

the
**FILM
APPRECIATION
BOOK**

*The film course you
always wanted to take*

JIM PIPER

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About the Book

Consider the book you are holding to be your own Film 101 course, a beginner's course in "film appreciation," or "film study" if you like.

I assume you have already seen lots of movies, and know what types of motion pictures you favor over others. You know what actors you like or dislike. You may also know something about film directors, and eagerly await new releases from your favorites. In this sense, you are at a tremendous advantage over the art appreciation student, who may not have visited many galleries, or the music appreciation student, who may not know much about Viennese composers. And of course, your vast movie-going experience has informed you, at least intuitively, about plot—that is, how matters should wrap up and give your viewing experience a sense of being whole. You know when you've been cheated because the story ends implausibly or with a thud. When the story ends agreeably—not always "happily"—you leave the theatre (or eject the DVD from your player) with a sense of fulfillment.

But if you were to enroll in an actual Film 101 course at a college or university, the chances are your professor would take you beyond mere plot, to matters such as framing, composition, lighting, and digital imaging. Certainly she would drop in a little film history and theory so you'd know how, why, and when certain techniques originated, and which filmmakers first tried them out. She'd want you to know how film editors work, and how they shape your response to a movie. There is a whole world of film sound she'd want to introduce you to—music, sound effects, mixing, and dubbing. And finally, meaning: your film professor will likely invite you to explore various kinds of meaning in the films she shows you. She might have you consider film as literature.

But you will get as much from this book—analyses of images, cuts, sounds, and overall meaning. I explain why and show you how.

MOVIES INTO FILM

When you do allow your professor (or this book) to present motion pictures to you in these ways, a magic thing happens: you may turn movies into films. It's a good thing we have these two words in our language. Movies are largely

entertainments, gobbled down and forgotten like a cheap, drive-thru hamburger. Films, on the other hand, have potential to be works of art or literature. They have staying power. They continue to move us decade after decade.

William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and Katherine Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) deliver truths about war. *Best Years* conveys truths about the end of WWII, when people didn't know what to do with their lives. *The Hurt Locker* is about addiction to risk and danger, even death. Your typical movie presents life as we wish it to be—when people went back to work and family as usual after war or were totally unaffected by combat. Wyler and Bigelow knew better.

We may disagree. What might be a film for me could be a movie to you. And vice versa. But if you take my invitation to get serious about photography, editing, and sound—as well as meaning—you may begin to perceive art, truth, and something close to real life in the motion pictures of your life, and thus enrich your film viewing experience. You might also enrich your life.

TO THE INTERNET

Just as a film professor would show you still images, clips, and entire films, I am going to take you to the Internet now and then to show you clips of significance. And I'll suggest dozens of noteworthy films for you to watch.

Since paper books do not, as you know, let you navigate the Internet, I can't just drop them in this book.

But I have a solution. It involves visiting the website SkyhorseSupplements.com, and following the link for the supplement to *The Film Appreciation Book*. As you read the book, you will note many suggested links. For example, here is a page from the chapter called "Composition":

OVERHEAD SHOTS

These are shots taken from a camera placed directly over the subject. There is seldom a need for such shots in most films. But in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) there is considerable need as James Stewart goes all queasy when he finds himself in high places. Below is a link to a scene that contains two cutaways meant to simulate Stewart's condition of vertigo as he forces Kim Novak to climb rickety stairs in an old California historical landmark.

Vertigo

www.youtube.com/watch?v=je0NhvAQ6fM

The “*Vertigo effect*,” as it is now famously known, was produced by simultaneously tracking out and zooming in, like ELSs set in deserts. There is little to obstruct panoramic views.

The supplement contains the same links as those in the book. Read the book with a computer of some sort—laptop, tablet, smartphone—at your side and toggle from book to computer, then back to the book. Or wait until you finish a chapter and bring up all the links for that chapter one after the other.

The trouble with links

. . . is that in time some of the sites they take you to may disappear or become altered so much that they are of no use to us. Though I have tested and retested these links many times, expect 5 or 10 percent of my links to be inoperable by the time you read this book. If so, you can usually bring them up yourself with a quick search. For example, if you can't reach the shower scene in Psycho with my link, try going to YouTube on your computer and searching "Psycho shower scene."

These changes will be updated regularly in the supplement.

Some clips and trailers on YouTube have commercials you have to sit through. I can't stop this. Fortunately these commercials are brief and often can be skipped before they finish.

Redirect notices

. . . look like this:

“The previous page is sending you to feliceblog.blogspot.com/2009/11/cold-mountain-2003-photo-gallery.html. If you do not want to visit that page, you can return to the previous page.”

I HAVE . . .

. . . taught film “appreciation” and filmmaking for thirty years in a California community college. I have reached students of all ages and walks of life—because community colleges have wider doors than any other level of higher education. They just do not exclude. I even had a blind student who did very well in the film study class with the help of her sighted daughter. Plus I had a nearly blind student in the filmmaking class who did a mostly black film with sound that suggested what it was like to be blind.

. . . published five books about films. Go to Amazon and find my latest book, which I call *Spiritual Films: The Secular Approach*.

. . . won awards in the United States and Europe for short dramatic films I have made.

. . . served as a board member for eleven years for a nonprofit which brings foreign and American independent films to my town, Fresno. Visit www.fresnofilmworks.org.

Shots

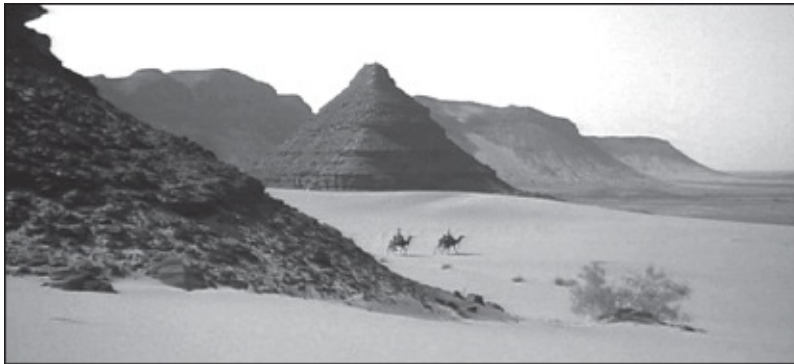
CHAPTER 1

Frame

Think of five film frames: extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, close-up, and extreme close-up. Each has specific uses in the language of film.

EXTREME LONG SHOTS

These provide a distant view of people and events. No one person is individualized, as in the shot linked below from the David Lean masterpiece *Lawrence of Arabia*.



Lawrence of Arabia

Settings dominate in ELSs. The next photo shows you another desert in Mexico where a nanny has lost her way.



Babel

The film is *Babel* (2006), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. Like all ELSs, the frame could have been tighter. It could have shown a look of desperation on the woman's face. In fact, the film does this several times. But Iñárritu felt he needed more. He wanted to place the nanny very small and very lost-looking in the barren setting. An extreme long shot was the perfect frame for this.

Below is a link to a famous extreme long shot. At this point in the story, director Victor Fleming had already shown you what Dorothy and her companions look like up close. Now he wanted to show you the fantastic Emerald City. The flowered hillocks are lovely, too. Again, in ELSs, setting, not characters, dominates.



The Wizard of Oz

And another extreme long shot from *The Pianist* (2002). The lone figure is a Jew who has escaped from the ghetto in war-torn Warsaw. Director Roman Polanski wanted you to experience devastation, not the plight of the man.



The Pianist

LONG SHOTS

. . . show people in films from head to toe. You can make out their faces, their expressions. You can tell if they are happy, angry, afraid, or whatever. They show the setting plainly enough, but the setting is less important in long shots. People now loom as more important. Here is a long shot from the Martin Scorsese film *Hugo* (2011) showing a pair of young people in a train station.



Hugo

And again from *Lawrence of Arabia*:



Lawrence of Arabia

And finally a long shot from *Walkabout* (1971). The aborigine boy leads the two children. It's important that we see him leading because much of the film has to do with what the boy has to teach the two inexperienced Anglo children alone in the arid Australian outback.



Walkabout

The link below is from Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). It shows how the general in the center is clearly in charge. Everyone faces him at attention. The ocean in the background figures importantly in the story. From it Yanks will launch an invasion of the island.



MEDIUM SHOTS

These characteristically frame two people from the waist up. They usually stand or sit side by side. It's implied that the people are dramatically equal—that is, for the moment, neither dominates.

The first shot below is from the classic movie *Casablanca* (1942). We see four people all lined up. The second shot below is from *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). The man is trying to save Tutsis from the machetes of the rampaging Hutus. His wife fears for her family. No one is dominant in these two shots—thus the simple left-to-right composition. Finally, third shot is arguably one of the most famous medium shots in film history. It's from the Oscar-laden production of *On the Waterfront* (1954). In it two brothers discuss what the man on the right, Marlon Brando, should do. He's been hanging out with the sister of a dock worker he had unknowingly set up to be killed by the mob. His brother, Rod Steiger, is the mob's lawyer. He's trying to get Marlon to stop seeing Edie and take a cushy dock job somewhere else.



Casablanca



Hotel Rwanda



On the Waterfront

Some medium shots do indicate dramatic superiority. The still below from *Vier Minuten* (*Four Minutes* in English, 2006), a German film, shows the main character in the foreground and her guard in the background. Placement strategy now is foreground-background. The guard has had just about enough from the impudent young woman, who is a virtuoso piano player. He's also out of focus. Subjects in the background and subjects out of focus are almost always dramatically less important than foreground subjects in focus.



Vier Minuten

Medium shots also show a bit of setting. In the image above, we can see stacks of books suggesting a library. (In fact, it's a prison library.) The medium shot from *On the Waterfront* takes place in a cab. The shot from *Hotel Rwanda* looks like it takes place in a refugee camp.

CLOSE-UPS

. . . show emotion, intent, frame of mind. The frame shows only faces or heads and shoulders. Close-ups (CUs) often peer into the souls of characters. The close-ups below are from *Schindler's List* (1993), the film about the change of mind of a Nazi war profiteer who stops his exploitation of Jewish slave labor in favor of saving as many Jews as he can from gas chambers. Here Liam Neeson, playing Schindler, looks confident scamming the officer in charge of the Warsaw Ghetto, a man named Goeth (below) played by Ralph Fiennes.



Schindler, in Schindler's List



Goeth, in Schindler's List

Commonly, the film editor cuts back and forth between two close-ups, but that is a subject better left to my chapters on editing. The whole purpose of the CU is, as I have said, to single out, isolate. Schindler looks capable. Goeth looks next to evil. Long shots integrate—you have to take in a lot in a short period of time. CUs make you think of one thing at a time separate from other visual matters.

CUs seldom show much of the setting. Setting recedes in importance. LSs and ELSs are the frames for showing settings. CUs mainly do faces.

Here is a loose CU from *Hustle & Flow* (2005), a film about a pimp trying to make a hit rap song. We see the microphone plus an important gift one of his hookers gave him, a lava lamp. The actor is Terrance Howard.



Hustle & Flow

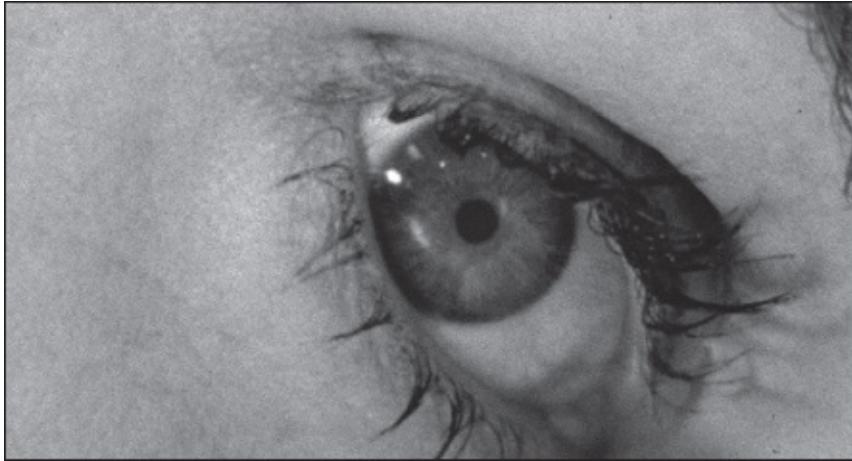
Below is a tighter close-up of a little-known actor, Arnold Lucy, who plays a rabid, super-patriotic professor in the anti-war film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). There is no room in the frame for anything but the face. The background is indistinct.



All Quiet on the Western Front

EXTREME CLOSE-UP

And finally, the extreme close-up. The most common subjects in a film to be rendered by ECUs are eyes, actually a single eye. When you fill a fifty-foot (or inch) screen with an eyeball, you mean to convey something extreme—madness or fear usually.



Psycho

That's Janet Leigh, who never completed her shower.

Even with such minimal information, you can tell if the actor is sleepy, alarmed, or calm—maybe even dead.

Films about piano players always have ECUs of fingers on keys. Often they are stand-in fingers, as actual actors seldom know how to play the piano. The ECU below is from Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* (2002).



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

One way to look at the process of filmmaking is to consider how the director orders a day's worth of varied frames—long shots, close-ups, another close-up, a medium shot, then another long shot. When she wants to show, say, what a room looks like, she will do a long shot. When she wants to reveal what a character is thinking, she'll instruct her camera crew to move the camera in closer and tightly frame an actor's face. And so on. Each time the camera has to be moved is a *setup*. Particular setups may take an hour or longer. Props and backdrops have to be brought in. Lights and microphones placed. Camera positioned and loaded with film, and the appropriate lens attached. While all this is going on, the director is working with the talent. Then the shot. After that, retakes.

Here are links to two clips quite different from each other. Both illustrate simple camera setups. The first is from the fifties classic *Roman Holiday* (1953) and is about a princess (Audrey Hepburn) taking in the street life of Rome. She finally ends up getting her hair cut. The scene was rendered mainly with a pair of medium shots and a couple of close-ups. Try to figure out why director William Wyler used the medium shots when he did and why he used the close-ups. Here is the link: *Roman Holiday*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Udhn4vCPZ7A

The second clip is from the political thriller *All the President's Men* of 1976. Bob Woodruff (Robert Redford) is a reporter with the *Washington Post* trying to get information about Watergate goings-on. He meets a reluctant informant known as Deep Throat (Hal Holbrook) in a dark parking garage. Director Alan J. Pakula put this scene together with great economy: an extreme long shot and two close-ups in a parking garage. Then, in Bernstein's apartment, a few loose close-ups blending two medium shots. The link: *All the President's Men*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVNU5jkOwzU

Doubtless both of these scenes required at least an entire day to set up, light, rehearse, and film. The clip from *Roman Holiday* also required a day of filming. All three scenes needed editing too.

AN ALBUM OF FILM FRAMES

George Stevens's *A Place in the Sun* (1951) The couple has just met. Let's put

some distance between them. The pool table does the trick.



A Place in the Sun

Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) Normally, as I have said, the CU is reserved for one person. The exceptions are for scenes of intimacy.



Notorious

Fred Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity*

What kind of frame is this? Medium shot? Long shot? Moviegoers of 1953 had not seen much in the way of crashing waves to suggest passion. Burt Lancaster



and Deborah Kerr in *From Here to Eternity*:

Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Centered medium shot of lawyer (Gregory Peck) and his client (Brock Peters) stretching to deep-focus long shot.



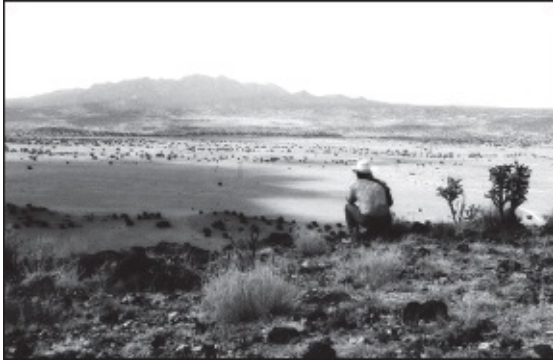
To Kill a Mockingbird

Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) Split screen: creative simultaneity. You can see (and hear) what is going on in Annie's shrink's office and in Alvy's shrink's office *at the same time*, instead of cutting back and forth. The frame from *Annie Hall* is not actually a true split screen, because it's a set built to suggest two offices, to facilitate acting. Split screen technique goes back to *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *The Thomas Crowne Affair* (1968); maybe even more in more contemporary films: Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000), Hans Canosa's *Conversations with Other Women* (2005), Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (the second one, 2010). Split screens are demanding. They offer more to look at, more to take in and evaluate.



Annie Hall

The Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007) Extreme long shot taken from a rise to show the valley below. We become Josh Brolin, the man scanning the horizon. This is what I mean by the integrative nature of ELSs.



No Country for Old Men

Deep-focus MS to LS from Alex Proyas's *I, Robot* (2004) A good choice of frame and lens to show eerie mass production.



I, Robot

TRY THIS:

See a good film with a variety of settings. Pay attention to one scene, running just a minute or two. Make a list of the frames and try to determine the strategy of each. Why a close-up here? A medium shot there? What was the purpose behind the director's calling for each of these frames?

CHAPTER 2

Composition

Composition is the functional or artful placement of subjects in the film frame. As I indicated in the last chapter, basically there are only five frames: extreme close-up, close-up, medium shot, long shot, and extreme long shot. But there are countless ways of composing within these frames. Here are some common strategies.

OVER-THE-SHOULDER

Some approaches to composition are common and are used over and over in the motion picture world. For example, the image below is called an “over-the-shoulder” shot. This is a variation of the medium shot I discussed in the last chapter: instead of having actors sit or stand next to each other in a left-right strategy suggesting dramatic equality, one is filmed face on, the other is seen only as a shoulder and the back of a head. The person facing the camera gets the dramatic emphasis. The most obvious follow-up shot is for the director to reverse the compositional strategy so that we see the face, and the expressions, of the person the camera was behind, while the other person is composed with his back to the camera. This strategy alternates dramatic emphasis.

Below is a link to a short clip from the movie *Elysium* (2013) about Matt Damon trying to date a nurse, filmed entirely with alternating over-the-shoulder shots.

Elysium

www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRT8S1owRYQ

ANGLE

Most photography, still or motion picture, is taken at eye level. Now and then though the film director wants to place the camera low to shoot *up* at the subject or higher as on a crane or other device for elevating the camera to shoot *down* at the subject. Each choice has meaning. Since eye-level shots are so common, no one thinks about them much. But high-angle shots nearly always mean someone is in trouble or in some way compromised.



Psycho

You know the story. You probably know what's going to happen to Martin Balsam for poking around.

Low-angle shots nearly always make the subject seem larger than life, in command, even menacing. Below is a shot from the Brazilian film *City of God* (2002), about murderous gangs in Rio.



City of God

Slight high-angle shot from *Gravity* (2013):



DUTCH ANGLE

Here the camera is tilted to produce a world-out-of-kilter effect. In Sam Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953), pickpocket Richard Widmark confronts a hooker in a shack on the waterfront.



Pickup on South Street

OVERHEAD SHOTS

These are shots taken from a camera placed directly over the subject. There is seldom a need for such shots in most films. But in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) there is considerable need as James Stewart goes all queasy when he finds himself in high places. Below is a link to a scene that contains two cutaways meant to simulate Stewart's condition of vertigo as he forces Kim Novak to climb rickety stairs in an old California historical landmark.

Vertigo

www.youtube.com/watch?v=je0NhvAQ6fM

The “Vertigo effect,” as it is now famously known, was produced by simultaneously tracking out and zooming in.

COMPOSING WITH PROPS

Often directors utilize props to add meaning to their compositions. The still below is from *The Pawnbroker* (1964), Sidney Lumet’s film about a bitter Holocaust survivor who has separated himself from the world with heavy fencing.



The Pawnbroker

The shot I take you to below is from *Gone with the Wind* (1939). It shows Scarlett in her boudoir flanked by several mirrors so as to see her from several angles. Scarlett has several personas in the film—irresponsible before the war, a shrewd businesswoman after.



Gone with the Wind

Who would think you could show distance between a teenage girl and her parents with a mere dining room table? I mean generational distance. This still from Sam Mendez's *American Beauty* (1999) economically accomplishes this.



American Beauty

Some props are more intrusive than others. You note the heavy fencing in the pawnshop and wonder what's up. Why does a pawnshop need all that? Then it occurs to you that the prop master or the director had something else in mind beyond mere security. But the table in the Mendez film is pretty ordinary. You have to tune in to it. You glimpse that it's a little large and people are seated formally. You think about the film as a whole. Yes, the girl is isolated. Why not use space and a prop to convey this?

Here is another still from *Hustle & Flow*, during the early going when the pimp and his people are actually making the song. The prop is an ordinary fan. Director Craig Brewer had a good reason for placing it alongside Nola, the hooker, in effect making her and the prop equal. The fan gives Nola the chance to be something special, to participate. Nola can't sing or make music, but she can turn a fan on and off—on when the group isn't recording, off when it is. The setting is hot Memphis. At last Nola (Taryn Manning) has something meaningful to do. The scene gets to you for its simplicity and what the fan job means to Nola.



Hustle & Flow

F.G./B.G.

These terms stand for “foreground and background.” Directors and their cinematographers often compose in depth. When they do, they have a choice of keeping many planes in focus or throwing one plane out of focus, usually the background. Below is a deep-focus shot from *Citizen Kane* (1941). Such shots are usually taken with a wide-angle lens that not only keeps backgrounds in focus, but also tends to make backgrounds seem very far off.



Citizen Kane

The young Orson Welles, who directed *Citizen Kane*, was playing a visual trick on viewers. The room you see is the living room of the Kanes's mansion—but it is ridiculously large in order to suggest the emotional distance between Kane, barely seen in focus in the extreme background, and Susan, his wife, also in focus, in the foreground.

In the frame below from *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), a soldier has just returned home from service in WWII. He greets his two children but wants to surprise his wife, in fairly sharp focus in the b.g.



The Best Years of Our Lives

Gregg Toland shot *The Best Years*. He also shot *Citizen Kane* and was partial to deep-focus photography. Here is another shot from *Citizen Kane* in which Kane occupies the f.g., Leland (Joseph Cotten) the midground, and a third character, Bernstein (Everett Sloane) in the b.g.—all in focus.



Citizen Kane

FUZZED-OUT BACKGROUNDS

Here are two stills from movies that don't try to keep f.g. and b.g. in focus, for good reasons. Both were shot with telephoto lenses. The first is from a film called *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), directed by Joshua Marston. You can't make anything out in the b.g. The second is from Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). The b.g. is fuzzed out in this shot too.



Maria Full of Grace



Platoon

Why would film directors fuzz out either f.g. or b.g.? In *Maria Full of Grace* the young woman is having a hard time; she's a drug mule from Colombia and is frankly lonely in NYC. The fuzzy background is Marston's way of showing her total self-absorption. NYC means nothing to her. In the shot from *Platoon*, Stone wants you to connect with the soldier's anguish and nothing else, for the running time of the shot.

OTHER APPROACHES TO COMPOSITION

Sometimes narrative circumstances combine to call naturally for compositions that are soft, lyrical, and sometimes indistinct, beckoning interpretation. It depends on the story, the preferences of the director and her cinematographer. It might also depend on where we are, not only the setting but the moment. Here are three films with (at least occasional) soft composition.

Many art films feature lyrical composition. Below is a still from *House of Sand*, a Brazilian film of 2005.



House of Sand



Surreal composition from Inception (2010)

COLOR FIGURES

Follow these links to see studies in brown and black from *Days of Heaven* (1978) at goo.gl/g1bA6v, and *There Will be Blood* (2007) at goo.gl/9tDJp3.

HARD COMPOSITION

. . . is dominated by hard surfaces, dark colors, sharp angles, an utter lack of lyricism, and mechanical contrivances usually looked over by men.

This shot from *The Big Combo* (1955) is famous for its contrast:



Speeding motorcycles in *THX 1138* (1971):



PERSPECTIVE

Here is a deep-focus shot that emphasizes perspective, or the sense of distance.



From the Wim Wenders masterpiece:

Wings of Desire (1987)

That's actually the old Berlin Wall on the left. Had Wenders used a longer lens (more telephoto), the sidewalk would not have converged so sharply, and the wall would seem just about as tall in the b.g. as in the f.g. But Wenders liked this wide-angle look.



Saving Private Ryan (1998):

ARTFUL COMPOSITION

Cinematographers are artists in their own right who often can't resist composing

for the sake of art. They go for innately appealing frames, if their directors will let them. Or the directors themselves have a strong artistic sense and order certain visual elements. It's hard to know. What might be artful to me could be functional to someone else. Or the reverse. Anyway, I am taking the liberty of showing you a few shots I call intrinsically artful.

Artful silhouetting of Kim Novak from *Vertigo* (1958):



Spoof on technology from *Brazil* (1985):

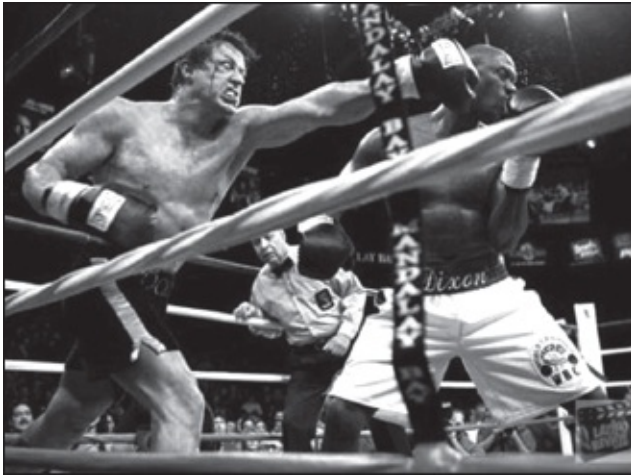


Child with sparklers in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012):



DIAGONALS

Visual artists are often partial to diagonal lines. Many believe they convey strength. Even pop films like *Rocky* (1976) benefit from artful diagonals. In the shot below, Rocky's strength is enhanced not only by the low angle of the composition but also by the diagonal parallelism of the ropes and Rocky's arm. Bam!



Rocky

Here is a shot with strong diagonals from Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (1954). It shows farmers lined up close-packed awaiting marauding bandits. The spears have an appealing lower-left to upper-right composition.



The Seven Samurai

And here are Anthony Quinn and Lila Kedrova reclining diagonally in *Zorba*



the Greek (1964):

Zorba the Greek

SYMMETRY

Below is a shot based on the compositional strategy of symmetry. It's from a Chinese film called *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), directed by Zhang Yimou.



Raise the Red Lantern

Zhang had a good reason for composing some of his shots symmetrically. The film is about a concubine house with heavy, heavy rules. If you did not obey, you might be executed. The symmetrical shots suggest rigidity, formality.

Below is a link to the most famous symmetrically composed shot in film history. It's a clip actually, from a British film called *The Third Man* (1949). Carol Reed was the director. The zither music is authentic central European.

The Third Man clip:

www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=N8Njr-jbj2s

This trailer for *The Third Man*—in my view, one of the best films ever made—was put together by Michael Koepenick.

The Third Man trailer:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bTHnw2NUys

TRY THIS:

Watch any film you think will offer some interesting frame compositions. Look for functional composition, when the cameraperson got a lot of stuff in the shot. And look for what I've called artistic composition. Pause the film, study these shots.

CHAPTER 3

Movement

Movies move. Images on the screen move. Actors move and cameras move. Movement was why movies got started back around 1895 in the first place. People had seen plenty of still photos. Nothing about them moved. Movement was a novel development in visual communication and ensured, finally, the success of the movie industry worldwide.

PERSISTENCE OF VISION

Human vision contributes to the experience of taking in a movie. A phenomenon known as *persistence of vision*, which all humans are endowed with, produces a brief after-image. You know this best as a lingering bright light you see for a split second after a flash photo of you is taken. Though each movie frame is slightly different from the one before, the eyes (and the brain) carry the action over and create in you the illusion of smooth motion. If Martians lacked persistence of vision and tried to watch an Earth movie, they would see only a jittery, annoying succession of still images, and not “movies.”

Movies move in many ways. Here are some common movements of *subjects*:

- ▶ Toward a stationary camera and past it
- ▶ Toward a moving camera which keeps pace with the subject
- ▶ Away from a stationary camera; subject appears smaller
- ▶ Away from a camera that follows, laterally or frontally; subject does not change in size
- ▶ Lateral to the camera, the camera either panning from a tripod or following the subject from side to side on a wheeled device
- ▶ Minor movement—lifting a cup of coffee, turning a head, the camera sometimes following
- ▶ Random movement—two boxers in a ring

And here are some ways the *camera* moves:

- ▶ Tracking shots. The camera is mounted on a device that has wheels and moves on tracks. Just about every film made today uses dozens of dolly shots.
- ▶ Handheld shots. An experienced camera operator walks around with a

lightweight camera. If absolute smoothness is desired, the operator uses a device called a Steadicam, which incorporates a gyroscope so the operator can walk with the camera and get footage that looks as silky as tracking shots. Steadicam shots are employed when terrain or architecture does not allow for laying dolly tracks. Sometimes, though, smoothness is not desired, so the operator just hoists the camera onto his shoulder and shoots, maybe even jerking the camera a little.

- ▶ Crane shots. The camera is mounted on an actual crane or “movie bird.” Crane shots are very dramatic. They might start at eye level, then sweep up over houses and trees. Films often begin or end with crane shots.
- ▶ Pans and tilts. The camera is mounted on a rigid device, such as a tripod, and the operator rotates the camera left to right or tilts it up and down.
- ▶ Zooming shots. These optical effects enlarge or reduce the subject and they do it gradually. Zooming in narrows background; zooming out widens it.

AN ALBUM OF FILM MOVEMENT

Boxing as dance

From *City Lights* (1931). (Actually this fight does turn into a kind of ballet.)

City Lights

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qsd6FX3C0c

Stealthy movement away from camera

. . . and right into the fog of war. From:



Jarhead (2007)

Incredible Arctic running

From *The Fast Runner* (2001). This film was made entirely by Inuits—cast and crew. It features a ten-minute chase during which a despised man flees other Inuits who want to kill him. The chase crosses a snowy, slushy Arctic landscape. The pursued man is naked, and his ding dong swings about. YouTube used to show the entire sequence, but it must have gotten a lot of complaints because it now makes you verify your age and jump through other hoops. I did happen to find a two-minute version of the running on YouTube, which you may access with the link below. I don't know why YouTube feels that a two-minute version of a swinging ding dong is acceptable but a 10-minute version is not.

The Fast Runner

www.youtube.com/watch?v=u30kkn3FUHo

Also, I don't know how Inuit director Zacharias Kunuk managed to shoot this sequence out in the cold Arctic. I don't know how actor Natar Ungalaaq ran naked in the Arctic winter for a day or two during filming.

Fatal shower

From *Psycho* (1960). Not much movement. Just some slashes. Want to see it? No, you don't. Yes, you do.

Psycho

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VP5jEAP3K4

Compelling trailer of running

From *Run Lola Run* (1998). In this German film, Lola runs to save her man from the German mob. Director Tom Tykwer and editor Mathilde Bonnefoy play with the old Einsteinian concept of space-time collisions, some of which you can see in the trailer linked below:

Run Lola Run

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ea0mG4hRk

Spiritual dancing

From *Zorba the Greek* (1964). Old man Zorba's scheme to harvest trees has turned out to be a colossal failure. What does Zorba do? He teaches young Basil how to get past adversity by dancing.

Zorba the Greek

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AzpHvLWFUM

TRAINING YOURSELF TO SEE MOVEMENT

We have seen so many films with movement of either camera or subject we are inured to the technique. We don't follow movement with an aesthetic eye. And yet movement can be beautiful; its own art form, well worth noting. Movement provides ever-changing frames, fresh compositions. It's fine just to follow story, but it's also satisfying to follow the thinking of the director for ordering pans, tilts, tracking shots, zooms. Yes, you have to do several things at the same time—follow story, listen to dialogue, train one ear on music, the other on sound effects. You do many things in life at the same time. Like driving a car. Cooking. Multitasking. You do these things at the same time. You can also watch a film on many levels—story, photography, movement.

Here are some clips I would like you to follow just for the interplay of moving camera and subject. Try to read the mind of the director in ordering these kinesthetic shots.

***Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)**

Stars James Dean and Natalie Wood. The clip you can link to below shows a “chickie run” involving diving out of your car before . . . you'll see.

Rebel Without a Cause

www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGUYsuYudVA

***Bullitt* (1968)**

This is the classic troubled-cop film from the sixties. It features the granddaddy of all wild car chases—one of them, anyway. The star is Steve McQueen.

Bullitt

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wD64vIMxLA

***Spider-Man 3* (2002)**

This is my favorite pop film for motion. I can't get enough of Toby swinging through the canyons of the city.

Spider-Man 3

www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCmMLfXdURs

***Ironman 3* (2013)**

Second for second, there is always much more action in trailers about superheroes than in other kinds of films—or even in features about superheroes.

Ironman 3

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ke1Y3P9D0Bc

THE LONG TAKE

Orson Welles probably started it as a self-conscious endeavor with his *Touch of Evil* (1958), a nasty crime film set on the US–Mexico border. It's the first shot of the film and runs three and a half minutes. The camera doesn't just sit inertly on actors; it goes all over the place and so do the actors. The camera moves constantly—high on a crane, then down to earth and across a street near the border, then tracks along following Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh on a sidewalk in search of ice cream.

What was so notable about a shot that runs three and a half minutes? Movie takes in 1958 (and up to the present) usually ran no longer than thirty seconds and almost always were cut up and alternated with other shots. The average clip, before and after *Touch of Evil*, ran no longer than six seconds. Welles didn't want to cut into his long-take shot. He wanted to show the world how he could engineer grace into the moves of camera and subjects. That was the challenge: pull off a long take with lots of movement without seeming arty or pretentious. Since *Touch of Evil*, other notable directors have opened their films, or have included somewhere along the way long-take, uncut, moving-camera and moving-subject shots, among them Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, and Brian De Palma.

The long take has become a kind of in-joke among knowing directors, film professors and critics, and savvy viewers. If you are such a person you might watch a film with a less sophisticated friend and exclaim, "Did you see that? It

was all one take!” He might go, “Shut up.” Still, you will want to press “<<” and see the shot again, if your friend lets you.

For my money, no other type of motion picture photography has the potential to be so artistic as the long take. It’s a special art form. Remember Ricky Fitts in *American Beauty* (1999), the young man who was fond of filming plastic bags fluttering in the breeze? We might call him an artist of abstract motion. In the film he says, “Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world I feel like I can’t take it, like my heart’s going to cave in.”

Filmmakers like Orson Welles weren’t after abstraction, but you can get into pure abstract motion by blocking story from your mind for a time and instead tuning into things that move. Here is a link to Steven Spielberg’s first film, called *Duel* (1971). Dennis Weaver has just been threatened by a mysterious truck. The camera follows him into a restroom and then out again.

Duel

www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TaWiq_-2Dc

Then go to—you knew this was coming:

Touch of Evil

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg8MqjoFvy4

. . . for the mother of all long takes, the one I mentioned that opens *Touch of Evil*.

Finally, go to:

The Player

www.criticalcommons.org/Members/brettservice/clips/player_clip.mov/view

. . . for Robert Altman's spoof of the Welles long-take shot in *The Player*. One character even mentions *Touch of Evil*.

I'd also like you to see the spiritual long take in a German film called *Wings of Desire* (1987). It's about angels who have descended to earth to help mortals who are troubled. They are unseen, except by other angels. The scene linked below takes place on a subway car. The camera sweeps by the passengers and catches snatches of their desperate thoughts.

Wings of Desire

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2izlo8UX_PA

Amazing tree fight

One of the most poetic examples of cinematic movement is found in Ang Lee's *Hidden Tiger, Crouching Dragon*. The film appeared in the year 2000 and has been widely imitated.

Hidden Tiger, Crouching Dragon

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQw5s2oiqk0

TRY THIS:

Watch movies for movement. You will seldom see a film that is devoid of movement. Even films about people sitting around living rooms have some movement about them. Study this movement. Does it seem random? Is it all in one direction, toward one character, rehearsed? Now squint. Do not see people, hands, bodies, but only abstract movement. Follow the beauty of abstract movement shorn of recognizable body parts or objects.

CHAPTER 4

Lighting

All film needs light. You can't shoot on a stormy night in a farmhouse without power. You can't take a shot of two people in a car at night without some kind of simulated dashboard light, bright enough to see faces. Viewers have to see what is going on even if it isn't clear where the source of light is coming from.

There are many ways to light a scene. Big-budget films have entire lighting crews headed up by the director of photography (DP or cinematographer) and his assorted technicians and grips. One of the pleasures of movie watching is to study the lighting—its strategy, its purpose. From what direction does the light come? Is it sharp? Intense? Diffuse?

THE SUN

The most fundamental source of light for many kinds of photography is the sun. It doesn't demand a crew to utilize it. It's up there shining away for half of the day. About all you have to do is pay attention to its position. You get different photographic effects by shooting away from the sun or toward it, or if the sun is low or high in the sky.

Here is a shot from the famous indie film *Easy Rider* (1969). The sun was the sole source of light for this bit of action. (Note: only one shadow.) It is located to the left of the frame at approximately right angles to the subjects, Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda. (Jack Nicholson too is seen behind Fonda.) László Kovács shot the film. To maximize the sun, Kovács had a few decisions to make, like what time of the day to shoot and in what direction the trio would be riding. Even outlaw films like *Easy Rider* require some thinking through.



LIGHT REFLECTORS

Obviously Kovács could do nothing to control the light of the sun. An assistant could not run along beside the motorcycles with a reflector. But most outdoor shoots do employ a number of reflectors and other devices for controlling the sunlight. Do a Google search for “light reflectors for photography” to see a variety.

SHOOTING TOWARD THE SUN

. . . may produce some interesting shadows and darkened faces all the way to silhouettes. Here is a shot in which the camera was turned toward the sun. From the Macedonian-British film called *Before the Rain* (1994):



The shadows point to the sun in *Before the Rain*.

THE MAGIC HOUR

Cinematographers often like to shoot during what they call “the magic hour,” that brief period just after the sun goes down but before it gets dark (or just before dawn). Footage taken during the magic hour is often moody or aesthetic. These links lead to magic-hour photography taken by professional photographers: il.treearth.com/photos/30373/magic_hourjpg and shadowness.com/JoseMelim/magic-hour.

Next, a shot from the low-budget film *Sleepwalking* (2008), shot on an overcast day. Director: Bill Maher; DP: Juan Ruiz Anchia.



Sleepwalking

SHOOTING WITH CANDLES

With the availability of more sensitive lenses and film stock, a few filmmakers have started shooting with only candlelight—no artificial light at all. Below is a link to Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) in which two men talk at a table set with lots of candles. This scene is then analyzed by a pair of cinematographers.

Videomaker

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lg-FDmbXs0

THREE-POINT LIGHTING

When photographers, still or moving-image, elect to use artificial lighting, they often start with faces. They start with portrait photography. They don't just throw light flat on a face. They *model* the face to give it depth, three-dimensionality. They do this with three kinds of lights: 1. The key light

2. The fill light
3. The backlight

The key light provides the brightest illumination while the fill light fills in areas that could go too dark for the mood the film's director or the director of photography is after. The backlight has several functions, the most important of which is to illuminate the backdrop. It might also shine light atop the actors or rim light them.

Here is an example of the interplay of these three kinds of lights in a medium shot from *The Ghost Writer* (2010). All three lights were placed out of frame. The key light is located to the right. Notice how it brightly illuminates the left sides of Kim Cattrall's and Ewan McGregor's faces. The fill light comes from the left and forward and provides enough light, though less than the key, to keep Kim's arm and the right side of both actors' faces from going too dark. The back light keeps the backdrop from going dark, though it is out of focus. The result is lighting in depth. Kim's arm is modeled fetchingly round, not flat. This film was lit and shot by Pawel Edelman.



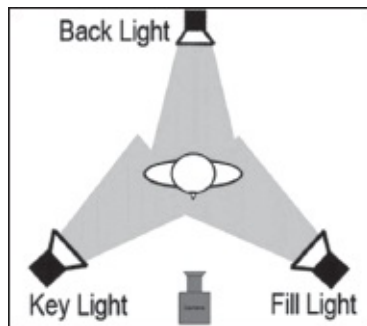
The Ghost Writer

Here is a three-point shot from *Stand by Me* (1986):



Stand by Me

This time the key light has been placed off-camera left. It is the brightest light and illuminates the right side of the boys' faces. Exposure was set for the key. To keep the other side of the boys' faces from going too dark, less intense fill light was brought in and positioned off-camera right. The cinematographer may not have used much in the way of backlight as the backdrop is so dark. This creates a sinister effect. *Stand by Me* was shot by Thomas Del Ruth.



Three-point lighting schematic

LIGHTING A SCENE

This link will show you a scene lit by two lights and a reflector, set up by video recording studio Milwaukee: goo.gl/UERqtk.

The Internet yields hundreds of images like this with all manner of lighting. Search “lighting for film.”

AN ALBUM OF LIGHTING STRATEGIES

Venetian-blind light. Fancy, fancy. From *The Conformist* (1970). You see lots of Venetian-blind lighting in films, for example, *Chinatown* (1974), but none that I know of in which actors are costumed in stripes. DP Vitorrio Storaro and costume designer Gitt Magrini apparently worked pretty well together.



The Conformist

Spiritual lighting from *Waitress* (2007). Jenna's pies are "Biblical" and "unearthly," so says her lover. Key light comes from the right. Several backlights were used. So-called barn doors were also employed to keep the room meditatively dark.



Waitress

Implied window at right lights left side of Michael Douglas's face and falls directly on Glenn Close (left) but leaves Anne Archer's face muted. From:



Fatal Attraction (1987)

Below, strong side lighting with lights set low. This is a concert hall. The performer's head is rim lit. Very little fill light is on the performer or audience.



From:

Vier Minuten (Four Minutes) (2006)

A note about window lighting More Venetian-blind lighting, from *Blade Runner* (1982). You'd think that in Harrison Ford's futuristic world they'd think of other ways of controlling outside light. But no, DP Jordan Kronenweth couldn't resist.



Blade Runner

Window light blasts through in the shot below from *The Upside of Anger* (2005). The camera might easily have been pointed at the wall behind Kevin Costner to simplify lighting. It takes a lot of time and effort to throw light through a window—even a simulated window—and produce those rays. Director Mike Binder must have thought he could say something about these two self-indulgent characters with the strong window light. (The other character is Joan Allen.) The cinematographer was Richard Greatrex.



The Upside of Anger

Nor could Steven Spielberg resist shooting toward this window in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). With some filters and scrims, and maybe some fiddling with a computer, Spielberg came up with a hazy effect to match the hazy moral issues of the film. Shot by Janusz Kaminski.



A.I. Artificial Intelligence

Night shooting

If possible, when shooting at night, photographers like to go with natural lights—lighted storefronts, electric signs, streetlights. Example:



Jack Reacher

Nice puddles.

Meanwhile compare these natural-looking shots with the one from the horror film *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), below. Obviously lights were used off-camera left. You know it's supposed to be a night shot because of the darkness at the top of the frame and the car light. DP: Denis Crossan.



I Know What You Did Last Summer

Day for night

This is a photographic term having to do with actually shooting in the daytime but darkening the image to simulate night. The image link below was shot in broad daylight but has been made night-like by underexposure. What you might take as the moon was really the sun.

Photograph by H. David Stein

goo.gl/rKAuTN

Underexposure and overexposure

A common way of darkening images is simply to underexpose. Unlike your iPhone camera, professional movie cameras have aperture controls that can produce darkish or bright-ish shots.

Here are a couple of dark shots produced by either “stopping down” the aperture or reducing exposure by means of a computer-editing program. First a still from *Fight Club* (1999); David Fincher directed *Fight Club*; his DP was Jeff Cronenweth.



Fight Club

And from the same film:



Fight Club

High key and low key

This has to do with the ratio of lights to darks in the film image. High-key lighting has lots of normally exposed areas; low-key lighting is shadowy—in fact, mainly black. The shot below is from *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).



The Night of the Hunter



This image shows an example of low-key lighting, which is often accomplished with a single light that emphasizes the contours of the subject.

Contrast

Contrast has to do with the ratio between whites and blacks. Here are two pictures of the same famous actor. One is high contrast and the other is low contrast.



LIGHTING AND MEANING

Light is seldom neutral. As we've seen, the absence of a lit backdrop in the frame from *Stand by Me* makes the shot a little ominous. Shadowless light too has power to communicate. The shot below, set in the *Washington Post* newsroom, is from *All the President's Men* (1976). The flat, even light on reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein implies wrongdoing will eventually be illuminated by the journalists.



All the President's Men

Compare the lighting of this scene with the very dark “Deep Throat” video I linked you to in [Chapter 1](#). Here is the link again, below. Why dark? Reporter Bob Woodward is about to learn about dark stuff.

All the President's Men

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvIRZ6bfb3c

Below: A couple is emerging from a shadowy world into light, maybe suggesting a turning point. The turning point is the onset of Alzheimer's in Julie Christie in *Away from Her* (2006). As for composition, the trees make a kind of cathedral arch. The change the couple is undergoing is spiritual. Directed by Sarah Polley, photography by Luc Montpellier.



Away from Her

Below: A confused and fearful naturalist has just been dropped in the middle of a wintry nowhere. The problem is that it's late in the day—note the long shadows. He still has to pitch his tent, build a fire, and settle in. Lengthy shadows tell us he doesn't have a lot of time. From:



Never Cry Wolf (1983)

Consider: Only one light was used to take this interesting shot. From:



The Good German (2006)

Photography by the film's director, Stephen Soderbergh.

