective 46–50, 64
 pitch 34
 'Plainsong' (song) 103
 plot 6, 108–11, 116–17, 118, 119–20, 135
 point-of-view shots 69–70
 Polley, Sarah 130
 posture 31, 33
 prequels see film series
 Price, Steven 169

prison films 18, 126
 props 13–14, 56, 106, 125, 149, 152
 see also personal props
 protagonists 110–13, 121, 122, 140–1, 143,
 153, 156, 160, 165, 168
 and change 112
 see also characters
 psychological horror 127
 psychological thriller 128

Q

quick edits 94, 152, 154

R

realism 66, 160
 and acting style 35–6, 165
 and handheld shots 68
 illusion of 6, 7, 8, 17
 realistic acting 36
 reboots 136
 reimaginings 136
 resolution, see narrative resolution
 restricted information 120
 revenge films 126
 review-writing 163–70
 revisionist films 133, 152
 rhythmic editing 94–6
 quick editing 94
 slow editing 94
 rhythmic matches 84
 'Ride of the Valkyries, The' 134
 romance in film 13, 44, 118, 151, 152, 156
 romantic comedies 29, 112, 125, 128

S

samurai films 126
 Sandler, Adam 36
 satire 95, 127
 scenes 77
 definition of 2–3
 key scenes 141
 linked by sound bridges 105–6
 see also editing
 Schwarzenegger, Arnold 31
 science fiction 66, 125, 127, 128, 151, 152
 Scorsese, Martin 99, 164
 sequels see film series

- settings 10, 11–12, 17, 22, 36, 49, 60, 100, 116–17, 136, 143–4, 149, 156, 168
 and character 44
 and film exposure 39
 and genre 126
- shadows 10–11, 21, 22, 24, 25–6
- Shahbazi, Ali-Asghar 148
- shaky cam *see* handheld shots
- Sharma, Suraj 143
- shot/countershots *see* shot/reverse-shots
- shot/reverse-shots 79–80
- shots 2–3, 15, 16
 definition of 2
 edited together to form scenes 5, 73–96
see also cinematography, editing, lighting
- side lighting 22–3
- slasher films 127
- slow edits 94
- slow motion 42, 152
- smoking in films 14
- Snyder, Zack 42
- social values 133
 and identification 157
 and punishment 159
 and representation 157
 and reward 159
 writing about 156–62
- Sorkin, Aaron 138, 165
- sound 4, 5, 13, 82, 97–106, 121, 152, 154, 168
 and cuts 74, 83, 90
see also music soundtrack
- sound bridges 82, 105–6
- sound motifs 102
- soundtrack, *see* music soundtrack
- space of a film 10, 76, 82, 85, 88, 105
- spatial editing 82–5
- special effects 4
- speed ramping 42
- split edits 82
 and J cuts 82, 105
 and L cuts 82, 105
- spoofs, *see* parodies
- Spurlock, Morgan 130
- star system 137–8
- static shots 62
- Steadicam (shots) 67–8
- Steppenwolf 99
- still shots 62
- story 108–9, 116–17, 118, 119–20, 153, 168
- Strauss II, Johann 99
- stylised acting 35–6
- sub-genres 127
- subjective point of view 121–2
- submarine films 126
- superhero films 26, 29, 127, 128
- supernatural horror 127
- surrealism in films 122
- ## T
- Tarantino, Quentin 99, 132
- teen films 99, 131
- telephoto lens 48
- temporal editing 85
- themes 10, 11, 13, 60, 68, 92, 95, 108–9, 126, 133, 136, 137, 138, 143–5, 149–50, 157, 160, 166, 169–70
 writing about 151–6
- Theroux, Louis 130
- three-point lighting 21
- thrillers 22
- tilts 63–4
- time, representations of 42, 74, 75, 76, 81, 83, 85–91, 92, 117, 140, 142
- time-lapse photography 42
- 'Times They Are A-Changin', The' (song) 99
- top lighting 24–5
- tracking shots 64–5, 67, 169
- Truffaut, François 120
- twists (narrative) 118–20, 165
- ## U
- under lighting 24
- underexposure 39–40
- unrestricted information 119–20
- ## V
- violence in films 14, 15, 26, 99, 102, 124–5, 126, 127, 151, 152, 154–5, 163, 167
- visual art forms 1, 4, 135
- voice 32, 34, 104
 and pitch 34
- voice-overs 91, 105, 122, 130
see also narrators
- volume of sound 34

W

- 'We'll Meet Again' (song) 99
- westerns 2, 20, 124, 126, 149
- wide-angle lens 47
- widescreen formats and television screens
71–2
 - see also aspect ratio
- Wilson, Luke 89
- wipes 76, 77

Z

- zooming 49