TRY THIS:

Watch several films that differ from each other in their lighting. What kind of light does each employ? Diffuse? Sharp? From the side? Shadowy? Flat? How do dark scenes differ from light scenes? Can you detect the use of three-point lighting? Do some scenes seem lit only by the sun?

Imaging

The world needed two things to get started making movies. First, it needed a photographic base to leap from. Second, it needed new technology to create the illusion of motion.

The photographic forerunner to movies was still photography, up and running worldwide by the mid-nineteenth century. Photography is about chemicals changing as light strikes them. When applied to a medium—glass, paper, film—the chemicals don't just change randomly. A lens organizes the image and focuses it. Thus to take still pictures you need light cast on a subject, chemicals coated on a medium, and a lens. You also need a light-tight box for the film.

EARLY STILL PHOTOGRAPHY

. . . was monochromatic, commonly called black and white. Think of a silver spoon that turns black if left out in the sun or in a window. The longer the spoon is exposed to light, the more tarnished it becomes. But it won't register any kind of image because (usually) no lens organizes the light falling on it. Early photographers discovered that silver oxide was the best compound for taking still pictures. They mixed the silver oxide with gelatin and spread it on glass plates.

I've oversimplified here. The first exposure of the film produces a negative. The darker the subject (or elements of the subject) the less light reached the negative. So those elements turned out light on the stock. Brighter subjects burned dark. When a positive print is made, the light elements turned out darker, the darker brighter.

Still photographers like Mathew Brady who worked during the Civil War could not film much in the way of action because the silver oxide emulsion needed to be exposed so long—that is, the shutter had to be left open for several seconds—that the action would blur. This is why we remember Brady more for his images of battlefield corpses—no movement—than for soldiers charging up hills.

THE MOTION PICTURE CHALLENGE

The challenge for inventors of motion picture photography a half-century later was to develop chemicals that would register an image much faster than the emulsion Brady and his contemporaries used. Pioneers like Edison in the United States and the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, in France succeeded in developing emulsions so “fast” that shutter speed (exposure time) could be cut to $\frac{1}{48}$ of a second, sufficient to capture motion without blurring.



The industry was poised for launch when, nearly simultaneously, George Eastman in the United States and the Lumières developed *film*, that is, ribbons of flexible celluloid coated with a silver compound and loaded on spools into special cameras with “claws.” The claw grabbed a sprocket hole and pulled down the equivalent of one frame and held it for a split second while the shutter opened and exposed an image behind a lens—in effect, making still photographs 16 times per second. (Later bumped up to 24 frames per second.) The processed film was transparent, like a slide, so that the ribbon of film could be projected on a screen in a theatre, the backroom of a bar, a storefront. Twenty or thirty people might have paid a nickel or less to crowd into the room and watch the movie, which ran only a minute or so. They were thrilled to see motion projected on a six-foot-wide sheet.

PERSISTENCE OF VISION

As I explained in [Chapter 3](#), the illusion of smooth, realistic motion could not be accomplished if human beings didn't possess *persistence of vision*, by which one frame carries over in the brain and produces the illusion of motion.

By 1893, Edison had set up a studio and started making little movies and so did the Lumières two years later. By the turn of the century, making and exhibiting movies was a semi-thriving business, catering mainly to working-class men. In 1903, Edwin S. Porter, who had been a cameraman for Edison, made his historic *The Great Train Robbery*, one of the first films to tell a story, employ editing, and utilize outdoor locations. Note the advantage of shooting outdoors in the still below: composition in depth with real tracks converging in the distance. The film ran twelve minutes and was a great hit.

Go to this link to see the entire film: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRuMhqYhltM





Monochromatic moviemaking held sway for nearly fifty years. Above is a still from the famous D. W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915. Note the production advancements: larger cast, high angle photography, much motion.

ALTERING BLACK AND WHITE

Both black and white and color film can be altered for various dramatic and artistic effects. For example, I altered the b&w shot below from Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) to be less contrast-y in the first instance and more in the third. I did this with the simple picture editor that comes with Microsoft Word.



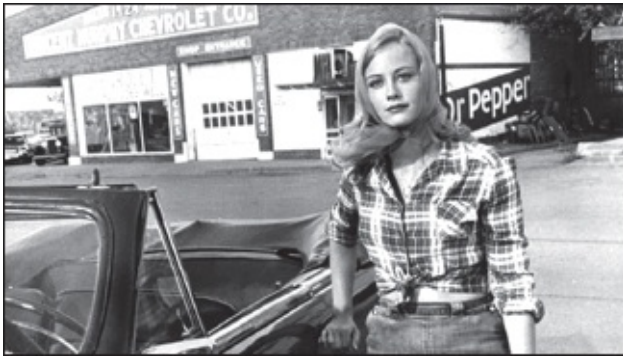
A few black and white films have been shot entirely or in part in high contrast to affect a weird, nightmarish look. Below is a frame from *Pi* (1998), about a crazy but brilliant scientist who believed all truths could be reduced to mathematical formulas.



Pi

MORE TYPICAL B&W

. . . is exhibited in this shot from *The Last Picture Show* (1971), which displays a continuous range of tones from near whites, through grays, to blacks.



The Last Picture Show

For a clip from *The Last Picture Show* (1971), a supremely great film, go to the link below.

The Last Picture Show

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWSvo0eMK7E

COLOR

It was inevitable that movie directors and technicians would hunger for color. The only way to do this early on was to tint the film. This was not true color photography, but altered b&w photography with something that looked like a wash. Below is a frame from the Abel Ganz extravaganza *Napoleon* (1927) in which the original b&w photography was tinted sepia. Ganz also used three cameras running simultaneously to produce “tryptic” images—three images in one very wide “frame.”



TECHNICOLOR

True color photography was a matter of coating strips of film with three color gels, one strip each for the primary colors red, blue, and green. When light hit the strips the color exploded—instantly and harmlessly. Early Hollywood-style color films were dominated by Technicolor, a corporation which loaded special cameras with the three color strips and mixed color in post-production at a lab. As you can imagine, these cameras were bulky. Fluid, moving-camera cinematography suffered. Some famous Technicolor films: *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, *Bambi*, *Dumbo*, *Broken Arrow*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *How to Marry a Millionaire*, *Jungle Book*, *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, *The Quiet Man*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Three Sailors and a Girl*.

Here's an image of a technicolor camera: goo.gl/a11pXi.

HIGH SATURATION COLOR

Color films with high saturation are richer and brighter-looking. The links below go to shots from two well-known films, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952).

Gone with the Wind

goo.gl/dZjk6s

Singin' in the Rain

goo.gl/pRlqKl

MONOPACKS AND SUBDUED COLOR

We tend to associate Technicolor with high-saturation color films; however, bright, punchy films were probably more a result of preferences of the times than the product of the Technicolor system. Two developments worked to simplify shooting in color and tone it down. First, moviegoers gradually gave up their preference for high-saturation color—though they never had a chance to think

about it because Hollywood seldom showed them subdued or low-saturation product. (The same kind of thinking dominated early color TV; the networks thought audiences would prefer programs dripping with color.) But by the 1970s film directors and their cinematographers were producing films with down-toned color, for a variety of aesthetic reasons, and audiences did not object. They hardly thought about it at all. Some viewers might even have appreciated the subtlety low-saturation color films could deliver.

Second, companies like Eastman Kodak were able to coat a single ribbon of film with emulsions of the three primary colors so that color mixing took place in the camera, instantly, upon exposure—and not at a lab. The industry went big for Eastman Kodak's color and its relatives, and bulky Technicolor went into decline. Cameras became smaller and more mobile and studios could outright buy them—the Technicolor corporations made studios rent their cameras.

Thus shooting in color became routine by 1970. Peter Bogdanovich, who made *The Last Picture Show*, had to plead with Columbia to let him shoot in b&w. He thought he could capture the soul of the little dead-end Texas town where the film is set better in b&w. When Hal Ashby wanted to shoot the dustbowl-set Woody Guthrie biopic *Bound for Glory* (1976) in b&w, United Artists said no. So director Ashby instead had his cinematographer, Haskell Wexler, shoot with a woman's stocking stretched around the lens to diffuse the color.

A GALLERY OF SHOTS FROM LOW-SATURATION COLOR FILMS

4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days of 2007 is about risks taken when a woman wanted an abortion in communist Romania. She and her doctor could be sent to prison. You would not want to see this film in bright colors: goo.gl/vAJfHx.

From *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), a film about doing the long time in prison: goo.gl/Znw5NI.

Here is a shot from *The End of the Affair* (1999), a gloomy film based on a post-WWII love triangle: goo.gl/be537X.

DIGITAL EFFECTS

By the mid-1990s, filmmakers didn't have to stretch panty hose around the lenses of their cameras. If they wanted a subdued effect, they did it in their computers. As I've suggested, computers, even simple ones like Apple's iMovie, let you do a near-infinite number of image transformations. They can shift color from cool to warm. They can leach out almost all color. They can tweak color.

They can convert color footage to black and white and accomplish tricks like having a girl wear a red coat in an otherwise all black-and-white film. Follow this link to see an image from *Schindler's List*: goo.gl/p13Phe

In the 1990s and beyond, digital editors were dragging and dropping incredible creatures into films, like this amazing brontosaurus from *Jurassic Park* (1993). This 'saurus moved smoothly, muscles rippling, mouth gracefully plucking leaves—utterly realistic.



Jurassic Park



300

When the shot above from *300* (2006) was “taken,” there were only a few soldiers in the foreground and nothing but a “blue screen” behind. The digital editor added the remaining soldiers, the sea, the sun, the clouds, the tint (to see the color go here: goo.gl/g4h9IW).

All films made today end up in the computer, regardless of how they were shot. Most big productions are shot on celluloid—old-fashioned film—then exported to a computer, where they are edited. After this, they are transferred back to celluloid release prints for distribution. An increasing number of films are shot digitally with cameras that store sound and image on tape or drives. This

data too is imported into a computer for editing.

TRY THIS:

Now and then, a classic black-and-white film will be restored, digitized, and re-released. In recent years, I have seen Orson Welles's weird *Touch of Evil* (1958) in San Luis Obispo, Satyajit Ray's great Bengali film *Pather Panchali* (1955) in Berkeley, and Federico Fellini's deeply moving *Nights of Cabiria* (1957) in San Francisco. I hope you can see films like these in theatres in 35mm prints. You can't always get a feel for great b&w photography in DVD. Stay alert.

Also, plan to see a variety of color films, some displaying high saturation, some with low saturation of color. Many high-saturation color films were released during the 1950s and early 1960s. Then see a few contemporary color films in which color has been toned down. Which do you prefer and why? Or is "prefer" the issue? Might it depend on the film?

See a couple of color films by British director Ridley Scott, a master of color. His *Gladiator* (2000) probably has a more varied color palette than his other films because it ranges from Africa to Spain to Rome (or so the story suggests), plus contains some dreamy sequences in which altered color is used to suggest subjective states.

Plan too to see some famous color films and films with stupendous digital effects. I suggest *300* and *Jurassic Park*, well-known stuff like this. Enjoy the color and the CGI—computer generated imagery.

Cuts

CHAPTER 6

The Grammar of Editing

Look at the 37-second clip below of a famous scene from a famous film.

Raiders of the Lost Ark

www.youtube.com/watch?v=anEuw8F8cpE

It's Harrison Ford, of course, in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Ford matter-of-factly shoots a dumb guy threatening him with a sword. The video is named online as “guns are better than swords.”

Editor Michael Kahn put this scene together with seven shots. Here they are:

- ▶ Ford runs around in long shot in a crowded Cairo bazaar trying to find someone.
- ▶ Ford turns and sees sword guy off-camera; looks concerned.
- ▶ Over-the-shoulder shot of Ford as we see sword guy in background flashing a sword at him. (See [Chapter 2](#) for “over the shoulder.”)
- ▶ Over-the-shoulder shot from behind: sword guy menacingly shifting sword from hand to hand. Ford in b.g.
- ▶ Medium shot sword guy, laughs.
- ▶ Medium shot Ford, draws gun.
- ▶ LS as Ford shoots sword guy casually, his back to him as if to say, “What a dummy.”

Film editors depend on directors and cinematographers to produce footage sufficient for putting scenes together in ways that are understandable. Director Steven Spielberg and cinematographer Douglas Slocombe knew to break the action down this way so that they secured the shots with the right frames for what needed to be shown. I am sure that Slocombe took other shots as well. Most obviously he took three or four *cutaways*—more on this later—of people in the crowd in close-up, looking on. But Kahn just used these seven shots and no cutaways. Maybe Spielberg told him to speed the scene up. Twenty-seven seconds were all he wanted to lavish on it.

So now we enter the realm of *film grammar*, which implies rules editors pretty much have to follow. “Grammar” also suggests basic communication. The grammar of editing is like this: people who know editing will think you are a rube if you don't follow some basic rules of editing grammar. You will probably never be a film editor, but your film viewing will be enhanced by knowing about the grammar of editing.

Here are six commonly used conventions of film grammar.

- ▶ Parallel shooting

- ▶ Match cutting
- ▶ Jump cuts
- ▶ Crosscutting
- ▶ Point-of-view sequences
- ▶ Cutaways
- ▶ Cut-ins

The brief sequence from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* displays the first two of these editing conventions and hints at another.

PARALLEL SHOOTING

This has to do with following a shot you have taken with a shot of similar or identical frame or composition. Spielberg and Slocombe did this twice for the dumb sword guy sequence, in shots 3 and 4 and shots 5 and 6. It just makes sense to follow an over-the-shoulder shot toward the sword guy with another over-the-shoulder shot toward Ford. Also, if Slocombe took a medium shot of the foolish sword guy posturing, it makes sense to take a medium shot of Ford briefly considering what to do. Parallel shooting is one way filmmakers and their editors build coherence, continuity, and grace into their efforts.

MATCH CUTTING

This is harder to explain than to see. It has to do with making sure the action of one shot takes up at the exact moment when the action of the last shot left off. Thus the action is smooth and continuous across the cut. The shots are said to “match.” Kahn did two match cuts, for shots 3 and 4 and shots 6 and 7. In 3 and 4, either Spielberg or his continuity person had to make sure both Ford and the sword guy were standing the same way for the two shots. Ford could not have his hands on his hips in one shot and hanging at his side in the next. The result would be jarring and viewers would notice—what is called a discontinuity or *jump cut*. Ford whips out his revolver at the end of shot 6. Kahn cut 7 to match the action of shot 6 carrying over to 7. If Kahn had cut 7 too short or too long, the result would be . . .

JUMP CUTS

This is when action does not match across the cut. If the action had been cut too short there would be a visible discontinuity, a “jump”; if too long, the action would have been unnaturally and annoyingly prolonged. In both cases the cuts

would call attention to themselves. But matched, they call no attention to themselves. Most editors want their handiwork to be *invisible*, or nearly so. Not always but most of the time.

Here is a clip from *Hunger Games* (2013), which has many match cuts, especially when Jennifer Lawrence is sawing the tree limb.

Hunger Games

www.youtube.com/watch?v=SirI7cJfnnI

CROSSCUTTING

The scene from *Raiders* does not present a ripe example of the grammatical device of crosscutting, which has to do with alternating clips of two long takes in the pattern of an “ABABAB” kind of format. Kahn could have cut shots 3 and 4 into two or more clips each, or 5 and 6 the same way, but the editing from such elaboration would have been more complex than it needed to be.

The videos I’ve linked you to below have a pair of typical examples of crosscutting. Both are taken from Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992), a story about pathological violence in the Old West. The first scene starts with two men standing about six feet from each other. Both are saddened by their lives of violence. Eastwood stands and looks off into the distance into grassland. He is melancholy and regretful about all the innocent people he has killed. The other figure is a mere boy, called “The Schofield Kid,” who has recently killed a man taking a shit—no glory in that. Eastwood is philosophical, the Kid is plainly guilty and remorseful. Placing these characters in separate shots heightens their bad feelings about themselves, though in different ways. Their self-loathing would have been diffuse and less intense had editor Joel Cox not used the close-ups. Link to the scene:

Unforgiven

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wGiJcq95Ug

The second scene takes place in the main saloon of Big Whiskey and consists of some old-fashioned gunplay. Practically all shootouts in films, Western or not, have to be crosscut because the shooters stand or hide at some distance from each other. In this shootout from *Unforgiven*, Eastwood carries a shotgun that misfires. So, quick as a flash he discards that weapon and pulls out a couple of six-shooters. Cox then crosscuts from Clint blazing to various bar drones dropping. No shot lasts more than a few seconds. There is other material: prostitutes watching from a balcony, a writer of cheap novels scared to death. Note how Cox embroiders the scene with these secondary subjects. Link:

Unforgiven

www.youtube.com/watch?v=0B5lFuTUhso&feature=endscreen&NR=1

POINT-OF-VIEW SEQUENCES

POV means point of view. Someone looks, the shot cuts to what he sees, then the editor cuts back to a reaction shot of the person watching. Below is a link to a trailer for Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), a movie dominated by point-of-view sequences. *Rear Window* was edited by George Tomasini.

Rear Window

www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi2157838617/

The laid-up guy (James Stewart) looks through his camera with a telephoto lens or his binoculars, sees something suspicious or even threatening in the apartment building across the courtyard, then reacts.

Point-of-view sequences are highly psychological. They let us in on what people see and think, mainly through facial acting. We perceive characters who don't get POV sequences as less important, dramatically, than characters who do.

The clip from *Hunger Games* I took you to above opens with editor Christopher S. Capp (and two others) working in a few quick POV sequences to show Katniss looking around the forest.

CUTAWAYS

These are shots of people just off the main line of action. I've already mentioned several in the clip from *Unforgiven*—the bar drones, the prostitutes. Their facial expressions help you interpret the main action. They look plainly worried, even frightened. If they had looked blasé, the scene would have a much different feel.

CUT-INS

. . . are brief shots of small objects—a pocket watch, a wad of money on a table, a pistol kicked into a corner of a room. The editor then cuts them into the principle scene as needed. Cut-ins are usually taken by a second-unit crew while the main personnel are not even present. In the pessimistic Western *High Noon* (1952), some thugs just let out of prison are returning to the prairie community of Hadleyville bent on killing a few people in town who helped put them away. The main avenger will arrive on the noon train; thus, time is important. Will Kane (Gary Cooper), the marshal, keeps looking at his pocket watch, photographed long before or after the shots of Kane pulling out his watch and looking at it. *High Noon* was edited by Elmo Williams.

In the video below there are several cut-ins of one of those old-fashioned bomb detonators with plungers you push down. The film is *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), which takes place in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp near an important river during WWII. The British prisoners have built a bridge, but British commandos have secretly wired it to blow up. Officer Nicholson (Alec Guinness) takes an engineer's pride in what his men have wrought and doesn't want to blow it up.

Bridge on the River Quai

movieclips.com/pXkuw-the-bridge-on-the-river-kwai-movie-what-have-i-done/

The film was edited by Peter Taylor. The clip deserves study for what it can teach us about timing in editing. The train has to reach the bridge just as Nicholson falls on the detonator. Of course, the two events were filmed hours, maybe days apart. Plus the explosion itself and the collapsing of the bridge, filmed on yet another day, had to be worked, or *edited*, in. All this fell to Taylor to create the illusion of a real-time, continuous event.

Tim Dirks, film critic, loves to make lists of films—the best cinematography, the best acting, and so on. He has a website called Tim Dirks' Best Film Editing Sequences. Maybe you can't see all the films on Dirks' list. Still, it's a good guide for future viewing. The bridge blow-up made number 16 on his list.

Dirks' best edited sequences:

www.icheckmovies.com/lists/tim+dirks+best+film+editing+sequences/johnnyg/

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER IN A CHASE

With Martin Campbell directing and Stuart Baird editing, *Casino Royale* (2006) offers viewers one of the most exciting chases ever produced in a movie. This is mainly because much of it takes place way up in the air amid the girders of a skyscraper under construction. The chase occurs near the start of the movie as do other legendary set pieces that open James Bond flicks. It's nine minutes long. Look at it and identify instances of crosscutting, match cutting, and POV sequences. There are cutaways too. My point is that this superb chase sequence was put together mainly with basic editing grammar.

Casino Royale

www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5M5R2pcPJ0

For a few seconds, both Bond and the chaser are together in the same frame, but the chaser quickly gives Bond the slip, and it's back to crosscutting. A few shots are based on an over-the-shoulder, foreground-background strategy.

Like all editors who work on chases, Baird had to make sure viewers are aware of how far apart chaser and chaser are. He did this mainly by cutting heads and tails (beginnings and ends) of shots just so. If the chaser exits a shot, Baird had to decide how many film frames to leave at the tail of a shot. When he cut to Bond (Daniel Craig), he had to decide when to cut the head of the shot. If either head or tail is too long, the chase seems hopeless—Bond is too far behind. If too short, it seems like Bond will soon catch up. Campbell advised, “Make sure the chase runs about nine minutes,” he might have instructed Baird.

TRY THIS:

Simply endeavor to identify these editing staples in the next action flick you see. Appreciate shot length, timing, and where shots begin and end. Might you have edited certain scenes differently? Faster or slower?

Keep track of the editing of dialogue. What is the strategy behind seeing the speaker or seeing the listener?

CHAPTER 7

Editing Sound and Image

You not only *see* a movie, you *hear* it, too. Many directors employ one person, or a person who heads a team, for editing both sight and sound. Bigger films will have separate image-editing teams and separate sound-editing teams. Pairing sound with image is itself an art form—there are so many intriguing possibilities. A quick, gruesome example: A bad guy points a gun at a victim. Must we both see *and* hear him fire the shot? Why not cut away to a more meaningful image, such as the victim or someone nearby, as the sound of the gun is heard off-camera? To have the visual repeat the aural, or vice-versa, is usually redundant. But to hear one thing and see something more meaningful creates editorial art.

DIALOGUE EDITED WITH IMAGE

Below is a link to a famous scene from another famous film. It's Father Barry's impassioned sermon in *On the Waterfront* (1954) to troubled stevedores in the hold of a ship. Barry wants the men to stand up to the murderous union that controls their lives. He is played by Karl Malden.

Note the use of cutaways to the stevedores, to the union goons, and especially to Marlin Brando who is trying to decide if he should testify against the union at the crime hearings. The link:

On the Waterfront

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XLbRI0kdLg

Thus Father Barry is on camera for only about half the running time of the scene. Without the cutaways, the scene would not only be far less interesting to watch but we would have no idea how Barry's words fall on his audience. *On the Waterfront* was edited by Gene Milford.

Here is a scene from Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *Paths of Glory* (1957). The scene is set during WWI trench warfare and consists mainly of three long-running moving-camera shots: a dolly shot down the trench where soldiers are awaiting orders to go "over the top": another moving-camera shot, this time a reverse angle shot of the first that shows Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) walking swiftly down the trench and cursorily inspecting his troops; and a third moving-camera shot which tracks along with the advancing soldiers for a very long distance. Link:

Paths of Glory

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPtVNDvwGMou

The scene uses only four sounds, none recorded during actual filming. Most dominant are the sounds of explosions which we sense are in the background. Eva Kroll edited the film. Martin Müller, who is credited with recording sound for the picture, and Al Gramaglia, the sound mixer, assisted her. Kroll cut Müller's raw recorded sound to make it synch with explosions on-camera seen in the background.

The second sound comes from a sergeant who counts down from 20 just before everyone climbs out of the trench. This was probably dubbed in post-production. Then Douglas blows a whistle (also dubbed) that cues the soldiers to scramble out of the trench and attack. The fourth sound is the sound of the soldiers making warrior hoots and hollers as they race into the jaws of the enemy, German soldiers. Gramaglia then mixed the yelling with the explosions.

Eliminating sound recording during actual filming greatly simplifies production. No microphones, no recorders, no wires to worry about. No unwanted flyover aircraft to spoil the take. For more on this subject, see [Chapter 18](#), "Mix and Dub."

The sound mixing for this scene from *Paths of Glory* is relatively simple. Even simpler is a one-minute scene from *High Noon*. As I've said previously, a very bad guy just released from prison is returning to the small Western city of Hadleyville on the noon train to rub out the judge who put him away along with assorted jury members and the marshal, played by Gary Cooper. For about twenty seconds of the clip we hear the overwrought musical theme of the film, then silence for a second, then, blasting away, the whistle of the noon train.

High Noon

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpABJHwsZG0

As we hear the whistle, the image cuts from a worried Cooper to his even more worried wife (Grace Kelly), and three more bad guys who are already in town. We also see the train in extreme long shot, puffing and tooting away.

Did you notice that the train whistle lacks aural perspective? It sounds the same no matter where people who hear it are located. Sound mixers today know how to mix sound to make it seem close or far away. Maybe sound people did not have the equipment for doing that in 1952. Jean L. Speak was the sound engineer. Elmo Williams was the film editor. Maybe they could have rendered the train whistle in perspective but preferred not to. These are matters you can

take into consideration.

MONTAGE

This is a French word that refers to a collection of objects or images that coalesce into a whole. In film, a montage is a brief succession of clips that have a single purpose—to compress time. The YouTube contributor called the *High Noon* sequence a montage. It cuts around the community and shows the tension of the townsfolk—in the bar, at church, and that of secondary characters like Katy Jurado.

Film montages like the one in *High Noon* unspool beyond time. The passing of time is indefinite. Other montages do convey a feel of passing time—say, a 30-second montage of a difficult workday, or a one-minute montage of the rise of a pop singer over a period of months.

POETIC SOUND

Here is a clip from the great Indian film *Pather Panchali* (1955) by Satyajit Ray. It is haunting and poetic in its use of sound. Two children wander farther away from their home than they have ever been. Great power-line towers loom and hum as a kind of dissonant but comforting music. Wind blows. A train chugs by. It's likely that these sounds were dubbed in post-production. The sparse dialogue might have been dubbed and spared the crew a recording team. The children, a bit unsure, make their way through plumed grass higher than their heads. Then comes the sound of the steam locomotive, which they probably have never heard before. [Link:](#)

Pather Panchali

www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-JWZDALouI

COMPLEX MIXES

Now we go to a great opera of sound and picture editing. It's the invasion scene in *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Coppola in 1979. Click on the link below for an eighteen-minute version of this scene which includes coverage of hundreds of explosions and colored smoke bombs, shots of choppers aloft coming out of the clouds, shots inside the choppers, shots of the beach, shots of villagers running in panic. We see trucks blown off bridges, shacks exploding, peasants gunned down and falling. We see and hear US soldiers talking about surfing on the village's wonderful beach. Surfboards are brought out within minutes of the invasion's conclusion. We see proud, erect, fearless Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall), who loves it all and is unfazed by nearby explosions and who says things like, "I love the smell of napalm. It smells like . . . victory," and Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen), who looks morally conflicted by all the destruction and carnage. Kilgore orders the playing of martial, demonic music from Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* through speakers mounted on the choppers. Note that as location changes, the music changes in aural perspective; as I have said, the train whistle in *High Noon* did not.

The entire sequence amounts to one of the greatest anti-war statements in filmdom. As you watch and listen to the clip, keep track of how sound and image pair up to produce something greater than just frightful images and loud sounds. They produce a third thing: revulsion.

Apocalypse Now

www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKaYOW9zMoY

Much of the photography is nearly beautiful. The camera moves constantly, or subjects move, the camera following. Men move across the beach and into the village in arresting copper-ish hues. Shots that had to be taken hours or days apart have their explosions matched in incredible feats of continuity. In the next chapter, I will ask you to look at another invasion, Steven Spielberg's reenactment of D-Day in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). It is grim, devoid of music, bloody, brutally real—a far cry from Coppola's lush invasion. Nothing teaches like comparisons. Look at both invasions several times and note the differences in their tone and feel.

Not many of these sounds were recorded live as cameras rolled. Most were edited, mixed, and paired with images months after shooting. We are a long way from *High Noon*.

It fell to a team of 47 (!) sound engineers, sound designers, sound editors, sound recordists, sound makers, and sound mixers to cut sound to complement the edited picture track—or the other way around: a team of image editors cut pictures to complement the soundtrack(s). It took weeks and weeks. The main man was Walter Murch, who headed both the picture-editing team and the sound-editing team. Murch took two Academy Awards for his contributions.

TRY THIS:

You can look for interesting pairings of sound and image in almost any film. Even relatively simple films (technically speaking) like *Point Blank* (1967) have cuts from speakers to listeners that can teach you much about editing sounds and images. The loud, echoing footsteps of Lee Marvin as he walks down a long corridor and outside to his car don't end as he reaches his car and drives off. They continue until he reaches his wife's house and barges in—the same hard footsteps we first heard in the corridor. Why would editor Henry Berman carry these footsteps over several shots in different locations? To show Marvin's determination, his can't-be-stopped frame of mind? Mere sound effects become an important means of revealing character.

CHAPTER 8

Editing Space and Time

All films deal with some kind of space that has to be understood by viewers. Unless it pans, the camera can point in only one direction at a time. It usually can't cover all of the space in one shot, so the director orders several shots—left, right, center; east, west, north, south. This amounts to a lot of footage. It's the editor's job to sort through all this material and present space in a swift and coherent way. Directionality is super important in movie plots where space might mean life or death. *No, don't go there. The killer is behind that barn!*

It's the same with time. Directors always order up more footage than their editors can possibly use. It's not unusual for a director to shoot ten to one or even a hundred to one—meaning, only one foot in ten or a hundred will make it into the finished film. The editor faces a lot of decisions having to do with passing time. Ought time pass slowly? Fast? Might it be stretched out? What kind of film is it? Lyrical and leisurely? Rapid fire with lots of movement? The editor has to meet with her director to get straight on these matters.

ESTABLISHING SHOTS AND THE CLASSIC SEQUENCE

Below is a link to a three-minute clip from *The African Queen*, directed by John Huston in 1951. It has to do with an aging couple, played by Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn, floating down an African river during WWI. He is a riverboat captain who drinks too much, she a proper Christian missionary. They are bound for a German-controlled lake where they hope to sabotage a large German warship. They approach rapids. The woman looks forward to being tossed around by the white water.

Editor Ralph Kemplen set the scene with, first, an *establishing shot* of the boat chugging down the river. We see that river and boat are set in a jungle in the b.g. Then Kemplen cuts to a medium shot of Bogart and Hepburn in the boat. Bogart says to hang on, they're approaching the rapids. Hepburn says bring it on—in so many words. The link:

The African Queen

www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/247092/African-Queen-The-Movie-Clip-A-Mere-Physical-Experience-.html

Kemplen chose two more methods of reestablishing the river: a cutaway up river where it curves, and a shot of gathering rapids captured in the background behind Hepburn. This is Kemplen's way of telling you the river is pretty important—and a little dangerous.

THE WOLF WHO FOLLOWED

Here is a bit of editing involving a deserter from the US Army, played by Kevin Costner, and a wolf who apparently wants to befriend him. The film is *Dances With Wolves* (1999). Costner, who directed, has two main methods for showing how the wolf closes the distance between him and the soldier. The first is by crosscutting and utilizing POV sequences for showing the wolf and the soldier. Early shots show the wolf far off and small. As the sequence unfolds, the wolf is framed larger and larger, suggesting he is closing the distance. The second way of establishing distance has nothing to do with editing but with how this sequence is shot. Director Costner had his DP (director of photography) take over-the-shoulder shots of Costner looking back on the wolf, which is seen in the distance, small at first in the frame of the prairie-like background. Later the wolf is seen larger. It's a good example of pure cinematography and straightforward editing to establish the relationship of man and animal.

Also note how both Costner on his horse and the wolf always run in the same direction. If they did not, it would look like they were running away from each other or toward each other. The link:

Dances With Wolves

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMRNmrXfivI

(By the way, it takes a professional animal wrangler, as they are called, to get the wolf to act just right. The wolf never looks menacing. The wrangler gets him to “smile” in a friendly canine way.)

The cinematographer was Dean Semler and the editor was William Hoy. Scotty Agare wrangled.

USING FOREGROUND/BACKGROUND STRATEGIES FOR MAKING SPACE CLEAR

This is a common, much-honored editorial method for presenting space. The director simply composes in depth, placing one subject in the f.g. and the other in the b.g. It doesn't have to be a long-running shot, just a few seconds, to show how far away two (or more) people are. Here is short clip from another John Huston classic, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), when bandits confront an American prospector, played by Humphrey Bogart again. It's the famous “We ain't got no stinkin' badges” scene. The integrative f.g./b.g. shot comes late in the scene.

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsdZKCh6RsU&feature=related

Huston changed editors for this film. Owen Marks might have opened this scene with the f.g./b.g. shot. In fact, as I just said, that would be the usual strategy—establishing the shot first, with tighter shots following. But he apparently decided it would be more dramatic to withhold the establishing shot for a time. You watch the alternating medium shots and think Just how far away from Bogart is this menacing bandit? Marks makes you wait a few seconds. Then he informs you with the f.g./b.g. shot.

Don't forget: Marks couldn't create footage he didn't have. Huston had to order the f.g./b.g. shot and cinematographer Ted D. McCord had to produce it. Making movies requires thinking ahead like this all the way to the editing bench or computer.

ELABORATE SMALL-SPACE EDITING

Mike Nichols, director of *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), thought he needed some pretty elaborate coverage of space for the office of a member of Congress, Charlie Wilson, played by Tom Hanks. Wilson is just getting interested in supplying the

Afghans with some sophisticated weaponry to fight Russians in the 1980s. A man from the CIA has dropped by his office to explain what is possible. Three women are present as well. The office has two rooms, the outer office where the women work, and Wilson's inner office, meant for private meetings. You might want to look at the scene twice, first to glean what you can of the story and of the characters of Wilson and the CIA guy (Philip Seymour Hoffman), and a second time to follow Nichols's delight in breaking down the space of the office.

Charlie Wilson's War

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHNZUmdqdv8

Nichols's editors felt they needed 27 shots to render this three-minute clip! Not much space, only two rooms, but quite a few people.

I hope you followed these devices for establishing space:

- ▶ Cuts from one part of the office to another
- ▶ Panning shots, no movement of actors
- ▶ Panning shots to follow moving actors
- ▶ A wide shot (really an establishing shot) as Wilson and the CIA man enter the second office
- ▶ Alternating medium shots, which tend to reaze space but which are okay because Nichols already established the look of the office with the wide shot
- ▶ Pull back to long shot as Wilson's aide interrupts by coming through a side door
- ▶ Crosscutting from the women to Wilson, not useful for establishing space, but since space has already been established, it's okay.

All this and we are only two minutes into the eight-minute clip! Additional space-orienting cuts follow but less frequently.

CROSSCUTTING TIME AND SPACE

Early in *Forrest Gump* (1994), Forrest, as a child, is actually disabled and requires metal braces so that he can walk. He can hardly walk at all, and running is especially challenging. He is on a forest path with his young companion Jenny when a gang of bullies on bikes shows up to throw rocks at Forrest and race after him. Jenny yells, "Run, Forrest, run!" Forrest tries to run. Editor Arthur Schmidt crosscuts between the bullies and Forrest, but not realistically. The bullies lose ground, Forrest gains. Magically, Forrest's braces fall away allowing him to run

like the wind. Not very realistic, but fun editing—and fun to watch.

Forrest Gump

www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2-MCPa_3rU

TEN MINUTES

Here is a short video from *Quantum of Solace*—my nomination for the most forgettable movie title of 2008. This is a James Bond flick starring the ever-capable Daniel Craig. In the scene linked below, Craig beats up four thugs in a mere twenty-five seconds.

Quantum of Solace

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd_qW0bkL5I

YouTube used to provide a clip showing Bond and his lady friend (Olga Kurylenko) walking through the desert to the village in Bolivia where water is scarce. Editors Matt Cheese and Richard Pearson selected extreme long shots to show the hike. But it's not strenuous. It takes but three or four shots to get them across the desert. In real life, this ought to take hours and hours and they ought to be sweaty and parched at the end. But this is not real life. It's a James Bond flick. The couple looks pretty good at the end of their hike. Cheese and Pearson cut the crossing down to a mere minute and thirteen seconds. Movies do this. You just want a hint of desert, and walking, and arriving at the village, and you are ready for the next pretty or violent thing.

Play the elevator beating-up scene again. It goes by so fast it's really incomprehensible. The shots come so fast you can't follow them. You just *believe*: a cool guy like Bond can render three trained thugs inert heaps on the floor of an elevator in less than half a minute. Cheese and Pearson know you are helpless and gullible. So: cut, cut, cut—faster than you can snap your fingers.

No viewer is going to find the manager of the theatre after seeing *Quantum of Solace* and demand her money back because the elevator-punching scene was unbelievable.

SHORT TRIAL

The movie *The Fugitive* (1993), directed by Andrew Davis and starring Harrison Ford, is about—well, you probably know: a physician is falsely accused of killing his wife and spends the whole film trying to exonerate himself and find the real killer. Circumstances work against Ford. It's the kind of movie where you just know Ford is innocent because he is, after all, Harrison Ford, who is never a murderer. But in this story, he is found guilty.

His trial is squeezed down to less than three minutes. It's a fair trial—that's not the problem. Writers Jeb Stuart and David Twohy and editor Don Brochu and his team had to keep the trial short because it's not the important part of the film. Ford's sleuthing and Marshal Tommy Lee Jones in relentless pursuit is.

That scene is not available on YouTube, so in compensation I am taking you to another scene in the movie. The following link delivers you to the famous train-and-bus wreck by which Ford escapes.

The Fugitive

www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvizgSKTaVE

I've mentioned crosscutting of one sort or another in nearly every chapter. Analyze the train-wreck scene from the standpoint of crosscutting and manipulation of space. Train, Ford, Train, Ford, Train, Ford. Then, in the same frame, Ford (actually a stunt man) jumping clear in the nick of time. It's good thriller cutting. We love it. In fact, the whole film is based on the device of crosscutting. We follow Ford for several scenes, then Jones for several scenes, then Ford, then Jones. Both inch ahead in discovering the truth.

FAST TRAVELING

In *Up in the Air* (2009), George Clooney travels a lot. He loves to travel. He loves being organized about his traveling. Editing is the main way director Jason Reitman conveys this aspect of Clooney's personality. The clip below shows Clooney packing and unpacking as a mind-boggling exercise in efficiency. The shots are short, the better to convey the speed and aplomb with which Clooney lays his things out then packs up again. You and I—it takes twenty minutes to unpack; Dana E. Glauberman, Reitman's editor, settles George into his room in ten seconds.

Up in the Air

www.traileraddict.com/clip/up-in-the-air/packing-up

THREE CHOICES

Editors have three choices when it's editing time. They can cut their films (or particular scenes) in "real time," they can make scenes run longer than they might in real life, or they can make them run shorter. I have stressed the third option—editing to compress time. It's the most common approach to editing film time.

A famous film that pretty much unfolds in real time is the Western *High Noon*. As I noted in the last chapter, the noon train is bearing a freed convict bent on vengeance. The film starts when it's about 10:30 in the morning in the town of Hadleyville. So that is an hour and a half to tell the story, and the running time of the film is about ninety minutes. This doesn't mean that every scene is in real time. Some play faster, some slower.

The only film I know that is absolutely in real time, in every scene, is the experimental production by Mike Figgis called *Timecode* (2000). This is because it's one uncut take from beginning to end. Actually, it's *four* related single-takes, each running ninety-seven minutes and playing *simultaneously* in their own quadrant on the screen. It's a viewing experience like no other. The story: Hollywood goes on, raising money, having sex in limousines, making deals, outsmarting people. Link to a trailer:

Timecode

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQidFlpYIDw

STRETCHING TIME OUT

Here is a film that seems to run longer than in real life. The Italian director Sergio Leone likes to work this way. Below is a link to his *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, a Western about a quarrelsome and deadly trio: Blondie (Clint Eastwood, the good), an outlaw Angel Eyes (Lee Van Cleef, the bad), and Tuco (Eli Wallach, the ugly) who looks on. Lots of eyes shifting, lots of hands on pistols, lots of reestablishing of space, some feel *ad nauseam*.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPVH7rxl6So

Stanley Kubrick liked slow editing, especially if the subject was stately or transcendent. Below is a clip from his *Barry Lyndon* (1975) in which Ryan O'Neal seduces Marisa Berenson. Kubrick took his time:

Barry Lyndon

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jXRqQAIVQg

Kubrick was scarcely interested in the grammar of editing. Mainly he wanted you to look at his frames, not his cutting.

TRY THIS:

Watch a film with a worthy reputation. First, keep track of how the editor presents space. What cuts make it understandable? Second, keep track of how the editor deals with time in some of these spaces—does he speed it up, slow it down, or keep it more or less realistic? What might be lost if she speeds time up, as is so often the case?

The Art of Editing

This chapter amounts to a tour of some of the most artful and compelling edited sequences in film history. Many people feel that editing should be “invisible,” felt but not seen. Edited sequences should roll along seamlessly and lucidly. But editing that is meant to be artful often does indeed call attention to itself. You quickly realize you are in something special, something aesthetic, and you are compelled to look, note, and maybe marvel, according to your film aesthetic.

Often it is during scenes of violence that editors get a chance to strut their stuff. Violence compels movement, changes in location, confusion, extreme states of mind—the ingredients of creative editing. Thus most of the scenes I discuss below are based on violence. It’s harder to detect art in quieter scenes.

The Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

First, we go back to 1925 and a Soviet-era film by Sergei Eisenstein called *Battleship Potemkin*. It is set in 1905 when the crew of the battleship *Potemkin* rebelled against their Tsarist officers. In all, the film is meant to serve as a precursor to the wider Russian Revolution of 1917.

Eisenstein was a scholar of film technique. He was interested in how editing might produce strong emotions and ideas in viewers largely by *the cut*, and by the sequence of images. This technique had been called *montage*, from the French *to put together*. The most famous montage in *Potemkin* is the Odessa Steps sequence in which Tsarist soldiers shot down many civilians after the *Potemkin* sailed into Odessa Harbor and incited residents to rebellion. Here it is:

Battleship Potemkin

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ps-v-kZzfec

There is something strange and morbidly wonderful about this sequence. Time and space are distorted. Action overlaps. The steps down which the Cossack soldiers march seem endless. It’s a world gone perverse, setting the laws of physics aside. There is looping back to subjects shown again and again. The baby-carriage succession of shots, which ends the sequence, is broken up,

crosscut, and repeated, almost surrealistically. There are numerous close-ups of bloodied, anguished faces. Eisenstein wanted to show so much: old people, a legless man, the advancing Cossacks, the mother's face, the mother gripping her stomach, the baby carriage, the wheels of the carriage, the baby. Plus, Eisenstein cuts to extreme long shots to show the whole of the massacre. Back and forth. The particular and the general. Certainly Eisenstein's montage took much longer to unreel on the screen than it did in real life when it occurred in 1905, although we don't really know now how long it took or how many people were killed.

This is art. It's also propaganda, as is all art. In fact, Eisenstein was probably more interested in propaganda than in art, and certainly more interested in art than in literal reality.

Another way of looking at the Odessa Steps sequence is as an artful application of the principles of editing grammar I wrote about in [Chapter 6](#). The sequence has many instances of crosscutting, POV shots, cutaways and match cuts—or violations of this grammar. Many shots that should have been match cut run longer than they would in “realistic” cinema, to underscore the atrocities. Eisenstein edited along with Grigori Aleksandrov.

The breakfast scene from *Citizen Kane* (1941)

In a film chock-full of cinematic innovations this scene is more demure than most. It consists of only seven shots, most of which are crosscut by director Orson Welles's editor Robert Wise. The whole scene is set during a series of breakfasts in Kane's classy digs and is meant to represent several years of passing time.

Citizen Kane

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg7VUk4DjIk

The first shot tracks in to frame Kane and his wife Emily sitting rather close together in a medium shot at a small table. They chitchat about Kane staying home—he runs a newspaper—so that presumably they can make love. Then there is what is called a zip pan to denote a passing of time. The dialogue between Emily and Kane now becomes somewhat more contentious. Wise crosscuts two medium close-ups to suggest nuptial distance—Kane and Emily are no longer in the same frame, or, as we might say today, not on the same page. There is another zip pan to show more time passing. Now the table is much longer, the clothing less sensual, the talk more political. The sequence ends with Emily starting to say, “Really, Charles, people will think . . .” and Kane rudely

interrupting her with “What I tell them to think.” After this, the camera tracks back to show the pair alone at far ends of a very long table. She reads a competitive newspaper.

This scene is far simpler than the Odessa Steps sequence. Art is found both in complexity and in simplicity. Wise was helped by props (the tables) and costuming. A second-unit crew had to produce the zip pans. Even back in 1941 when the film came out, viewers knew that a zip pan meant a passing of time.

Editing within the shot from *12 Angry Men* (1957)

Even simpler than Welles’s breakfast scene is a scene from Sidney Lumet’s *12 Angry Men*. Twelve male jurors have been sequestered on a hot day to decide the fate of a teenager who has been accused of killing his father. One juror gives a speech full of bigotry about the irresponsibility of young people. He grows angry and ugly, so much so that the other jurors get up and turn their backs on him. Then Henry Fonda makes a speech about tolerance. Here is the link.

12 Angry Men

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTDhgR3p12w

The amazing thing about this scene is that it has no cuts at all. Technically, it’s what I called a long take in [Chapter 3](#). It’s also a good example of what film commentators call “editing within the shot.” There are no actual cuts, but people move or the camera moves, resulting in an edited feel, but a very smooth feel. Editor Carl Lerner could have actually cut—snip, snip—but Lumet didn’t shoot it this way. All Lerner had to do was trim the head and the tail of the shot. The shot is elegantly simple. It starts on a medium close-up of the bigot Ed Begley (centered in the shot) and gradually zooms out as the jurors get up and move away from Begley. After this, a zoom-in commences, finally settling on a medium close-up of Henry Fonda making a pitch for tolerance.

The shower scene from *Psycho* (1960)

Doubtless you’ve seen this scene many times. This time allow me to take it apart from the standpoint of an artful piece of editing—shooting and editing. There are actually several jump cuts or discontinuities in the sequence of shots. I think Hitchcock ordered editor George Tomasini to leave them in. They make the editing itself a bit frenzied and unnatural, like the act of murder. I have read that Hitchcock had a special shower with removable walls built so he could film from

all angles. This allowed varied and actually jittery coverage from multiple perspectives. Such a disturbing scene deserves jittery. Art sometimes must be jittery, especially when it deals with craziness.

Psycho

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VP5jEAP3K4

The baptism scene from *The Godfather* (1972)

This is an example of a basic editing technique raised to high art. The sequence is actually several scenes cut together, or what I called crosscutting in [Chapter 6](#). One scene, the anchor scene, shows the baptism of the daughter of the young Godfather, Michael Corleone (played by Al Pacino); the multiple other scenes go beyond the cathedral to show competing mob bosses being murdered by Corleone's hit men. They are killed in a barbershop, on the steps of a government building, in an elevator, and in a bed.

The crosscutting is meant to convey that these two events—the baptism and the assassinations—are happening simultaneously.

The Godfather

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CDIBLvc3YE

This is filmic hypocrisy. Michael Corleone utters all the right churchy things—he believes in God and Jesus Christ, he has pledged to fight evil—even as the film cuts away to a mob guy being machine-gunned by Michael's men. He is using the baptism to cover himself. *Who me? I was at the Cathedral for my daughter's baptism.* *The Godfather* is rife with family matters and ritual but none speak as loudly as these scenes edited together. Even as mob guys (i.e., corporate mob guys and government mob guys) *appear* to honor the right, they are actually getting away with murder.

The gunning-down scene from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

This is the climax of the 1967 version of *Bonnie and Clyde*, directed by Arthur Penn. The film was made during a period of innovation in American cinema. Penn and his editor Dede Allen were actually taken by European styles of editing. Bonnie and Clyde drive down a country road. The actual gunning down may be like no other piece of editing you have ever seen. Moments before the shooting, the scene plays fast with lots of brief shots of heads turning and changes of expression from love to fear. During the shooting, Penn employed slow-motion photography and had Allen overlap some shots to stretch out the executions. The

hail of bullets from the law guys in the bushes lasts about half a minute—believe me, it’s a long half-minute—and Bonnie and Clyde twitch and recoil with every slug they take. As critic Pauline Kael said about this scene, “It puts the sting back into death”—since for decades shootings in movies had been fast, simple, and bloodless, to satisfy code people.

Notice that one cut to Bonnie is a few frames longer than surrounding clips. She gazes at Clyde. The shot says, “Good-bye, my love.” She knows this is it. It’s amazing what leaving two frames at the tail of a shot—one twelfth of a second—can accomplish. The clip:

Bonnie and Clyde

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhyCCB_xm7U

Final shoot-out of *The Wild Bunch* (1969)

I believe that the editing of the final shoot-out in *Bonnie and Clyde* was a big influence on Sam Peckinpah, who directed *The Wild Bunch*, and his editor Lou Lombardo. Both Penn and Peckinpah wanted to turn violence into art, and the experimental atmosphere of the times gave them permission to do so. Here is the link to the final shoot-out:

The Wild Bunch

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJMxGFco57Y

The sequence is about four over-the-hill renegades coming into a Mexican village to avenge the terrible torture and death of one of their own. You will note similarities between the cutting of this scene and the cutting of the gunning down scene in *Bonnie and Clyde*: the fast cutting, the quick head-turning, the trimmed-to-the-bone POV shots and crosscutting. Halfway through the sequence Peckinpah switches to slow motion. The falling is matched. (See [Chapter 6](#) for a discussion of the matched cut.) One guy starts to fall, cut to a second guy falling in the same position as the first guy, then cut to the third guy falling the same way as the second guy. Stay alert. This happens very fast.

One sequence is very famous. In it Lombardo crosscuts elaborately. Instead of the usual ABAB when a wild-bunch guy shoots a Mexican, Lombardo edits ABABABAB—in other words, cutting back and forth six or eight times, from shooter to faller, shooter to faller, back and forth, in slow motion. The head of all the B shots are matched to the tails of all the A shots. There is no overlap.

Some people feel this revenge scene plays macho silly. It glorifies killing and death. These people might feel that any attempt to make art of killing and death

diminishes the reality of death and disrespects victims and survivors. This is a politically correct response, but for many people, violent scenes that use skillful technique can still be appreciated.

The chase-the-chicken scene from *City of God* (2002)

City of God is the brutal, conscience-lacking film about near-orphan kids, most children of prostitutes, who roam the slums of Rio, form gangs, rob, and kill. This sequence is the first of the film and actually displays credits. On the literal level it's about trying to catch a runaway chicken to chop its head off. But as foreshadowing, it shows the glee and high level of energy these boys display. Later they will kill people with the same zest.

City of God

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASPvpdaQpRQ

The camera is handheld; it jerks, swings around. This is very energetic camerawork. Some shots are so short that they register nearly subliminally. In one remarkable shot a boy has nearly caught the chicken. He holds his arms out. His chums watch him. Somehow the camera travels completely around him—twice—very fast, and the shot dissolves from city blue to countryside brown. We see two companions walking. Eventually they will want out of this gang life. Unfortunately for us there are no English subtitles. It's fine: just feast on the visuals.

Note the cutaways to the chicken. Through shot juxtaposition it seem like he knows what is coming down on him, namely beheading.

Go back to [Chapter 2](#) and a low-angle shot of a kid with a monster pistol from the same film. The expression on his face reflects the craziness of the thug lifestyle.

I am indebted to listverse.com for bringing this sequence to my attention. Visit this site to read about and see nine more astonishing edited sequences: listverse.com/2007/10/28/top-10-best-film-editing-sequences.

The “Sound of Silence” scene from *the Graduate* (1967)

In *The Graduate*, Ben (Dustin Hoffman), a recent college graduate, lives a double life. He is having an affair with the wife of his father's business partner, a woman (Anne Bancroft) much older than he. He isn't too interested in finding a job. He just lounges around the house, swimming, sunbathing, napping. He seems muddled, uncertain as to what his next step in life ought to be. To show this through a succession of images, editor Sam O'Steen contrived a sequence in

which directionality and the color black are used to capture Ben's confusion.

The Graduate

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciERzSFRwzk

See what I mean? You think Ben is walking left in his own house, but he passes through a door that is not to his room but to the hotel room where he has rendezvoused with Mrs. Robinson. We glimpse her at the mirror as the camera slides by her. A bit later Ben walks right to close the door to the hotel room but we see the kitchen of his house where his parents are having a meal. Director Mike Nichols and O'Steen might also have wanted to show that Ben has a parental hang-up while getting it on with Mrs. Robinson.

The color black is used in pieces of furniture and a few props to purposely confuse viewers. The bed in the hotel room has a black headboard and the chair in Ben's room is also black. A black pillow also figures. O'Steen cuts back and forth among these black props until you don't know where you are. Neither does Ben.

BACK TO MODEST EDITING

As I have said, many of these highly charged edited sequences come from that rambunctious period between 1965 and 1973 when editors (or their directors) wanted the craft and art of editing to elbow its way into the forefront of viewers' attention. Can you blame them? Film editors had dwelt in artistic obscurity for so many decades. William Reynolds, who had a long and distinguished career as an editor of Hollywood movies, felt that editing should not call attention to itself. Below is a link to a scene from *The Sting* (1973). It's not very complicated. No gunplay, no leaping over fences, no blazing six-shooters. Instead, the scene is composed almost entirely of faces and playing cards with a bit of a surprise at the end. You watch this scene and just know Reynolds is a master. The pacing is especially adept. Reynolds took an Oscar for his work on this film.

The Sting

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae6Lz_3jlo0

Walter Murch, the Oscar-winning editor who cut the famed helicopter invasion scene for Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, supposedly said that film editing "... requires the same dedication and persistence that any art form does," and controls "the story, the music, the rhythm, the pace, shapes the actors' performances, 're-directing' and often re-writing the film during the editing

process, honing the infinite possibilities of the juxtaposition of small snippets of film into a creative, coherent, cohesive whole.”

Today editors have a choice. They may follow the example of Lombardo and O’Steen and indulge in elaborate, ultimately stylized editing; or they may follow Reynolds’s lead and work modestly. Of course, much depends on the preferences of their directors and the nature of the films they work on.

TRY THIS:

Virtually every film released today has a few sequences creatively edited. These might show what people are thinking, what they remember, how they relate to important elements of the story or to other people. They can be happy, sad, contemplative, scary, nutty, or revelatory. They might stretch time out. Often they are played with complementary music. Look for snatches of creative editing in the next big film you see.

Styles

CHAPTER 10

Hollywood Style

Over the years, Hollywood movies, and also many American independent films and foreign films, have developed certain conventions for telling stories. I have already mentioned quite a few in previous chapters—for example, the establishing shot and the classic sequence described in [Chapter 8](#). This style, often called classic Hollywood style, was so successful that it established a worldwide standard. Films that lacked important ingredients of classic style might be hard to follow or seem weird.

When I said “successful” in the last paragraph, I meant that they made money. If films with certain visual and audio features made money, they were imitated. Movies that did not follow these viewer-pleasing or story-clarifying trends did not make money. Producers studied their money-losers, compared them to films that did make money, got rid of unclear or boring features, and imitated the features of successful films.

Thus classic Hollywood style *evolved*, just as turtles with thick shells and tulip trees with big luscious blossoms evolved: over time. It took turtles and tulip trees millions of years to evolve; Hollywood style needed only twenty years to bloom and infect moviemaking worldwide.

NOT INVISIBLE

Many film writers claim that the reason classic Hollywood style developed was because the style was invisible. That way, viewers could concentrate on story and not technique. But style certainly was not invisible. It survived because viewers got used to it. They were born into it—literally: They watched movies (and later TV) since early childhood and simply picked up the “language” of Hollywood style. To cut from a long shot to a close-up is not an invisible technique. In fact, it is patently jarring. To pan from subject A to subject B is dizzying. To crosscut between two lines of far-flung action is experientially impossible. You cannot do this in real life. You *learned* to understand Hollywood style as you learned language: gradually, unconsciously. No one formally taught you. You don’t question why “faultless” means “without fault” but “reckless” does not mean “without wrecks.” You do not see what you are used to.

There is a famous, maybe apocryphal, story about an early use of the close-up. Someone in a theatre, alarmed at an image showing only head and shoulders,

stood up and shouted, “Show us his feet!” Maybe other people felt the same way. Moviegoers at that time weren’t quite ready for the close-up. But it just took a few short years for (a) nearly all film directors to employ close-ups and (b) for audiences to accept them. Soon no one leapt to his feet, alarmed at a big face on the screen. Close-ups differentiated movies from plays. Close-ups really do jar and they are not invisible. Yet we quickly accepted them.

Close-ups were inserted into movies for two reasons. First, the story unfolding on the screen demanded that, now and then, characters had to be isolated, set apart from other characters and from events. To insert a close-up accomplished this. For a few seconds you are invited to consider the plight or the mind-frame of one character above others. Second, close-ups were big enough to convey inner states—fear, joy, anger, confidence, affection. If a character was lost amid five or six other characters, say in a long shot, your attention would not have been drawn to individual characters.

Moviegoers might have been confused by close-ups of characters in the early days of moviemaking, but directors went ahead with them anyway; they were simply indispensable.

Media guru Marshall McLuhan wrote about unsophisticated Africans who had never seen movies before. When showed UN educational movies meant to urge villagers to throw out standing water, they were in fear when someone walked off the screen. They thought the person had disappeared or was abducted by an evil god. Some in the audience got up and looked behind the screen. These people had not been exposed to standard filmmaking techniques. Walking off screen is a staple of Hollywood style. Sophisticated viewers do not panic when someone does that in a movie. When shown a film that cut from an extreme long shot of a house that looked very small, to a long shot, these African viewers gasped. They thought the house had magically grown in size.

D. W. GRIFFITH, THE FATHER OF FILM TECHNIQUE

This man is generally credited with doing more to develop Hollywood style than anybody else. It’s not an exaggeration to say he literally invented Hollywood technique as we know it today. He was one of the first to employ:

- ▶ Crosscutting ([Chapter 6](#))
- ▶ Match cutting ([Chapter 6](#))
- ▶ Directional continuity
- ▶ Frame changes ([Chapter 1](#))

- ▶ Scene changes
- ▶ Camera movement (Chapter 3)
- ▶ Time manipulation (Chapter 8)
- ▶ Longer running time (the feature film)

And countless other techniques we are scarcely aware of today.

Griffith did this over a period of years starting around 1907 while working for Edison's studio in New York City under Edwin S. Porter and later for Biograph Studios, also in NYC. At first, Griffith, who affected gentlemanly ways and was from the South, wanted only to write screenplays, but gradually Porter and Biograph made an actor out of him and gave him directing chores. In four short years he was doing it all—writing, directing, editing, producing.

You have to understand that in those days (circa 1907) movies never ran longer than sixteen minutes, and no one expected them to. Each reel of film held only sixteen minutes of film. It did not occur to anyone for a long time to change reels to allow films to run longer, if the reels could be changed seamlessly. This procedure would entail two projectors for smooth and swift reel changes. Most of the two-bit, fly-by-night theatre owners of the time just did not want to spend the money on a second projector. Besides, the public was accustomed to seeing films that ran no longer than sixteen minutes or less, and were quite happy—just as today no one demands that TV sitcoms run longer than twenty-three minutes. The concept of the feature film just did not exist. Movie people doubted that anyone would want to sit through a film that ran an hour or an hour and a half. Typically you'd drop by a bar with your buddy, toss back a few, mosey into the backroom to see a ten-minute flick, then go back to the bar and continue drinking. The film was an amusing thing—*moving images!*—but not the main reason you were out and about.

All this gradually changed as stars like Chaplin and Keaton drew larger and larger audiences and dedicated movie theatres replaced backrooms in bars with sheets thumbtacked to walls. Griffith hit it big with his now-famous *Birth of a Nation*, a “silent” film that appeared in 1915. It ran over two hours and of course required reel changing, common by this time. It was shown in the best of venues with a full orchestra accompaniment. It was, in fact, not only the first feature film made (or among the first), but the first big movie event, immensely popular and chock-full of techniques—I've mentioned only eight above—which affected the entire world of filmmaking, and I do mean *world*—England, France, Russia. It was the *Avatar* of its time, and it made lots of money. It brought a middle-class

clientele into theatres for the first time and made moviegoing respectable.

(*Birth of a Nation* is about the Civil War and is frankly critical of the North for winning. It depicts freed slaves as rapists of white women and glorifies the Klan. Too bad. These unfortunate turns of plot and bigoted attitudes have deflected many people from seeing the *cinematic* advances of the film. Content is one thing, technique another.)

Here is a trailer for:

Birth of a Nation

www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9UPOkIpR0A

Griffith made other features, notably *Intolerance* (1916), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921). This last film showed the world how to edit space and time (see [Chapter 8](#)). A bit of the story: Henriette and Louise had been raised as sisters just prior to the French Revolution (about 1790). They traveled to Paris to see if they could find anyone who could cure Louise of her blindness but they become separated and accused of counter-revolutionary activity. Henriette is scheduled to have her head chopped off. Her friend Danton learns this, appeals to the Revolutionary Council to save her, and secures a reprieve. Now he has to get back to the public guillotine site before the blade falls on poor Henriette. Two lines of action develop: Henriette's being prepared for the execution before a crazed mob, and Danton's galloping on his horse, reprieve in hand, hoping to reach the guillotine before the worst. It seems Danton will never reach the officials at the guillotine in time. He even has to get around a traffic jam of carts and horses. But through editing, Griffith slows . . . time . . . down . . . for the beheading scene and *speedstimeup* for the galloping. Cut back to the guillotine: Henriette has been strapped to the chopping block. The guillotiner has his hand on the rope. Cut back to Danton: He gallops fiercely, reaches the guillotine site, races up the steps, and flings the reprieve in the official's face. Henriette is spared, but not before swooning on the chopping block.

Speeding up time for one sequence while slowing it down for another was a rather novel technique in 1915. But not today. It's a standard element of Hollywood style. Viewers understood, then as now.



A COMPENDIUM OF HOLLYWOOD STYLE THROUGH THE DECADES

I can't list all the features of classic Hollywood style. Instead, here are a few well-known films, which, though very different from each other, are founded on Hollywood style.

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932)

Though this film, directed by Mervyn LeRoy at the dawn of the sound film era, was far out of the mainstream of popular moviemaking, it obediently honored Hollywood style. It's about a man wrongly convicted of committing robbery and murder and serving time on a chain gang laying railroad tracks. I believe the film got made because people saw it as a metaphor for the Great Depression, namely, the unfairness of the apparently failed economic system that had screwed over the whole country.

Below is a link to a six-minute clip with numerous examples of Hollywood style. See if you pick out:

- ▶ Crosscutting
- ▶ Cutaways
- ▶ Point-of-view sequences
- ▶ Unidirectional continuity
- ▶ Variety of frames—close-ups, long shots, *etc.*

► Match cuts

Forget the music. It's way unoriginal.

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjUb_a7NT3s

***Sullivan's Travels* (1941)**

This clip is dominated by what is called “the two-shot,” which shows two people in the frame together. If there is no reason to show them in separate shots, then why do it? Filming them separately in their own shots just takes time and money and separates them unnecessarily.

Here is a well-known two-shot from Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), a film about a movie director played by Joel McCrea who flees Hollywood to gain a feel for how ordinary people live. He runs into lively, pleasantly contrary Veronica Lake, who longs to work in Hollywood. Link:

Sullivan's Travels

www.youtube.com/watch?v=02A2a-aEvmI

The scene starts with some distance between the two actors, but they soon gravitate to each other.

Actually, there are more reasons for filming characters in their own shots than placing them together in friendly frames. Movies, like other species of stories, depend on conflict. You can't develop much conflict from two people sitting next to each other in a diner dunking donuts. Filming characters in their own shots heightens conflict, provides space for action, and portends danger.

Back in [Chapter 1](#), I described two-shots as medium shots. Same difference.

***It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)**

Below is a tribute to a well-known movie called *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) narrated by *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott. Scott shows us about half a dozen scenes. The director, Frank Capra, is especially good at huddling people in groups and shooting them from high angles, a standard feature of classic style.

It's a Wonderful Life

www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrQFessHE2o&feature=fvsr

***Shane* (1953)**

Shane, directed by George Stevens and released in 1953, tells the story of a tired gunfighter who befriends a ranching family. He's got to confront the town's

main gunslinger and save the ranching families before he moves on. Here is a classic Western gunfight, though it's filled with questionable timing and a lot of lame shooting. Alan Ladd was damned lucky. But this is Hollywood at its peak. You couldn't simply kill off fair-haired Alan Ladd.

You might compare this scene with the Joel McCrea/Veronica Lake scene I discussed above. Shane and his adversary, a gunman named Wilson, needed space in the barroom to do their shoot-out, and they got it.

Shane

www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1l3TboL5MI

Kiss Me Deadly (1955)

Now for some film noir, otherwise known as “dark cinema.” The trailer below is ripe Hollywood with its fast action and heightened editing. You will have to see the movie to learn why the house is exploding in such a bright and terrifying light. All the shadows and dark lighting were standard features of noir style.

Kiss Me Deadly

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCuhR_SyH8k

***North by Northwest* (1959)**

This is the great thriller by Alfred Hitchcock, and the clip, linked below, is about the most famous scene in it—attempted murder by crop duster:

North by Northwest

www.youtube.com/watch?v=g458w2X9uHc

You would think that such an innovative (and patently ridiculous) scene would be full of innovation, but technically it's not. It's classic Hollywood style through and through, comprised of a couple of POV sequences and some match cutting.

***Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)**

But Hollywood wasn't all clichés and nonsense. Just when you were about to give up on ever seeing anything original, something fresh turns up—like David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*. There hadn't been many films set in the desert until this movie came out and made Peter O'Toole famous. And Lean made it absolutely beautiful.

Below is a link to a scene I call Bedouin Rescue, though YouTube calls it something else. It's gorgeous in its sparse horizontality. It's also 70mm widescreen, rather novel in 1962. But it's still standard Hollywood style. Lawrence has ventured out of his camp to find a Bedouin who has fallen off his camel and trudges across the desert parched and near death. His servant boy keeps watch, scanning the minimalist horizon for any sign of Lawrence. A series of POV shots unreels. The music swells. The boy keeps his eyes on the horizon and spots something we can't really see. The boy is excited and urges his camel forward into a trot, always right to left. Then the film cuts to Lawrence on his camel with the Bedouin hanging on to him from behind. Lawrence's camel trots left to right. Good ol' fashioned directional continuity.

Lawrence of Arabia

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tuNR-uD_mE

Suppose there had been no such thing as classic style. Might Lean have gotten his directions mixed up so that you really couldn't tell what was going on? Thanks to people like Griffith, he instantly understood how his cast, on camels, should move.

TRY THIS:

School yourself in classic Hollywood style. Watch two films out of Hollywood (circa 1940-1960) and note the similarities and differences between it and standard technique. See if you can neutralize story to concentrate on technique—framing and editing, including cutaways and crosscutting, movement, *etc.* This won't be easy. Maybe you should rent two films from the same genre, like two thrillers, and compare two similar scenes, like a car chase or the discovery of a body. Which film follows classic style most slavishly, which departs? It might depend on the years in which these films were made. More recent films might show more departures.

Independent Styles Before 1960

There have always been filmmakers who longed to break out of established traditions of making movies. They wanted to photograph, edit, or add sound in new ways. Often they wanted to bring innovation to storytelling or tell stories about offbeat subjects. They rebelled in degrees. Some arm wrestled studio heads (and always lost) to show a man and a woman horizontal on a bed, or to tell a story about evil not being vanquished in the end. Some just threw up their hands and started their own studios. Others didn't work in studios at all; they just took their little casts down to Coney Island and made movies totally out of the mainstream on the sly and with the slimmest of budgets.

This chapter takes a look at independent filmmaking before 1960; the following chapter surveys some major independents who worked after 1960. The focus of both this chapter and the next is on US filmmaking, while the two chapters that follow those are about novel approaches to filmmaking in foreign lands. Collectively, these filmmakers have created an impressive body of work. Many of their experiments with sight, sound, and storytelling have even found their way into mainstream filmmaking.

Today, independent filmmakers take Academy Awards out of all proportion to their numbers and to their production costs. At the 2010 Academy Awards, for example, these (mainly little) indie films (or their cast members) were either nominated for Oscars or won Oscars: *Precious*, *The Hurt Locker*, *An Education*, *Crazy Heart*, *Inglourious Basterds*, *A Serious Man*, *The Last Station*, and *Up in the Air*. Big studios were involved to some degree with a few of these films—Paramount for *Up in the Air*, Columbia for *Inglourious Basterds*, and two films, *An Education* and *The Last Station*, were produced by foreign studios. In a year when *Avatar* dominated box office, the gripping *The Hurt Locker* won more Oscars.

But the point here is *purpose*. Indies frankly aspire to something like art or literature; Hollywood aims at mere entertainment or exploitation—though I must admit the line is fuzzy.

Independent means one of two things, and often both. It means filmmakers

were free to concoct their own stories and direct it their way, and it means making movies *off-Hollywood*, beyond the reach of the profit-driven studios, though many independents did in fact work for studios. They made the studios so much money they could work their will on them.

As for style, Hollywood, or old style, persisted. It persisted because it worked. It got the job done. It told stories cleanly. One way to think of new style is as a cake of old style with a thick, tangy icing of experimentation, enough for viewers to feel that they had seen something truly different.

Silent-era indies Two great directors of the silent era were Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. At the height of their popularity, both had 100 percent control of scripting, shooting, and editing. Each then stamped every film they made with their unique personalities and takes on life.

Chaplin We remember Charlie as the nimble, quick-witted tramp figure with a giving and positive nature. The whole world took Chaplin to its heart. He made so much money he was able to set up his own studio, and he wrote, directed, and edited all of his films after 1914. He even composed music for them. He was one of the first true “indies.”

Moviegoers loved Chaplin because they could identify with him. He was footloose though always close to financial ruin, a guy who improvised to get by in an era before welfare and shelters for the homeless.

Chaplin’s style was less of a visual innovator and more of a narrative innovator. His tramp figure was not unique in literature or film, but his particular take on it was special—the beguiling combination of down and out, generosity, poise, and abiding respect for women. Chaplin was a genius of restraint. He realized that audiences would tolerate sentiment only so long before tuning out. So he always kept the mushy parts under control. At the end of *City Lights* (1931), when the once-blind girl learns it was the man in tatters before her who secured the money for her operation, she says, “You?” and Chaplin only nods. End of film.

In *The Gold Rush* (1925), he and his prospecting partner are faced with starvation in an Alaskan winter. How do you create humor from starvation? Chaplin improvises by boiling a shoe for their Thanksgiving dinner. Neither the narration nor the music in the clip below is authentic: Thanksgiving dinner in *The Gold Rush*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY0DOnNK3Wg

Keaton The imperturbable Buster Keaton was also much beloved by filmgoers in

the silent era. Unlike Chaplin, he did not have his own studio to make movies shaped to his will, but he joined Talmadge Studios in 1917 where in time he acquired complete control to write, direct, and, most important, to dream up his own stunts and comic bits. The clip below contains a useful narration that explains how Keaton wrung humor from mechanical objects.

The General www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3xh108cLbo

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

What's this film doing in a chapter about independent filmmaking? In 1938, when *Snow White* came out, Hollywood product was not doing very well at the box office. Then Disney had the brashness to set up his own studio for the making of animated films—exclusively. This was a crazy idea. Sure, there had been many animated films before, but almost none in color or running to feature length. Everyone thought *Snow White* would fail—it had no stars. But it became the largest grossing film of 1938 and put Disney on the movie map.

Here is a link to the famous “first-love kiss,” during which a passing prince kisses the well-preserved Snow White and rouses her from her endless sleep.

Notice all the Disney features: the forest setting, the sympathetic animal life, the bashfulness of the dwarfs.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9zZMqIHrm8

I know it's hard to think of Disney products as art or literature. Most of the studio's films through the 1980s are badly dated today—cloyingly sentimental and annoyingly virginal. I should say here that not all independent filmmakers are driven by high aesthetic purpose. New Line was the major backer of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and has, in fact, backed many indies, worthy or not. But Wes Craven, the man behind *Elm Street*, was not out to engender respect from film critics. He just wanted to make a lot of money.

Orson Welles . . . arrived in Hollywood at the ripe old age of 24, having wowed the nation with a radio docudrama of *War of the Worlds*, about aliens (from outer space) invading New Jersey. The production was so realistic it scared viewers up and down the East Coast and caught the attention of Hollywood. Welles finally struck a deal with RKO Studios to do a film about a fictional newspaper czar loosely based on the life of William Randolph Hearst. This was *Citizen Kane* (1941), a film so studded with innovation that contemporary audiences didn't know what to make of it. It took viewers and critics decades to recognize the greatness of the film. It is often placed at the top of lists of the best

films of all time. It features long takes, deep focus, forced perspective, moody lighting, and unique story lines in which five people explain to a reporter how they perceived Charles Foster Kane. It's like the fable of the blind men who feel parts of an elephant. One reports that the elephant is very much like a snake, another like a tree trunk, a third as a wall. It's an old fable, which probably originated in India, about how reality is not only subjective but also not accessible to any single individual.

Here is a link that will take you to the last scene of the film when the meaning of "rosebud" is revealed. Kane had uttered this word on his deathbed. The reporter who was assigned to discover the meaning of rosebud never succeeded. The meaning is made known only to viewers. It is both mundane and profound—and underscores the theme of unknowable reality.

Citizen Kane www.youtube.com/watch?v=eP0O1BKu3zk

Preston Sturges again I mentioned this man in the last chapter as a practitioner of a venerated Hollywood technique, the two-shot. Now I want to call attention to seven sterling comedies he made from 1939 to 1944 (among many other movies before and after).

This man was a Hollywood whirlwind. What made Sturges an independent? Two things. First, he was allowed to both write and direct, not a common thing during this period when the rigid studio system was based on a strict division of labor. And second, Sturges's subject matter was far more satirical and biting than anything Hollywood was turning out during WWII when the tendency was to play it safe. In *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), a pretty young woman is so sexed up she goes to a series of parties held for servicemen about to be shipped overseas. She marries a private and gets pregnant by him, but is so drunk she can't remember anything about him—or it. (Actually the movie shows her getting bumped on the head as the cause of her amnesia, but nobody believes that.) This girl, played by Betty Hutton, goes by the improbable name of Trudy Kockenlocker. Below is a link to a clip from the movie showing the succession of (pretty wild) parties.

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR9GOBICNWQ

The "miracle" of the film has to do with Trudy's giving multiple births. It becomes a national news zinger, something like what CNN would cover for days and days today, and Sturges turns the politicians involved into publicity-hungry hypocrites.

THE ART FILM

Now for a total shifting of gears. While Hollywood (and the rest of the world of commercial moviemaking) was perfecting its style of storytelling, a handful of American and European filmmakers made experimental films that owed more to the world of poetry and modern painting than to what the big studios on the West Coast were doing. These films were short and these films were long—thirty seconds to five hours. In the 1940s, a woman who went by the name of Maya Deren began making some engaging, totally fresh “art films” which owe practically nothing to Hollywood style. Her *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) has had a tremendous effect on the world of underground filmmaking. It displays a little directional continuity and a match cut or two—classic technique—but mainly it is a source-less succession of images, deep shadows, and props from everyday life as well as spooky props like figures shrouded in black with mirrors for faces. A Wikipedia contributor wrote this about *Meshes of the Afternoon*: *Meshes of the Afternoon* . . . is a short experimental film directed by wife and husband team, Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. The film’s narrative is circular, and repeats a number of psychologically symbolic images, including a flower on a long driveway, a key falling, a door unlocked, a knife in a loaf of bread, a mysterious Grim Reaper-like cloaked figure with a mirror for a face, a phone off the hook and an ocean. Through creative editing, distinct camera angles, and slow motion, the surrealist film depicts a world in which it is more and more difficult to catch reality.

You can see the 13-minute *Meshes of the Afternoon* in its entirety by clicking below: *Meshes of the Afternoon* www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mm3lEUThPo

Kenneth Anger . . . was a Californian who made several short films with homoerotic themes. Among the best known is *Fireworks*, made on a zero budget in 1947. There were not many homoerotic films made in 1947, as you can imagine. But Anger’s film, mainly about a dream, showed how film could suggest the dream state, and inspired people to make similar films, though not necessarily homoerotic, for years to come.

Film of course is the ideal medium for creating dreams or for blurring the distinction between waking reality and dreaming. Here is a link to most of the 20-minute film.

Fireworks www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDu7mbcGqGY

Anger said this of his film: “A dissatisfied dreamer awakes, goes out in the night seeking a ‘light’ and is drawn through the needle’s eye. A dream of a dream,

he returns to bed less empty than before.” Adding later, “This flick is all I have to say about being seventeen, the United States Navy, American Christmas, and the Fourth of July.”

He was arrested on obscenity charges soon after the release of *Fireworks*. The case went to the California Supreme Court, which declared the film to be art.

Nicholas Ray . . . was a Hollywood director who made several films about disaffected youth: *They Live by Night* (1949) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). This was during an era of sweet films about young people, with Mickey Rooney in *Andy Hardy’s Blonde Trouble* (1944) and *Summer Holiday* (1944). Kids got into harmless jams that never questioned the system of—whatever: sexism, parental obtuseness. Here is some dialogue among Jim Stark, the main character of *Rebel* played by James Dean, his parents, and a grandmother. Nobody understands anybody else.

FRANK STARK: We give you love and affection, don’t we? Well, then what is it? Was it because we went to that party? Well, you know what kind of drunken brawls those kind of parties turn into. It’s not a place for kids.

MRS. CAROL STARK: A minute ago, you said you didn’t care if he drinks.

MRS. STARK, JIM’S GRANDMOTHER: He said a little drink.

JIM STARK: You’re tearing me apart!

MRS. CAROL STARK: [*shocked*] What?

JIM STARK: You, you say one thing, he says another, and everybody changes back again!

MRS. CAROL STARK: That’s a fine way to behave!

MRS. STARK, JIM’S GRANDMOTHER: Well, you know who he takes after.

Alfred Hitchcock This man invented the thriller. At the height of his career in the 1960s he turned out one masterful suspense film after another, nearly all embraced by viewers the world over. He was too big and important to stay with one studio. He did *North by Northwest* (1959) for MGM but formed his own TV production company for *Psycho* (1960). Studios shied away from it because of the content. Paramount co-produced *Vertigo* (1958).

Hitchcock not only was an elegant storyteller, he was a visual genius. Here is the famous carousel scene from *Strangers on a Train* (1945). The carousel rotates much faster than normal, endangering lives. A fight ensues as the ride is out of control. Note touches like the hooves of the wooden horses threatening to stomp on faces. The little subplot of the old man crawling under the spinning contraption adds interest. The scene is vintage Hollywood style, however, complete with cutaways, crosscutting, and match cuts.

Strangers on a Train www.youtube.com/watch?v=75ACQveD9ac&feature=related

Ray Ashley, Morris Engel, and Ruth Orkin In 1953, these three Americans made an endearing eighty-minute movie about a boy who, believing he has killed someone, runs off to Coney Island. It's a charming mix of delight and fear as the boy strolls through the park, rides the merry-go-round, and fights off dread. It's called *The Little Fugitive* and it was of the essence of indie filmmaking: Ashley and Engel just went to Coney Island with a cast of one or two and shot what was going on. They did not try to control anything in the background. No formally designated "extras." They did not get permission to shoot. All the sound was added after editing. Later filmmakers were to call this kind of filmmaking *guerrilla*—move in fast, get the footage, then get the hell out before anyone had the sense to yell, "Hey, wait a minute. You can't do that!" Ruth Orkin did much of the directing.

Below is a link to an atmospheric clip which suggests the loneliness of the boy, as well as his hunger. Listen to the fine mix.

The Little Fugitive www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkJVtA052k0

Ashley, Orkin, and Engel's films—they made three features in all—had a considerable effect on European filmmakers looking to simplify production and explore themes of everyday life. This meant getting out of studios and taking to the streets, as Ashley, Orkin, and Engel had done. *The Little Fugitive* may have been a source for *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959), Francois Truffaut's famous account of a boy neglected by his parents and forced to live mainly by his wits in Paris. It's the classic tale of misunderstood youth.

The Four Hundred Blows www.youtube.com/watch?v=i89oN8v7RdY

Shirley Clarke . . . made several important art films about such subjects as bridges and skyscrapers and a few feature films about American jazz and drug addiction. She was totally out of the mainstream with her 16mm camera and miniscule crew. She was an artist before her time. In the late 1950s and '60s almost no one wanted to see films about gay African Americans or heroin-addicted saxophone players. Below is a link to a retrospective about her work.

Shirley Clarke Retrospective www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ7CMi6TnJE

TRY THIS:

See a couple of films described in this chapter and tune in to their unHollywoodness. Rejoice in differentness. Google "independent films" or "experimental films" and see what the Internet yields. Go to websites of

theatres specializing in indies and see what's playing. Try Landmark Theatres of Los Angeles and San Francisco, The Palm Theatre of San Luis Obispo, Fresno Filmworks in Fresno, The State Theatre in Modesto, and the Tower in Sacramento. In NYC, try the Angelika and the IFC Center. Virtually any big city has an "art-film" or alternative-film theatre. Google or look in newspapers for what's playing. Virtually all indies are available on Netflix, so sign up.

Independent Styles After 1960

It's a miracle that any independent films were made at all before 1960. Society was much tighter and preferences were narrowed. Audiences generally were clueless about alternative cinema, and—big differences—there was no Internet, no YouTube, no digital equipment you might make a movie with for small change such as iMovie for editing and GarageBand for adding music, two programs Apple has always given away.

In the 1960s, change, technological and social, marched across the land, slow at first, then racing. Vietnam brought about much rethinking. Countercultures flourished. Racism eased. Pot abounded. New thinking roamed. Women spoke out. Something called *the environment* was discovered and gradually embraced. Video rentals and purchases opened up entire *oeuvres* of filmmakers to you. You might see the latest Stanley Kubrick flick at the local theatre; but now you could rent most of his other films, study his output, get to know the man and his work. For a time, in the eighties and nineties, you copied films you wanted to keep on VHS tape. Then DVD and the Internet made it so easy to simply buy or rent through the mail or instantly download that you left off copying. You can call the sixties and decades beyond many things, but it was certainly a time for national film-consciousness. One measure of this: the number of young people wanting to major in film skyrocketed. I know. I taught film during this period. At the start, one or two students wanted to major in film. By the 20-oughts, the whole class did. So-called film schools sprouted like dandelions in Spring.

MORE ART FILMS

Jonas Mekas, a Lithuanian immigrant, was an early art-film advocate. He hung out with the likes of Andy Warhol, Allen Ginsberg, Yoko Ono, and Salvador Dali. He edited a publication called *Film Culture* and wrote a column about film for *The Village Voice*. As far as I can determine, he has made hundreds, probably thousands, of films, starting in 1953 and continuing at least to 2006 when he made a film a day—365 in all—to celebrate Apple's introduction of the iPod, at the age of eighty-four.

Mekas makes jerky, inelegant—or at least unpretentious—films of everyday life, particularly his own life. It snowed in NYC. Mekas got someone to film him taking a stroll down a sidewalk. A friend baptized her baby. Mekas was there capturing the event on film. There is virtually no difference between what Mekas does and the home movie, except Mekas’s films unfold much faster. Mekas apparently likes quick cuts more than the average home movie maker does. One reviewer called Mekas a “diarist.” He was put on Earth to remind us of the significance of the ordinary, the worthiness of preserving the here and now. He has influenced filmmakers around the world.

One of his best-known films is *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000), about family and friends. Here is Mekas’s three-minute version of the original five-hour film. Mekas narrates. Without the narration, the snippet would make no sense at all to most people:

As I Was Moving Ahead . . .
www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhmZ7C-oXDY

Another influential art filmmaker was the American Stan Brakhage, reported to have made 380 films ranging in length from nine seconds to four hours. In his later years he became Distinguished Professor of Film at the University of Colorado. Most of his films do not send out the faintest whiff of classic Hollywood style.

Here is what one film commentator on Wikipedia says about Brakhage’s work:

. . . Brakhage created a large and diverse body of work, exploring a variety of formats, approaches and techniques that included handheld camerawork, painting directly onto celluloid, fast cutting, in-camera editing, scratching on film and the use of multiple exposures. Interested in mythology and inspired by music, poetry and visual phenomena, Brakhage sought to reveal the universal in the particular, exploring themes of birth, mortality, sexuality, and innocence . . . Brakhage’s films are often noted for their expressiveness and lyricism.

Not always. I showed my students a reel of Brakhage films a number of years ago. All were harsh—hard on the eyes and grating to the ears. Students demanded I turn the projector off or they’d throw it out the window. You know you are trafficking in something important when you get responses like that.

Here is a six-and-a-half-minute film by him, entitled:

I . . . Dreaming (1988)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkJK01toHww

ART AND EXPERIMENTAL FILMS ONLINE

Here is a link to a Google listing for “experimental films”: goo.gl/OJQ1xE.

Two Stanleys

. . . made stunningly original films during the sixties, seventies, and beyond. They aren't art films, but they are forever relevant.

Stanley Kramer produced and directed "message films" which stuck-in-the-mud Hollywood wouldn't touch. He made a pair of important films about race relations (*The Defiant Ones* in 1958 and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* in 1967). He made controversial courtroom dramas: *Inherit the Wind* (1960) is about the teaching of evolution while *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) is about Nazi war crimes.

Here is a clip from *The Defiant Ones*, literally dripping with meaning. It's raining. The escaped convicts played by Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier are (literally and symbolically) chained at the wrists. They have to (symbolically) work together to extricate themselves. [Link:](#)

The Defiant Ones

www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGZ6Kjk807Q

Stanley Kubrick's lifetime output is unique. His *Paths of Glory* (1957) is among the greatest anti-war films ever made. (The title comes from the Brit poet Thomas Gray: "The paths of glory lead but to the grave.") In 1962 Kubrick adapted *Lolita*, the shocking novel by Vladimir Nabokov about sex with a child. No one at that time thought it could be done—fewer thought it *should* be done.

By 1967 Kubrick had made the film he is probably most famous for: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a very big film that suited his light-show besotted audience. In 1971 he made the futuristic thug flick *A Clockwork Orange*; four years later he directed the visually lush *Barry Lyndon*, about social climbing in eighteenth-century England. All over the place.

John Cassavetes

Kramer and Kubrick worked within the studio system. John Cassavetes, a New York-based actor and filmmaker, worked on his own, without benefit of (or obstruction from) studios. He just picked up a 16mm camera, got some friends together, and made longish, often improvised films about friends and family. *Shadows* (1959) is about a troublesome triangle among a jazz musician, his sister, and his agent. *Faces* (1968) is about an older man who leaves his wife for a younger woman. Probably Cassavetes's best-known film is *A Woman Under the Influence* (1975), which takes on the problem of mental illness in a middle-age woman, played by Cassavetes's wife Gena Rowlands. This film was nominated for two Oscars (Rowlands and Cassavetes) and won a Golden Globe for Rowlands. Here is link to a trailer for:

A Woman Under the Influence
www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4Uzdlgv2G8

David Lynch

Lynch's films are probably the most unique among feature films. His *Eraserhead* (1977) is so weird and hard to deal with that most innocent viewers are turned off, at first anyway. The "story" is self-consciously absurd. Bushy-headed guy works in a factory where severed heads are mushed up to make pencil erasers. He has a mutant, wormlike baby that won't stop moaning. It's a full-fledged nightmare. In time people "saw" *Eraserhead* as a kind of masterpiece of the surreal.

Lynch never has made a straight film. Even his ventures into TV (*Twin Peaks*) are crooked and bent. In Lynch's world severed ears are found in vacant lots and armies of ants fight full-tilt. Weird oxygen-tank-enhanced sex goes on.

A few more Lynch films you might want to look into: *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Inland Empire* (2006).

A short clip from *Eraserhead*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU7OqGCicak

John Sayles

. . . was for several decades considered the premiere American independent filmmaker. He tried working with a studio, Paramount, once—only once. Though dissension and compromise marked production, the movie that emerged from the deal with the devil—*Baby It's You* (1983), about two young people trying to find themselves and relate to each other—is actually pretty good. It eschews the kidflick happy ending. After this film Sayles chose to work entirely on his own—financing, writing, acting, directing, cutting—doing it all.

Sayles went on to make such important films as *City of Hope* (1991), *Lone Star* (1996), and *Men With Guns* (1997). Many of Sayles's films have a strong sense of less-than-perfect societies and how individuals in them deal with disappointment, bigotry, and compromised dreams.

Here is a video about *Matewan* (1987), a Sayles film having to do with the gunning down of coal miners on strike in Appalachia. You get to hear Sayles's account of his dealings with studios and how the massacre was virtually unknown outside of West Virginia.

Matewan

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXj1vzwXwYQ&feature=related

Steven Soderbergh

. . . is credited with revitalizing the indie film movement when it was supine in the late 1980s by making a curious little uncapped film called *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. In it James Spader induces women to speak intimately about their sex lives while he videotapes them. This film won top awards at the Cannes Film Festival, which in turn encouraged other would-be filmmakers to go indie. Here is a trailer for the film:

Sex, Lies, and Videotape

www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi1568801049/

Soderbergh also knows how to put big, expensive Hollywood productions together and direct stars like George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Julia Roberts in the three *Oceans* films (2001-2007). But he returns to little, chancy films like *Bubble* (2005), a slice of life in an Ohio River community, and *Che* (2008), in two parts, about the life of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara.

Jim Jarmusch

Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) is often considered what the American indie film should be—experimental, uniquely toned, and delicately climaxed. The tone of the film is a droll/comic/sad/existential mix. You smile and snicker but seldom laugh aloud. It's about three NYC losers on a journey across America with questions they can't answer because they don't know what to ask.

Here is a clip from *Stranger Than Paradise*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWnvlhg5qII

Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1991) is about rides in taxis all around the world with people like Gena Rowlands (John Cassavetes's wife) as an aggressive casting agent who jabbers almost constantly into her cell phone—then, zoom: We are in another taxi in Paris with a blind passenger who gives a lecture to the cabbie about how to deal with the handicapped. You don't take these conversations too seriously. Mainly they are comments about pop culture and contemporary stuff. There is always backhanded, throwaway humor going on:

Paris cabbie: Don't blind people usually wear dark glasses?

Blind passenger: Do they? I've never seen a blind person.

Gus Van Sant

Van Sant made *To Die For*, a film about an ambitious TV news reporter played by Nicole Kidman, for Columbia in 1995. She says things like “You aren’t really anybody in America if you’re not on TV.” Van Sant has made break-out films like *Good Will Hunting* (1997) which starred Robin Williams as a university professor and Matt Damon as a math genius who mops floors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

But Van Sant seems most comfortable making little films about askew characters. His *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) is about two hustlers in the Portland, Oregon, area. River Phoenix is gay and in love with Keanu Reeves. It would be easier if Reeves too were gay, but he isn’t, at least not willingly. Yet they are fast friends. Phoenix is also obsessed with finding his mother, who abandoned him as a child.

Quentin Tarantino

Tarantino is the tough-guy independent. He likes to heat up dialogue and get characters killed in ugly ways. You are helpless before a Tarantino flick. The profanity Tarantino puts into the mouths of his characters both disgusts you and transfixes you. You wish you could cuss like that. It's elemental naughty. This is the way men should act. You both love and hate the way Uma Thurman learns martial arts then gets herself buried alive in a coffin in one of the *Kill Bills* (2003-2004). You can't turn away from that pathological scene in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) when Bruce Willis and Ving Rhames "go medieval" on the pawn shop guys. You can hardly bear to watch, but you do.

Some people call Tarantino "Hollywood on steroids." Or "Hollywood without censors." It's like Hollywood went sissy; Quentin came 'round to save us from PC and corporate mentality. There's no law and order in *Pulp Fiction*. I take that back: Bruce Willis finds a cop and says the mob is after him. Cop says, "What for?" Willis says, "Gambling debt." Cop says, "Don't worry, gambling's illegal." For all the shooting and killing, you never hear cop sirens in *Pulp Fiction*. This is a world without cops.

Here is a trailer for Tarantino's 2009 *Inglourious Basterds*, which won an Oscar and was nominated for six others:

Inglourious Basterds

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRYDNWXuip8

Spike Lee

Somewhat like Steven Soderbergh, Lee alternates between making Hollywood movies and his own indies. When he apparently needs money, he does thrillers like *Inside Man* (2006). The same year he made a sensitive documentary called *When the Levees Broke*, about the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in African American neighborhoods. Lee has made some very big films—*Malcolm X* (1992), for example—but he seems to prefer coming back to smaller efforts like *Get on the Bus* (1996), about the Million-Man March in Washington, and *4 Little Girls* (1997), about four African American girls who died when racists bombed their church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.

Lee's *25th Hour* (2002) may be his best film. It's about a guy, played by Edward Norton, who has to go to prison for a long time on a drug conviction. He spends his last day as a free man looking up people from his past he has wronged or whom he loves, trying to make contact, wanting to patch things up. The film has an authentically tragic feel, for viewers know he won't get any last-minute reprieve. Nor is he innocent. Hollywood does things like that. Norton will do the time, all right. What's important is the process of expiation.

Todd Solondz

Solondz is a tough filmmaker. He doesn't believe in standard film technique or in telling standard stories. His *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) is about suburban Hell. It focuses on Dawn (Heather Matarazzo), a thirteen-year-old girl in middle school in New Jersey. She's not sweet or pretty, and she gets picked-on constantly by her classmates. She's a loner, always seen trying to fit in but not knowing how. Her parents are not sensitive to her depression, nor is her brother. She herself is not aware of her depression. Being on a constant downer is for Dawn simply what life is about. Her younger sister is the pretty one, confident and outgoing. Nobody learns anything at the school. Learning is beside the point. The teachers are unaware that no learning goes on, or they are cynical and just put their time in. Teaching is a job, not a calling. The kids just have to go to the school. It's what school is. It's what kids do. Everyone puts in their time. In all, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* is a bleak and unsentimental view of uncaring America, peopled with kids and grown-ups who just don't give a shit.

Solondz's *Palindromes* (2005) is much "worse": it's even tougher to take and nearly impossible to understand. This film baffles critics. Most hate it, but a few perceive sly, postmodern art in it. Here's why *Palindromes* has so much going

against it: first, the story is about a thirteen-year-old girl, Aviva, who is pregnant. (A palindrome is a word that is spelled the same way forwards or backwards.) Pedophilia is an inherently repugnant topic. But more troubling, Aviva is played by *eight different actors* including a chubby girl, a skinny girl, an obese woman, a boy, and the well-known Hollywood fixture Jennifer Jason Leigh, who was past forty when she did the film. Plus three more Avivas! And third, the dialogue is flat and amateurish. In fact, the whole film feels like a bad film.

But the few critics who like the film feel the bad-film-ness and the multiple casting of Aviva are intentional, maybe even strokes of genius. They put audiences off. They upset all expectations. You never feel cozy with the story. Solondz won't let you.

John Waters

This guy also makes strange films a lot of people hate. Waters is really into camp, bad taste, cult, and shock. For one of his films—I forget which—ushers passed out cards with numbered blisters. When you saw “7” flashing in the corner of the screen, you scratched the blister numbered 7 and the smell of vomit wafted up. Or bad breath. Or baby shit. “Smellovision,” Waters called it. Three of his early films (*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Desperate Living*) made up what he labeled the *Trash Trilogy*. From Wikipedia: “Waters’s early campy movies present filthily lovable characters in outrageous situations with hyperbolic dialogue. . . . A particularly notorious final segment of *Pink Flamingos*, simply added as a non sequitur to the end of the film, featured, in one take without special effects, a small dog defecating and Divine [probably a transvestite and Waters’s favorite actor] eating the feces.”

Later in his career, Waters calmed down, so to speak, and made more accessible films. His *Hairspray* (1988) was a pop blockbuster and was transformed into a successful Broadway musical (though not by Waters), then into a movie starring John Travolta (costumed as a fat woman) and directed by Adam Shankman in 2007. *USA Today* called the movie “one big, loud, tacky party, sure to offend the neighbors—particularly those with no tolerance for racial humor, fat jokes, or sexual innuendo.” So in spite of all this watering down, much of Waters’s original happy vulgarity survives.

The Coen Brothers

Usually Joel writes, Ethan directs. Or they both write. Or they both direct. Whichever, it's a productive team which has turned out some great indies. Lately (2007) the brothers did *No Country for Old Men*, a heavy contemplation of evil roaming the plains of West Texas. Ostensibly, *No Country for Old Men* is a thriller based on an old plot device: a drug deal gone bad. There is a valise full of money. There's always a valise full of money, isn't there? People kill for it, don't they? But in this film, there is coincidence and accident, and stuff that happens unpredictably and messes up the thriller mold. In a typical thriller, the sheriff is supposed to catch the bad guy. That's too easy here. Evil walks.

Below is clip from *No Country for Old Men* about a coin toss. Never has such a simple act seemed so sinister:

No Country for Old Men

www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkh6if8TL2U

The Coen brothers should probably win an award for the most varied output of any indie filmmakers. Their first film, *Blood Simple* (1984), had so many twists and betrayals it made other films noir look like simplistic children's tales. *Fargo* (1996) features a dowdy housewife as a cop of a small town in Minnesota going after a pair of East Coast toughs who've killed three people.

The Coens made *Burn After Reading* in 2008. It's a fast-talking, fast-moving comedy starring Brad Pitt and George Clooney as you've never seen them before. *A Serious Man* was released in 2009. It's a circa-1960s reenactment of the *Book of Job*.

OTHER NOTABLE CONTEMPORARY INDIES

Terry Zwigoff has made a couple of engaging indies—*Crumb* (1994) and *Ghost World* (2001)—both about outsiders. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini did *American Splendor* in 2003, about self-pitying underground comic-book maker Harvey Pekar. Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995) has been called a horror film of the soul, though it does not look or feel like a horror film. It's about one woman's self-imposed isolation in suburbia and the wretchedly tiny life she has made for herself. Haynes's *Far From Heaven* is remarkably similar in theme to *Safe* but very different in style. It's about the horror of living in the restrictive fifties. Haynes has imitated—*resurrected* may be a better word—the look and feel of “weepies”—that is, female-centered romances of that decade.

Haynes's latest film is hard to classify. It's a kind of dramatized documentary on the life of Bob Dylan called *I'm Not There* (2007) with *six*—shades of Todd Solondz!—actors playing Dylan, including Kate Blanchett.

Richard Linklater is the indie chronicler of youth. His films catch young people in different life stages with different possibilities—or its lack. *Slacker* (1991) is about that perplexing period in life when you don't know whether to go on being cool or get a job. *Dazed and Confused* (1993) is also about youth smacked over the head by impending adulthood; *Before Sunset* (1995) is a romantic idyll about a guy and a girl spending a day, but not the night, together in Vienna. *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) are strange films that talk and talk, mainly about un-filmic philosophical matters. Both films were first shot live then converted to an animated look via a computer. In 2008 Linklater came out with an endearing film, *Orson and Me*, about a youth who

gets a minor part in Orson Welles's WPA production about Julius Caesar.

Lisa Cholodenko has made a couple of Southern California-based indie films, mainly about family and relationships. Her latest is *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), featuring two lesbians, their teen children, and their sperm donor. Before this, she did a film called *High Art* (1998), in which a young woman editor at a magazine enters the life of a high-octane photographer. *Laurel Canyon* (2002) is about the record industry and sundry high-living goings-on. Connect to a trailer for:

The Kids Are All Right

www.youtube.com/watch?v=RixlpHKfb6M

Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden, as director and writer, have made a pair of engaging indies. *Half Nelson* (2006) is about a drug-addicted history teacher trying to do right. *Sugar* (2008) is a sports film, but it doesn't end with the usual fame and fortune. Instead, it treats the fates of aspiring athletes more realistically.

Kelly Reichardt has made small films with small casts in which people make everyday decisions with long-term consequence. Her *Old Joy* (2006) is about two men who used to be footloose but have drifted over time. *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) is about a young woman on the road without enough bucks to keep herself going. She loses both her car (mobility) and her dog (security).

Here is a clip from *Wendy and Lucy* that touches on the young woman's desperation and an older security guard who wants to help.

Wendy and Lucy

www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi1728447257/

More notable indies:

- ▶ *Trust* (1990), Hal Hartley. A high school girl gets thrown out of her house when her parents learn she is pregnant. Later she meets an understanding young man.
- ▶ *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), Jared Hess. A nerdy high school guy helps his friend run for student body president.
- ▶ *Buffalo 66* (1998), Vincent Gallo. Guy gets out of prison, runs into a dance studio to pee, and kidnaps a girl who eventually is okay with this.
- ▶ *Transamerica* (2005), Duncan Tucker. Man saving up for a sex-change operation learns he has a son in trouble in NYC.
- ▶ *The Lookout* (2007), Scott Frank. Young man has memory problems following a bad car accident; gets caught up in bank robbery.

THE EUROPEAN ART-FILM MOVEMENT

Somewhere in this chapter a long section on the influence of the European “art film” needs to be brought in, though I have included two chapters on “Euro-indies.” I am going to direct you to an excellent essay on Wikipedia called “Art film.” It explains how the antecedents to contemporary indies go back to 1910 and the hard-fought battles between groups of filmmakers who wanted to be liberated from the budding studio system which often denied creativity in favor of profits and sure things. Orson Welles was hugely influenced by German expressionism with its dark shadows and forced perspective. Starting in the 1940s, American filmmakers, and some large segments of audience, too, started paying attention to the European “resetting” of what films should be about—Italian neorealism, French New Wave, British Kitchen Sink, and Japanese cinematic myth-making and humanizing of Hollywood practices which had crossed the ocean. These movements showed American filmgoers and filmmakers what cinema might achieve. These influences are still with us.

The link: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_film

TRY THIS:

See some films mentioned in this chapter. For each, determine what makes them “alternative” or Anti-Hollywood. Not just technique, but content, too.

How might you characterize their style?

Here is a list of fairly recent American and British independent films you might look into:

- ▶ *Absolute Wilson* (2007)—Biopic of a famous experimental playwright.
- ▶ *Art and Copy* (2009)—About advertising and inspiration.
- ▶ *Bright Star* (2010)—Three-year romance between nineteenth-century poet John Keats and Fanny Brawne.
- ▶ *The Messenger* (2009)—An American soldier struggles with an ethical dilemma when he becomes involved with a widow of a fallen officer.
- ▶ *Frozen River* (2008)—A woman smuggles undocumented Mohawk women across the frozen St. Lawrence River.
- ▶ *In the Loop* (2009)—The US President and UK Prime Minister fancy a war. But not everyone agrees that war is a good thing.
- ▶ *Killer of Sheep* (2007)—Stan works in drudgery at a slaughterhouse. His personal life is drab. Dissatisfaction and ennui keep him unresponsive to the needs of his adoring wife.
- ▶ *Outsourced* (2008)—After his entire department is outsourced, an American novelty products salesman heads to India to train his replacement.
- ▶ *Two Lovers* (2009)—A Brooklyn-set romantic drama about a bachelor torn between the family friend his parents wish he would marry and his beautiful but volatile new neighbor.

(Most of these summaries taken from imdb.com)

CHAPTER 13

Other Styles

Here are a few more styles to round out our survey of filmmaking tendencies.

FILM NOIR

The French gave this term to certain American films that they couldn't see during WWII. When they did get a load of them they were surprised at the pessimistic tone many Hollywood films had taken on. These dark films were virtually always about crime. Some had happy endings, but most ended in death or imprisonment, mainly for men. "Film noir" in French means "black film."

Film noir came on during the end of the US Depression and found a ready audience in the United States. Hollywood may have produced too many films with frothy wrap-ups, which more sophisticated viewers were impatient with. There was a market for downer films—not a particularly large market, but a profitable niche market made up of filmgoers who were okay with bleak.

Film noirs were generally shot dark with lots of shadows, lots of blackness. Wide-angle lenses deepened focus and distorted perspective. Some critics feel that noir starts in black. Cinematographers then gradually add light, just enough to make out figures and important props. Here is a shadowy trailer from *Out of the Past* (1947), a noir shot by Nicholas Musuraca:

Out of the Past

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dn8EImlkRV8

Film historians generally credit *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) as the first film noir—though Hollywood had produced many films before with downbeat endings. In this film Humphrey Bogart as the private detective Sam Spade has to figure out who killed his partner. He also has to listen to his heart: should he allow himself to fall in love with a beautiful woman who has hired him to find a jewel-encrusted statuette, the Maltese Falcon? Three other shady, underworld characters seek the statue. Spade falls for the woman, but she ends up in a bad place.

Here is a tribute to the film—and to film noir—by New York *Times* film critic A. O. Scott:

Tribute to film noir:

video.nytimes.com/video/2009/03/30/movies/1194839024645/critics-picks-the-maltese-falcon.html

The figure of the *femme fatale* (“fatal woman” in French) occurs in many noir films. She is the woman who leads the protagonist to his doom, always for personal gain or ego. In *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), Gloria Swanson is the aging, forgotten star of silent cinema who prevails on screenwriter William Holden to write her a script that will restore her to stardom. Holden can’t resist, in several senses. He ends up floating in a swimming pool. Holden narrates, even though he is dead.

Noir plots are often tangles difficult to unknot. It’s been suggested that noir stories are sometimes overly complicated because life is like that, especially to doomed men. When Howard Hawks adapted Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1946) he had to get Chandler on the phone to lay out the plot lines of the climax. But Chandler was no help. “Beats the shit out of me,” he said, in effect.

Some film historians feel film noir was not only a style but a product of a certain period of film history, namely from the late thirties to the late fifties. Yet noir lives. Here is a list of palpable film noirs that have been released in the 1970s and beyond.

- ▶ *Klute* (1971)
- ▶ *Chinatown* (1974)
- ▶ *The Conversation* (1974)
- ▶ *Angel Heart* (1987)
- ▶ *Who Killed Roger Rabbit* (1988)
- ▶ *Batman* (1989)
- ▶ *The Grifters* (1990)
- ▶ *Miller’s Crossing* (1990)
- ▶ *Memento* (2000)
- ▶ *Road to Perdition* (2002)
- ▶ *Sin City* (2005)
- ▶ *A History of Violence* (2005)

Chinatown, released in 1974, has often been called the greatest noir ever made. It has all the ingredients of noir—confusion, obsession, crime and perversity, a sort of femme fatale (though softened and made a victim), and the obligatory unhappy ending. But it lacks the dark, black and white photography of classic noir. In fact, since it is set in sunny Los Angeles, it is uncharacteristically bright, an ironic touch.

Here is a trailer for *Chinatown* which, though a bit overheated, nevertheless

picks up many features of noir.

Chinatown

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yJJWXhXbuI

Noirs made in the seventies and later often depart from classic models. *Angel Heart* is really a horror story. *Who Killed Roger Rabbit* mixes live action with cartoons. *Batman*—well, we all know it ain't no classic noir. *Memento* goes backwards in time (!). *Sin City* is based on a graphic novel. The farther we depart in time and place from the American homeland of noir, the less films of crime resemble the classic noirs of the fifties. Does it matter?

NOIRS FROM ABROAD

The UK has produced many noteworthy film noirs, or near-noirs. Doubtless the best known and most honored is *The Third Man* (1949), directed by Carol Reed and starring two Americans, Joseph Cotten and Orson Welles. Cotten is a pulp fiction writer who travels to Vienna at the invitation of his old college chum, Welles. Cotten learns that Welles is dead, killed in a traffic accident. Or was he? Playing a detective in one of his novels, Cotten investigates. He learns Welles had been involved in some horrendous black market schemes that had resulted in the deaths of children. *The Third Man* is often cited as one of the best films ever made, pure noir or not. Image:



The Third Man

See a trailer and a famous scene from *The Third Man* in [Chapter 2](#).

Peeping Tom, directed by Michael Powell, engendered revulsion in British moviegoers in 1960. It's considered a classic today that ranks with Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The story concerns a pathological killer of beautiful women who has rigged a movie camera to record their terror and death throes.

Here is a clip of the opening scene:

Peeping Tom

www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9ss1W4IeGc

Two extremely well-crafted recent British noirs are *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Layer Cake* (2004). The former movie, directed by Guy Ritchie, is about some guys who owe a huge gambling debt which must be paid off by a fixed deadline. Reneging means bad things will rain down on them. *Layer Cake*, directed by Matthew Vaughn, was Daniel Craig's breakout movie. It has a typically complex plot having to do with drugs and Craig's wanting to retire from drug dealing but always seeming to be pulled back in. Both of these films are sadistically violent. Killing with gusto becomes a kind of test of manhood. Opening scene:

Layer Cake

www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_0D8F_X7us

France has produced many notable film noirs—after all, they discovered and named the genre. Jules Dassin was an American film director who was blacklisted after exposure by the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the United States, he had directed what is now considered a classic noir, *Night and the City* (1950), about a hustler whose plans never work out. He immigrated to France and made a number of noirs, the best known of which is *Rififi* (1955), a heist film which influenced US heist films like the *Oceans* series.

In recent years, a pair of French noir masterpieces have been resurrected for US art-film houses and festival distribution. *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), directed by Louis Malle, is about a man who murders his boss and tries to make it look like suicide. *Army of Shadows* (1969), by Jean-Pierre Melville, is about doomed French underground forces sabotaging Nazi installations in France during WWII.

Here is a moody trailer for:

REALIST STYLE

. . . has to do with literally depicting reality on the screen—not symbolically or indirectly but directly. This is accomplished by foreswearing special effects, toning down music, and adopting a near-documentary style of shooting and editing. Realists in all the arts—not just in film, but in photography, painting, poetry, and fiction—believe in showing actual hunger, violence, and injustice reflected in faces and captured in incidents. In fact, realist artists tend to lean to the political left to show an uncaring and exploitative capitalist set of values at the root of much woe in the world.

For example, the British filmmaker Ken Loach has made a career, stretching over forty-plus years, of depicting a variety of social problems and how they affect ordinary people. His *Bread and Roses* (2000) is about the screwing-over of immigrant workers in Los Angeles hotels who strike over low pay and poor working conditions. Loach recruited actual exploited workers to play certain parts. Nothing quite captures oppression better than the faces of the oppressed.

Loach evokes the clash of cultures created by contemporary immigration in his *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004), a story about a Pakistani youth and an Irish schoolteacher who fall in love, and the complications of family and church this brings about. In *My Name is Joe* (1998), an alcoholic man struggles to overcome a tendency to violence without completely succeeding. This realistic predicament stands in contrast to the Hollywood happy ending of *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1994) when Meg Ryan triumphs over her alcoholism to reunite with forbearing husband Andy Garcia and live happily ever after. Hollywood presents situations as it knows viewers *would like* them to resolve; realists like Loach offer viewers resolutions that are closer to real life.

The Belgian Dardenne brothers, Jean-Pierre and Luc, are among the most honored realist filmmakers working today. They have picked up a couple of Palme d'Or—Cannes' highest award—and many top honors in both Europe and the United States. Their films are about little people with everyday conflicts. In *La Promesse* (1996) a youth struggles to keep secrets about what his immoral father has done. In *The Son* (2002) a petty thief is tempted to sell the infant son of his girlfriend to a baby black market. These characters don't save the world; they save themselves.

The Dardenne style is simple, straightforward, and in many ways anti-

Hollywood. The brothers eschew classic Hollywood style and, for example, simply pan from character A to character B, instead of the usual crosscutting. There are no effects for their own sake. Stories are driven not by fearless high-speed car chases, the defusing of bombs, or catching bad guys, but by simply doing the right thing. Dardenne films offer no music.

Trailer shows the Dardenne's stripped-down style:

La Promesse

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsOi17HJZ5k

SOME AMERICAN FILM REALISTS

DIRECTOR	NOTABLE FILM	NOTES
John Ford	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (1940)	Adaptation of the famous John Steinbeck novel describing the travails of migrant dust-bowl refugees.
Elia Kazan	<i>America, America</i> (1963)	Young Greek man oppressed in Turkey finally immigrates to U.S.
Lance Hammer	<i>Ballast</i> (2008)	The effects of a suicide on Americans residing in the Mississippi Delta.
Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck	<i>Sugar</i> (2008)	Dominican baseball standout tries to make it in American major-league play. But this is not your typical rise-to-the-top sports film.

Trailer for *Sugar*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrovzeE8uTM

(It should be noted that Ford and Kazan were not thoroughgoing realists. Like all big-time directors, they wallowed in Hollywood with the best, or the worst, of the wallowers.)

FORMALIST STYLE

Frankly, I don't really understand this. Whenever I read about it, it sounds academic and high-minded, barely comprehensible. But I have (reluctantly) used the term before (in my book *Get the Picture?*) as a counter to realist filmmaking. If realist filmmaking uses no tricks, formalist filmmakers use lots of tricks, these days mainly digital; if realist filmmakers work from little budgets, formalist filmmakers generally have larger budgets. If realist filmmakers traffic in reality, formalist filmmakers often deal with fantasy.

The reason it's called *formalist*, I think, is that there is an emphasis on *cinematic form*, on every form of filmmaking—photography, editing, special and digital effects, and lots of music raining down on you so you can't just have your own private reaction to a scene.

Here is a list of well-known American formalist films. Their titles alone should provide a blanket definition.

► *The Wizard of Oz*

- ▶ *All Disney films*
- ▶ *Harry Potter films*
- ▶ *All Tim Burton Films*
- ▶ *Star Wars films*
- ▶ *Lord of the Ring films*
- ▶ *Alice in Wonderland*
- ▶ *Batman, Iron Man, Superman, etc.*

Every summer Hollywood releases a spate of fantasy, horror, and sci-fi films that rely more on special effects to move audiences than on humanistic storytelling. In the summer of 2010, these formalist films were released:

- ▶ *Prince of Persia*
- ▶ *Resident Evil: Afterlife*
- ▶ *Toy Story 3*
- ▶ *Despicable Me*
- ▶ *Inception*
- ▶ *The Expendables*

There have been many serious formalist filmmakers over the decades. Not all are prisoners of dumb-ass Hollywood. Julie Taymor's films—*Titus* (1999), *Frida* (2002)—have many stylistic touches that help her get to the truth of Shakespeare in the first instance and to the art of Frida Kahlo in the second. The champ of special effects in the United States has to be James Cameron, whose *Avatar* (2009) scarcely presents us with a virgin image; yet his intent was not just to have viewers go *gaga*, but to make statements about rapacious corporations exploiting indigenous peoples. American expatriate Terry Gilliam (now residing in England) always makes formalist films—*Brazil* (1985), *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* (2009)—which are not only downright fun to watch but also make profound statements about society and human nature.

Here is a trailer for *Imaginarium*:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jU3AimFaz0

The Frenchman Jean-Pierre Jeunet makes lush and compelling films with far-fetched plots you finally yield to. In *A Very Long Engagement* (2004), Audrey Tautou's character refuses to believe her lover died in WWI. She tries to find him. Her persistence pays off. In *City of Lost Children* (1995) a mad scientist figure strives to capture the dreams of children. For formalists, truth is hidden

and must be uncovered by extreme technique.

Trailer for *City of Lost Children*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNYG9cXTSds

CHANGING DOCUMENTARY STYLE

The main issue concerning documentary films is this: How real are they? Have they been fudged? Romanticized? If so, how and for what purpose? A pioneer of the documentary, Robert Flaherty, idealized Inuit life in his *Nanook of the North* (1922). Flaherty wanted Nanook and his family to come off as ruggedly independent, tribal, and living close to nature—and to death. In reality, Flaherty staged many scenes. The Inuits were not nearly as independent and resourceful as Flaherty made them out to be. They probably shopped at the company store.

A few years after Flaherty made *Nanook*, the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov made a film entitled *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), a documentary about life in the Soviet Union. It leaned toward propaganda, depicting a bustling, productive Soviet society, but sprinkled also with the pain of everyday life. More than propaganda, however, Vertov sought visual power in editing. He loved to juxtapose shots that together produced strong feelings in viewers. He and other filmmakers of the early Soviet period experimented with editing, developing techniques later picked up by filmmakers worldwide and still used today.

Man with a Movie Camera

www.youtube.com/watch?v=00ZciC4JPw

Meanwhile, in the era of the US New Deal, propaganda certainly was the object of many American filmmakers subsidized by the government. *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) sang the praises of federal recovery programs. WWII brought about many docs with patriotic edges, notably Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1942-1944). The German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl made a spectacular documentary called *Triumph of the Will* (1935), about Hitler's entrance into Nuremberg and subsequent speechmaking. Riefenstahl had the complete backing of the Third Reich and used dozens of cameras and hundreds of production assistants. The result is often called a work of art. Too bad Riefenstahl was on the wrong side of history.

Here is the opening from the film:

Triumph of the Will

www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6uVrO5d6KU

CINÉMA VÉRITÉ

. . . was a movement among French documentary filmmakers who wanted to return to truthful filmmaking unsullied by propaganda or even by points of view. They always faced this problem: could truth be revealed if the subject knew he was being filmed? Or must the subject be unaware of the presence of a camera? And: is truth multi-perspective or uni-perspective? Heavy theory.

Vérité filmmakers also question the use of narrators and pointed editing that shuttle readers to conclusions. They prefer to let cameras simply sit on subjects so that they might reveal the truth about themselves through what they say and do. D. A. Pennebaker, an American vérité filmmaker, has said:

It's possible to go to a situation and simply film what you see there, what happens there, what goes on, and let everybody decide whether it tells them about any of these things. But you don't have to label them, you don't have to have the narration to instruct you so you can be sure and understand that it's good for you to learn.

Pennebaker made documentaries of everyday life. Here is a clip or a trailer or the entire film—I'm not sure which—about a commuter train, in essence people going to work. You furnish “meaning.” Only music guides you:

Pennebaker film:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2oHTYkYm8s

FREDERICK WISEMAN

. . . was a chronicler of everyday life, of stuff easily forgotten and suddenly gone. He might remind you of Jonas Mekas. Here is a short video of a retail food window in a public housing project. It's vérité through and through—available light, no special mics, no tripod, and certainly no script or rehearsal. Just people, overworked and uncivil. No one knew he was filming them.

Wiseman film:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=TctXUT5_YtU&feature=related

Barbara Kopple made a vérité-inspired documentary in 1976 about striking Kentucky coal miners and their wives. No narrator, no music except what miners themselves produce on camera, minimal editing. Just people speaking for themselves, venting their anger at the exploitative company they work for. The film is called *Harlan County U.S.A.*, and here is a trailer for it. (Cinema 5, which

released the film, insisted on a pinch of narration, but the film doesn't really need it.)

Harlan County, U.S.A.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCiVMnglLEI

KEN BURNS DOCUMENTARIES

. . . pervade TV, whether PBS or The History Channel. They always have narrators who tell you how to think. They are often sensationalistic, sentimental, simplified, repetitive, and usually lacking in human dimensions. *Front Line* and *P.O.V.*, both of PBS, are less like this. The latter presents films secured from independent filmmakers. Still, the docs they show don't stray too far from Ken Burns style. (Ken Burns, of course, makes his living doing films for PBS: *The Civil War*, *The War*, *Baseball*, *The National Parks*, etc.)

HUMANISTIC DOCUMENTARIES

. . . start to feel like literature or art. They join sound and picture in aesthetic ways and in doing so offer possibilities for deeper meaning.

The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill (2003)

This doc is about a street person who hadn't done much with his life until he learned about a flock of feral parrots that clustered around a famous San Francisco landmark. He became their benefactor and fulfilled the Zen principle of finding right livelihood, though no one paid him.

Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red-Light Kids (2004)

From IMDB: "This film is a chronicle of filmmakers Zana Briski's and Ross Kauffman's efforts to document the plight of children whose parents work in Calcutta's red light district. To do that, they inspired a special group of children to photograph subjects both reluctant and wondrous. Probably unwittingly, this film shows the universality of childhood." Poor Calcutta children bound for prostitution look, act, and sound like kids anywhere. This film won an Academy Award for the best documentary of 2004.

Crips and Bloods: Made in America (2008)

"With a first-person look at the notorious Crips and Bloods, this film examines the conditions that have led to decades of devastating gang violence among young African Americans growing up in South Los Angeles" (from IMDB). One

tracking shot swims past about a dozen middle-age women in close-up who lost their sons to gang violence and become increasingly sad, finally coming to tears. I don't know how director Stacy Peralta got this amazing shot. It's an ingenious way of showing what gang violence does to mothers. Here is a trailer:

Crips and Bloods

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gBDnratXHw

Exit Through the Gift Shop (2010)

“The story of how an eccentric French shop keeper and amateur film maker attempted to locate and befriend the famous graffiti artist Banksy, only to have the artist turn the camera back on its owner, with spectacular results. Billed as ‘the world’s first street art disaster movie,’ the film contains exclusive footage of Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Invader and many of the world’s most famous (or infamous) graffiti artists at work” (IMDB). This doc is nutty, experimental, gorgeous, and manages to say as much about alternative art as alternative lives.

Exit Through the Gift Shop:

www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi2018051097/

Between the Folds (2010)

A thoughtful documentary about the art and physics of paper folding—origami.
Trailer:

Between the Folds:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE4lqYzS2m0

Rivers and Tides

This film is about the Scot Andy Goldsworthy, who makes sculptures out of perishable natural materials. The fact that they will ultimately deteriorate is a large part of Goldsworthy’s point. The film is by the German Thomas Riedelsheimer:

Rivers and Tides

www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT3lveJmjY8

TRY THIS:

If you decide to see a few films mentioned in this chapter, be patient and open-minded. They usually aren't like Hollywood. Budgets are lower, settings less lavish. Liberate yourself from the concept of the "well-made" (and usually expensive) film. Also, there is a look to the casts that is defiantly un-Hollywood. So I say, be patient. Let these stories unfold at their own pace. Open up. Extend.

“Indies” International: Western

MEurope any countries have popular cinemas that are crafted for local tastes and not especially meant for export. The best-known is the Indian “Bollywood” which makes colorful, expensive song-and-dance movies out of Mumbai (formally Bombay) aimed at the newly affluent Indian middle class. A few Bollywood films break into the American and world markets.

There are also many filmmakers from abroad who, like serious American independent filmmakers, long to reach worldwide audiences. This chapter is about their films. It starts with three well-known post-WWII movements among European filmmakers then comes up to the present with descriptions of notable contemporary European off-mainstream filmmakers.

ITALIAN NEO-REALISM

This was—and still is—a movement among Italian filmmakers who were weary

of irrelevant entertainments coming from the likes of Cinecittà, the big Italian movie studio located in Rome. Italian post-WWII filmmakers especially wanted to make films that reflected actual conditions of poverty and inept social services following the war.

Neo-realists worked cheap, often using amateur actors plucked from the streets and shooting on these very streets instead of on studio back lots. Read more about realist style in the last chapter.

Well-known neo-realists and some of their films: **Vittorio De Sica's** *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) follows the life of a poor man whose bicycle is stolen. If he can't find it, he can't work; if he can't work, his family won't eat. Here is *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott again, paying tribute to this classic film.

The Bicycle Thief www.youtube.com/watch?v=njLcOqW7xV0

De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) is about an elderly man who can't make ends meet on his meager pension. His landlady throws him out and turns the apartment building into a brothel.

Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* (1945) is about poor youths resisting the presence of German soldiers in Rome. *Paisan* (1946) is also set during the War. Poor Italians interact with GIs, and follow them from Sicily to Venice. Neither side trusts the other.

Luchino Visconti had long been fascinated with the lives of poor fishermen when he made *La Terra Trema* in 1946. It's a story about a fishing family thrown into hard times when a storm wrecks their boat and predator capitalists finally claim their home. Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) is about young men who travel to North Italy to escape poverty.

Gianni Amelio is a contemporary Italian realist noted for several films of the 1990s, *Stolen Children* and *Lamerica*. The former film is about a policeman who becomes attached to two orphan children; the latter is about a young man who first was bent on exploiting poor Albanians, then has a remarkable change of heart.

For more about Italian neo-realism films, visit: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_neo-realism.

THE FRENCH NEW WAVE

Italian neo-realism had a profound effect on post-war European filmmakers. Not all of them did realism as the Italians had—they had a little more money. But they did a kind of realism all the same. Universally they wanted to throw off polite, fluffy cinema, and make films that had something to do with real life—or

real life plus a bit of cinematic art, if they could manage it.

The French brand of reinvented post-WWII cinema was called “The New Wave.” It consisted of eight or ten impatient, rebellious filmmakers who were both in revolt against Hollywood yet also in love with it.

Jean-Luc Godard was the most experimental of the group. His films broke with Hollywood style and included such no-nos as actors looking at the camera and jump cuts (see [Chapter 6](#)). His *Breathless* (1960) is about a petty crook on the run and stars Jean-Paul Belmondo. The American Jean Seberg was his companion. Godard made heavy political films such as *La Chinoise* (1967), a Marxist statement influenced by student rebellions of the late 1960s. *Masculine, Feminine* (1967) was a meditation on rebellious French youth. In *Alphaville* (1965) Godard combined satire and science-fiction and shot on sets that were aggressively non-sci-fi. Whoever heard of a private eye from another planet that hangs out in bars and hotel rooms that look like 1965 Earth-style bars and hotel rooms?

Francois Truffaut, less political and experimental than Godard, made warmer films. I’ve already mentioned his *The 400 Blows* (1959) in [Chapter 11](#), about a misunderstood kid out of step with his surroundings. *Fahrenheit 451* (1976) is Truffaut’s adaptation of the Ray Bradbury novel about a futuristic dystopian time when reading is banned so underground people memorized entire noteworthy novels. Two of Truffaut’s best-known films are *Day for Night* (1973), about all the difficulties and delays of making a feature film, and *Jules and Jim* (1962), about two men in love with the same woman. For decades this film sat on lists of the best films ever.

Alain Resnais’s films were quite different from Godard’s and Truffaut’s, but this shouldn’t be surprising as New Wave filmmakers did not make work that resembled each other’s very much. Resnais’s best-known films are the romantic *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and the dreamy, formalistic *Last Year at Marienbad* (1960). The first deals with a love affair between a French actress and a Japanese architect. The second deals with an encounter between a man and a woman at a European spa. In both films memory plays an important role. Resnais, in his eighties, directed a film in 2009 called *Wild Grass*, another romance, this time based on a woman’s purse lost and later found.

Agnes Varda established herself as a New Wave filmmaker with *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1960), about a singer from whose life Varda spring-boarded to existentialist themes and feminist issues. Another Varda feminist film is *Vagabond* (1985), the story of a footloose young woman who values independence more than the

company of people or personal security. More recently she has taken to making personal documentaries. Her *The Gleaners and I* (2000) is about scavengers in the French countryside and in the cities. Varda believes they serve a valuable social and spiritual purpose. In 2008, she put together a documentary about her own life, called *The Beaches of Agnes*. Technically, Varda is less “New Wave” and more “Left Bank,” a distinction you can read about online. You should also know that Resnais is considered “Left Bank” as well—but the differences seem less important as the years go by.

Here is a four-minute clip from: *The Gleaners and I*
www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKgjjEJvMbM

The link below will take you to a Wikipedia entry about the French New Wave.

French New Wave: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_New_Wave **BRITISH KITCHEN-SINK REALISM**
... was a movement that informed British art for several decades from the 1950s. It may have sprung from Great Britain’s divesting itself of its colonies and falling on hard times as the welfare state took root and entangled nearly everyone. “Kitchen sink” refers to the pot-scrubbing, coal-mining life of ordinary Brits. Swept aside then were the polite drawing-room comedies of Noel Coward and the Rank Organization.

Jack Clayton’s *Room at the Top* (1959) is about an accountant who wants to get ahead by marrying the daughter of the rich guy he works for. Along the way, he falls in love with an older woman but doesn’t know how he feels about that. The film was successful worldwide and won two Oscars. It was instrumental in kicking off British New Kitchen Sink realism.

Three years later **Tony Richardson** directed *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, a story about a working-class youth who gets himself arrested and sent to reform school, a kind of microcosm of the soulless British welfare state. The youth is a talented runner conflicted about whether to run for the glory of the school, which in his mind amounts to a sell-out, or run for himself. Video: *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQJsE4dJmG0

In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), Richardson tells the story of a factory worker who gets an older woman pregnant and takes a beating from her husband. Sunday morning funk.

Lindsay Anderson’s *This Sporting Life* (1963) is about a coal miner turned rugby player who has an affair with the woman who runs his rooming house. Like so many of these films, there is not much love or lasting happiness.

Karel Reisz, an immigrant from Czechoslovakia, worked with Tony Richardson for a time before making *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1958), a realistic account of poor boys in South London. Reisz's *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966) was, again, about working-class youth. It has strong documentary tendencies.

Most of these Kitchen-Sink filmmakers passed on from realism to make films of wider appeal. Richardson directed the global hit *Tom Jones* (1963), which launched the movie career of Albert Finney, while Reisz directed another worldwide global favorite, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), starring Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep. Lucid trailer: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTO1wDxAxc

GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM AND RELATED TENDENCIES

Germany already had an important film industry in the 1920s, based largely on the artistic movement known as *expressionism*, which featured surreal sets and dark themes. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (directed by Robert Wiene, 1922) was about a series of murders in a German village. *Nosferatu* (directed by F. W. Murnau, 1922) is a retelling of the Bram Stoker Dracula story. These two German films and others like them had a tremendous effect on horror films the world over. The man who shot *Citizen Kane* for Orson Welles, Gregg Toland, was heavily influenced by German expressionism. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) feels a lot like what German filmmakers were doing in the silent film era.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrXU58gb4pw

German filmmaking served a mainly propaganda function in the thirties and forties. Then, after the War was over, young German cineastes wanted to do for German film what De Sica and Richardson had done for Italian and British filmmaking—namely, establish a more truthful and relevant motion picture industry. Here are three important post-WWII German filmmakers.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder had a short but amazing career. He directed thirty-five films in fourteen years. His *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979) is set against the backdrop of post-WWII devastation and is about a German woman living by her wits. Fassbinder's consensus masterpiece is a nineteen-hour TV film adaptation of Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), about a petty criminal who is released from prison and goes back to doing crime. Various unsavory lowlife types, both sympathetic and not, people his films.

Werner Herzog likes to make man-against-nature films. His *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) is about Lope de Aguirre, a sixteenth-century Spanish

conquistador and his water-drenched contingent slogging through the Amazon rain forest vainly seeking gold. He's made mad by the jungle, the rushing Amazon River, the little monkeys that bounce off his shoulders.

While Herzog was shooting in South America, he also made another raving-mad film called *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), about a crazy European who wanted to get to Peru to start a rubber-tree plantation. He has natives pull a large boat over a mountain to get to his destination. Oh, I forgot: he also wanted to build an opera house in the middle of the jungle. Both films star the estimable German actor Klaus Kinski.

Here is a trailer for *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojwxrzmAkDA

One of Herzog's most original efforts is *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011), a 3D documentary of the art of the Chauvet caves of Southern France.

German filmmaker Wim Wenders made the incredible *Wings of Desire* in 1987. It's about angels who flutter down on Berlin to give comfort to the depressed and dying. They don't have much luck. One reverts to humanhood because he wants to feel love again, though it means he'll have to give up immortality. Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984) is about a man who has been wandering in arid Texas for four years, and nobody misses him.

Here is A. O. Scott's Tribute to *Wings of Desire*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHFEeVKjHGw

CONTEMPORARY

Italy The Italian Giuseppe Tornatore made the charming *Cinema Paradiso* in 1989. It's about a movie-crazy boy and the father-figure projectionist at their town's movie theatre. It won an Oscar for best foreign film in 1990. Another Italian film took an Academy Award the next year—*Mediterraneo* (directed by Giuseppe Salvatore), a tale about leftover and forgotten Italian soldiers after WWII had concluded. Roberto Benigni won three Oscars for his concentration-camp movie *Life Is Beautiful* (1997). *Il Postino* is a 1994 Italian film directed by Michael Radford about a postman who doesn't know he is a poet until Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda draws it out of him. In 2001 Nanni Moretti's film *The Son's Room* received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

France Contemporary French filmmakers of note include Claude Sautet, whose *A Heart in Winter* (1992) is about a passionate violin player and the joyless man she has the misfortune to fall in love with. Jean-Paul Jeunet makes drop-dead gorgeous films, if you can get around the occasional grotesquery. Jeunet's *City of*

Lost Children (1995) is a mad-scientist film about a guy who looks as menacing as his weird goal—to capture the dreams of children. *Amélie* (2001) is about a naïve Parisian girl who seems compelled to help others. Eventually she falls in love.

You gotta look at a few minutes of a Jeunet film. Here is a trailer from Jeunet’s 2004 *A Very Long Engagement*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oViFyQgzk_I

French actress Marion Cotillard won an Oscar for her astounding performance as French singer Edith Piaf in *La Vie en Rose* (directed by Olivier Dahan, 2007). *The Class* is a remarkable film about life in a mixed-culture French high school, a kind of microcosm of cultural diversity in France today. It was directed by Laurent Cantet in 2008.



The Class **Great Britain** In the 1990s, Great Britain produced a number of historical films that were successful, critically and financially, around the world. In particular:

FILM	DIRECTOR	ABOUT
<i>Howard’s End</i> (1992)	James Ivory	An adaptation of the famous E. M. Forester novel
<i>Emma</i> (1996)	Douglas McGrath	Another adaptation, this time of the Jane Austin novel.
<i>Sense and Sensibility</i> (1996)	Ang Lee	Another Austin adaptation.
<i>Mrs. Brown</i> (1997)	John Madden	About a possible lover of Queen Victoria, John Brown, formerly a servant of the Queen’s deceased husband, Albert.

Not all of these directors are British. Ivory was born in Berkeley, California, and Lee in Taiwan.

John Madden continued the historical tradition with his *Shakespeare in Love*

(1998), but this delightful film is more speculation than fact. It's about the young Will in love with someone he shouldn't be. Madden is British through and through.

Trailer for *Shakespeare in Love*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gk1rTKB6ZF8

Britain has done well internationally with a series of quality films: *Vera Drake* (2004, d. Mike Leigh), is about a woman who freely performs abortions—although this is illegal—not for money but out of compassion; *The Queen*, about Elizabeth II coping with Diana's death (d. Stephen Frears, 2006); *The Last King of Scotland* (2006, d. Kevin MacDonal), about a young English physician who almost loses his soul to the murderous Idi Amin in Uganda; and *Atonement* (d. Joe Wright, 2007), about a misunderstanding that affects the lives of several people for many decades.

Most of the films were financed by Americans, as was the highly successful Harry Potter series.

The Killing Fields (1984) recounts the harrowing story of Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia following the end of the war in Vietnam. British director Roland Joffé tells the story of three journalists swept up in fast-moving events. Cambodian journalist and interpreter Dith Pran is arrested and for a time disappears into the nearly inescapable “killing fields” where thousands of Cambodian teachers, intellectuals, and civil servants are murdered.

The Crying Game (1992) is set against Irish-English conflict. The story starts out a psychological thriller but soon takes on additional dimensions, including the unlikely presence of a black man in the Irish Republican Army and a startling case of sexual identity, which leads to deception. Neil Jordan directed.

Shaun of the Dead (2004) is a nutty mix of a guy trying to find himself and make amends to a pissed-off girlfriend while also dealing with an army of zombies. The film, directed by Edgar Wright, was a worldwide hit. A trailer: *Shaun of the Dead* www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfDUv3ZjH2k

Scandinavia Of course, you have to see a few films by the great Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman. His characters seek God, meaning, purpose—and even play chess with Death. Here is a clip from Bergman's 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*, in which a knight returning from a crusade wants to know why a witch is being burned at the stake.

The Seventh Seal www.youtube.com/watch?v=30C1vZBJeI&feature=related

The Danes initiated a movement in film called Dogme 95 in which artifice

was kept to a minimum—no fancy lights, no make-up, no special costuming, not even a tripod—all in the name of cinematic purity. Some Danish directors who worked like this:

FILM	DIRECTOR	ABOUT
<i>Breaking the Waves</i> (1996)	Lars von Trier	A naïve woman wishes her husband did not work so far away on an oil rig. When an accident paralyzes him, she blames herself.
<i>Celebration</i> (1998)	Thomas Vinterberg	A large family gathers on the occasion of the patriarch's 60 th birthday. Stories of child abuse come out.
<i>Italian for Beginners</i> (2000)	Lone Scherfig	A rare Dogme 95 comedy about three women who take a course in Italian to relieve the tedium in their lives.

Other Danish films of note are *Babette's Feast* (1987), about a Parisian-trained chef who prepares a great meal for sense-starved (and spiritually deprived) religious fanatics, and *Everlasting Moments* (2008) which tells the story of a poor woman who discovers photography and transforms both herself and the people whose pictures she takes.



Everlasting Moments **Spain** Two hugely important filmmakers stand astride Spanish cinema. These are Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodovar.

Buñuel associated himself with the surrealist movement in the arts that was very popular in Europe in the twenties and thirties. Films like *Belle de Jour* (1967), *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), and *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) contain compelling dreamlike sequences that make you go, huh? For example, in *Discreet* six intelligent, middle-class people are trying to have a dinner in a nice restaurant. But the restaurant is out of this and out of that. The waiter professionally takes their order then goes to the kitchen. In a few minutes

he returns to the diners' table to tell them he is out of what they ordered. So the diners order again. Again the waiter returns to tell the diners he is out of what they just ordered. This situation is repeated four or five times. The waiter is always straight and polite. Finally the diners settle for glasses of water.

A. O. Scott's tribute to *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOsofbjQt7k

Some of Almodovar's best films are about women: *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1990), *All About My Mother* (1999), and *Talk to Her* (2002). There is something of Buñuel in Almodovar. Like Buñuel's, Almodovar's stories don't always add up. In *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, a crazy person kidnaps a famous female actor and holds her like a hostage, though not for money. He just wants her to love him. And guess what? She finally does.

TRY THIS:

Many of these films are an acquired taste, as most are very un-Hollywood. But it's like trying many new things. At first maybe you don't like, then you aren't sure. But keep at it. Let Europe in.

“Indies” International: Moving East

W and South e now move in several directions, into Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Three Czech films have taken Academy Awards for best foreign-language films. These are *The Shop on Main Street* (ds. Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, 1965); *Closely Watched Trains* (d. Jiri Menzel, 1965); and *Kolya* (d. Jan Sverak, 1996). *The Shop on Main Street* takes place during World War II when the Germans were on the verge of invading Czechoslovakia. A Czech man is torn between turning in an old Jewish woman shopkeeper or just letting the matter go. *Closely Watched Trains*, also set during World War II, is about a boy who has the bad luck to come of age during troubling times. *Kolya* is about a once-carefree single man dumped with a five-year-old boy by an ex-wife who has had enough of mothering.

The best-known Czech filmmaker is Milos Forman, who after making some outstanding films in his native country (*Loves of a Blonde*, 1965; *The Fireman's Ball*, 1967), made his way to the United States to direct the stellar *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), which took five Oscars, and *Amadeus* (1984), about the life of Mozart, which nailed down seven Oscars.

POLAND

Two Polish filmmakers with secure global reputations are Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polanski. Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) is set against the backdrop of Germany's surrender in 1945 and details attempts to assassinate a Communist commissioner of a small town in Poland. So much violence—the war and its

aftermath—is in need of deliverance and humanity. The main character of *Ashes and Diamonds*, a soldier in the Polish army, may find them in a burned-out church where this poem is scratched on the wall: “. . . are you as a blazing torch with flames of burning rags falling about you flaming You know not if flames bring freedom or death, Consuming all that you must cherish.

[Will] ashes only be left, and want Chaos and tempest Or will the ashes hold the glory of a starlike diamond The Morning Star of everlasting triumph?”

Wajda made a pair of films about the legendary Lech Walesa, the Polish labor leader of Solidarity, the movement that prefigured the collapse of the Soviet empire. These are *Man of Marble* (1976) and *Man of Iron* (1981).

Wajda was feted with an honorary Oscar during the 2000 Academy Award proceedings.

While at film school, Roman Polanski made *Knife in the Water* (1962), an important film about male ego. The film is remarkably minimal. Polanski himself shot it and directed. The cast numbers three. An assistant or two hung out. The film gained worldwide recognition for Polanski and got an Oscar nomination. Polanski entered the United States via Great Britain and eventually made the towering *Chinatown*, which in 1974 won an Oscar for screenwriting and was nominated for just about every other award. Polanski’s *The Pianist*, about a well-known Jewish pianist caught up in WWII matters of survival, received three Oscars in 2002.

Knife in the Water www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaBa2Wj3gHk

HUNGARY

Yet another Nazi-themed film came out of Hungary in 1981: *Mephisto* (d. Istvan Szabo), which was widely shown in Europe and North America. It’s a retelling of the tale of Mephistopheles and Doctor Faustus. A Nazi functionary sells his soul to the devil—that being the Nazi party—to receive favors and promotions.

Szabo also directed the international production *Sunshine* (1999), which follows three generations of a Jewish family from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Hungarian revolt in 1956. Themes of persecution and rootlessness center on a character played by the Brit Ralph Fiennes.

Hungarian filmmakers have put out a few quality films since 2000 though they are unknown to much of the world. *An American Rhapsody* (2001) is a poignant story about a family separated for decades by sweeping political changes in Europe. It stars the German Nastassja Kinski and the American

Scarlett Johansson, and was directed by Eva Gardos.

Szabo returned to filmmaking in 2004 to do *Becoming Julia*, starring Annette Bening and Jeremy Irons. It's about London theatre people in the 1930s and was based on a W. Somerset Maugham novel.

The remarkable Hungarian melodrama (1999) *Gloomy Sunday*, directed by Rolf Schübel explores a *ménage à trois* among a Nazi-era Budapest restaurant owner, his piano player, and a beautiful singer. The piano player writes songs so sad that people take their lives after hearing it.

A non-English clip from *Gloomy Sunday*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2_F_kCMYKY

ROMANIA

Romanian cinema attracted worldwide attention in the 2000s with a pair of dark films: *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007). Both show how grim life was under communist rule.

SOVIET/RUSSIAN CINEMA

Early Soviet cinema centers on the work of Sergei Eisenstein, who explored many of the editing techniques I discussed in [Chapter 9](#), especially montage and the A + B = C effect. These techniques are illustrated abundantly in two films Eisenstein made in 1925: *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*. Though both films are propaganda pieces, they showed the world how film editing could be both theoretical and expressive. Film professors love Eisenstein. (See [Chapter 9](#) for a description of Eisenstein's editing of the Odessa Steps sequence.) In 1938, Eisenstein made a renowned sound film having to do with Russian history, *Alexander Nevsky*, about mythic battles between Teutonic Knights and the Russian people of Novgorod, back in the thirteenth century. Nevsky leads his people to victory over the Germans. But the heavy hand of Stalinist censorship pretty much suffocated Soviet cinema during the 1950s and '60s. However, like so many artists in totalitarian regimes, resourceful Russian filmmakers found ways around the censors or managed to do important films that did not offend them. A miscellany: ► *The Cranes are Flying* (d. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957). World War II again. The awful suffering of the Russian people. This film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1958. There is no more prestigious award.

- *Solaris* (d. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972). A slow meditation on life in outer space on a deep space craft.
- *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (d. Tatyana Lioznova, 1973). A 12-episode Soviet TV series about the well-known Soviet spy Yulian Samyonov who

operated in both East and West Germany. Very popular in the Soviet Union and Germany.

- ▶ *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (d. Vladimir Menshov, 1979). Surprisingly realistic melodrama about three provincial young women who resettle in Moscow. Won an Oscar for best foreign-language film in 1980.
- ▶ *Little Vera* (d. Vasili Pichul, 1988). Another film about a young woman who relocates in Moscow from the provinces. Very popular in the Soviet Union. Also one of the first Russian films to show explicit sex.

(It's not easy to find clips or trailers of any of these films with English subtitles.) **A REMARKABLE FILM FROM SAUDI ARABIA**

Almost no films come to us from Saudi Arabia, and none by women. *Wadjda* (2012) is the exception. Directed by Haifaa al-Mansour—who gave directions to her crew from a van via walkie-talkie because women are not allowed to give orders to men in Saudi Arabia—*Wadjda* tells a simple but effective story about a rebellious 10-year-old girl who wants to own a bicycle. It's not against the law in Arabia for girls to own bikes, but it is frowned upon. (Her mother claims that riding a bike will render her incapable of having children.) All the same, she finally gets her way.

FARTHER INTO ASIA

We get a glimpse of Asian anthropology in *Head On* (2005), a joint German-Turkish production by Fatih Akin, a Turk. It's about Turkish immigrants living in Germany. A young woman needs to escape her oppressive family and tries to snag an unmarried Turk. But the guy is a mess. He's tried suicide several times, can't get that right, doesn't bathe, and works at a dumbshit job in a slummy bar.

In Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007), a young man searches for his father's girlfriend in Istanbul. This film won many awards at European festivals.

IRAN

Iranian cinema is mature and world-class, and has been for decades—just as Iran is a mature and sophisticated nation. Iranian cinema goes back to the turn of the last century.

Probably the best-known Iranian filmmaker is Abbas Kiarostami, whose *Taste of Cherry* (1997) is about a man who wants to commit suicide. He has one problem. Islamic law requires that the dead be buried before sundown, and the

man can't find anyone to throw dirt on him after he's done the deed—even though he's already dug the grave. Atmospheric clip: *Taste of Cherry* www.youtube.com/watch?v=LecoqFoxz5o

Kiarostami made a puzzling film about originals and copies in art in 2011—It's called *Certified Copy* and stars Juliette Binoche.

Another respected Iranian filmmaker is Jafar Panahi, whose *Offside* I've mentioned in [Chapter 15](#). Panahi won the prestigious Camera d'Or at Cannes in 1995 for his first feature, *The White Balloon*, a highly original and effective film about how unscrupulous city folk hustle money from a girl who had saved up to buy a goldfish.

There is much gender anthropology in Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), which brings together three short films about what girls and women face, growing up in Iran. They can't do this, and they can't do that. Westerners will wonder why. Below is a link to a trailer touching on all three lives. (To clarify, women are not supposed to ride bicycles.) *The Day I Became a Woman* www.youtube.com/watch?v=194rTpQhQF0

Osama (2003), by Iranian Siddiq Barmak, is about a young woman who is trying to work to help her destitute family. But the story takes place in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan where women are prohibited from working. To complicate matters, a young man sees through her disguise as a man and falls in love with her.

Kandahar (2001) is one of the saddest films I have ever seen. Directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, also an Iranian, it's about a Canadian-born Muslim woman who journeys to Afghanistan to rescue her imprisoned sister. It's not easy.

One of the most moving films you'll see from any country is the Iranian *The Color of Paradise* (1999), which is about a sightless boy who attends a school for the blind. Mohammed is blessed. His lack of sight is no real handicap. It might even be a life advantage. He is happy. He tunes into nature with a sensitivity which adults and sighted people have long forsaken. He hears the chirp of a newly hatched bird—which others cannot hear or decline to hear. He locates the bird on the ground by its chirping. He finds the tree it fell from. Clip: *The Color of Paradise* www.youtube.com/watch?v=D70ZSOT64Uo

The director, Majid Majidi, also made a wonderful film in 1977 about two children, called *Children of Heaven*. They travel about Tehran in search of a lost pair of shoes. Political issues are played out in the background; the children pay no attention. They are innocent; the rest of the country is not.

INDIA

For many years India's cinema has been the world's largest, producing three times as many pictures as Hollywood does, and for two reasons: India nearly has the most people to entertain, and television came late. Better to go to the movies and enjoy air conditioning or overhead fans than sit around at home and listen to the radio.

The Western world first heard about Indian cinema in 1955 when a little film from Bengal won a ton of awards at the Venice film festival and other European festival venues. It was called *Pather Panchali*, and the Bengali Satyajit Ray produced it humbly on a budget of the change you and I pour into a jar at the end of the day. He followed with two more spare films about the same young man, Apu, who is the focus of *Pather Panchali*—these are *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sanar* (1959). Together the three films make up what is called the Apu trilogy.

These films are not about anything very much—except life. The trilogy is about the everyday ups and downs of a poor Bengali family doing real things. Still, it touches you. The great *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael said this about *Pather Panchali*: “The first film by the masterly Satyajit Ray—possibly the most unembarrassed and natural of directors—is a quiet reverie about the life of an impoverished Brahmin family in a Bengali village. Beautiful, sometimes funny, and full of love, it brought a new vision of India to the screen.”

Here is clip from the first Apu movie about the simplest of subjects: rain. Ray turns it into poetry.

Pather Panchali www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnm7QP1JXgY&feature=related

The Indian films we Westerners are likely to see are produced and directed by Indians who have a keen sense of the market for American independent films and of world cinema in general. They aren't Hollywood, and they aren't Indian provincial. For instance, Deepa Mehta has made a trio of serious films about important Indian social issues. Her *Fire* (1997) was promoted as the first Indian film about lesbianism—this in a country which still restricts many rights of women. *Earth* (1999) is about the partition of India into India and Pakistan after the British vacated the subcontinent in the late forties. The lives of millions of people were disrupted as they moved from East to West and West to East. Mehta's *Water* from 2005 is a dramatization of an unfair Indian law that stayed on the books until the forties—if a woman's husband died, she had to marry one of his brothers or else take up residence in a sort of convent and have nothing further to do with the world.

Water www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R0pRl18js8

The Indian Mira Nair has made showy films—*Monsoon Wedding* (2001)—in the tradition of the Bombay (Mumbai) “Bollywood” movies, featuring much color, dancing, and a light, comic touch. But Nair has also made serious films set outside India: *Vanity Fair* (2004), an adaptation of the Thackeray novel and *The Namesake* (2006), about a New York-ized teenager from a transplanted Bengali family who struggles to find his ethnic roots.

Trailer for *Monsoon Wedding*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaP-UrmS6Ww

India’s recent worldwide hit was *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), based on the popular American quiz show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?”

Clip from *Slumdog Millionaire*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-moVw-R1rw

CHINA

For decades, you couldn’t do much in China if you were—or hoped to be—a filmmaker. You couldn’t criticize the Communist system or even depict poor living conditions in the films you made. The government checked you every step of the way and simply closed down production if you didn’t follow party precepts.

However, as China gradually went capitalistic, restraints on the arts were loosened, and a world-class cinema emerged, often called the “Fifth Generation” of Chinese filmmakers. The two filmmakers from this period—which endures still—are Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Below, in table form, I’ve gathered some basic info about six Chen films and six Zhang films.

CHEN KAIGE FILMS	SUMMARIES
<i>Yellow Earth</i> (1987)	A Communist soldier is sent to a far-off village to gather supposedly upbeat folk songs for the revolution. But he finds only sad songs about suffering and privation.
<i>Life on a String</i> (1991)	Two tales of hope. A blind man, a sort of troubadour, has been told that when he replaces the 1,000 th string on his guitar he will regain his sight. His apprentice, meanwhile, hopes that the magic of his master will result in a village girl returning his love.
<i>The Emperor and the Assassin</i> (1991)	Third-century B.C. Chinese intrigue involving an emperor of China’s largest province, his beautiful concubine, and an assassin.
<i>Farewell My Concubine</i> (1993)	Two Beijing opera stars anchor themselves against changing political winds.
<i>Killing Me Softly</i> (2002)	A thriller set in London, and not too great. In English. See it to muse about what happens when a relative outsider, Chen, is hired to do a Western-style genre flick.

WESTERN-STYLE GENRE MOVIE.

<i>The Promise</i> (2005)	A kind of fairy tale in which a girl wanting to escape poverty makes a deal with a devil figure that she will be beautiful and have the love of every man who meets her, without herself experiencing love.
<hr/>	
ZHANG YIMOU FILMS	SUMMARIES
<i>Raise the Red Lantern</i> (1991)	Beautiful young woman takes up residence as the concubine of a wealthy businessman thinking she will live a painless life. She is wrong.
<i>The Story of Qui Ju</i> (1992)	Pregnant woman, whose husband has been wronged relentlessly, seeks justice from local courts.
<i>The Road Home</i> (1990)	An urban businessman returns to the province of his youth to arrange for his father's funeral. He discovers many changes.
<i>Not One Less</i> (1999)	A young teacher in a school in a remote mountain village vows to retain all her students, in spite of pressures students feel to drop out.
<i>House of Flying Daggers</i> (2004)	A beautiful, blind lady warrior and her adversaries dance out incredible slo-mo action sequences, on the ground and in the treetops.
<i>The Curse of the Golden Flower</i> (2007)	Palace intrigue set in 900 A.D. Incest. Fathers killing sons. Probably the most visual epic ever made. Yellow and gold palace is absolutely stunning, as is costuming. Incredible battles, stuff going on you've never seen before. Zhang has an uncanny eye for camera setups.

Ang Lee belongs to the world. Born in Taiwan, he emigrated to the United States and took film degrees from American universities. Doubtless, you've seen a few of his films: ► *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) ► *The Ice Storm* (1997) ► *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) ► *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) ► *Ride With the Devil* (1991) ► *The Hulk* (2003) *Brokeback Mountain* is about a forbidden relationship between two cowboys in Wyoming in the 1960s. *The Ice Storm* is set on the East Coast of America during bad weather and has to do with a failing marriage. *Sense and Sensibility* is Ang's adaptation of the Jane Austen novel. *Ride With the Devil* is about a gang of Missourians who make raids on the Union Army during the Civil War. *The Hulk* is a film version of the comic book. Wyoming, England, China, the American Civil War. What sweep!

A trailer for *Brokeback Mountain*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=W117JZA5LQc

AFRICAN CINEMA

Very few African films—that is, films produced, written, and directed entirely by Africans—make it into the United States. It's hard to find African films on US mail order or download film services. To see African films you have to visit African studies departments of universities and inquire into screenings, or catch the occasional African film that plays at non-profit film organizations in larger

cities. Now and then Link TV on Dish Network will show an African film. You have to work at it. One of the last authentically African films to play in the United States was *Sisters in Law*, which had a pretty good run in 2005. A documentary, the film is about African gender justice, at least in a small town in Cameroon. A tough prosecutor and a liberated court president find three men guilty of rape in breakthrough trials. The film was directed by Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi.

An African film called *Tsotsi* provides a poignant portrait of a boy growing up in crime-ridden Soweto in South Africa. The film, by Gavin Hood, won the Oscar for best foreign film in 2006. Hood is from Johannesburg, South Africa.



Tsotsi The best-known African director is Ousmane Sembene, a Senegalese who early in his life wrote novels about colonial oppression and the corruption of national governments. At age forty, realizing that only a minority of Africans were literate enough to read his work, he turned to making films. He made films in several languages and distributed them in variously subtitled versions. *Black Girl* (1966) is considered the first sub-Saharan feature made by an African. It's about an African nanny who follows her employers to France, hoping to become more cosmopolitan.



Instead, she receives harsher treatment. Sembene's latest film is *Moolaadé* (2004), about the horrors of female circumcision. Sembene continued to make films into his eighties. He died in 2007.

Anthony Fabian, an American by birth, made a fascinating film about the role of skin color and politics in The Union of South Africa in the 1960s and '70s. The film is *Skin* (2007). It's about a girl with Negroid features born to outwardly appearing white parents who did not know that they carried some black genes. So Sandra is denied access to many services and rights of white society. The film stars Sophie Okonedo and Sam Neill.

Trailer for *Skin*: www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi821729305/

JAPAN

Japan has been home to no less than three world-class filmmakers, Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Akira Kurosawa. The latter made a number of sublime films that transcend Japanese life and are ultimately addressed to the world. I've mentioned his compositions in [Chapter 1](#) and his editing in [Chapter 4](#). His films

cover a span of fifty years, from before World War II had concluded to 1993. He made films about a great many historical periods and subjects—films about samurai warriors and historical figures, films about contemporary Japan, films based on myth, films based on Western literature. Notes on six of them:

FILM	TYPE	ABOUT	FEATURES
<i>Rashomon</i> (1950)	Myth	The slippery nature of truth—a rape and murder as perceived and told by several onlookers.	Fine, supernatural quality; won many European festival awards and introduced Japanese filmmaking to the world.
<i>Ikiru</i> (1953)	Contemporary drama	Bureaucrat dying of cancer learns humility and humanity	Great performance by Takashi Shimura; revealing view of post-World War II Japan.
<i>The Seven Samurai</i> (1954)	Samurai action	Seven warriors agree to defend a farming community against annual raids by bandits—more for a sense of duty than for gain.	Action sequences superbly shot and edited.
<i>Throne of Blood</i> (1957)	Adaptation of <i>Macbeth</i>	Most of the characters from the Shakespeare play are brought over into the film.	Atmospheric—eerie forests, desolate landscapes, ghosts.
<i>Dersu Uzala</i> (1975)	Joint Soviet-Japanese production	Soviet cartologists of the wilds of Siberia encounter an old hunter who teaches them much about survival.	Raw, primal, the sense of a remarkable man and unique character.
<i>Kagemusha</i> (1980)	Historical	Lower-class criminal is taught to impersonate a nobleman to spare the area war.	Kurosawa's thoroughness exemplified in his use of 5,000 extras for a battle scene, of which only ninety seconds made it into the final cut.

Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953) is about the widening gap between parents and children—grown children with families—a common plot situation in cinema all around the world, especially in societies that have undergone enormous technological and social change. Ozu is not a sentimentalist. His camera work is plain and formal; some would call it minimalistic. Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953) is about a greedy peasant who steps on women to advance himself in the world.

By far the best-known contemporary Japanese filmmaker is Hayao Miyazaki, producer and director of what many feel are the world's best animated films,

called anime in Japan and in much of the world. His *Princess Mononoke* (1999), *Spirited Away* (2001), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) did good business in the West. No one in the world, live action filmmaker or animator, does myth and the supernatural better.

Princess Mononoke www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkWWWKKA8jY

BRAZIL

Now across the Pacific and back to the New World . . .

Compared with the inception of other national cinemas, Brazilian cinema was late getting started. It was not until the thirties that Brazilian filmmakers came to the foreground and started producing films for homegrown audiences.

The golden age of Brazilian cinema may have been in the sixties when many local filmmakers used social ills as backdrops for their storytelling. Hector Babenco's 1981 film *Pixote* is about the lost children of São Paulo, born to prostitutes, without family, poor as dirt, and forced to live by their wits—which means by crime. The contemporary analog to *Pixote* is *City of God* (2002), by Fernando Meirelles. This film too is about rootless and amoral (virtual) orphans running in slum gangs, but it's flashier and deadlier than *Pixote*. Ken Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote of *City of God*: "[It] moves at the breakneck speed of these adrenalin-pumped young lives, pulling us along on the cresting wave of hair-trigger emotions and deadly confrontations." Fast-cut trailer: *City of God* www.traileraddict.com/trailer/city-of-god/trailer

A much quieter contemporary Brazilian film is *House of Sand* (2005), which I discussed in [Chapter 2](#). Two women live on the sand dunes of northern Brazil, facing the Atlantic. A mother and daughter in real life—Fernanda Montenegro and Fernanda Torres—play mother and daughter in the film, and not just one pair of mother and daughter, but three, signifying as many generations. These women have been brought to the dunes for vague reasons by a crazed man who soon dies. The women survive, meet the occasional male drifter, have sex, bear children.

House of Sand www.youtube.com/watch?v=algdilTBfRs

Central Station (1998), by Walter Salles, which traces one of the most moving transformations of a character in a film you are likely to see—that of the woman Dora, played by Fernanda Montenegro, the stellar Brazilian actress. Trailer: *Central Station* www.youtube.com/watch?v=ako8metwLAY

ARGENTINA

After a vigorous start in the 1890s, Argentine cinema got stalled in the 1950s and '60s because of Church and Perónista censorship. But it has rebounded with a couple of strong films. Luis Puenzo's Academy Award-winning *The Official Story* (1985) is a political film in which junta-era wrongdoing is felt in a middle-class family. In 2010, the Argentine thriller *The Secret in Their Eyes* won another Oscar for best foreign film.

ETHNOGRAPHY

- ▶ *Turtles Can Fly* (d. Bahman Ghobadi, 2004). This Kurdish—yes, Kurdish—film is about children caught up in the Iraq-Iran war.
- ▶ *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (d. Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni, 2003). This film was made by German ethnographers who document the effects of a mother camel who has abandoned her calf—not a trivial matter in this marginal Gobi Desert society.
- ▶ *The Mountain Patrol* (d. Chuan Lu, 2004). Poachers keep killing off the rare, beautiful Tibetan antelope. A patrol is formed to hunt down the poachers who keep retreating higher into the Himalayas.
- ▶ *The Fast Runner* (d. Zacharias Kunuk, 2001). This Inuit film is based on a centuries-old legend about love, hate, retribution, and honor—kept alive orally by the Inuits over the centuries. It takes place in Arctic Canada. I mentioned it in my discussion of motion in [Chapter 3](#).

With the exception of the camel film, these films were made by people who share the nationality of the people they are documenting. Yes, documenting. These films have the feel of documentaries, but many parts have obviously been staged and directed. No matter.

TRY THIS:

The farther away you get from Hollywood, the more extreme-feeling the films become, until they become nearly magic. This is what is in store for you if you give some of these films a spin. The only film I discuss in this chapter which Netflix does not stock is *The Black Girl*, and it's probably because there was no DVD for it. Also, as I have said, it's hard to find English-subtitled or dubbed films from Russia and other Eastern European countries.

But I did find films on Netflix that I didn't think I could—the Inuit epic, *The Fast Runner*, the Kurdish tragedy *Turtles Can Fly*, the Brazilian art film

The House of Sand. There was no Netflix ten years ago, no way to sample films from Turkey or Iran or Brazil. You are very lucky to live today.

Spoken Words

CHAPTER 16

Spoken Words

There are still film buffs who, believe it or not, feel that the move to synchronized sound in the late 1920s was an artistic step backwards. These sentimentalists insist that the film experience is first and foremost a visual one. They hold that talking turns film into something it was never meant to be, something like inelegant radio with moving images.

NONE, SHORT, AND LONG

There is some truth to these sentiments. We do appreciate films with little talking and a maximum of arresting images. Carol Ballard's *The Black Stallion* (1979) is a story about a boy who finally bonds with a horse after both have washed ashore on an uninhabited island following a shipwreck. The boy gradually wins the horse over, and the horse finally lets the boy ride him. But there is no dialogue. None is needed. Ballard makes what is essentially a silent picture, at least for the first third, although there is music and sound effects. The boy and horse are finally rescued and rejoin society, and after that there is dialogue, but you are a little disappointed. You enjoyed the wordless movie so much. Clip:

The Black Stallion

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eu3y3dyUxW0

A totally original and innovative animated feature, *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003), comes to us from France. It offers almost no talking at all. I'm not sure I can condense the story, so here is part of a summary from the Internet Movie Database: "When her grandson is kidnapped during the Tour de France, Madame Souza and her beloved pooch Bruno team up with the Belleville Sisters—an aging song-and-dance team from the days of Fred Astaire—to rescue him." There are several scenes from the film with snappy singing and energetic dancing, but there's not much in the way of dialogue:

The Triplets of Belleville

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fwM4hnsdSA

In *The Piano* (1993), set in New Zealand in the nineteenth century, a sort of mail-order bride, Holly Hunter, is brought over from Scotland by a wealthy landowner, played by Sam Neill. The woman does not speak. Instead she plays the piano *at* people. What she plays reflects her particular attitude at the moment: anger, serenity, confusion. Hunter won an Oscar as the mute. It's not often people win Oscars for not talking. The sensual faux-nineteenth-century piano music is by Michael Nyman. Harvey Keitel's passion is set against Neil's rigidity. The film was directed by New Zealander Jane Campion. Here is a trailer:

The Piano

www.kino-zeit.de/filme/trailer/das-piano

Silence is moving, but at the same time, when words are witty or profound, we ought to pay attention. Moviegoers (and now DVD renters) have always admired the sparkling dialogue in the talky *All About Eve* (directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz), a 1950 film about sophisticated theater people starring Bette Davis, Ann Baxter, and George Sanders. Sample dialogue:

MARGO: Birdie, you don't like Eve, do you?

BIRDIE: You looking for an answer or an argument?

MARGO: An answer.

BIRDIE: No.

MARGO: Why not?

BIRDIE: Now you want an argument.

The whole reason for seeing *Get Shorty* (1995) is to watch John Travolta work his will among small-time thugs, egotistical movie stars, and marginal movie producers with his terse "Look at me" imperative.

In 1981, French director Louis Malle directed a film in English called *My Dinner with Andre* consisting almost entirely of dinner talk between two intellectuals, Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory, who play themselves and also wrote the dialogue. At first you may find the talk, talk, talk wearying, but in time it starts to work on you as a kind of music, droning on, a little nutty but not especially dated either.

Here is Andre Gregory in monolog:

My Dinner with Andre

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOZ0l-uir6s

In the Iranian film *Offside* (2006) we learn early that women are not allowed to attend soccer matches in Iran. But a clutch of teenage girls who are nuts about soccer attempt to sneak into the big stadium in Tehran to watch a World Cup match. Soldiers stop them. They leave, come back, try to sneak in, elude the soldiers, then get caught again. Writers Jafar Panahi and Shadmehr Rastin set up the story to have nonstop talking between the girls with each other, the girls and the soldiers, the soldiers among themselves. Sample talk between one of the girls and a soldier:

GIRL: When Japan comes to Tehran to play Iran, how come the Japanese women are allowed into the stadium?

SOLDIER: Because they're Japanese.

GIRL: So the problem is I am Iranian?

So the girls argue, cajole, make fun—all in a flood of words. And the soldiers—most of whom are inexperienced and uncertain—try again and again, in a semi-nice way, to get the girls to obey the law. This is all pretty funny. The talking lends energy to the film and adds a dimension of character and assertiveness to women we aren't normally perceived as thinking this way.

Other films with lots of talking are not so successful. The estimable American director Spike Lee, in such films as *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Summer of Sam* (1999), lets his characters talk too much. The talk is wearying; with tighter writing and editing, it might have been more satisfying to viewers. Nor was Martin Brest tough enough with his screenwriters when he made *Meet Joe Black* in 1999. The story is dumb enough as it is: Death walks around in the body of Brad Pitt, who, inexplicably, needs a haircut. Claire Forlani—unconvincing as a pediatrician—falls in love with Pitt, a stick of a man who is supposed to be profound because he uses words like “splendid.” But worst of all is the dialogue, which goes on and on and on in every scene and stretches the film out to nearly three hours.

Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* is probably too talky. The film has been packaged with Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* and distributed as *Grind House* (2007). In *Death Proof*, two groups of four stuntwomen in two cars go on and on about moviemaking, men, sex, food, drink, and how to get back at a crazy, dangerous, stunt car driver. You can sense that Tarantino's film does not have enough story. But he had to end up with something like ninety minutes of usable

film. So instead of trimming the droopy dialogue, he just left it in.

STYLIZED DIALOGUE

Some screenwriters regard dialogue as the stuff of art that might be rendered in interesting ways. If you limit yourself to responding only to “realistic” dialogue, you may cheat yourself. Stylized dialogue has potential to take spoken words to new levels.

The American playwright and filmmaker David Mamet writes dialogue in which characters give lines in a flat monotone and often repeat words—their own words and words of other speakers. In his *House of Games* (1987), a famous psychologist played by Lindsay Crouse has been humiliated by Joe Mantegna, a confidence man. She tries to con him back, but he catches on. The following scene takes place in a deserted baggage area of an airport. Note especially the repetition; read the dialogue as though it were music:

CROUSE: It was fate I found you.

MANTEGNA: Yes, it was.

CROUSE: Because together we can—

MANTEGNA: Yes, we can.

CROUSE: And when I saw, when I saw that they came after me—

MANTEGNA: It's all right now. You're safe.

CROUSE: No, I knew, I knew that I was being punished.

MANTEGNA: No, it was an accident.

CROUSE: No, I knew—that I was bad.

MANTEGNA: No—

CROUSE: No, I knew that I was bad. You know why? You know when I knew? Because I took your knife. That's when I knew.

MANTEGNA: What knife?

CROUSE: Your knife from the hotel room. And I said that's why it happened. Yes, because I'm bad. Because I stole.

The British filmmaker Sally Potter was enamored with Shakespearean verse when she made *Yes* in 2004. All the dialogue is in iambic pentameter, a venerated meter in which five lines of spoken words take the form of ta TA, ta TA, ta TA, ta TA, ta TA—that is, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. This is the meter Shakespeare used for most all of his poems and plays. Here are a few lines of iambic pentameter from one of Will's sonnets.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Though art more lovely and more temperate
Harsh winds do shake the darling buds of May
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

And here is a character from *Yes* named Cleaner doing iambic pentameter:

In fact it's really only common sense;
There's no such thing as nothing, not at all.
It may be really very, very small
But it's still there. In fact I think I'd guess
That "no" does not exist. There's only "yes."

In the Coen brothers' *True Grit* (2010), a sort of Western set in rural Arkansas (but actually filmed in California), everyone talks semi-eloquently, like something you'd read in a bad Victorian novel. LaBeouf is a Texas Ranger, Mattie a fourteen-year-old girl who has hired LaBeouf and Rooster Cogburn to find the murderer of her father.

LABEOUF: You give out very little sugar with your pronouncements. While I sat there watchin' I gave some thought to stealin' a kiss . . . though you are very young, and sick . . . and unattractive to boot. But now I have a mind to give you five or six good licks with my belt.

MATTIE ROSS: One would be just as unpleasant as the other.

Trailer in which some of this elevated dialogue comes through:

True Grit

www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUICu-zuAgM

PLAIN SPEAK IN ANIMATED FILMS

Most animated films have jettisoned the thees and thous of fairy tales and cutsie kid books of old in favor of more colloquial dialogue. From *Tangled* (2010):

FLYNN RIDER: Rapunzel?

RAPUNZEL: Eugene!

FLYNN RIDER: Did I ever tell you I've got a thing for brunettes?

And from *A Bug's Life* (1998):

DOT: But it's a rock.

FLIK: [shouting] I know it's a rock! Don't you think I know a rock when I see a rock? I've spent a lot of time around rocks!

DOT: You're weird, but I like you.

NARRATION

. . . is off-camera storytelling usually by a character in the film. Good narration has potential to move a story along swiftly and make it unnecessary to dramatize or show stuff that just isn't important.

Martin Scorsese uses narration probably more effectively than any other American filmmaker. His *Goodfellas* (1990), for example, is a dense story which benefits from the narration of Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), a small-time hood, to speed the plot.

Halfway through the film, when pressure on Hill starts to mount, we follow him through a particularly hectic Sunday. We see him stuffing three or four guns into a paper bag, then dropping the bag into the trunk of his car. He wants to fob the guns off on Jimmy (Robert De Niro), but Jimmy doesn't like the guns. In dialogue we learn from an angry Jimmy that his silencers don't match the guns. Henry narrates:

Right away I knew he didn't want them. I knew I was going to get stuck for the money. I only bought the damn guns because he wanted them, and now he didn't want them.

Some of this we don't need to hear because we can see that Jimmy is pissed when he looks at the guns and tries to match the silencers. But what we can't see is that Henry bought the guns as a kind of favor to his friend. To film that particular plot wrinkle would have taken time and money for writing, setting up, rehearsing, lighting, filming, and recording dialogue. Henry implies as much in

ten words at almost zero cost.

Meanwhile Woody Allen uses narration in his *You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger* (2010) so sparingly you have to wonder why it's in the film at all. A few afternoons of sprucing up the dialogue would have made the narration unnecessary.

In the Edward Zwick thriller *Blood Diamond* (2006), about smuggling “conflict diamonds” out of Africa, a minor character sets up the whole film in a kind of narration. The movie starts at a big-time G8 (“the Group of Eight”—meaning the eight most influential economic powers of the world) conference on diamonds in Antwerp. The conference host addresses the body of delegates:

Throughout the history of Africa, whenever a substance of value was found, the locals die in great number and in misery.

At this point the movie cuts to shots of impoverished African workers sifting through mud in a creek for diamonds. The host continues to explain in voice-over:

Now this was true of ivory, rubber, gold, and it is now true of diamonds.

Cut back to creek. We see guards on the creek bed brandishing AK-47s. A worker finds a diamond and pops it into his mouth. Cut back to host:

Now according to a devastating report by Global Witness, these stones are being used to purchase arms and finance civil war.

Cut to creek. Host continues in voice-over.

We must act to prohibit the direct or indirect importing of all rough diamonds from conflict zones.

A guard sees what the worker has done, gets him to spit out the diamond, then shoots him in the face. The host gets the last (camera) shot. His remarks, delivered in less than two minutes and inter-cut with the creek scene, set up the whole film. The sequence demonstrates the often artful and functional interplay between spoken words and images.

But in *Little Children* (2006, directed by Todd Field), a film about the pettiness of suburbanites, the narration, supplied by Will Lyman, doesn't work so well. With another two days of mulling and revising, writers Todd Field and Tom Perrotta could have supplied more info in dialogue, thus making Lyman unnecessary. What's more, PBS devotees will instantly recognize Lyman as the main narrator of *Front Line*—very confusing. Foreign filmmakers like narration better than we Americans. Often the narration is confusing or unnecessarily

complicated. This happens in both the Mexican film *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) and in the Dutch film *Antonia's Line* (1995) in which events are narrated by grandchildren who arrive late in the stories. For me the goal is: the less narration the better, with none being ideal.

IRONIC NARRATION

Occasionally filmmakers and their writers pull off what I call ironic narration. That is, there is disparity between what we see and what we hear. They are at odds. *Into the Wild*, the 2007 film directed by Sean Penn, tells the story of a young dissident, Chris McCandless, who, fed up with consumerist society, strikes off for the wilds of Alaska. He narrates, and fine narration it is, for without it we would not understand his particular pantheism, his love of nature, his quest to live authentically. Visuals would not be enough. For example:

Two years he [McCandless himself] walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the West is the best." And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

This is practical or literal narration because what we see reinforces what we hear. But several times during the film, the voice of Chris's sister Carine swims into the soundtrack. She talks about how dysfunctional the family is.

From as long ago as Chris and I could remember, there had been daily bouts of rage in our house, violence that we were forced to witness. It was very real. But it was like theater. They cast us as both judges and the accused.

As we hear this, we see happy, happy. Happy birthday parties, happy dinners. The visuals lie. We trust Carine's commentary more than what we see. Intermittent happiness, yes, but long-term, authentically, no.

No, we don't want to jettison spoken words from movies. They tell us things visuals cannot, and vice versa. Even the purists of the early sound era admitted that movie scenes needed titles inserted now and then because pure visuals just couldn't do it all. Voices in films have tones of voice, character, and emphasis. Titles do not. The question is not whether movies should have spoken words, but how they are employed.

TRY THIS:

Pay attention to the style of the dialogue you hear in a variety of films—comedies, thrillers, animated, even foreign films. See if you can characterize each in some way: terse, understated, stingy, fulsome, overstated, begging to be cut, overlapping, too writerly, adequately informal. Could you keep up with the dialogue in foreign films or did subtitles seem inadequate? Pay attention to narration. Was it straight or ironic? With two or three more script conferences, might the screenplay writers have done without it? When was it wisely used to speed matters up and save filming costs—if at all?

Music

In the one hundred-years-plus history of the movies, almost no motion pictures played without music. Music has been so fundamental to moviegoers' expectations that even during the so-called silent era theatre owners provided some kind of music, usually just a facile piano player who looked up at the screen and improvised romantic music, suspenseful music, or comic music—whatever the story called for.

Music is more primal than dialogue, and certainly more basic than sound effects and ambient sound. Music tells you how to react, then as now. If a scene had an ounce of ambiguity about it, the music you heard cleared matters up nearly instantly. You were invited to laugh or cry or at least put in some serious thinking about what was happening on the screen.

Piano players—and now and then, for big films, string quartets and full orchestras—had some leeway in the kind of music they would play for audiences. This piano player might be three shades more sentimental in his handling of screen melodrama than the mocking player in the theatre down the street. An orchestra might play something tight and regulated from Mozart or something expansive from Rachmaninoff. Whatever music flooded the auditorium (or bar backroom) had definite effects on audiences. They'd cry a little more with Rachmaninoff, bear up with Mozart.

The history of improvised piano accompaniment to early movies has yet to be written, probably because the subject was so hard to research, and nobody much gave a damn. How informative it would be now to know how Chaplin's favorite accompanist treated his comedies, his pathos.

THE ADVENT OF SYNCH SOUND

All this changed in 1927 when movie studios distributed locked-in music with their product. They hired composers to write scores, and with the arrival of new technology that is what you invariably heard. No variation, no uncontrollable improvising by strong-willed musicians.

The film usually credited with first utilizing synchronized sound is *The Jazz*

Singer (1927) featuring Al Jolson who sang a lot of songs audiences in the twenties loved. Here is a link to a ten-minute excerpt of Jolson singing several songs.

The Jazz Singer

www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIaj7FNHnjQ

Songs synched with moving lips! Audiences had never experienced anything like it at the nickelodeon on Main Street. They were transfixed, in the same way families were delighted when Kodak technology developed talking home movies in the 1960s. But the system Warner Bros. employed to achieve permanent, fixed lip-synch proved long-term to be technically unreliable. Warner relied on a double system with sound on phonograph records and picture on film. Belts and gears maintained a precarious synchronization. The problem was that an inept or drunken projectionist might bump the phonograph player and throw synch off—a famous scene in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) spoofs this apparently common occurrence. So “Vitaphone,” as Warner called their system, was eventually rejected by the industry. Within a year, Hollywood had converted to a single-system optical sound system—that is, the sound was printed, optically, right on the film. Bump away, but you’d never lose synch. This method prevails today.

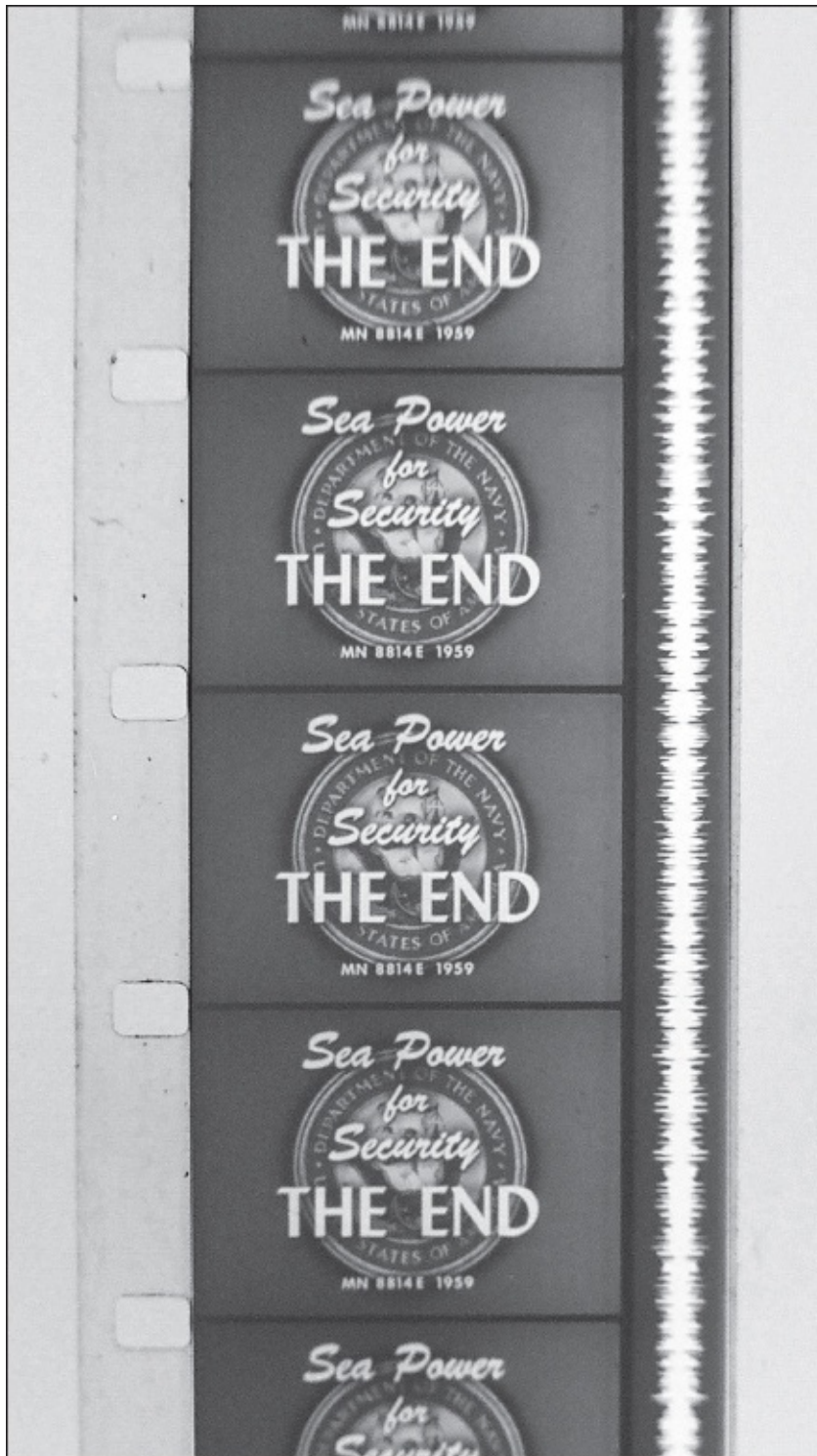
Now for a historical stroll through movie history and some highlights of changing musical taste and practices.

THIRTIES FILM MUSIC

To our ears, film music of the 1930s often seems cloyingly sweet or naïve, maybe as a hedge against the depressing Great Depression. No rock 'n' roll, no rap, not much jazz as we know it. Here is a clip featuring Shirley Temple singing “The Good Ship Lollipop,” plus a half dozen songs from films she made in the thirties. The scenes have been colorized but were originally shot in black and white.

The Good Ship Lollipop

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLLSqYyPD8



The imaging on the right of the film strip pictured here depicts the soundtrack to the film.

By 1930, a bouncy, innocuous, palatable kind of big-band jazz had seeped into movies. Paul Whiteman and his band became well known and successful worldwide. His *King of Jazz* (a self-referring moniker) of 1930 didn't tell much of

a story. Instead, it amounted to a review of musical acts spun off of Whiteman's band. A link to "Happy Feet" featuring a young Bing Crosby:

King of Jazz

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1W1V_nsBaX8

Here is some incidental (background) music from *Gone With the Wind* (1939), a bit dated maybe by today's musical standards. It was composed by Max Steiner.

Gone With the Wind

www.allmusic.com/album/gone-with-the-wind-original-mgm-soundtrack-mw0000611054

Here is a trailer from the digital release of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) in 1997. You hear only snatches of the famous songs in the picture, doubtless because the music was so familiar to movie viewers.

The Wizard of Oz

www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFpVsTuOpK8

After we had won WWII, we felt expansive and patriotic. Below is a link to the end of one of the most beloved war films ever, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, which was released in 1949. It amounts to a crescendo which builds up to the "Marines' Hymn."

Sands of Iwo Jima

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2Ym1rmWr3s

That soldier named Stryker laying face down on the ground with a bullet in his back is played by John Wayne.

BIG FILM MUSIC

The 1950s was a time for big cars and big film music. Here's a clip from *Ben Hur* (1959) called "Aftermath of Crucifixion."

Ben Hur

www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbSaNxldiSQ&feature=related

Here is a trailer for another sword-and-sandal movie, *Spartacus* (1960), a film about a Roman-era slave rebellion directed by the young Stanley Kubrick who was probably powerless to ratchet down the score. Note how each character is introduced by his or her burst of extravagant music.

Spartacus

www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_C21N1UabM

The irony is that two years before, Kubrick made a little film with exquisite musical touches. In 1957, he directed the poignant *Paths of Glory*, a dark film set in France during WWI about soldiers needlessly sacrificed for political expediency. The video below is the film's climax and shows the effect of a captured German girl forced to sing a German folk song in a French bar packed with soldiers in need of redemption. She gets to them in one of the greatest humanistic moments in the entire canon of war films.

Paths of Glory

www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0yVoxUQ7Q8&feature=related

ROCK 'N' ROLL FINDS ITS WAY INTO MOVIES

Blackboard Jungle, released in 1955 and directed by Richard Brooks, was probably the first movie to employ the new—and to some, threatening—sound of rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues music in its score. At this time, both types of music were associated with disreputable types, or what we used to call “juvenile delinquents.” Our current nostalgia for Bill Haley and Joe Turner just did not exist. Brooks used rock and R&B to make the assorted thugs and no-good kids at Glen Ford's high school seem menacing. He also used a lot of melodramatic music. Overstated trailer:

Blackboard Jungle

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr7n9Wxmcf4&feature=related

But just a year later, rock in movies suddenly became respectable as clean-cut kids thrilled to it in *Rock Around the Clock*, directed by Fred F. Sears. Dig the quaintly dated slang:

Rock Around the Clock

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnHnEbbWEhk

Soon pop music was all over the movies. Here is a link to the 1969 movie *Midnight Cowboy* trailer, which includes the Harry Nilsson classic “Everybody's Talking at Me” near the end of this trailer:

Midnight Cowboy

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnFoaj8utio

A few years later, when George Lucas wrote and directed the classic *American Graffiti* (1973), rock and R&B had become iconic music for youth and

the rest of society ceased to be frightened by the testosteronic sounds. Here is a clip showing a callow Richard Dreyfuss falling for the mysterious blonde in the T-Bird, to the strains of “Why Do Fools Fall in Love?” emanating from Wolfman Jack’s pirate radio station.

American Graffiti

www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2sMAJVml2c&feature=related

A few years before George Lucas used rock and pop for *American Graffiti*, Dennis Hopper used “Born to be Wild” over opening credits in his biker-hippie movie *Easy Rider* (1969). Hopper, Peter Fonda, and later Jack Nicholson biked through the Southwest and into the South as Steppenwolf served up:

Get your motor runnin’
Head out on the highway
Lookin’ for adventure
And whatever comes our way
Yeah Darlin’ go make it happen
Take the world in a love embrace
Fire all of your guns at once
And explode into space
Born to be wild

Born to be wild

Easy Rider

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJS8j9YYB9w

HIRED FILM COMPOSERS

Soon filmmakers hired composers of pop music, often rock, to do original soundtracks. The link below will take you to the official trailer of *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), about a pill-addicted woman (Ellen Burstyn) who is obsessed with being a contestant on a TV quiz show. Here are two links, first to a trailer, then to the popular Clint Mansell soundtrack:

Requiem for a Dream

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YDk89e1miY&feature=related

Requiem for a Dream, Mansell

www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTN9jn8_FZ0

For his *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Quentin Tarantino made use of Stealers Wheel’s “Stuck in the Middle With You.” Warning: this is a brutal clip.

Reservoir Dogs

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrJQDnAHrRY

Bad Lieutenant, also released in 2000, is about an utterly depraved NYC police officer played by Harvey Keitel who does drugs, hits on innocent teen girls, and is alienated from other cops and his family. For some reason director Abel Ferrara decided to pair perversity with the poignant Johnny Ace song “Pledging My Love.” It’s hard to figure out why—though the song may point to eventual atonement. Here it is:

Bad Lieutenant

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzsayiLy52E

In 2006, Sofia Coppola directed *Marie Antoinette*, the story of the doomed French queen. Much of the music is traditional eighteenth-century chamber, but every now and then the punk music of Gang of Four crowds in, reminding us of the challenge of leisure:

Marie Antoinette

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WjsqVwWyrI

MOCK BIG

Back in 1983 the film *The Right Stuff* appeared, based on achievements of the Mercury space program astronauts. The original novel, written by Tom Wolfe, and the picture, directed by Philip Kaufman, was not straight-ahead glory. Instead, it mixed achievement, national pride, and satire. The astronauts are rendered human but not superhuman and Wolfe and Kaufman had some fun spoofing the space race and American exceptionalism. The music, by Bill Conti, is probably mock-epic.

Here is a scene from early in *The Right Stuff* when test pilot Chuck Yeager (Sam Shepard) breaks the sound barrier.

The Right Stuff

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE2t6Sg_H74

Mr. Holland’s Opus (1995) is about a much-beloved high school music teacher who gets laid off when the school falls on hard times. Mr. Holland, played by a Richard Dreyfuss of retirement age, has tinkered with a single symphony for much of his life. Below is a link to his last day on campus when . . . well, take a look, but be prepared to wait a few minutes until Mr. Holland lifts the baton.

Mr. Holland’s Opus

www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8E807R7GkI

Holland calls his work, written for the film by Michael Kamen, the *American Symphony*. It's tear-summoning music, perfect for rolling closing credits. It's also very feel-good Hollywood.

RESTRAINT

By the end of the twentieth century, film music—some of it, anyway—was becoming more restrained and consciously artistic. For example, in both *Aliens* (1986) and *The Abyss* (1989), two films directed by James Cameron, most of the music is so low-key that you scarcely hear it. Both films employ heavy metal—lots of big hardware and chunky technology that clangs, beeps, hisses, and whooshes. The music is sometimes nearly indistinguishable from these sounds. For *The Abyss*, composer Alan Silvestri uses drums, strings, and brass—very subdued—to enhance the story of an ocean oil rig crew that dives deep to salvage a nuclear sub.

The musical score for *Aliens*, another thriller, feels a lot like the score for *The Abyss*, though it was composed not by Silvestri but by James Horner, who received an Oscar nomination for his work. Horner keeps his score low-key during the low-drama scenes. Again, the music is often hard to separate from the many techie sounds of the film. Here is a link:

Aliens

www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUIYaowhYKM

By the time Steven Spielberg made *Munich* in 2005, world music had penetrated the global ear. This film is about revenge taken by the state of Israel after terrorists had assassinated 11 Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympic games at Munich. Composer John Williams enfolds many Jewish songs and instrumentals into his otherwise subdued score.

Munich

www.youtube.com/watch?v=08lIT6WCdq0

In *Syriana* (2005), the French composer Alexandre Desplat also mixes Western musical motifs with what sounds like Middle-Eastern music. The film is about nefarious oil dealings and stars George Clooney as a CIA agent. Trouble is, an overzealous trailer-maker uses too many drums and loud noises, nearly overwhelming Desplat's fine music.

Syriana

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTa2PTcycyI

Mark Isham is an American composer of film music who gets around quite well in a number of Western and non-Western modes. Below is an eight-minute collection of scenes from Carroll Ballard's *Never Cry Wolf* (1983), most dominated by Isham's music. The wisdom of Inuit culture figures heavily in the film and Isham's music reflects this:

Never Cry Wolf

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Izb0ScZSBpk

No Music

A few filmmakers are bold enough to make films with no music at all. I mentioned in [Chapter 12](#) how the Dardenne brothers of Belgium eschew music in their award-winning films, probably because they feel it isn't necessary. They rely more on effective scripting and subtle acting than on music for explaining texturing the plot and goosing their stories.

I also mentioned a film way back in "About the Book" called *Ballast*. It also forgoes music. The tendency, in fact, among contemporary filmmakers is to use less and less music. The opening scene of Clint Eastwood's thoughtful *Hereafter* (2010) is a stupendous digital creation of a Tsunami wreaking havoc and drowning people in a seaside community in Indonesia. Waves push, crush, smother, taking out trees and entire structures. People flail, get hit in the head by stray timber. The scene is reminiscent of video footage of NYC residents running away from the enormous cloud of smoke generated by the collapse of the World Trade Towers. And yet Eastwood provided no music to guide our response to the terror and destructiveness of the tsunami. He didn't have to. I have a feeling that if Eastwood (or anybody) had made this film ten years before, it would have loud, brassy, minor-chord apocalyptic music.

Hereafter

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2t0zQ9RmYSc

Hereafter does have music, most composed by Eastwood himself. But it usually takes the form of tinkle-y, barely-heard piano. A lot of contemporary films employ soft piano music. *Love and Other Drugs* (2010) does, and so does *The Kids Are All Right* (2010).

WEIRD

Look at this trailer for the classic sci-fi/monster film *Alien*. Even though the

music is over forty years old, it sounds like it was written yesterday. It's techy, tuneless, rumbling, and above all scary.

Alien

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIECUbKkjQk

Old-hand film-music guy Jerry Goldsmith wrote it.

FOUND MUSIC

This term refers to music that had long existed prior to the production of the film it is heard in. Often the music has a separate, worldwide reputation, and is secure in the concert repertoire. Here is a link to *Badlands* (1973), directed by Terrence Malick, a film about two criminals on the run played by Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek. The music is from the Carl Orff classic *Carmina Burana*. (*Carmina Burana* is actually a collection of European texts dating back to the twelfth century dealing with drinking, immorality, and love. Orff set 24 of the poems to music in the 1930s.) *Badlands* would have had a far more conventional feel without the Orff.

The first link below is an involving trailer but not much Orff; the second is all Orff but doesn't reveal much about the film.

Badlands

www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcFx06cBmbk&feature=related

Badlands, Orff music

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tEgzGnzojc

One of the first films to use found music was *Elvira Madigan*, a Danish production from 1967 about an Army deserter and a circus girl who run off together—right into disaster. Director Bo Widerberg pairs sensual lovemaking scenes with the scrumptious second movement of the Mozart Piano Concerto No. 21. The trailer you can click on below is a little soft (probably on purpose), but Mozart comes through just fine:

Elvira Madigan

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qi_J3_co3dQ&feature=related

A film with a related ambience is *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), about girls from a proper private school who disappear during a Valentine's Day outing while exploring a famous rock formation in the Australian countryside. The year is 1900 and the girls are exquisitely virginal. At one point in the film beautiful swans appear. Music director Bruce Smeaton mixes down ambient sound to

insert the slow movement from Beethoven's fifth piano concerto.

I could not find a scene from the film backed up by the Beethoven. But here is Leonard Bernstein conducting the NY Philharmonic in the piece.

Bernstein conducting Beethoven fifth piano concerto:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cd9rg9v25bo

Just why the girls disappear is kept a mystery. The story offers suggestions of supernatural forces at work, perhaps mythical or pre-Western entities that abduct the girls. To capture this feel, Weir engaged the services of Gheorghe Zamfir, an internationally known composer who specialized in the Romanian pan flute. Here is a scene from the film that features Zamfir's flute as well as suggesting two more possible suspects:

Picnic at Hanging Rock

aso.gov.au/titles/features/picnic-hanging-rock/clip1/

The best-known film with found music is doubtless Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). It uses the thundering music of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss as well as the soothing *Blue Danube Waltz* by another Strauss, Johann (no relation). A music video link to the former composition:

2001: A Space Odyssey

www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxLacN2Dp6A

COMMISSIONED MUSIC

Occasionally filmmakers commission well-known contemporary composers to write their scores. Below is a link to the trailer for *The Hours* (2002), a film about British writer Virginia Woolf directed by Stephen Daldry. Philip Glass is the composer, but doesn't come through very well in the trailer because of all the dialogue, so I've supplied a second link of the Glass music. The trailer, like so many trailers these days, is vaguely atmospheric. It doesn't tell you much about the story. Glass is an academic composer who is often called a minimalist.

The Hours

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbc7jtmuOJM

The Hours, Philip Glass

www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-vrNaIWPZQ

A few chapters ago I mentioned a film called *The Piano*. It tells the strange story of an 1860s “mail order bride” from Scotland who ends up in New Zealand to be the wife of a held-in rich farmer played by Sam Neil. The bride, played by Holly Hunter, doesn’t speak. Instead she plays her piano at people—angrily, sweetly, contemplatively. The music is by English composer Michael Nyman, who has written operas, string quartets, and many film scores.

Here is a trailer that doesn’t reveal much about the film but lets Nyman’s music through. Like Glass, Nyman is considered a minimalist.

The Piano

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsxHuW26rc8&feature=iv&annotation_id=annotation_99250

INTERNATIONAL

Ravi Shankar is an Indian sitar player and composer who contributed scores to many films that have been released in the West. He performed for Satyajit Ray in his famous Apu trilogy, masterpieces of Indian realism depicting the lives of poor Bengals. In the clip below, from the third film of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar*, Apu’s wife thinks he works too hard.

Apur Sansar

www.youtube.com/watch?v=TR1jR37jsHM

In time Shankar went on a world tour and attracted the attention of American and British rock stars. Below is a video of Shankar appearing at the Monterey Pop Festival.

Ravi Shankar, Monterey Pop Festival:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KqUpUf8nrs

Alexandre Desplat, a well-known French composer whom I mentioned earlier, comes up with scores that are always listenable, even if in the background. The *Los Angeles Times* ran a piece about Desplat’s challenge in writing music for a famous man who stuttered, namely England’s George VI. The unnamed *Times* music blogger wrote:

The drama in *The King’s Speech* stems from the inability to communicate. The challenge, then, for French composer Alexandre Desplat was to keep his score from saying too much.

“This is a film about the sound of the voice,” Desplat says. “Music has to deal with that. Music has to deal with silence. Music has to deal with time.”

Here is a trailer for the film with lots of music, though I can’t be absolutely sure Desplat wrote all of it.

The King's Speech

www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzI4D6dyp_o

Nino Rota was the acclaimed Italian composer who wrote scores for dozens of Italian films and many American films. He was chief musical director for many films of Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti. He wrote the famous wedding dance for Francis Coppola's *Godfather* (1972).

Here is a video of stills from Fellini's *8 ½*, a film about a film director who can't get his ninth film off the ground.

8 ½

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWqC6kRCLjI&feature=related

TRY THIS:

Start making judgments about the music you hear in movies you see. Is it just wall paper, emotional filler, cues for scary scenes? Then watch some films mentioned in this chapter that I claim offer more original music, scores that might stand on their own without a movie to front them. I hope eventually you can become film-music-wise enough to give a nod to a truly unique score, and maybe acquire it.

It does depend on your taste in music. I can't help you much if you stick to pop-and-thriller, been-there-done-that music. How can I suggest you try to broaden yourself? Risk. Expand.

Below is a link to an article written by John Graham, which asks, "Is film music great?"

www.mfiles.co.uk/is-film-music-great.htm

Mix and Dub

In recent years film sound has become so complex that people called *sound designers* have joined sound teams to oversee the putting-together of complicated soundtracks. The sound designer is not just an *uber*-technician. She is also an artist. She makes aesthetic decisions about:

- ▶ How long a sound should run
- ▶ How loud it should be
- ▶ How it might be modified—or digitally processed
- ▶ How it plays with other sounds, before, after, or at the same time
- ▶ How, if it all, it should be repeated, lengthened, or shortened
- ▶ How clear or in the foreground it should be, or how muted

If the film is big and aurally intricate, the sound designer works with a very large staff. When *The Exorcist* was digitized and re-released in 2000, Steve Boeddeker came on as sound designer. (He is also credited as the film’s composer of original music.) He had over thirty people “under” him, an assortment of dialogue editors, music editors, effects editors, mixers, equalizers, digitizers, and small armies of assistants and file librarians. As far as I can tell, the original *Exorcist*, which appeared in 1973, had no single person designated as sound designer. (The term has come into film lingo only in the last ten or fifteen years.) Certainly someone was in charge of sound for *The Exorcist*, but not formally so.

Click below to reach a clip which includes dozens of sounds heard in *The Exorcist*. Each had to be made or found, processed, edited, and mixed:

The Exorcist

www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDGw1MTEe9k

The clip doesn’t use any of the well-known music. To hear thirty seconds of it go to iTunes and search by “exorcist theme.” It’s not particularly scary or over-the-top. Just understated tinkly ominous.

MOS

This is a term movie studios used for a time which stands for “mitout sound”—Hollywood picked it up from Jewish film directors fleeing Nazism in the 1930s. Entire scenes in films were filmed MOS—and still are—because circumstances did not easily allow for the placement of mics and lengthy audio adjustments.

The harrowing chase scene that ends *Terminator 2* (1991) most certainly was filmed MOS. There are a few lines of dialogue, but actual words spoken by the actors could have been dubbed in post-production. It’s a common practice. Most of the dialogue is delivered when lips can’t be seen, making dubbing even easier.

Shooting MOS would make it much easier for director James Cameron to film the chase unencumbered by mic placement or sound recordists. It was a dangerous shoot. The fewer crew present, the better for everyone. All the non-dialogue sounds were doubtless added by the film’s sound people. Link:

Terminator 2

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu3b4x66DzM

Gary Rydstrom is listed by imdb.com as the sound designer for *Terminator 2*. More about him later.

As you listen to the clip, notice how the words of speakers outside on the bridge have a different quality than speakers inside the truck. This kind of fiddling with frequency and reverb is what sound designers oversee. Follow individual sounds in the clip.

FOLEY ARTISTS

So-called Foley artists are frequently employed by the film industry to manufacture various sounds for film directors and sound crews working on scenes shot MOS. These artists watch a screen and create sounds in a studio in synch to visual events. The original Foley was a real person, Jack Foley, who added ambient sounds to early sound films shot with crude microphones that could not pick up subtle noises like footsteps or closing doors. Foley crews today come up with all manner of strategies for convincingly making sounds in films, for example, the slicing of a head of lettuce supposedly sounds exactly like someone being slashed up with a knife—or so I am told.

Here is a short video showing Foley people at work. They are delighted to share their aural secrets with you.

Foley people at work:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0wWo5QzFQY

Half Nelson (2006) is an independent film directed by Ryan Fleck and made for a mere \$700,000—small bucks by Hollywood standards. Only eleven people worked on sound, three of them Foley artists. Here is a short scene certainly shot MOS. The story is about a crack-addicted high school teacher doping up in the boys' room. Only a few sounds are used, but they are echoey and ominous. A low frequency hum makes a sad kind of music. Most viewers simply don't hear these sounds nor ponder their intended meaning, so focused are they on the story and the visuals. Yet if scenes like the teacher doing drugs in the boys' room lacked sound, the scene would play flat. Sound often works underhandedly, penetrating the listener subliminally.

Half Nelson

www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn0V5tYG5q8

Ryan Gosling is the teacher. He was nominated for an Oscar in 2007. Tom Efinger was the “post-production supervising sound editor.”

CREATING SOUNDS

Sound engineers are remarkably resourceful. Say they need a sound for the closing of a hatch of a spacecraft. They may have something like that in a commercially available sound file that could be copyrighted and has to be bought. Or they might go out into the community and record the raw sound of a car door closing or the closing of a bank vault. They then bring that sound back to their computer, import it into a sound program, and, for starters, make it run slower or faster to affect frequency. If it still doesn't sound like the door of a spacecraft closing—a subjective thing: how many of us have actually heard such a sound?—they might mix the slamming with something as simple as a recording of the running of fingernails over a stiff carpet. Each sound has a build up (attack) and drop off (decay) which can be altered to be slow or fast. Fiddle, fiddle, experiment, listen, evaluate. One sound at a time.

Another film with a complex soundtrack is *WALL-E* (2008), the Pixar futuristic animated film about a love affair between two robots in conflict with machines who want to keep humans subservient to them in a huge spacecraft. Below is a link to a lecture and demonstration by Ben Burtt, the sound designer for the film. You will learn that Burtt had to keep track of 2,600 separately recorded sounds or files. He worked on the film for three years.

Sound for *WALL-E*:

benburttinterviews.blogspot.com/2009/02/benburtt-demonstrates-how-he-made-wall.html

And here is a one-minute clip from the film during which many different sounds are heard:

WALL-E

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHH3iSeDBLo

Gary Rydstrom is a veteran sound designer. *Mix*, an online sound magazine, recently interviewed him.

Rydstrom interview:

mixonline.com/recording/interviews/audio_gary_rydstrom/

They didn't have people called sound designers when Orson Welles made *Citizen Kane* in 1941, but as far as I can tell a man named John Aalberg seems to have been in charge of sound for the film. The Internet Movie Database lists only fifteen people in the "sound department," Aalberg among them. Half of these fifteen worked during shooting—recording, placing microphones, etc.—so that left a mere half dozen technicians for post-production chores. Yet the soundtrack of *Citizen Kane* is extremely sophisticated. Here is a clip from near the start of the film when the reporter Thompson is given his assignment: to find out what "rosebud" meant to the recently deceased Kane, played by Welles. Note the complexity of the dialogue, how it overlaps, how people talk at the same time.

Citizen Kane

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj9lloAKw4c

Here are comments on the mixing of dialogue in the reporter scene in *Citizen Kane* by astute Australian sound designer Philip Brophy.

"... there is a thrilling sense of orchestration audible in the scene. The voices weave in and out from each other, sometimes picking up the rhythmic banter of the former, other times dominating the other to create a rhythmic and timbral shift. The voices in this sense map an aural dogfight as the characters' are energized by each other, responding to each other's lines and having flashes of ideas which give rise to rapid fires of dialogue. This swirling dynamo of group vocal action lets the scene convey a sense of vitality that kick starts the investigative story for *Citizen Kane*."

Below is a link to a scene from John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952). It's typical of the challenges sound people take on. The scene is about a good-natured fistfight which sweeps up the entire Irish community where John Wayne, an

American ex-prize fighter, has retired. Listen to each sound—punches, crowd sounds, Wayne falling, then his opponent, Victor McLaughlin, also falling, water splashing. Tune in to onlookers laughing. Note how the laughter continues over cuts. Hear birds twittering. Impish music, turning '50s-cute. More crowd noises, the priest Barry Fitzgerald insisting on some Marquis of Queensbury rules. People laying bets. Cutaway to cops—do they stop the fight? No, they place bets, too.

The Quiet Man

www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/74511/Quiet-Man-The-Movie-Clip-The-Big-Fight.html

This famous scene took days to film, the auxiliary scenes several more days. Actually, when the main fight was filmed, not much sound was recorded live—the dialogue between the fighters is about all. Even the punches were enhanced in the dubbing to be louder. All the other sounds, especially the crowd noises, were mixed in during post-production. Imdb.com lists only five sound people. Director John Ford kept them busy.

Films about war always create jobs for sound editors and mixers. Here is a clip from:

Saving Private Ryan (1998)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOpNFK14490

Only the dialogue—and monolog (the sniper's prayers)—was recorded live. The rifle fire, the explosions, even the whining motors of the tank raising its cannon, were dubbed in during post-production. Note how the combat sounds are reduced in volume when the sniper prays in a low voice, so we can hear his words. The rain was recorded live, but the sound of the drops was doubtless enhanced. Gary Rydstrom, who as I've said gets around in Hollywood, was the sound designer. Steven Spielberg's re-creation of WWII provided jobs for forty-six sound technicians and artists.

SOUND PEOPLE AT OSCAR TIME

The Academy Awards gives out two Oscars for sound, one for Best Sound Editing, the other for Best Sound Mixing. And a good thing it is, too, because no film artists are less appreciated by the moviegoing public than sound people. You seldom wax lyrical to your date after seeing *Avatar* with, "Wasn't the mixing just terrific?"

Here is a link to *The Hurt Locker* (2009), about a soldier in Iraq who defuses

bombs, and an out-of-luck civilian all wired up and ready to explode a dozen or more bombs around his torso. There is a timer set to go off in two IEDs—bombs planted in streets. But the bomb diffuser can't cut all the locks in that time. He has to abandon the civilian. See the trailer below to find out what happened. But I'd rather you watch the scene for the mixing of dialogue, how people talk to each other, how they talk over each other, how their emotions change as the timer counts down to zero. They talk over each other, they talk loud, soft, excitedly. Katherine Bigalow directed this devil's mix of excited dialogue.

Sound designer Paul N. J. Ottosson picked up both sound Oscars for his work in this film. Link:

The Hurt Locker

www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-LSJCNPsfg

Jeremy Renner played the defuser and was nominated for Best Actor in 2010. Probably most of the sounds you heard were made in post-production. Note how Renner's helmet changes his voice, an effect probably also achieved in post. Also note the music. Music? It's barely felt, just under the surface of the action, a single-note portentous sound like a swarm of hornets. For all I know, they were hornets.

TRY THIS:

Start listening—really listening—to the sounds of movies. Which sounds seem to have been mixed in post-production? Which were enhanced by computers or equalizers? If the scene is noisy, it's a good bet other sounds were mixed down so that more important foreground sound, like dialogue, is audible.

Which scenes might have been shot MOS? Listen to individual sounds and speculate about how they were manufactured and mixed.

Meaning

Story: Conflict and Meaning

The story is one of the most enduring inventions of the human species. It predates the wheel, the axe, the rope. It has common elements employed by a broad range of spinners of tales: cavemen (and women maybe) sitting around fires relating daring exploits after successful hunts; Roman soldiers boasting of glorious conquests; monks, priests, and nuns relating parables of right behavior to the laity; and Hollywood filmmakers who aim to thrill audiences with harrowing car chases and shootouts. All tell stories with the same elements listed below:

- ▶ Conflict
- ▶ Characters
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Meaning
- ▶ Character Relationships
- ▶ Symbol
- ▶ Tone
- ▶ Resolution

A film story lasts only two hours, more or less. You will derive more from this book and from the films you see by endeavoring to keep track of more than one of these story elements at the same time, like multitasking.

CONFLICT

Aristotle proposed six kinds of conflict in stories—he was writing mainly about Greek drama, but they apply to film as well. Here are the six, along with films that exemplify the conflicts:

Person vs. self

Schindler's List, *On the Waterfront*, *25th Hour*, *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*. In each of these films, main characters are conflicted between what they ought to do and

how they might get off the hook. The goal always is to know the right thing and do it.

Person vs. person

The Wizard of Oz, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, High Noon, The Fugitive. Protagonists (main characters) are up against people who would afflict them.

Person vs. society

The Grapes of Wrath, Star Wars, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, All Quiet on the Western Front. Now protagonists are in conflict with entire societies, ranging in size and importance from the whole galaxy to the social arrangements of particular institutions, such as mental hospitals.

Person vs. nature (including natural disasters)

2012, Children of Men, Armageddon, Jaws, Jurassic Park, Into the Wild. Protagonists are in conflict with the raw outdoors. Weather, vast space, wild animals, or epidemics might figure.

Person vs. the supernatural

Nosferatu, Dracula, Ghost, Hamlet, Vampires Suck, Lord of the Rings. This group of films rests on forces that can't be explained by science or known laws of nature. You don't know what will happen next unless you possess the keys to the magic.

Person vs. technology (not from Aristotle)

2001: A Space Odyssey, Frankenstein, Godzilla, A.I. Artificial Intelligence. These films are based on extensions of science with potential to do harm.

No conflict, no story. Conflict drives story, creates interest and suspense. We watch to learn how matters will turn out. Some people find a film like *Tree of Life* (2011) hard to follow. The conflict is very muted, more like poetry than narrative.

Often films belong to more than one of these categories of conflict. Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) is not only arrayed against bad guy Frank Miller and his henchmen in the Western *High Noon* (person vs. person conflict), he is also in conflict with the town of Hadleyville, which won't lift a finger to help him (person vs. society). Dave (Keir Dullea) in *2001: A Space Odyssey* not only has to disarm Hal the computer (person vs. technology), he has to survive in airless, inhospitable deep space (person vs. nature). It's likely that the more conflicts a

screenwriter can plausibly bring into a story, the more involving the story will be to audiences.

Some of these conflicts are simply more sophisticated than others. The conflict of a person against himself has potential for all sorts of moral issues beyond the mere laying down of plot. Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) must see the essential evil of Nazism and the wrongness of employing Jewish slave labor. Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) has to finally understand how corrupting his power has been for himself and others—though he never does. Great literature, including great films, always comes down to moral choices. On the other hand, movies about vampires seldom have anything to do with morality. Usually, human beings are not responsible for bringing vampires into existence. They just turn up, grab you, and plunge teeth.

But responsibility looms very large in films like these:

- ▶ *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: What is the responsibility of a facility such as a mental hospital for treating patients humanely?
- ▶ *The Wizard of Oz*: Is Dorothy ever going to grow up and stand up to the Wicked Witch?
- ▶ *Jurassic Park* and *Frankenstein*: Ought science mess with nature? Do you get what you deserve when you do?

Even when a character is not in conflict with herself, she may face multiple obstacles that seem nearly impossible to surmount. The main character of a film called *Winter's Bone* (2010) is a girl of only 16 (Jennifer Lawrence)—in the book; the film insists she is seventeen. She faces so many conflicts the situation seems hopeless. The main one has to do with locating her fugitive, meth-cooking father who has skipped bail. If she can't find him the bail-bonds people will take her house and kick her out, along with her mentally challenged mother and her two young brothers, into the cold of an Ozark winter. Plus the male code of the region insists that men reveal nothing, not to the law, not even to innocent family members. Plus it is cold. Plus Jennifer, though plucky, is inexperienced. How can she hope to go up against cynical, law-hating mountain men?

Here is a trailer for the film that sets up these conflicts:

Winter's Bone

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bE_X2pDRXyY

RESOLUTION

All story conflicts are eventually *resolved*—that is, they cease to exist. Often the resolution is obvious, sometimes muted. In thrillers and assorted adventure or crime films, the bad guy is killed off—end of conflict, end of film. Let me provide a few resolutions for a few films, most well known.

Warning: spoilers ahead.

FILM	CONFLICT	RESOLUTION
<i>Avatar</i> (2009)	Marine Jake Sully is trying to help the people of Pandora ward off the corporation that wants to mine precious metals and destroy the Na'vi way of life.	Jake recruits thousands of warriors from neighboring clans. They finally prevail over the corporation. All humans except Jake are expelled from Pandora.
<i>Up</i> (2009)	Carl is feeble and grumpy, an old man who never went on the adventures he and his deceased wife once dreamed of. The city wants to tear down his old house.	Carl inflates a great quantity of helium balloons that rips the house off its foundation and takes off floating to the South America wilderness. A kid, Russell, tags along, bent on taking care of Carl to earn merit badges. In the wilderness, the pair encounters Muntz, a discredited explorer who wants to steal a rare bird Russell has befriended. Muntz dwells high in the sky in a dirigible. Possessed now with purpose, Carl regains his strength, pushes furniture and other heavy stuff out of doors and windows to make the house lighter, ascends to Muntz and confronts him with a cane he uses as a sword. Carl prevails. He and Russell bond like grandfather and grandson.
<i>Amreeka</i> (2009)	A single Palestinian woman moves to the US so her son might obtain a better	The woman starts dating the principal of the high school, who is actually Jewish. They get along fine. He does not exactly shelter her, but she feels

education, but both meet discrimination and abuse at every turn.

less alone with him. He stands for tolerance in US society she had thought did not exist.

Toy Story 3
(2010)

Andy is on the verge of college. The toys end up in a rough-and-tumble day-care center, abused and unappreciated.

After much maneuvering, Woody and the gang finally find a home in the playroom of a little girl, Bonnie, who appreciates the toys, as Andy once did.

MEANING

You let resolution take you to meaning. For a time, you soar above the particulars of the film and consider its significance, its lesson for you, or at least some kind of truth about society or human nature. Apply this three-step process to the old fable of the tortoise and the hare:

Conflict: Who will win the race? Viewers (readers) just naturally root for the underdog, the slow-moving tortoise.

Resolution: Luckily for the tortoise, the hare is arrogant. He thinks he can goof off, stop off for a beer, have a smoke. He mocks the tortoise this way. But the tortoise perseveres, putting one scaly foot in front of the other. He passes the napping hare and goes on to win the race.

Meaning: One must overcome one's limitations by hanging in there, not giving up, believing in one's self. This applies as much to human beings as to tortoises.

Three kinds of meaning

Consider three kinds of meaning: *mythic*, *epic*, and *thematic*.

Myth has to do with what we *want* to believe, with ideas, notions, and preconceptions we have internalized since childhood. Myths don't *confront* us; they comfort us. They tell us what we already know. The Frank Capra movie *It's a Wonderful Life* is based on the myth of the small town, where citizens come to the aid of people in trouble. "The Tortoise and the Hare" is based on the myth of the underdog who eventually prevails. It goes back at least as far as the Bible—"The meek shall inherit the earth." Myth is not always "false." It may have foundation in truth.

Epic is broader than myth. It has to do with long-standing, *remembered*, historic values that have been lodged in the psyche of the nation. *Gone With the Wind* is full of epic about the graciousness of the Old South. The Western movie *Shane* is based on epic trends that favor farmers with families over rapacious cattlemen.

Theme is more universal. It might confront us and challenge cherished beliefs. Ideally, theme transcends myth and epic to reveal what is true and universal. A film like Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* portrays twelve jury members wrestling with issues of bigotry concerning a young defendant. The William Wyler classic *Roman Holiday* has to do with two people, a princess and a journalist, doing the right thing *for their time*.

Who determines myth, epic, or theme?

You do. There is nothing wrong with seeing a film as myth or epic and not especially as truthful theme. There is pleasure in following myth. There is pleasure in following epic. Some films embody both. You learn about your culture and your country by tuning in to myth and epic in narrative. Consider:

Avatar is more mythic and epic than thematic. We've been there before. Nature needs protection. Indigenous peoples need protection. Environment good, corporations bad. Good (should) prevail over evil.

Up also feels familiar. Old guys have to rejuvenate themselves, find purpose, take action. This applies to people of any age.

Toy Story 3 may be the most thematic of the films I've mentioned. And its theme isn't very pretty, long term. Bonnie too will grow up and lose interest in toys. The toys will seem dated to her. Their arms will fall off, their facial features will rub off with time. All of the *Toy Story* movies, in fact, have streaks of ugly

realism like this. Surely all toys are destined eventually for landfill. But so are we all, in one century or another. *Shudder, shudder.* Now and then theme should make you shudder.

Wishful thinking

Meaning in many films often takes the form of wishful thinking. The Na'vi finally beat the corporation, but realistically speaking in many places in the world—our world—primitive peoples have not beat back the corporations. Not in the jungles of Asia, not in the oilfields of Africa, not in the forests of the Amazon. It is our choice to smile at the happy ending and accept it or to disbelieve. *Amreeka* too verges on wishful thinking. What really are the chances that an uprooted Palestinian woman will meet a kindly Jewish man? We have to believe. We have to believe in miracles.

Or maybe the point of *Amreeka* is to show how two people who are traditionally at odds might find love—in another country. Their relationship breaks patterns. It's up to the director and writer Cherien Dabis to make the example convincing.

More examples of themes

It is the rare film that tells us things we don't want to hear, that evades myth. Here are three, which happened to be in the Oscar race in 2010 when *Avatar* was competing.

The Hurt Locker. This is Catherine Bigelow's little anti-war film of 2008, though she claims in interviews she did not set out to make an anti-war film. I've mentioned the film in several other chapters. To repeat, this film is about a bomb defuser with the US Army in Iraq. The guy, Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), gets into a heavy, awkward bomb-repelling suit, pulls the visor of a thick helmet down—the temperature might be 110 degrees inside there—slips into an astronaut-type suit, and starts digging in a hole in a Baghdad street for one of those IEDs. Who would agree to take on such a job? The answer to this question spawns a multiplicity of authentic themes, not myths. There is the theme of courage, yes, but there are also themes of suppressed fear, of alienation, of outright craziness, of the testing of manhood, of life on the edge and what it does to people who live that way.

One brilliant sequence shows what this kind of life does to people who live as James does: he is on leave. He rejoins his family back in the states. To get back to normal, he goes to the supermarket for his family. He contemplates a long aisle of sugary, inconsequential breakfast cereal. No box will blow up in his face. Still, he cannot decide on which brand to take home. It doesn't matter. There is no risk, no meaning. He says nothing, but the look on his face mirrors American

society: our choices are inauthentic. The real choice is between life and death.
Link:

The Hurt Locker

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PgbNQU3cYo

Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire (2009). This film is about an abused, obese teenage girl who doesn't like herself very much. How can she? Her father has raped her repeatedly. Her mother treats her like shit. She never looks at anyone. She is so held in, she can barely speak. She is like many unattractive, apparently unremarkable young people in the world: hopeless. But she is not hopeless. She has the good fortune of having relationships with two people who want to help, a teacher and a social worker. She comes to life. She stands up to her mother. We learn she is HIV positive but the child she is carrying is not. She vows to do all she can for herself and for the baby. Yes, all this may be wishful thinking. But the original plight of the young woman is thematically true and real.

Trailer for *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tARYrepOGJc

Think of this film less as myth, less as life as we desire it, and more about miracle. *Precious* is one in a thousand. Most young women in her position would give up, give in, stumble and go on to live miserable lives, die young. But *Precious* rebounds. This is the theme of coming back, rebounding, accepting the kindness and wisdom of people who care, if only professionally. It's putting the life growing within you first. Maybe I call this a theme rather than myth because director Lee Daniels puts the film together with such honesty that he avoids myth. He *particularizes*. *Precious*, played by Gabourey Sidibe, is a unique figure and actor. You believe.

An Education (2009). This British film is what we Yanks call an initiation story. A beautiful and talented teenager, Jenny (Carey Mulligan), has become enamored with a man three shades too old and worldly for her. He is smooth talking and has some money. The girl considers dropping out of school and abandoning her plans to attend Oxford to live the high life with the guy. Her school headmistress brings her to her senses. She learns the man is still married. He's been lying to her. She drops him, throws herself into her studies to get into Oxford, and succeeds.

She says to herself at Oxford, "I probably looked as wide-eyed, fresh, and artless as any other student. But I wasn't." Jenny was initiated into the life of grown-up deceit.

The fine line

. . . between myth and theme, or between expectation and truth, is not easy to determine. What may be myth to me, could be profound truth to you, and the opposite. Hollywood tends toward myth. Independent filmmakers tend toward legitimate theme—though this is oversimplified. We all have to decide for ourselves. Whichever, your job is to determine whether you have seen all this before or is the film showing you something fresh and real.

THREE MORE TAKES ON CONFLICT

Teachers of literature and film would also like you to think of these kinds of conflict in narrative:

Conflict of plot

At their simplest level, all stories have conflicts of plot. In fact, as I've said, no plot conflict, no real story. Savvy screenwriters know enough about narrative structure to build conflict into their stories. In *Titanic* (1997), director and writer James Cameron crafted a plot about life and death: will the upper-class Rose (Kate Winslet) and the steerage-class Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) end up together, or will they drown out there in the cold Atlantic? We know the ship finally sinks, but we want Jack and Rose to be together, among the survivors.

In *Enemy of the State* (1999), the flashy melodrama directed by the late Tony Scott, we quickly come to care about Will Smith, a lawyer who is in jeopardy. There are bad guys in the government who think Smith has a videotape that will implicate them in the assassination of a United States senator. Smith doesn't know what is going on except that people are trying to kill him. He runs and runs. He is monitored by all sorts of high-tech electronic devices. Dozens of experts are arrayed against him. It looks hopeless.

In *16 Blocks* (2006), Bruce Willis is a burned-out, seemingly ineffectual cop who has been given the job of transporting a prisoner from the NYC jail to the courthouse, a distance of 16 blocks. Seems like an easy assignment. But the prisoner will give testimony implicating a lot of corrupt cops who scheme to take out the prisoner somewhere en route to the courthouse. The bad cops think that Willis will be a pushover—that's why they gave him the job. So conflict of plot: Can Willis deliver the prisoner to the courthouse? The film was directed by Richard Donner.

Crank (2006) is driven by a crazy plot reminiscent of the setup for the Keanu Reeves–Sandra Bullock flick *Speed* (1994). Writers-directors Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor contrive a mob that injects Jason Statham, a hit man wanting to go straight, with a drug that will kill him if his heart rate falls to a low level. So Statham runs, fights, gets pissed off, and even makes love in public with Amy Smart to keep his heart ratcheted up. It's a silly, though energizing plot.

Conflict of character

Better stories feature characters we can care about. They too are in conflict but on a deeper level than mere plot. The conflict has to do with who they are instead of what they do or what happens to them. In *Titanic*, Jack doesn't really have a personal problem. Cameron makes Jack brave and resourceful, and he's likable so the audience can cozy up to him.

No, it's Rose who has the main stress. It isn't just that she doesn't want to marry the domineering, arrogant Cal Hockley (Billy Zane). To call off the marriage would disappoint her mother and apparently leave them penniless. This is real pressure.

Bruce Willis in *16 Blocks* has to hold the bad cops at bay. To prevail, he has to summon something within himself he has lost.

Another flick about a main character who has to prove himself to himself is *Man on Fire* (also by Tony Scott, 2004) in which bodyguard Denzel Washington takes a job protecting the young daughter of a rich family from being kidnapped in Mexico City, which is plagued by numerous kidnappings and extortions. Denzel drinks too much and despises what he used to be: a CIA undercover agent and assassin. So (as you could have guessed) the little girl is kidnapped. And Denzel snaps into action. He has to overcome his ennui, same as Bruce Willis does.

Will Smith's personal problem in *Enemy of the State* is at first pretty basic. He has to keep his wits about him and stay alive—and also find out what is going on. Later in the story, he has to learn to trust ex-spy Gene Hackman. Plus, Gene has to trust Will. When you can't tell who is good or who is bad, trust does not come easily.

In the Line of Fire (d. Wolfgang Petersen, 1993) features Clint Eastwood as an aging Secret Service guy who is having trouble joggling to keep up with the presidential limousine during parades. Also, he wonders whether he isn't too old to attract women—namely, fellow-agent Rene Russo, who is much younger than he.

More than just sticks

Here are five older thrillers that, in spite of their melodramatic story lines, have characters who have more personality than usual. They are complex and face daunting personal problems. See the films and track the development of personal conflict.

Bullitt (1968). San Francisco police detective doesn't think much about putting himself or others in harm's way. His girlfriend does. Directed by Peter Yates and starring Steve McQueen.

Deliverance (1972). Four men from the city go on a white-water canoeing trip. They run into a lot of trouble from nature and from mountain men. Directed by John Boorman and starring Burt Reynolds and Jon Voight.

The Man Who Would Be King (1975). Two Brits try to scam high priests of a Himalayan kingdom out of great wealth. Directed by John Huston and starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine.

Dog Day Afternoon (1975). Guy robs a bank to get money for his friend's sex-change operation, ends up having to hold employees and customers hostage for hours. Based on a true story. Directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Al Pacino.

The Verdict (1982). Alcoholic lawyer reduced to ambulance-chasing is given a slam-dunk case by a friend who wants to help. The catch is, he has to settle out of court. But the lawyer, played by Paul Newman, wants to go to court to expose fraud and immorality—also to prove something to himself. He's up against the town's biggest law firm. Also directed by Lumet.

Conflict of theme

As I have said, theme has to do with broad, overarching lessons, realities, truths. All stories have themes, even dumb ones like *Speed*—which is founded on the immutable truth that you can get killed driving too slow in Los Angeles. Often screenwriters don't even know they are infusing their stories with themes. That's okay. We'll do the infusing. Any well-crafted story has a theme, whether the author disavows such intention or not. At the start of *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain admonishes us that "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." Good readers know that Twain is funning and will do just the opposite of his dicta—that is, find motive, moral, and plot.

In *Titanic*, the conflict of theme has to do with the modern woman, just emerging in 1912, whom Rose personifies. Was it possible for intelligent, willful, tuned-in young women to live independent lives in that pre-World War I era? James Cameron doubtless had this large issue in mind as he drafted the story, though of course he was mightily influenced by contemporary feminism. He had to make sure Rose lived in order to keep the theme, and its possibilities, alive. Jack didn't have to live since men already ran things.

In the Line of Fire suggests several conflicts of theme, all related to character. Here are two, which I have stated as questions:

- ▶ Do women really, deep down, prefer tough old chauvinists like Clint over younger, more sensitive men?
- ▶ What about aging and self-doubt? How do older men deal with it?

Nifty trailer for *In the Line of Fire*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU4iPNL5yBM

In *Enemy of the State*, the conflict of theme has to do with the loss of privacy in a high-tech, high-surveillance society, particularly relevant today in this post-9/11 era of government snooping. Writer David Marconi very cleverly and presciently rigged the story so that all forms of communication, even a pay phone at a 7-Eleven, are plugged into Central Monitoring. *Enemy of the State* offers another important conflict of theme that blends with the conflicts of character I mentioned before: to beat the system, people have to link up, trust each other, and fight back. Will they?

TRY THIS:

You have much to do now. See films in terms of conflicts and resolutions. Assign types of meaning to each: myth, epic, or theme. Articulate each. How is the myth true or untrue? How does epic reflect the life of a nation? How is the theme “true” or seemingly valid? What kind of conflicts (nature, technology, society) do particular films deal with? How are these conflicts resolved and how do resolutions spin meaning? In your survey of meaning, don’t neglect conflicts of plot, character, and theme.

Here are some films to apply these concepts to.

- ▶ *The King’s Speech*
- ▶ *True Grit* (Coen brothers’ version)
- ▶ *The Fighter*
- ▶ *The Tourist*
- ▶ *Tangled*
- ▶ *127 Hours*

Technique, Structure, and Meaning

As I have noted in several previous chapters, practitioners of the film medium have developed over the decades a number of techniques in which meaning is imbedded. This chapter aims to bring some main techniques together and suggest their significance. Many of these techniques are obvious and well-known; others are less obvious.

EASILY RECOGNIZABLE TECHNIQUES

As lifelong film viewers, we have absorbed much film technique to which we instantly, even unthinkingly, attach meaning. Here is a list of such techniques.

- ▶ Bad things happen in the dark. Very few horror films take place in broad daylight.
- ▶ Quick cutting equals excitement, rapid change, perhaps danger or violence.
- ▶ Handheld, purposely jerky camerawork conveys that something is wrong; the world is out of kilter.
- ▶ Same thing for tilted camerawork, when the bottom of the frame is not parallel to the ground or floor.
- ▶ Extreme wide-angle lenses—often called fish-eye lenses—suggest altered psychological states, perhaps abnormal or threatening.
- ▶ Minor key music also proceeds or accompanies menace. Trailers are partial to not only minor key compositions, but also lots of drums and hard-to-identify sounds of slashing, crashing, and destruction. We seldom actually *listen* to such music, but it works on us all the same.
- ▶ And the opposite: scenes of verdant nature add up to harmony; slow cutting invites us to be contemplative; music in major keys tells us everything is all right.
- ▶ We love contrast, not only of setting (city vs. country) but also of characters (innocence vs. worldliness or evil). We automatically root for innocence. This is not strictly technique; but innocence can be achieved through the techniques of casting, acting, and costuming.

- ▶ Moving cameras impart fluidity to shooting and produce serenity or a sense of well-being.
- ▶ Placement of characters is important. When they are physically far apart, they are also psychologically distant. When they stand next to each other, they may be intimate, even loving.
- ▶ Close-ups isolate people; medium shots and long shots integrate them. Films dominated by close-ups often offer characters who do not connect well with other characters.

Here are some films in which these techniques are predictably found.

In *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), the main character Sara, played by Ellen Burstyn, is often filmed with a fish-eye lens, not always to show her point of view, but to simulate the mental state of someone addicted to mind-altering diet pills. The fish-eye lens is also used for filming scenes of Sara's drug trips.

In the trailer for *The Dark Knight* (2008), the music might be listenable in its own right, if you are okay with dark and scary. It's accompanied by lots of drums and miscellaneous sounds portending jeopardy and violence—also psychopathology.

The Dark Knight

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jqq4j52Fb4

In *Inception* (2010), lots of close-ups suggest the isolation of Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his shaky status as the world's best extractor of dreams in league with nefarious corporations who stand to profit from what Cobb uncovers. (Note tilted camera.)

Inception

www.youtube.com/watch?v=66TuSJo4dZM

Pan's Labyrinth (2006) is an adult fairy tale. The old Pan figure tells the girl she has to pass three ordeals to prove she is a princess and deserves to be with her father, the King. But outside the cave it is 1944 and the Spanish Civil War brutally rages. Mixing fantasy with reality is risky, but casting, costuming, and latex make it all believable. Through it all, the sweet girl reminds us that everything will turn out all right. Here is the remarkable trailer:

Pan's Labyrinth

www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqYiSlkvRuw

In *Gladiator*, Russell Crowe is about to have his head chopped off. But he is saved through the magic of editing. His head is placed on the chopping block and the chopper raises his blade high, but through a very quick series of cuts which nobody watching the film in real time can follow, Crowe overcomes the chopper and gets the jump on everyone else around him, turning certain death into triumph. This feat is not physically or humanly possible, but director Ridley Scott and editor Pietro Scalia make you believe. At least everyone in the theatre I saw the film in apparently believed. I didn't see anyone walk out. I for one went, "Boo!"

Is there meaning in this kind of tricky editing? No. It's just part of the Crowe persona to accomplish the impossible. To me, with a little better writing and less fancy editing, writer David Franzoni could have extricated Crowe more believably and enhanced his character, instead of making it dependent on the computer mouse. Technique can take you just so far. Then the screenwriter should take over.

THE TWO-HOUR FILM

Most contemporary motion pictures run between ninety minutes and two and a half hours with two hours, give or take ten minutes, being nearly a worldwide standard. What is magic about two hours? Nothing. The largely automatic decision to make movies of this length is mainly commercial and historic, and not artistic. Two hours is a suitable length to establish conflict, develop characters, and resolve matters. Unlike TV drama, which must be written and edited into an unvarying fifty-two minutes of dramatic material, the running time of films meant to be shown in theatres is a little looser, within the two-hour

obligation. People all over the world make plans based on the assumption that the movie they plan to see will run about two hours. They will see the movie at four at the local multiplex. It will let out at about six, just in time for dinner. Occasionally they will agree to see a two-and-a-half-hour film, and will groan or feel delight, depending on their feelings for the director or stars.

The near-standard two-hour running time also allows for exhibitors to maximize money. If they showed nothing but three-hour films, they would have to schedule fewer screenings than if the film ran two hours. Fewer screenings, fewer tickets sold. Hollywood (and other filmmaking entities across the globe) know that audiences have been more-or-less conditioned to expect a movie to run two hours. The entire industry rests on this expectation.

Andy Warhol made a six-hour film of nothing more than a man sleeping. He did not toss and turn much. Warhol also made an eight-hour film of the Empire State Building. The structure did not move, act, speak, or emote. It just stood there, immobile. I watched an hour of *Empire* at a Warhol show in San Francisco, and could take no more. I left, feeling a little guilty. Why would Warhol make such a long film about such an unpromising subject? Was it a waste of film? If you look around for Warhol quotes, you will discover things like “I am a deeply superficial person” and “I like boring things” attributed to him. Call him the anti-artist who made a unique kind of art. It’s safe to say that Warhol’s longer films never played at the multiplex in Tulsa, though various museums have gathered up many of the hundreds of films he or his associates made (of varying length). They are shown occasionally at film festivals and art film venues.

I mentioned Jonas Mekas’s five-hour home movie in [Chapter 12](#). Its title is so lovely I have to repeat it here: *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*. (“Moving ahead” refers to life; “beauty” refers to everyday spirituality.) Mekas’s motivation for making long films differed from Warhol’s, who just wanted to explore the effect of the technique of sheer length on viewers. Mekas more likely was simply in love with the home movie, with the life it documented, and could not bear to cut it short, any more than he could cut any life short.

The most commercially successful long film I know of is Sergei Bondarchuk’s eight-hour *War and Peace* (1967), a Soviet production made for \$700 million dollars that grossed twice that amount in the Soviet Union. (I don’t know how it did in the rest of the world.) *Shoah* (1985) is a nine-hour, Steven-Spielberg-produced documentary about the Holocaust, directed by Claude Lanzmann.

Probably it has been more successful reaching people on DVD than in theatres.

But people who pay money to see movies by and large are addicted to the two-hour format. It requires an awfully good movie to hold an audience longer than that—*Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Schindler's List* (1993), *The White Ribbon* (2009).

Never do commercial theatres show films that run only ten or fifteen minutes. They used to. They would show cartoons from studios and newsreels, all short. Now it's only features, trailers, and Coke commercials. This is the main reason for the dearth of experience with and knowledge about the art of the short film among the film-going public. Minute for minute, the short film is often ten times more experimental and innovative than even the boldest feature. Some festivals and art film theatres show short films, and you can always rent Academy-Award-nominated animated and live-action shorts after Oscar time. Beyond this, you have to go online and Google “short films” or “art films” to actually bring up and see short films. Thank God we have that.

I went to YouTube and found this remarkable short film:

We Have Decided Not to Die

www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIg8bHnW9vk

Too bad you can't see films like this at your multiplex.

THE THREE-ACT SCREENPLAY

We are also accustomed to seeing movies in “three acts,” as the industry likes to call it. Almost no viewer knows this term nor can follow the beginning and ending of these acts. Instead they *sense* them and would probably feel let down if the film was fuzzy in its acts—either let down, or they would have to do some serious thinking. Many books have been written to aid budding screenwriters who are hungry to master three-act structure. Among the best known is Syd Field's *The Screenwriter's Workbook*, which breaks down the standard screenplay into the three parts of Setup, Confrontation, and Resolution. For a two-hour movie, the first act runs about thirty minutes (the first quarter), the second act is approximately one hour (the next two quarters), and the third act is the final thirty-minute quarter of the film. You can do a Google search for Syd Field and the “three-act film” for more information.

Pigeon-holing art like this is not unusual, nor is it debasing. Shakespeare wrote all of his plays in five acts, as did all Elizabethan dramatists—or so contemporary commentators tell us. Beethoven wrote all of his symphonies in

four movements: a spirited opening sonata or allegro, followed by a slow movement such as an adagio, then a minuet with trio or a four-movement solo sonata, and finally a scherzo ending in an allegro, rondo, or sonata. Usually, a main musical theme is alternated with other themes throughout the piece. This information is taken from the Wikipedia page “Symphony.”

Patrons often walk out on movies, plays, or musical works that are based on an alternate structure or have no structure. However, if *all* Elizabethan plays were structured this way and if all neoclassical or romantic symphonies followed this pattern, there is no invitation to contemplate meaning. But when Beethoven inserted a choir into the fourth movement of his Ninth Symphony, he was nearly lynched in Vienna. Musical connoisseurs, however, were moved to ask, *How dare you deviate?*

American experimental composer John Cage “wrote” a piano “piece” called 4’ 33” which instructed a pianist to stride onto stage, sit down at a piano, open the keyboard, and do nothing—play not a single note—for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Then he closed the keyboard, bowed to the largely baffled audience, and walked off the stage. Cage’s point: tune into restlessness among the audience. Hear *that* sound, which to Cage was just as important as anything that might emanate from the piano.

John Sayles’s *Limbo* (1999) does not offer a proper Act Three. Roger Ebert may have sensed why:

Juneau is the only state capital with roads that lead nowhere. Every highway out of town ends in the wilderness. That serves as a metaphor for the characters in John Sayles’s *Limbo*, a movie about people whose lives are neither here nor there, but stuck in-between. It also helps explain the movie’s surprising story structure, which doesn’t obediently follow our expectations, but reflects the way a wilderness like Alaska can impose its own abrupt reality.

Beethoven’s Ninth—ah, universally regarded as a masterpiece. But *Limbo* cost eight million to make and grossed less than two million. You alter structure, you take risks.

STRANDS

These occur in movies that tell disparate (not necessarily desperate) stories, alternating snippets until all come together and resolve in similar ways in the end. One of the first well-known movies to do this was *Amores Perros* (2000) by the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Here is a plot summary by an anonymous contributor to the Internet Movie Database:

“Three interconnected stories about the different strata of life in Mexico City

all resolve with a fatal car accident. Octavio is trying to raise enough money to run away with his sister-in-law, and decides to enter his dog Cofi into the world of dog fighting. After a dogfight goes bad, Octavio flees in his car, running a red light and causing the accident. Daniel and Valeria's new-found bliss is prematurely ended when she loses her leg in the accident. El Chivo is a homeless man who cares for stray dogs and is there to witness the collision."

You have to get used to this kind of story because it isn't easy to follow. Actually I should have said "stories" . . . "they" because for a time you are lost. Iñárritu intends this. He wants to show not only the randomness of life but the connectedness of it as well. Octavio is poor, Daniel and Valeria are normally well off. She is—*was*: she lost a leg in the accident—a beautiful and successful fashion model. El Chivo is an assassin. So there you are.

In 2007 Iñárritu made another stranded story, *Babel*. Now there are four stories to be braided, all based on a certain rifle. The setting widens from Mexico City to the entire world. As film critic Sam Rutledge suggests, communication—or the lack of—knits the four stories. An impoverished Moroccan goat herder takes a careless pot shot at a passing bus with a rifle and seriously wounds a tourist. The husband of the wounded tourist can't seem to contact medical people to come to his wife's aid. Another story flies off to Japan to follow the story of a despondent Japanese teenager who is both deaf and grieving the suicide of her mother. It is her father who finally comes into possession of the rifle.

Iñárritu made a third stranded story, *21 Grams* (2003), which also tells three stories in one and, like *Amores Perros*, is held together by a tragic traffic accident. This guy likes to work on a broad canvas. One story does not satisfy him. However, in 2010, Iñárritu made a mono-narrative, straight-ahead film called *Biutiful*, about a small-time crook whose cancer changes his outlook on life. Javier Bardem stars.

Two more stranded stories both better integrated—if integration is a virtue; I'm not sure it always is—are *Crash* (2008) by Paul Haggis and *Hereafter* (2010) by Clint Eastwood. The Haggis story is more narrowly concerned with law enforcement, cops, car thieves, and drug addicts. The Eastwood story is the most focused of these stranded tales. It's about people who have had brief after-life experiences and their need to make contact with each other.

You decide which type of narrative is more satisfying or meaningful—the random approach of Iñárritu or the less centrifugal approaches of Haggis and Eastwood. To me each has a place.

I am not sure my term *strand* is a valid one; I just seem to run across it when film critics discuss this kind of film. This type of film is relatively new. Film writers are still reaching for words to describe it.

SLICE AND DICE

Filmmakers are currently enamored with a style of editing that takes viewers forward and backwards in time several times during the running time of the film. The result often is confusing; however, matters usually sort themselves out in time. Sometimes cause-and-effect relationships can be established by jumping around in time, or significant contrast. This may have been the motivation of Derek Cianfrance when he made the past-present *Blue Valentine* in 2010.

SILENCE

. . . is often a powerful structural tool in film as well. A scene that should play to sound—say an explosion—instead plays to silence, not even music or other sound effects. Alfred Hitchcock not only used music in his *Birds*, he ran some of the most dramatic and scary scenes in the film to silence. *No Country for Old Men* (2007) by Joel and Ethan Cohen has a minimal soundtrack. Long important sequences are played to no sound at all. Dennis Lim of the *New York Times* wrote the following about aural technique:

“Suspense thrillers in Hollywood are traditionally done almost entirely with music,” sound editor Skip Lievsay said. “The idea here was to remove the safety net that lets the audience feel like they know what’s going to happen. I think it makes the movie much more suspenseful. You’re not guided by the score and so you lose that comfort zone.”

TRY THIS:

Consider structure and meaning in the films you see. Are some films too short and thus lacking in essential information or development? Are some too long and drag-ass? If you have a chance, see a longish film again and determine how it might be tightened. How do you feel about stranded films? What is gained, what lost by making films this way? Just for fun, try to detect acts in conventional films—Act I, II, and III. Also listen to a symphony by Beethoven or Mozart and pay attention to the different feels of the movements. Consider silence. What is the meaning of scenes in films that play without sound? What is gained?

Good screenwriters invite you to think about what their characters *mean*, and the directors they work for find myriad ways of amplifying significance in costuming, facial expression, body language, words, language, and action.

Two chapters ago I suggested you be sensitive to three kinds of meaning: *epic*, *mythic*, and *thematic*. Epic meaning has to do with the broad sweep of a nation's remembered history, its values, outlooks, and practices. Mythic meaning extends back to the very roots of culture and is often unspoken and unacknowledged. Thematic meaning may be the most useful and honest of the three. We might question the epic significance of the so-called Old South; we might dismiss the myth of the tortoise and the hare as wishful thinking. But when a character stands for some obviously true condition of society or human nature (i.e., a theme), we ought to pay attention.

Here are thumbnail analyses of several films whose main characters embody these three types of meaning.

LIKABLE CHARACTERS WITH HISTORICAL OR SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Screenwriters generally prefer to present us with likable, winning characters. There's frankly more money in it.

Atticus Finch (attorney in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962). As played by the always low-keyed Gregory Peck, Atticus defends a black man against the false charge of raping a white woman in Alabama in the 1930s. As the trial progresses,

Atticus finds many opportunities to explain to his two children how unjust the ways of the racial code in the Deep South are. As a compelling character, Atticus is a product of his times. Had he lived fifty years later he would not have seemed so courageous, though still a good man. This epic film was based on a novel by Harper Lee. The screenplay was by Horton Foote, and Robert Mulligan directed.

Kathy Selden (singer and actress in *Singin' in the Rain*, 1952). This film takes place during the movie industry's disruptive transition to synchronized sound—"talkies." Debbie Reynolds's character Kathy Selden dubs the songs of established silent-era star actress Lina Lamont, whose voice is so silly she threatens to make a movie in production a joke. Selden is forbearing and modest, never craving attention or stardom. But star Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly), in love with Kathy, raises the curtain on her backstage so that she finally gets the recognition she deserves.

Kathy Selden is likable (at least to most viewers in the 1950s) because she is so demure. Women were expected to be like this in the 1950s. Selden wins us over by "being nice." This mythology pervaded the 1950s and is still with us today: we believe nice pays off, people—male and female.

Princess Ann (Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday*, 1953) didn't get her man. Being nice was only part of the issue. She decided to return to her super-boring job of being a princess and emissary for her country because it was her duty to do so. In those years, duty ruled. Reporter Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck again), though in love with Ann, would not for a moment consider hitting on her. Just wasn't done by respectable males in 1953—or at least Hollywood would have us believe as much.

Howard Beale (news anchor Peter Finch in *Network*, 1976). This film is about corporate irresponsibility. A TV network with sagging ratings is tempted to turn news into entertainment (a new idea perhaps in 1976, but commonplace today). Beale is fed up with corporate "bullshit" and threatens to shoot himself on his last telecast. He angrily demands that his viewers go to their windows, fling them open, and shout, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Unexpectedly, Beale's ratings soar. A shrewd programmer plugs in more condescending "counterculture" shows.

Howard Beale came to life as a result of 1970s activism. It was a time of homegrown protest and questioning, terrorism and all manner of ways of challenging the system. Also, corporations were just starting to come under public scrutiny for their cynical and crooked ways, and *Network* plays on this. The film is based on a counter myth which challenges the long-held myth that

“what’s good for GM is good for the country.” *Network* was written by Paddy Chayefsky and directed by Sidney Lumet.

Network www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQUBbpvXk2A

Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*, 1994) is probably the least affected character in all “moviedom.” His brain bypasses current notions of practicality and what is possible and sets aside conventional wisdom. Not that he thinks about it much—he simply acts. He rescues doomed fellow soldiers in Vietnam, starts the craze for table tennis, sets up a shrimp boat fleet, invents bumper-sticker messages (“Shit happens”), runs like the wind, and by his example starts jogging mania—all while seemingly mentally challenged.

Forrest Gump is a creation of 1990s interest in *idiot savants* (also called savantism) characterized by developmentally disadvantaged people who possess at least one remarkable attribute, often in music or mathematics, at the level of genius. The film wisely omits all references to savantism. A few years before *Forrest Gump* was released, Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman did *Rain Man*, in which Hoffman plays an “autistic savant” who is a whiz at numbers. On a thematic level, Forrest invites us to consider the untapped potential of “disadvantaged” people and, at the very least, take them seriously.

Winston Groom wrote the novel while Eric Roth fashioned the screenplay. The director was Robert Zemeckis.

Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman in *Invictus*, 2009). Mandela, who was released from prison and in time became the President of South Africa, noticed that white South Africans cheered for all-black rugby teams. He exploits the occasion of the 1995 Rugby World Cup, held in South Africa, to bring about a degree of racial harmony. Mandela too was a product of his times, propitious for advancing race relations in South Africa a few notches. The film plays on hope (myth?) that the races can live in harmony.

John Carlin wrote the book, Anthony Peckham the screenplay. Clint Eastwood directed.

Meaning is embedded in practically all major characters in film. Minor characters too may take on mythic, epic, or thematic significance from time to time. When you follow who a character *is*, you uncover much of what the screenwriter and filmmaker *mean*.

CHARACTERS WE COME TO DISLIKE

I don’t mean all-out villains such as the demonic Howard Payne (Dennis Hopper) who wires a bus to explode in *Speed* (1994). I mean characters that have

some subtlety about them and bear on meaning.

Ethan Edwards (as a Civil War vet and now a “Westerner” in *The Searchers*, 1956). John Wayne did not play wimpy roles. Here he is typical Wayne—in control, resourceful, and charismatic. The film is based on a search of several years as Ethan goes up and down the land trying to find Debbie (Natalie Wood), kidnapped by Indians. When he does he at first wants to kill her—because she has been violated by creatures regarded as subhuman and doesn’t deserve to live.

The Searchers www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSM8vH04Vcs

Director John Ford’s portrayal of Ethan as an Indian hater is somewhat justified by our knowledge of the atrocities committed by Debbie’s abductor, Scar, who had slain Debbie’s family. Still, to reasonable viewers of any decade, that doesn’t give Edwards permission to do away with Debbie. The plot is based on epic notions that women who cheat on their men or become lesbians or prostitutes—or even are raped—do so voluntarily and ought to be forever damned; in some societies they are stoned to death. The same plot drives Martin Scorsese’s *Who’s That Knocking at My Door?*—not the stoning part, but rejection.

Historically, *The Searchers* stands at the threshold of a nation at last willing to reconsider its racism and embark on a long-needed reassessment of Native Americans in the life of the nation. I don’t know when exactly we stopped blaming women for what happened to them or condemning their lifestyles and their misfortunes. Maybe we still haven’t. Alan Le May wrote the novel while Frank S. Nugent penned the screenplay. John Ford directed.

Popeye Doyle (a cop in *The French Connection*, 1971), played by Gene Hackman. This film is about NYC police intercepting a big shipment of heroin from France. Outwardly, Popeye is a good cop—observant, persevering, fearless—but he drinks too much, has a terrible temper, and is bigoted. He ends up shooting someone innocent because of his impulsiveness.

Here’s an analysis of both the film and Doyle by NY Times film critic A. O. Scott: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dzYV_hXdU4

Popeye’s ruthlessness arrived on the movie scene just as Americans were discovering something called “police brutality.” The solid-gold good-guy cop of *Dragnet* fame, or like Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) in *No Country for Old Men* (2007), was then giving way to a paranoid, brutal brand of cop, too wound up for his own, or anyone’s, good. Epic? Mythic? Counter-mythic?

Kit and Holly (a garbage man and drifter, and his fifteen-year-old girlfriend in *Badlands*, 1972). Kit, played by Martin Sheen, is likable throughout the movie,

despite bad doings. He is resourceful—he builds a tree house, and he respects Holly, played by Sissy Spacek. Then he kills Holly’s father and burns down Holly’s house. The two hit the road; Kit continues to kill.

Badlands is based on actual events. Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate killed and ran, ran and killed, across the Midwest in the 1950s. Traditional psychology or stereotypes about rotten youth don’t seem to apply, so senseless were their crimes. Also, director Terrence Malick presents the duo’s crime spree without melodrama or an exaggerated sense of anyone being victimized. Malick tweaks the story here and there to nudge you to liking Kit and Holly. He adds classical “found” music that bends your sympathy. Along with Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), you are presented with criminals who invite you to like them. Terrence Malick wrote the screenplay. Trailer: *Badlands* www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcFx06cBmbk

Jack LaMotta (a prizefighter in *Raging Bull*, 1980), played by Robert De Niro. Jake is ferocious, nearly unstoppable in the ring. But he’s deeply suspicious of his wife and best friend to the point of violence. In time everyone, even viewers, agree that he’s nuts. Jake LaMotta was clearly mentally out of kilter. As a character in the mind of screenwriter Paul Schrader, LaMotta may have sprung from a new interest in psychology. By 1980 screenwriters did not shy away from characters with mental problems.

William Munny (a farmer and gunman in *Unforgiven*, 1992), played by Clint Eastwood. Munny can be good—forbearing and loyal, but he harbors an old predilection for killing. When his friend Ned is cruelly killed he has his excuse. He straps on his pistols, bent on revenge. *Unforgiven* was written by David Webb Peoples and directed by Clint Eastwood, who also plays Munny.

See [Chapter 6](#) for two trailers.

Unforgiven bears comparing to *The Searchers*. Both films stand at the cusp of new concepts about old glory. *Unforgiven* is the anti-Western, daring to show the pathological roots of violence.

CHARACTERS WHO CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

Billie Dawn (a ditzzy showgirl in *Born Yesterday*, 1950), played by Judy Holliday. Billie is dominated by a man who keeps her in the dark about papers he had her sign. But Billie is suspicious; with the help of a journalist (William Holden) she finally educates herself enough about the ways of power to realize the guy she’s living with—Broderick Crawford—is using her and ripping off the government. She goes through a total change-out from innocence to rough-hewn

sophistication. The story is an updating of the ugly duckling or Pygmalion myth —only in the hands of writer Garson Kanin and director George Cukor it seems fresh even today. I could not find a suitable clip or trailer for this film.



Born Yesterday **Terry Malloy** (Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*, 1952). Even though dockworkers hate their union, they are obliged to hold their tongues about corruption owing to a decades-long code of D and D—“deaf and dumb.” Terry, fed up with kowtowing, breaks the code by testifying against the union to a Congressional committee. For a time he is shunned, but workers finally come to see he has acted courageously in everyone’s best interests. They finally act collectively to throw the union out.

This film explores the theme of being alone and acting alone for the good of all. As Bill Shore, founder of Share Our Strength, puts it, “Acts of conscience often originate with a single person, but their power is in motivating larger numbers of individuals to act. Efforts to change the world are often hindered by constraints of time, talent, resources, even imagination. Acts of conscience can overcome them all.”

Bud Shulberg wrote the screenplay, and Elia Kazan directed.

Oskar Schindler (industrialist in *Schindler’s List*, played by Liam Neeson, 1993). Schindler prospers from his enamelware factory run by Jewish slave labor in Nazi Germany during WWII. But halfway through the movie he comes to realize how immoral his actions have been. He finally works behind the scenes and with great shrewdness to rescue thousands of Jews from the gas chambers. One key word dominates the theme: redemption. Book by Steven Zaillian, screenplay by Thomas Keneally, directed by Steven Spielberg.

Schindler’s List www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwffl1WMhgc

Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton as a Nazi skinhead in *American History X*, 1998). Derek had been a bigot who followed Nazi views of race and domination

until he befriends a black man in prison. Upon his release, he vows to turn his younger brother against Nazi ideology. Another film about redemption. Screenwriter: David McKenna. Director: Tony Kaye. A life turnaround.

Trailer:

American History X

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXaZENPQrsw

Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey as an advertising executive in *American Beauty*, 1999). Though outwardly Lester leads an ideal life—great job, lovely wife, comfortable home—inside he is nearly dead. He wants more from life. He quits his job, takes up new pursuits (weight lifting, connecting with early rock 'n' roll), and finally becomes serene in ways few suburbanites can imagine.

These last two films have “American” in their titles. We can't help but wonder what “American” has to do with their meanings. Lester fantasized about having sex with a beauty of a cheerleader, who at first comes on as worldly. But when it's time to take her to the bedroom, she admits to being a virgin and is frightened. Lester backs off and instead fixes dinner for the two of them. Is she the “beauty?” What is “American” about her—or Lester?

We might speculate: Lester is the beneficiary of Americans who, midlife, reevaluate and start over. In the early years of my decades-long teaching career at an open-door community college, I seldom had an older student who wished to start a new life. Nearly all my charges were 18, 19, 20, and had not been bitten by life. They had not thought much about rebooting their lives. Older “nontraditional students”—as the college called them—did not start arriving at my college in any numbers until the 1980s. Many were scorned as abandoning their families and steady jobs for flighty reasons. True, a few wanted to be poets and, I guess, were less than practical. But to them, writing poetry was more soul-nourishing than working at Handi-Lube.

Who was I or anyone to question their motives? Now it's common to have students in college classrooms in their thirties, forties, and fifties, and they are generally admired as lifelong learners and risk takers. Some want to be poets, though most are after something “practical,” like inhalation therapy. This is not thematic. It's epical. It's widespread change in American society, and the recession that afflicts Americans as I write this has hastened the trend as people scramble to retool their working lives. Lester was not concerned with occupational retooling; his was spiritual. Screenwriter: Alan Ball; director: Sam Mendes. Dreamish clip from *American Beauty*: *American Beauty* www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPJE21U518M

As for *American History X*, the title comes from a high school teacher who wants to teach something about the history of racism in American society. Epical—or maybe counter-epical is a better term.

A few of these characters too spring from epic trends in American life. Derek is another manifestation of Americans coming to terms with their racism. Lester is the beneficiary of Americans who, midlife, reevaluate and start over. A few decades before these films were set, much of the Western world—not just Nazi Germany—thought nothing of routinely discriminating against Jews and blacks, who were considered inferior, less than human.

CHARACTERS WHO CHANGE FOR THE WORSE

Savvy screenwriters know they can hang an involving story on characters who become selfish, immoral, and destructive over time.

Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, 1941). This film is about power and lost innocence. Kane turns a second-rate NYC newspaper into a great success. Early on he supports struggling people, but always paternalistically. He uses his great wealth to buy European art he really has no feeling for. He forces his wife into an opera career she doesn't want. He ends up a bitter and lonely man.

Citizen Kane is based on a myth and a theme. The myth is that money can't buy happiness. The theme has to do with who Kane is. As I suggested in [Chapter 11](#), a reporter is assigned the task of figuring out what the great man's last word, "rosebud," means. The reporter interviews several people close to Kane—his business partner, his estranged second wife, his financial advisor, and his best friend. Each person sees Kane differently. The reporter never learns what "rosebud" means—though in one of the film's final shots, we learn that it was the name of a sled Kane played with as a boy. It goes up in smoke along with a bunch of other seemingly useless effects from the past. "Reality" then is not only multifaceted; it is unknowable. Herman J. Mankiewicz was the main writer. Orson Welles directed. See trailer in [Chapter 11](#).

Michael Corleone (Al Pacino in *The Godfather*, 1972). This film too is about power and the eventual loss of innocence. As a young man, Michael disclaims any affiliation with the violence of his father. He tells his girlfriend Kay, "That's my family. It's not me." Yet once attaining the title of Godfather, Michael orders the murders of people he was close to.

There is something pathological about the careers of both Charles Foster Kane and Michael Corleone. Power to them is a narcotic. As young men, both swear they want nothing to do with the kind of men they finally become. Both have the means to break away, Kane with enough money to start a responsible newspaper aimed at a working class readership, Michael who simply wants to

attend college and leave the family's shady dealings behind. But in time their power corrupts them. Is this theme? Or merely workings-out of well-known epical truths in the capitalist era—namely that power corrupts? Mario Puzo wrote the novel and screenplay; Francis Ford Coppola directed.

When you watch these two films you can't help but feel that they have much to do with corporate culture, including the mafia. Big corporations seldom engage in murder, but they certainly act immorally in jostling for the edge—hiring unscrupulous lobbyists, buying people, sabotaging competition.

Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn in *Requiem for a Dream*, 2000). As a contributor to IMDB writes, the plot is, “Drugs. They consume mind, body and soul. . . . Four lives [including Sara's]. Four addicts. Four failures. . . . Watching the addicts spiral out of control, we bear witness to the dirtiest, ugliest portions of the underworld addicts reside in.”

Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis as an oilman in *There Will be Blood*, 2007). Set in California in the early decades of the twentieth century, this film depicts lying, cheating, and even murdering to acquire oil-rich land. In the end Daniel is friendless and wifeless. It is another indictment of stop-at-nothing capitalism. Novel by Upton Sinclair; screenplay and direction by Paul Thomas Anderson.

Ambiguous trailer for *There Will be Blood*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3THVbr4hIY

OTHER CHARACTERS—EPIC, MYTH, THEME

Dan Evans represents a type of character in movies who never changes. Some kinds of movie characters never change. We don't want them to. In *3:10 to Yuma*, though released in 2007, draws on an adage as old as the hills of Western movies—a man's gotta do what he's gotta do. Evans (Christian Bale) plays the rancher who accepts the job of getting a big-time outlaw to the train station in time for the 3:10, though he has no experience dealing with desperate men and the outlaw's gang is set against him every step (or hoofbeat) of the way. Meaning? The adage is pure myth. A lot of contemporary Americans live by this man's-gotta-do code, whether they are aware of it or not.

Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes) in *The Constant Gardener* (2005) is a normally unassertive diplomat who investigates the murder of his activist wife in Africa. His inquiry leads him to some bad goings-on by amoral and lethal American Big Pharma dispensing untested drugs in Africa.

One theme, one epical consideration, or counter-epical myth: the theme has to do with taking action after years of wimpiness; the epic part myth, or counter-

myth, is again about bad, even lethal, corporate behavior. Although, as the case against corporations continues to grow, it takes on the quality of epic: soon nearly all American (and global) corporations will be suspect, mistrusted—as pervasive as “a man’s gotta do what he’s gotta do.” Directed by Fernando Meirelles.

Trailer for *The Constant Gardener*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4iTjavIkbk&feature=related

TRY THIS:

See some films mentioned in this chapter and play psychologist. What makes the characters tick? Jealousy? Greed? Insecurity? Guilt? Obsession? Love? Spirituality? How do characters change? For better or for worse? What makes them change? And of course, stay alert for characters with mythic, epic, or thematic significance. If mythic, what is the myth? If epic, how do they stand for national outlooks? If thematic, what truth do they represent? Always relate character to a film’s meaning.

CHAPTER 22

Relationships

Film critics and academics like to talk about individual characters in films, but overall they pay far less attention to character *relationships* in films. Too bad, because often the relationships turn out to be more important than individual characters. Often you can't begin to know these characters unless you know how they relate to each other and to other characters. We can see individual characters, observe facial features and note how they speak and act. But we can't see relationships. Relationships in fact are not tangible. They are incorporeal, inferred, sometimes even not entirely clear. Maybe this is why they have received less attention than they should have.

LITTLE IN COMMON

Here are two films with characters that superficially have little or nothing in common, and yet they are based on strong relationships—one positive, the other negative.

In *The Way, Way Back* (2013), shy, withdrawn, and probably depressed Duncan, only 14, is not enjoying himself at the beach house owned by his mother's boyfriend. He doesn't have much of a relationship with either and later discovers that the boyfriend, played by Steve Carell, is cheating on his mother. It's summer, and Duncan (Liam James) sulks around the beach community. Not even a pretty girl he meets can't snap him out of his funk. He ends up at Water Wizz, a small amusement park with a pool and water slides. There he meets Owen, played by Sam Rockwell. Owen runs Water Wizz. He's something of a nut with a sense of humor who early-on senses Duncan's isolation and gives him a small, jokey job. He hopes to help Duncan. Owen doesn't really play father to Duncan, but his instincts are good. He knows what Duncan needs—a little job to keep him busy and some people around him who are having fun. Gradually Duncan comes around. Trailer:

The Way, Way Back

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwNo1i3jkCo

My Fair Lady (1964) is the Broadway and movie adaptation of the George Bernard Shaw play *Pygmalion*, probably the playwright's most loved work. In it, a pretentious professor of linguistics brags that he can pluck a common Cockney girl off the street and train her to speak "proper" English. He thinks he can even

pass her off as royalty at a big social event. Eliza speaks what the Brits would call abominable English—as you must know, pronunciation is valued more than correct grammar among the British; we Americans probably care less about pronunciation than grammar. To make a long story short, Henry Higgins (played by Rex Harrison in both the play and the movie) transforms Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn). She not only learns impeccable pronunciation, but picks up all the niceties and mannerisms of high-born Brits. She also picks up a keen sense of morality. She comes to see Higgins as an uncaring prig and thereby has insights into the meaning of her own story, which has to do with the consequences of making someone into your own image of propriety, and the arrogance of the upper classes. Just who is Eliza now that Higgins has totally transformed her? What is her identity? She isn't sure.

In both films, the relationship *is* the story. Duncan comes to life for his relationship with Owen; Eliza is crushed by her relationship with Higgins.

OTHER DOMINEERING MEN

Few films depict the consequences of male dominance more than Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (2009), set in Germany a year before WWI. Three men dominate: a pastor, a physician, and a baron who rules over an estate reminiscent of a feudal society. The men believe they can shape the behavior of errant boys of the community by stern control and punishment. The discipline is heavy, verging on abuse. But strange anti-social, even perverse things keep happening in the community, in spite of punishments. A wire strung low at a gate trips a horse the doctor had been riding and severely injures him. A mentally challenged child is tortured. A barn burns down. The floor of a sawmill is weakened and a woman plunges through to her death. The men continue to punish, the boys continue to misbehave, though nothing is clear, nothing proved, no admissions tendered. It's hard to know which boy or boys did this or that. They deny. They never argue back, never dispute.

The film then is a puzzle. Why are the boys acting like this? Why isn't the discipline of the men working? Some critics of the film half-believe that *The White Ribbon* leads down, in time, to the obscenities of Nazism. Others feel this interpretation is too simplistic. Many viewers feel that the stern treatment men mete out to boys is a large part of the problem, but the exact nature of the problem is elusive.

Haneke altered the footage to produce harsh, dark, black and white footage.



The White Ribbon

Men dominate too in Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010), a slice of Ozark Mountain sexism which I have mentioned twice before. A teenage girl, Ree, has to find her father who skipped bail. If he doesn't show up in court, Ree, her mentally challenged mother, and her two younger brothers will lose their home. But the code of these hill people is to keep their mouths shut, and that applies doubly to women. Here is a bit of dialogue between Ree and her uncle, called Teardrop. You sense the sexism in how he talks to her.

TEARDROP: [Ree's father] Jessup never would smack you. I don't know why, why he never would, but I always have said someday somebody's goin' to pay a price for him not whomping' you good when you needed it.

REE: I wasn't trying to be a smart mouth, there. Teardrop. Uncle Teardrop.

TEARDROP: It don't seem like you've got to try none, girl, smarty-mouth shit just flies out of your yap anytime your yap falls open.

In *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) doesn't physically dominate neophyte FBI agent Clarice Starling (Jody Foster)—he's actually behind bars—but he is of such a pathological and intimidating turn of mind that he frightens Clarice. Lecter is a crazed killer who eats his victims. Before embarking on his perverse murder career, Lecter was a respected psychiatrist, and Clarice has some raw talent for getting people to reveal their deepest thoughts. So she has approached Lecter in prison to wrest clues from him about another nutcase murderer on the loose, a guy who strips away the skin from his victims. You may wonder why the FBI would send a beginner to undertake this gruesome task. Screenwriter Ted Tally never explicitly says why, but you can't help but sense cynical motives: the young, attractive Clarice is sexual bait who might succeed in pulling secrets from Lecter when experienced and better trained shrinks have failed.

There are themes and universals aplenty in this story. The whole narrative setup is sexist, of course. And ambition—the lengths Clarice, or any beginner, will go to get promoted. And bravery to prove one's self. And that peculiar aspect of human nature that draws us to perversity. Not even innocent-seeming young women are immune to it.

The Silence of the Lambs

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWCAf-xLV2k

DOMINATING AND PREVAILING FEMALES

These include the famous femme fatales of noir fame. I've already mentioned Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) in [Chapter 12](#) and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* (1944) in [Chapter 21](#). These women lead weak men to their doom. There would simply be no story worth watching without them.

In the psychological thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), Angela Lansbury plays a woman so obsessed with getting a certain senator elected President she is willing to use her brainwashed son as an assassin to take out the current President. John Frankenheimer directed. Here is a short video that lays out the entire plot and shows what a nutcase mom she is. The mute guy in the chair is the son, played by Lawrence Harvey.

The Manchurian Candidate

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RAUm6l_t6k

The French classic *Jules and Jim* (1962) is based on a love triangle among a Frenchman Jim (played by Henri Serre), a German Jules (Oskar Werner), and the exhilarating French woman Catherine (Jeanne Moreau). But it's not really a triangle in the traditional negative sense. They all love each other, truly. There is no question that Catherine works her magic on the men, and probably enjoys it, but the men go along, grateful to share. It's a rare three-way relationship that has no room for jealousy. Few films dare to develop such interrelationships. *Jules and Jim*, directed by New Wave director Francois Truffaut, has often been cited as one of the ten best films of all time.

Maude (Ruth Gordon), in *Harold and Maude* (1971), doesn't really seduce gloomy Harold (Bud Cort), but she gives him hope to forego suicide. No film posits a greater range of ages between lovers: Harold is a teenager, Maude 79.



Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman) in *The Last Picture Show* (1971) is the doormat for her boorish husband and an unfeeling, unknowing teen who stupidly has sex with her. Her life is a lie—until, out of the blue, she explodes, and throws a coffee pot across the kitchen. The kid, Sonny (Timothy Bottom), knows exactly what she is going through and sits mute and ashamed. Ruth finally calms down and comes on gentle to Sonny, not for sex but for positive restarting, maybe to teach him something. “Never you mind,” she tells him. “Never you mind.”

Here is a video of the “Never you mind” scene:

The Last Picture Show

www.youtube.com/watch?v=__T3WJVmBY8

WORTHY ADVERSARIES

Films about competitors are often based on crime, and more specifically cops and criminals. One of the most nuanced crime films is *Heat* (1995), directed by Michael Mann. It’s a cat-and-mouse story with cop Al Pacino pursuing bank robber Robert De Niro. Both are cagey, worthy adversaries. This is why we watch the film. Had either Pacino or De Niro been less, the film would deflate.

Edward Guthmann, film critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, goes deeper:

According to *Heat* . . . cops and crooks start from the same place, and satisfy identical impulses through separate, opposing means. Both are drawn to the “heat” of violent conflict, both enjoy making the other guy into a patsy, and both are failures at integrating relationships and family with their addiction to danger.

In *The French Connection*, which I discussed in the last chapter, Gene Hackman is the coarse, obsessed narco cop chasing down suave French drug seller Fernando Rey. This relationship makes a good part of the reason we watch the film. Because Hackman gets more screen time, we are doubly interested in Rey when he comes into the story. Here is a trailer that gives you a good idea of what Hackman is like in this film, as well as a taste of Rey.

DOOMED LOVERS

Ah, nothing rivets us more than a good love story, especially one that ends in tragedy. Screenwriters and directors have concocted so many worthy and doomed lovers, I could write a book about them.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (written about 1595) is the famous tragedy about two "star-crossed" lovers, meaning they had the bad luck of belonging to two warring families in contentious Verona. Stories based on tragic love affairs often—always—end poignantly. *Romeo and Juliet* has been recast into several plays, operas, and movies, for example, *West Side Story*, (1961) about at-odds street gangs, *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), a punkish production directed by the Australian Baz Luhrmann and set in a hip contemporary Verona complete with guns. Earlier (1968), the Italian Franco Zeffirelli made an especially vigorous version of the imperishable Shakespeare play.

Nearly as famous as *Romeo and Juliet* are *Kathy and Heathcliff* in William Wylers's *Wuthering Heights* (1939), based on the searing novel of the same title penned by Emily Bronte in 1847. Social class is the main wedge between the lovers. Also cooling ardor, as *Kathy* comes to love *Heathcliff* less and less.

The theme of these various failed romances is felt frequently today in real-world love affairs between people who come from different backgrounds—in fact, intolerant backgrounds: Christians and Jews, Sunnis and Shiites, Blacks and Whites, rich and poor, whether it's unfair or not. These mismatched romances are probably more numerous in contemporary times as the movements of people across the globe means mates whom parents disapprove of meet and imprudently fall in love. As a counterbalance, tolerance too is on the upswing.

CRIME-BASED LOVE AFFAIRS

Screenwriters are fond of basing love affairs on crime, including robbery and murder for which the couples have to go on the run. I've already mentioned the Arthur Penn version of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) in several previous chapters. And I've written about *Badlands* (1973) in which *Kit* and *Holly* seem so much in love they scarcely think about the morality of their crimes, nor do viewers. But the champion film about love on the run is probably *Natural-Born Killers*, made in 1996 by Oliver Stone. *Mickey* (Woody Harrelson) and *Mallory* (Juliette Lewis) don't just kill defensively; they take great pleasure in killing. They always leave

one victim alive so he can explain to the authorities what exactly happened.

The only thematic sense I can make of these crime-ridden relationships is that they are metaphors for the craziness of passion. Lovers do act stupid, take chances, break the rules. Screenwriters can't resist surrounding such tales of need with the most cinematic and compelling of plot devices, crime—the more grisly the better.

The original on-the-run love story is *Gun Crazy*, directed by Joseph H. Lewis in 1950. There is not much in the way of metaphor here. Bart and Annie simply relish shooting guns. So they start robbing banks. Soon though, Annie involves Bart in much worse crimes. She is two shades more pathological than he is. Here is a classic clip from the film:

Gun Crazy

www.metacafe.com/watch/4906616/gun_crazy_1950/

(The clip is famous for being a single, uncut long take. See [Chapter 3](#).) An entire bank robbery is shot from the back seat of a car. Bart does the dirty work but the film never cuts to him inside the bank, thus saving at least a day of shooting and lots of money. Instead, the film stays with Annie smooth-talking a cop on the sidewalk.

CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Now and then we get films based on relationships so close we have to wonder about our own relationships. Are we as close to our so-called loved ones and friends? One of the strangest and most moving relationships you will find in the movies is between Owen and Abby, played by Kodi Smit-McPhee and Chloë Moretz. The film is called *Let Me In* (2010), directed by Matt Reeves. The leads are only twelve years old. They live in a dreary high-rise apartment building and their “parents” are lower class. Yet they bond.

But—brace yourself—Abby is a vampire. She's not a mature vampire. She still needs an adult vampire to go out and get blood for her. She is also obviously depressed and lonely. You don't see these states of mind often in vampire films. You have to think about it: of course adolescent vampires would be depressed. Nor do you see films about trainee vampires. (This film is actually based on a Swedish film of 2008 called *Let the Right One In*.) In time Owen learns who Abby really is, but he doesn't let that stop him from wanting to be with her. Nor does Abby ever try to attack Owen. The film ends with the suggestion that Owen will watch over her during the day, when sunlight could burn her up.

If you see this film, note the setting, which is bleak and unfriendly. It evokes the current recession. It is not comforting, nor are the parents. So despite the problems Owen and Abby face, they take a strange kind of comfort in being together in the midst of darkness and doom, to ward off the darkness. Clip:

Let Me In

www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRQPP6Blxvc

I've already written about *My Own Private Idaho* (see [Chapter 11](#)). I explained how the two outsiders, Mike (River Phoenix) and Scott (Keanu Reeves), hustle sex and steal in Portland. As I said, Mike is gay and loves Scott, but Scott is straight. He does not reject Mike. This is a story in which friendship trumps sexual preference. The pair lives outside conventional morality. Why shouldn't Scott go along with Mike? He doesn't have to let it jeopardize their friendship.

So these two pairs of characters, Owen and Abby and Mike and Scott, are very brave indeed. They establish relationships that are alternatives to conventional living—we ought to run from vampires and, some think, gays.

A film with a doomed and poignant feel is *Never Let Me Go* (2010), about a misguided futuristic society that clones human beings for later organ harvesting. This film, directed by the American Mark Romanek and set in Great Britain, centers on three adolescents, two girls and a boy, who attend a special school for clones, a kind of upper-crust institution. These children don't really understand what their lives are about or who they are until halfway through the story. When finally they learn they are expendable—expected and required to provide three vital organs to real people. They understandably become melancholy and establish strong bonds with each other. The film is an account of their sad bonding. One by one they are wheeled into the operating room to give up a liver, a lung, a heart, en route to death.

You can imagine the kind of relationships these children form upon learning of their fates. Two fall in love, a love of desperation, driven partly by the false rumor that young lovers will be allowed to “defer” their ultimate fate. Few moments in film are as wrenching as when the three learn the rumor is untrue. Truths pour from the film. Similar bonding must take place among children living in hospital wards for terminal illnesses, or wartime, or extreme societal changes that bring about dislocation and poverty. The strength of the film rests on the unfairness of it all, which viewers can't quite shake off. That and the contemplation of what it means, and what it takes, to be human—and be accorded the rights of humans. A similar theme pervades Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) in which Harrison Ford falls in love with a “replicant”—a manufactured woman—with a limited life span. Official trailer for

Never Let Me Go

www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXiRZhDEo8A

The King's Speech (2010) is the more or less true story of English King George VI, who suffered from a stammer, and his therapist, Lionel Logue, who over time was a great help. The King is played by Colin Firth, the therapist by Geoffrey Rush, an Australian, in the film and by birth. Though Lionel had no actual training or professional degrees in speech therapy, he brought George along through relaxation and breathing exercises until George could make long speeches to the nation and scarcely stammer at all.

The heart of the story though is not speech correction but social-class distance. At first George would not let his guard down with his therapist because Lionel was, after all, a mere servant and a commoner—and a colonial to boot. Lionel's method depended on trust and friendship. George finally understood this and accepted Lionel as an equal—no, as a superior, someone he could depend on and admire. The two developed a lifelong friendship. Trailer:

The King's Speech

www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzI4D6dyp_o

TRANSFORMATIONS

This is about two versions of the same person. Their transformations usually come from the realms of fantasy or science fiction. In *The Mask* (1994), held-in bank clerk Jim Carrey finds an ancient Nordic mask that, when he pulls it on, releases the inner man he wants to be: incredibly suave and cartoonishly facile. In *The Nutty Professor* (1996), filmdom's most nerdy character drinks a magic potion and turns into suave Buddy Love whom beautiful Stella Stevens falls for. And you know the Superman myth: newspaper reporter Clark Kent, who keeps pushing his glasses up on his nose, turns into—you know who. Margot Kidder falls for him in a big way. Superman takes her on a nighttime flight around Metropolis, a metaphor for sex. What turned her on was his x-ray vision. She finds out he can see through her underpants.

Need I say that all of these transformational films amount to a lot of entertaining wishful thinking, playing on men's fondest hopes for enormous changes in appearance and manner—while at the same time attracting women? It's a yearning as old as magic after-shave lotion. Women go through this too, in their own lipstick-y and hairdo-ish way—well, some women.

BUDDY FILMS

Finally, what is probably the best-known relationship movie—Robert Redford and Paul Newman turned it into a franchise with *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Sting* (1973). But it's not just a men's genre. The best-known female buddy film is *Thelma & Louise*. Others: *Beaches*, *Charlie's Angels*, *A League of Their Own*, *Ghost World*, *Waiting to Exhale* and dozens of others listed on Wikipedia:

Buddy films:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Female_buddy_films

TRY THIS:

Look deeply into the next film you see based on deep interpersonal relationships. On what basis does the couple bond?

Setting

No film is set arbitrarily. Starting with the screenwriter's intentions, settings are meant to shape lives, reflect on character, reveal values, stir strong feelings, drive story, and supply meaning.

My aim in this chapter is to present you with a miscellany of settings, and to comment on what each may say about the films arising from them. I want to make you setting-conscious.

Below are stills from two entirely different settings.

The rural setting linked below includes a gas station and a B grade motel in Texas, from the Oscar-winning film *Tender Mercies* (1983). Had the proprietor of the business, a widowed woman by the name of Rosa Lee (played by Tess Harper), not been stuck out in the middle of nowhere, it may not have occurred to her to get romantically involved with the alcoholic country-western singer Mac Sledge (Robert Duvall) who sobers up in one of her rooms. Mac is nearly reformed and his nice-guy-ness shines through; all the same, at first, he would not be considered a good risk. But Rosa Lee takes a chance on him, maybe in large part because she just doesn't have a lot of prospects. The film never says this. It's a level of meaning you have to *read into*, taking setting into account. It provides a dimension of desperation that would not have characterized the film had it been set in high-opportunity Dallas.

Tender Mercies

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tender_mercies_film_setting.jpg

The second setting I'd like you to consider here is from the post-WWII classic, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which also won a number of Oscars. The setting is a department store and is cultural rather than geographic. The clutter of advertisements hanging from the ceiling is meant to convey a feeling of good business. People had money to spend owing to the new prosperity following WWII. Crowds of people turn out to buy, buy, buy. The Depression is a distant memory.



The Best Years of Our Lives

The man in the foreground with his back to the camera is a discharged Army officer looking for work in an economy he doesn't understand. He is confused by all the hurly-burly. The new business practices will strike him as colder, crueller, more narrowly profit-driven than the gentler, kinder business ethic of America before the war. The shot is actually satiric: the clutter is overstated to make a comment about retail practices of the time. This shot is a good example of rendering an abstraction—here, good business—into something concrete.

SETTING AS JOURNEY

It matters where people are bound. The shot linked below is from the classic flick *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). The Joad family, dispossessed of home and farm, hopes to get back on its feet in California. But the quest is ironic. Instead of the land of milk and honey, California will turn out to be just as indifferent and cruel to desperate people as Oklahoma was before. It's a timeless tale of hopes raised and hopes dashed.



The Grapes of Wrath

Stand by Me (1986) is a story of four chums who learn that there is a boy's body out in the countryside next to a railroad track. Their discovery of the body changes all of them, and also changes their relationships to each other. It's a journey to maturity.

Trailer for *Stand by Me*:

www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi3398631705/

SETTINGS ON OTHER WORLDS

The main reason science fiction makes a good match with the motion picture medium is that movies can show us worlds we can't even imagine. Special effects and computer people want you to thrill to new biology and new astronomy. In the shot linked below from *Avatar* (2009), we are not only in awe of these other-worldly humanoids—one actually is human—but the setting, a moon of the planet Pandora, is utterly novel to us. A horizontal-growing tree branch you can walk on! Four waterfalls! And sky-scraping trees with limbs that look like giant helicopter landing pads! I hardly need to say that James Cameron cooked it all up.



Avatar

George Lucas was more conservative with his rendering of the arid planet of Tatooine in his first *Star Wars* (1977). He didn't have all the computer gizmos that Cameron had. He gave the scene an exotic look by somehow dropping in the double stars that Tatooine revolved around. Believe me, seeing those double stars was a totally novel experience for most of us in 1977. Sure, the setting was Earth-familiar—these scenes were actually shot in Tunisia—but placing two stars above the horizon was a terrific minimal touch.



Star Wars

SETTINGS OF POVERTY

Rain slows you down, makes you miserable. The poor are already slowed down enough. But when you have to find your stolen bicycle in the rain and have to drag your kid along, everything is worse. Why is the bicycle so important? If the man can't find it, he can't go to work. If he can't go to work, his family won't eat. The shot linked below is from *The Bicycle Thief*, the great Italian film of 1948.



The Bicycle Thief

Imagine living in stacked-up sewer pipes, which some poor people outside of Soweto in South Africa have to do. You can't even stand up. You can't plant your feet firmly on any kind of floor. Plus it rains! This shot is from a South African film called *Tsotsi* (2005), which means "thug" in Soweto slang. You survive by being a thug.



Tsotsi

Much of *Old Joy* (2006) is set in the Olympic Rain Forest of Washington state. It looks so tranquil, so comforting. But not all is well between the two men. The two used to be hippie types, carefree and unattached. But the second man has settled into a job and family. The men aren't really going to connect. Nature beckons to no avail. I am going to suggest that the past is on the right bank, the present and future on the left.



Old Joy

The five men in the shot below from *Deliverance* (1972) have workaday jobs and humdrum family lives. They've escaped to this canyon that is scheduled to be flooded by a new dam. But crazy mountain men pursue them. Only the man with the bow and arrow knows anything about survival. Note the dark patches, a sure sign that something about nature is sinister.



Deliverance

If you direct a film set in nature, you need to ask what kind of nature it is—kind, bracing, indifferent, threatening? Then you order your director of photography to compose and light scenes accordingly.

SETTINGS OF CRIME

Two kinds of crime settings: urban and rural.

The setting in the darkish shot below from the 1944 film *Double Indemnity* is a nice house in suburban Los Angeles. Leggy Barbara Stanwyck comes with the setting. She's out to ensnare insurance man Fred MacMurray in a murder scheme.



Double Indemnity

Remember this shot from the Coen brothers' film *Fargo* (1996)? It's set in the snow. Why would the Coens set this crime film—kidnapping, extortion, murder—in the snow? Marge, the woman in the picture (played by Frances McDormand), happens to be the chief of police of Brainerd, Minnesota. She is a kindly sort through much of the film. She doesn't seem like she could handle a couple of amoral toughs from Back East. The snow slows her down. It's cold.

You dress so warmly you look ridiculous, all puffed out. You can't even hang your arms at your sides. The snow is part of the system of obstacles that create drama.



Fargo

SETTINGS OF POLITICAL OPPRESSION

The shot linked below is taken from *The Lives of Others* (2006), a film about repression in East Germany before the fall of global communism. People were picked up for writing bad stuff about the government, interrogated, sent to prison.



The Lives of Others

Another shot from a film set in Communist times, called *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007). In Romania, it was against the law to get an abortion. If you got caught, you would go to prison and so would the doctor. The woman doesn't even know the doctor. He's just in it for the money. That's why she looks so scared.



4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days

SETTINGS IN WESTERN FILMS

The still below from *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957) was shot at a place called Agoura in Los Angeles County in California where many of Paramount's Westerns were set. It was convenient to shoot in and around the little community of Agoura because the place was close to Paramount's facilities. Transportation and logistics were simplified, expenses correspondingly reduced. We have come to expect Westerns with this kind of dry, empty look as default. Thousands of Westerns by many studios looked like this, most of t



hem telling long-established, time-honored stories of individualism, derring-do, and feats of courage—Western staples.



Gunfight at the O.K. Corral

However, now and then, a studio poured extra money into a Western and went off to different-seeming locations. The still below is from *Shane* (1953), shot in the Grand Tetons in Wyoming, or some scenes at least. Audiences thrilled to the sheer mountains, the greenery. These helped “sell” the movie—*Shane* was made for three million and grossed 20 million.



Shane

The next still is from an off-beat Western called *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), directed by Robert Altman in 1971. It too is set in mountains, signifying something different in Western narrative—namely, pure, two-fisted capitalism. The film stars Warren Beatty and Julie Christie.



McCabe & Mrs. Miller

But the setting which most film viewers are likely to associate with Western films is Monument Valley in Arizona, where John Ford and other directors set so many of their Westerns. Those grand, tabletop mesas—on some level they stood for a whole clutch of Western values: sturdiness, dependability, manliness. Just think John Wayne.



Stagecoach

SETTINGS IN ART FILMS

The trailer below is from *Being John Malkovich* (1999). The office people work in is only about 4½ feet high. Director Spike Jonze presents a lot of oddities like this in the movie, but he doesn't make a big deal of any of them. They just *are*. No critic I have read dares explain them, including the biggest: sliding into the actual brain of John Malkovich through a low door in the office and seeing through his eyes. The setting simply makes the film nutty without digital tricks, and most viewers, I think, accept it for what it is.

Being John Malkovich

www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7ahIGLNNwo

Jem Cohen's eight-minute art film *Blessed are the Dreams of Men* is set on a commuter train in winter ridden mainly by sleeping day laborers who steam up the windows as they exhale. Barely glimpsed beyond the condensation on the windows is a wooded area slipping by dreamlike. Read into the setting, inner and outer, what you will. Here is the entire film: *Blessed are the Dreams of Men*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4HgEDy7CM0

WARTIME SETTINGS

War is crazy, abnormal. It brings out the best and worst of combatants. Here is a clip from *Casualties of War* (1989) about a company of men in Vietnam cut off from the main US Army. They kidnap a Vietnamese woman and repeatedly rape her. Except one man, Ericson, played by Michael J. Fox, refuses to go along. He wants to help the battered and hysterical woman. Brian De Palma directed.

Casualties of War

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLZwQNPMmIk

If these men had run across the woman with a flat tire in a civilian setting, they doubtless would have helped her with no intention of raping her.

Wars not only destroy men's sense of right and wrong; they destroy cities—homes, stores, bridges, roads. They reduce infrastructure to rubble.



Another war scene, from Saving Private Ryan.

FILM LOCATION SCOUTS AND MANAGERS

Big films with lots of locations have teams of people to secure various settings. They find their locations prior to shooting, negotiate with property owners and unions, make sure the locations will accommodate major props, trucks, and so forth, and note in which direction the sun shines. Here is an article about location managers from Wikipedia: Location managers:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Location_manager

TRY THIS:

With every film you see, figure out the contribution of the setting to the overall meaning of the film. What kind of setting is it—kind, hostile, neutral, on the side of characters, set against them?

Symbols, Metaphors, Allegories, and Meaningful Details

Screenwriters, directors, and cinematographers seldom put anything you can see or hear into a movie that means nothing or is arbitrary. Everything you see that strikes your senses in a movie—even color, texture, and pattern—is intended to reveal character, crank up conflict, advance the theme, or otherwise get you to think. *Everything*. Other production personnel contribute. Costume designers have ideas about what characters should wear; set dressers know how to reflect outlook or lifestyle in furniture and décor; even editors know that how a scene is cut imparts meaning. And of course whatever music flows from movies is intended to set moods.

Seldom do movie people utter the word *symbol*, even less *metaphor* or *allegory*. They are too practical for language like that. But *meaningful detail*—maybe. More likely, when shown a range of props, costumes, or when visiting possible filming locations, they will say *Okay, that's fine* or *Show me more*.

All artists—poets, novelists, painters, even music composers—deal with symbols and their near relatives. But beware: as a viewer, you can get symbol-obsessed, and look for them where they aren't meant to carry much weight and miss other things about a movie. At the same time, noticing important details can certainly enhance understanding.

Let's first look at two kinds of symbols.

NATURAL SYMBOLS

. . . occur in the course of telling more or less realistic film stories. They do not especially call attention to themselves. If you do not ponder them, you would not be severely handicapped understanding the film. On the other hand, if you do, you might understand deeper implications and enhance your viewing.

Here are some naturally occurring symbols in well-known films, some of which I have discussed before.

Will Smith's constant running in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006)

Will runs all the time in this film. He has to run to get to a doctor's office at a certain time. He runs to pick up his son at the daycare center. He runs to get to the homeless shelter before the line grows too long. Often he runs with the heavy bone density scanner he is trying to sell to physicians to stay afloat. Viewers variously laugh or feel sorry for him. Will runs so much that you have to ask what screenwriter Steve Conrad had in mind. Most likely the running is just a quick, unpretentious way of saying life is hard for Will. The heavy scanner is a drudge. All this is natural, unforced.

Light and dark in *All the President's Men* (1976)

I've said this before but I'm going to repeat myself here. When scenes are shot with a lot of light they imply clarity, disclosure, good fortune. But when they are shot mostly in the dark, they mean just the opposite: something sinister or foreboding is about to happen. Gordon Willis shot *All the President's Men* this way. The scenes of Woodward and Bernstein in the *Washington Post* newsroom are brightly lit as the pair is gathering evidence concerning Watergate. But when Woodward meets "Deep Throat" in the parking structure, Willis keeps light levels very low. Deep Throat is not very cooperative, and the investigation is stymied.

Highway 66 in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)

There is a concept known to historians and poets called the irony of the quest. You hit the road for something, a new life maybe, but you don't get it. What you end up with might even be worse. You have to get to where you want to go. Highway 66 was the main East-West thoroughfare in the Joad family's life, back in the 1930s when people wanted to escape the dustbowl. It was the great conveyor of hope. The Joad family crosses the Colorado River into California, the land of milk and honey. Only there isn't much milk and honey in the Central Valley, where the Joads end up, except the milk in Rose of Sharon's breast, which she generously shares with her starving family. (This is in the novel, not in the movie. John Steinbeck wrote the novel, Nunnally Johnson the screenplay. John Ford directed the film.)

Wide-angle/deep-focus photography in *Citizen Kane* (1941)

I've said this before too; it's worth repeating: lenses and their optical results may be considered symbolic. There are many intrusive symbols in this film, and I'll mention a few later, but few viewers notice how perspective has been exaggerated

to suggest how the billionaire Charles Foster Kane lives in such spacious surroundings. Wide-angle lenses make backgrounds seem farther off than they really are so that the castle called Xanadu that Kane lives in with his unfulfilled wife seems enormous. Next time you see the film note the fireplace scene in the sitting room. Optics makes the room seem like the size of a basketball court. You don't realize how high and wide the fireplace is until Kane walks to it. Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles wrote the picture.



Citizen Kane

Bailey Savings and Loan in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Financial institutions have changed in meaning over time. Today many are suspected of luring homebuyers into loans they neither understand nor can afford. In George Bailey's time (the 1930s), "Savings and Loan" or "Building and Loan" institutions were simpler and maybe more honest. They stood for a good thing: making it possible for lower-income people to buy homes. Savings and Loan institutions of sixty or seventy years ago were nearly always locally owned, and owed nothing to Wall Street. The Johnson's saved at Bailey's so the Smith's could borrow money to build a home. The Johnsons and Smiths actually knew each other. Contemporary viewers can't help but wonder what has happened to George's straightforward and honest "thrift" institution, owned now by some Wall Street firm jacking up interest rates that eventually lead to foreclosures. The screenplay was penned by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett.

Homelessness in *City Lights* (1931)

We never see where Charlie Chaplin lives in this poignant film about a down-and-out man who talks a millionaire into paying for the corrective surgery of a young blind woman. Some film critics call this lack of abode a *structuring absence*. To actually show Charlie in a shelter or a cold-water flat would be more realism than the film could bear. Director Chaplin, one of the most understated

of film directors, decided to let his tattered clothes communicate this by themselves. Written by Chaplin.

The rain in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)

What many viewers forget is that Gene has just tried to get into Debbie's . . . apartment (I almost used another word), but she has turned him away. His prancing about in the rain is like taking a cold shower. Is he sad? Frustrated? Horny? Nope. This is 1952 when you couldn't show men in movies that way. Kelly overcompensates—singing, laughing, throwing his arms out—so viewers won't think horny for one second. Screenplay by Adolph Green and Betty Comden.

Balloons in *Up* (2009)

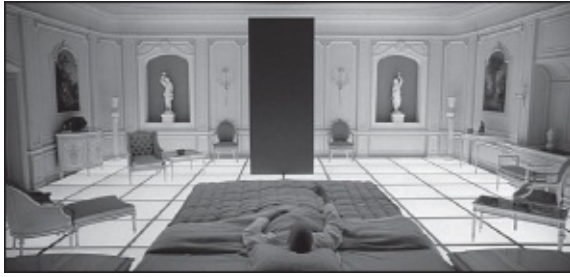
Balloons drive this film—maybe “drive” isn't the right word. “Lift” is better. You think they are cute, not especially symbolic. The mind would rather work literally and connotatively before it works symbolically. Of course it's unbelievable that a cluster of them could rip a house from its foundation and catch a wind to South America. But you go along. This is a cartoon, after all. Your gut reaction to balloons is that they are fun, frivolous, youthful. Old Carl isn't exactly fun or frivolous, but he's on his own highway 66 of the sky toward his youth. Pete Docter and Bob Peterson directed.

INTRUSIVE SYMBOLS

These cry out for immediate interpretation. They don't occur naturally. You can tell right away that the screenwriter and the director have cooked up something they want you to understand. They want you to stop everything, think *symbol*, and get into an intellectual frame of mind.

The monoliths in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

There they are, great slabs of metal or stone. What the hell? What do they mean? You can't really answer this question by watching the movie. You have to read the book by Arthur C. Clarke. You might glean that they are artifacts put up by some ancient intergalactic race of beings to foreshadow some stage of technological evolution, probably space travel. Then again you might not understand this at all. You ponder this knowledge—or lack of. You like reacting intellectually like this. Or you don't. Written by Stanley Kubrick.



2001: A Space Odyssey

The stag at Balmoral in *The Queen* (2006)

Elizabeth II (Helen Mirren) is out driving alone in her Land Rover, tooling around the hills and valleys of this 50,000-acre royal preserve. Her husband, Prince Philip, is after the stags, but is having trouble finding them. Elizabeth stops the vehicle. And there, in the middle distance, is a wondrous stag, immobile, looking back at Elizabeth. She weeps. (You can just make out the stag out of focus in the midground of the image below.) The nation had suspected that Elizabeth had no emotional reaction to Diana's death, which had occurred just days before this encounter and was the occasion for the Royal family escaping to Balmoral. She does not get on her cell to Philip and say, "I found a stag for you." Instead she just gazes, awestruck by—life. Does she weep for the stag, which Philip later catches up to and dispatches? Does she weep for Diana? For the nation? It's a complicated, intrusive symbol, and damn it, you can't just skip over it. Peter Morgan wrote the screenplay.



The Queen

The paperweight in *Citizen Kane* (1941)

You don't see these much nowadays. It's a glass sphere with a flat bottom for placing on a stack of papers to keep them from blowing away, in an era (1930s) when fans, not air conditioners, cooled offices. Often these objects contained a

scene from nature. If you turned the sphere upside down, little specks of white, like snow, suspended in water floated down. The whole presentation is idyllic, even primal, in its appeal. The paperweight is seen several times in the story, most notably when Kane is trashing his wife Susan's boudoir in anger after she leaves him. He pauses on the paperweight. He utters "rosebud" as he gazes at it. Which takes us to a child's sled named "rosebud" you see being tossed into a furnace at the very end of the film, which in turn takes us to Kane's childhood, dramatized early in the film, when he is at play in snow on his sled. A symbol inside a symbol within a symbol. You probably won't pause the film to think all these symbols through while you are watching *Citizen Kane*, but maybe you will that night or the next day. Somehow you come to *lost innocence*.



Citizen Kane

The chest armor in *Wings of Desire* (1987)

. . . which the angel Damiel wears as he completes his transition from angel to human. This symbol, though intrusive—is pretty easy to understand: you never see him wearing the armor in the rest of the movie. You have to remove the armor and be vulnerable if you are to be human. Peter Handke and Richard Reitinger wrote.

The rain of frogs in *Magnolia* (1999)

This is how the film ends. Frogs drop from the sky. They go *splat* on the face of a burglar climbing up the face of a building. They fall on lawns, streets, pools, parks, windshields—all over the place. Earlier, a dozen characters who are physically isolated from each other and alone sing successive lines of the same song, with proper tempo. (I believe the song is Harry Nilsson's "One.") This singing is a poetic device, and we can deal with it, even appreciate it. But a rain of frogs? Several websites explain rains of frogs, worms, fish, even alligators, as

occurring when something like a tornado descends on a body of water, picks up the aqua fauna, and drops it somewhere else. So much for the literal explanation. But what do the descending frogs *mean* in *Magnolia*? A description from The Internet Movie Database is a little help, but not much: “The film is an epic mosaic of several interrelated characters in search of happiness, forgiveness, and meaning in the San Fernando Valley.” You will have to figure out the frogs mainly on your own. Written by Paul Thomas Anderson, who also directed. Link to video of the rain of frogs:

Magnolia

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sWJuQD0cL8

The scissor hands of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990)

One of the most intrusive of film symbols. The story explains how Edward’s creator died before he finished his hands, meant to be regular hands. But why not finish Edward off with flippers or no hands? Why scissors? Most viewers look deeper. They have no choice. Soon they associate scissor hands with deformity, pity, handicap, and danger, but also generosity and a strange talent based on clipping and shearing—a plethora of positive responses. Written by Tim Burton and Caroline Thompson. Link to a sad trailer:

Edward Scissorhands

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eq2PPFUhfpo

Roses in *American Beauty* (1999)

These occur unnaturally. They flow from the bosom of the lovely cheerleader Angela. They nearly cover her in the bathtub as Lester looks on. They occur only in Lester’s mind and they are mainly symbols of beauty, after the title of the film. But there is more to them. They are also associated with spirituality, with life change, and with Lester’s newly acquired change of values. Money, sex, nice house in the suburbs—not important. What is, is beauty, early Rock ’n’ Roll, being with Angela, and gazing at a photo of his daughter Jane at age eight. *American Beauty* was written by Alan Ball.

Archery in *The Weatherman* (2005)

This is a story about a weatherman on a local Chicago TV station. He has the usual local weather-guy talent for getting through the weather fast with a winning smile, and wanting to be taken as useful in the world. But his domestic life is a mess. He is alienated from wife and daughter. In an attempt to reconnect

with the daughter, he takes her out to an archery range. She is not a very good archer and doesn't take much interest in the sport. But why archery? Why this activity? Why not a movie and dinner, an amusement park, a picnic—more traditional dad-trying-to-reconcile things to do? The symbol, if it is one, calls much attention to itself. You can't help but think about archery: traditional? skill-based? Robin Hood? A masculine thing to do? A bad choice? I never could figure it out. I just thought of this: maybe his choice of archery shows what a bad father he is. Steve Conrad wrote the screenplay.

METAPHORS

To me, there's not much difference between symbols and metaphors. Both stand for something else. What one commentator calls a symbol another calls a metaphor. It doesn't matter much. I suggest metaphors are long-running and maybe more complex symbols. They might embrace an entire film. *The Godfather* saga has often been called a metaphor for capitalism. *It's not personal, it's business* is something a boss could tell a worker he has to lay off. Here are a few films that might be based on metaphors:

The sinking of the great boat in *Titanic* (1997)

This stands for the demise of what the French called “La Belle Époque,” or what Americans called “The Gilded Age” and the British “Edwardian.” It lasted from the middle of the industrial revolution to World War I. It was characterized by the existence of obscenely rich people, a disregard for the poor, rampant corruption, and sumptuous living. The sinking of one grand ocean liner did not by itself bring down the era; it took unions, riots, and movements toward welfare states to bring about change. Director and writer James Cameron perceived all this in the historically true event.

The call to build a baseball diamond in *Field of Dreams* (1989)

Baseball is often considered a metaphor for a bygone pastoral era in American life. Football is industrial; baseball comes to us from the time of wide-open spaces and individual heroes who shag fly balls on the run and hit home runs. Maybe the building of the diamond in this film has to do with following one's dream, even though many people, including the wife of the poor farmer who wants to do this crazy thing, advise him against it. He does it anyway and many good things stem from it. Here is a link to an article about this by Elizabeth English: moondancefilmfestival.com/conflict-as-metaphor.

The assembling of Frankenstein's monster in *Frankenstein* (1931, 1994)

This is a metaphor for messing with science and having it bite you back. It's retrogressive, anti-science. It appeals on a deep level to people who are afraid of science. The monster gets loose, strangles people, and drowns a little girl, among other bad things. The story is also one of the models for "mad" scientist motifs.

The four gunfighters in *The Wild Bunch* (1969)

A metaphor for the closing of the wild and gracious west, the West of *Stagecoach*, *Shane*, and *Red River*. The four—William Holden, Ben Johnson, Ernest Borgnine, and Warren Oates—are not young men. They want to pull off one last job before settling down with Mexican whores. But this is not an imbedded metaphor. It lies right on the surface of the story for any viewer to pick up, and the men talk about the good ol' days. Automobiles pass through towns. But instead of pulling off the last big job, they go Old West, and avenge a youthful companion tortured by the Mexican army. It's a "see-you-in-hell" ending. It's what a man's gotta do.

ALLEGORIES

I like the definition of allegory from dictionary.com: ". . . a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another." In this sense, allegories are closer to metaphors than to symbols. They run through entire movies. But people don't always agree on the allegorical meaning of movies. Often they seem far-fetched and oddly personal. Examples:

The Western movie *High Noon* (1952) is an allegory about Americans' unwillingness to confront the communist menace.

This movie was made at the height of the communist scare in the US. People like Senator Joseph McCarthy wanted us to root out suspected commies in government, in the Pentagon, in local schools and government, and often arranged for supposed traitors to be blacklisted. In *High Noon*, no one in the town wants to help Marshal Will Kane confront the bad guys arriving on the noon train. He's got to go it alone. The townspeople are cowardly or blasé Americans unwilling to meet the communist threat. Kane is an ideological hero. Thank God we understand such hysteria today and think it was silly back then. And thank God *High Noon* can still be seen today as an important Western film without the commie baggage.

The sci-fi film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) is an allegory about how communist thinking insidiously invades people’s consciousness and softens them up for eventual take-over by the Soviets.

This film was made a few years after *High Noon* and “on the surface”—allegorists like the phrase “on the surface”—is about alien life forms invading earth and laying their eggs in human beings. When the eggs hatch, the humans become docile and zombielike. On that deeper level of allegory, some American paranoids saw the movie as a wake-up call to resist communist brainwashing, which supposedly had infested government and entertainment. Fortunately, the movie can be enjoyed today without the Soviet trappings. In fact, many sequels of the story have been produced in less hysterical times.

The Lord of the Rings series (2001, etc.) is an allegory for many events and horrors of WWII.

Tolkien was a participant of WWI and an observer—as were all Brits—of WWII. If you wish, you can trace many unhappy events of these two wars in the trilogy, thus transforming it, in your mind, to allegory instead of fantasy narrative.

The Lord of the Rings series is an allegory for racism.

Some “experts” want you to notice the dark complexion and outright ugliness of Grishnákh, a captain in the Orc army. He seems to perpetuate the unfortunate misconception that all dark-skin people are ugly and evil.

Smart-alecky allegorists are often over the top. If you want to find out just how far over the top they are, visit Read Junk:

www.readjunk.com/articles/hollywoods-10-most-controversial-political-allegories-on-film/

. . . where *Stand By Me* is characterized as “one of the clearest cut examples of Hollywood’s homosexual agenda.” Other films to receive allegorical makeovers at this site are *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Fight Club*.

JUST LOOK

As you can tell, most allegorists are bullshitters. I advise that you pay very little attention to symbols and the like and just look at film scenes, and note the care and professionalism that went into them. This is more fruitful than symbol sleuthing.

For example, the movie *The Hangover* (2009) is about two guys on the verge of marriage on one last fling in Las Vegas. Imagine what fun the set dresser and

prop master had spreading stuff around to make the scenes of their trashed apartment look like a complete mess—the glasses, the bottles, the paper, the food. All in the service of this one “symbol”: the guys are slobs.

There are people working in Hollywood who make good money selecting drapes for movie interiors. Or empty beer bottles. Or Big Mac wrappers. That’s all they do—select, hang, and arrange. Drapes in movies have to “look right.” I personally take as much pleasure in noting details like the style of drapes in scenes as in following story or meaning. I rarely think *symbol*. But we all have our viewing styles.

TRY THIS:

Look for symbols, if you have to. Try to figure out what they mean. Also ponder film-long metaphors. Let the possibility of allegories go, unless they tickle your fancy. Mainly, study scenes for meticulous composition, meaningful props, mood-making lighting, and revealing details. Take into account color and texture. Caution your movie-viewing friends against too much symbol grubbing. Be appreciative of simple but revealing bits in the scene.

Here are some films you might go watch for this:

- ▶ *Taken* (2010)
- ▶ *Unknown* (2011)
- ▶ *True Grit*, both versions (1969, 2010)
- ▶ *Beautiful* (2010)
- ▶ *Blue Valentine* (2010)
- ▶ *The King’s Speech* (2010)
- ▶ *Black Swan* (2010)

Wrap-Up: An Analysis of *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*

I close the book with an analysis of a famous film called *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, by the French filmmaker Robert Enrico. The story is an adaptation of a short story originally published in 1890 and written by the American Ambrose Bierce. Enrico's film was released in 1962. Both story and film enjoy tremendous international reputations. Even though the film has some years on it and is “pre-digital,” it amounts to a compendium of intelligent application of basic film techniques. It displays just about all the cinematic devices—*meaningful* frames, sounds, and cuts—I discuss in this book.

The film is about twenty-five minutes long; a middling good “print” of the film is available online, though it looks better when not enlarged. Here is the link:

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuP5kUQro40

Watch the film before reading on.

The film does not move fast, on purpose. The editing is on the long side, and it has good reasons for being cut this way. Be patient.

After you see the film, plan to see it again. Read my analysis of the shots, cuts, and sounds. Toggle back and forth from the film to the analysis.

In my analysis I frequently send you back to chapters in which I discuss specific techniques and their effect at greater length.

Opening shots

All are shot from a great distance from the bridge, and all are set on dolly tracks (Chapters 1 and 3) with the camera moving always left to right. We see the bridge, the creek, and soldiers standing ritualistically at attention awaiting the hanging of a civilian, an apparently well-to-do Southern planter by the name of Peyton Farquhar who has attempted to sabotage the Owl Creek bridge over which runs an important rail line serving the Union. You can tell from

costuming that the story takes place during the American Civil War.

The moving camera might be thought of as a distant observer who happens upon this execution from the crest of the hill he walks along. We never see this observer. These are not POV shots ([Chapter 6](#)). The distance from the camera to the bridge is so great that you, as viewer, cannot really tell at first what is going on. Maybe a hanging, you surmise—because this is wartime. But there is no music to guide your emotions. There is only the ominous hooting of an owl.

Also, it looks to be winter, the season of death. The trees are without foliage. Fog rises from the river bottom. I refer you now to the title of the story and the word “occurrence.” No word denoting an event is more neutral, more bereft of connotation. “Happening” was probably too colloquial for Bierce in 1890. No, *Occurrence* refuses to judge. This is not a “tragedy” or a weird thing that is going on. It is a military occurrence and it invites you to leave off feeling sorry for the man about to be hanged, if you can. It won’t be easy.

Rope and plank

At 2:32 we see a sergeant walking toward the center of the bridge with a rope. If we believed we might be witnessing a hanging, our hunches are now confirmed. We also glimpse what seems to be a plank extending out over the creek.

Back to ELS

At 2:50 the camera pulls back to yet another extreme long shot. It’s like Enrico does not want you to become too emotional about the event. Each ELS snaps the viewer back to neutrality, not pity or sympathy. In this ELS we can barely make out a pair of soldiers escorting a man in a white shirt to the plank. Read about ELSs in [Chapter 1](#).

Close-up of Payton Farquhar

This close-up at 3:00 does not show Farquhar agonizing over his fate. In fact, he seems distracted and rather unconcerned. It’s not a tight close-up. Enrico will give us this later. Again, see [Chapter 1](#) for the connection between frame and meaning.

Snap, tie, hands

At 3:10 the sergeant slings the rope over a crossbeam with a resounding snap coming just at the cut. The combination of the sound and the cut is jarring and harsh. The sound was doubtless enhanced in post-production ([Chapter 17](#)), though I don’t know how this was done with 1960s technology. After this the

sergeant makes a loop in the rope and pulls it tight around the crossbeam. A low-angle shot in wide angle ([Chapter 2](#)) shows the sergeant impassively adjusting the noose and pulling on the rope to test it. All this is done in real time. There is no hurrying. The wide-angle optics of the shot exaggerates the size of the sergeant's hands. This is one of the first of many exaggerations of the narrative. The first was the enhanced sound of the rope snapping.

Match cut

At 3:25, there is a match cut from the sergeant pulling on the rope to the low-angle shot. For more about match cuts see [Chapter 6](#).

Pull back to integrative long shot

Now Enrico cuts to an eye-level long shot in which we see soldiers with hands on Farquhar walking him to the end of the plank. An officer steps on the bridge end of the plank to counterbalance it. It's all accomplished wordlessly and efficiently, as if the military unit has done this many times. Hangings have become routine. There is no talk about details or procedure, no uncertainty. The procedure is mechanical, inevitable.

Noose and neck

Another close-up of Farquhar at 3:50. Hands reach into the frame and drop the noose around his neck. Still, Farquhar does not panic or show any emotion.

POV

Now at 4:15 Farquhar looks around. He looks down at the flowing creek water. He looks across the river to soldiers standing at attention on the far bank. It's like he's unfocused, his mind wandering. For more on POV sequences see [Chapter 6](#). These are not true POV shots because the camera tracks down the bridge to bring soldiers in closer. Farquhar on the plank could not "track in" like this.

Bound

At 5:15, a soldier reaches into the frame to tie strips of cloth around Farquhar's legs and ankles. Farquhar's hands have already been tied behind his back. Thus the soldiers overlook nothing. Even if the rope breaks—an unlikely development—Farquhar will surely drown in the creek because, bound as he is, he would not be able to swim to the surface.

Another pull back

Enrico pulls back for yet another ELS. This time the camera moves over the top of a cannon (5:25). Everything is in focus, from cannon to bridge. The human eye cannot keep everything from f.g. to b.g. in focus like this. This is another bit of distortion produced by wide-angle optics. (See [Chapter 2](#).)

Still no music

We are so used to scenes of discomfort played to melancholy music, we ask *what is going on?* In 1962 when the film came out, it was routine to hype up impending death with some kind of music. Is Enrico then heartless? Or is there method in his choice of means?

Floating stick

At 5:50 there is a cut to a floating piece of wood which Farquhar glimpses beneath him. What is this doing in the film? Might film editor Denise de Casabianca have done without this shot? Yes. But each shot that delays the hanging adds to the meaning of the film, as you will see.

The sun comes up

At 6:08, the sun creeps over a hilltop. Farquhar blinks at the sight. The officer notices the appearance of the sun, as if the military contingent has been waiting for it.

Flashback

We hear, off camera, “Abbey, Abbey,” and at 7:00 the film cuts to a scene of a woman and two children taking their leisure on the lawn before a large, comfortable house, the kind of place a prosperous planter would own. The woman rises in slow motion and starts for the camera, as if welcoming the man back after his ordeal. She is beautiful and comforting in her smile. The sound of a clock ticking in low-frequency slo-mo is heard. It gets faster and faster and higher in frequency until the words “Take his watch” (7:20) cut Farquhar’s reverie short and bring us back to the bridge. The words occur at the very end of the flashback, not after. See [Chapter 7](#) for a discussion of editing sound and image.

The ticking of the clock suggests that in large part this is a story about time, about the subjectivity of time.

Hands

. . . reach in Farquhar's vest pocket and remove his watch, which in turn is passed on to another set of hands. There is a greediness, a spoils-of-war feel about these extreme close-ups. You die, we take your possessions.

Another pullback to ELS

This time (7:20) the scene is bathed with early morning sunlight. "Attention!" is heard (7:45).

Low-angle ELS

. . . of the bridge, Farquhar, and the soldiers (8:00). This shot does not advance the action. It simply slows matters down, stretches out the execution. Again, time passes tortuously slow, or maybe mercifully slow for Farquhar.

Here we are, eight minutes into what should be a simple and swift procedure: a soldier stepping off the plank and allowing Farquhar to fall to his death. Film editors of all periods of filmmaking usually compress time, seldom extend it ([Chapter 9](#)).

Tight close-up: agony

It has finally "dawned" on Farquhar that he is about to die. His anguished face fills the entire frame. He whimpers. Cut to another tight close-up of Farquhar trying to twist free of the rope around his wrists.

The drop

At 8:30, a series of six (film) shots commences. The officer nods to the soldier standing on the plank. The soldier steps off the plank. Farquhar falls. But these shots are not matched; instead his plunge is covered in four shots that overlap slightly, another device for extending time.

But the rope breaks! Farquhar plunges into the water!

Underwater

Farquhar is underwater for ninety seconds covered in a dozen shots. Surely he will drown, viewers think. He can't use his arms to swim to the surface. He can't use his legs. Again, editor de Casabianca cuts these shots very long. Somehow Farquhar unties the rope around his wrists. He slips out of the bonds around his legs. He pulls his boots off. One boot floats leisurely downstream. De Casabianca allows the camera to follow it for many seconds.

To reiterate: contemporary editors would not normally cut this scene so long. Neither would editors in de Casabianca's time. The slow pace of the scene is not

a sign of bad editing, but good cinematic and literary intentions. The slowness of passing time is all in Farquhar's head. Again, if you haven't already, consult the material about shot and sequence length in [Chapter 9](#). Slow and fast are meaningful in context.

Firing in slo-mo

Farquhar makes it to the surface of the creek—it's really more like a deep river in Enrico's version—and shouts out in joy (10:20). His lungs are bursting. He can't believe his luck. He looks back at the bridge. The officer orders the soldiers to shoot at him, but they take their time. There is no frantic rushing down to the bank of the river to pick him off. Farquhar seems torn between relishing his being alive and getting the hell out of there.

Return of life

Remember: The story started in lifeless winter. But now, as Farquhar treads water and looks around, it is summer. Life abounds (10:40). Leaves are all over the place. Caterpillars, centipedes, spiders spinning webs are seen—or rather Farquhar sees them. Farquhar squanders time by contemplating life.

Music, finally

Then a poignant little song starts up at 10:30. It's about life, about tuning into life, your own life. It seems a little sentimental, but I think this is on purpose. You may come to see that Enrico meant this song sardonically.

Swimming

Finally Farquhar, unhurt and unencumbered, swims away from the bridge at 12:50. He's not a very good swimmer. He ought to be shot, end of story. But he thrashes away as soldiers move in slo-mo to set up, aim, and fire. They either look completely incompetent or are so restricted by the waiting of the order to fire that they are rendered ineffective.

Rapids and sand bar

Farquhar finally gets going. He keeps on swimming away from the bridge. He hits some rapids (15:20) which transport him out of rifle range of the bridge. He floats onto a sand bar, bleeding but very much alive—in fact, ecstatic. He laughs. He throws sand in the air. He rolls onto his back, mocking death. Then, inexplicably, a grapeshot is fired down river at him at 19:20, apparently at Farquhar. It scares him enough for him to get up and run.

Running

Farquhar's running (starting at 19:30) is optically varied. It cuts back and forth from wide-angle deep focus to telephoto shallow focus. See [Chapter 2](#) for a discussion of optics and focus. Wide angle pushes out backdrops; telephoto pulls them in. Normally a filmmaker would not work like this. She would use one lens or the other—wide, normal, or telephoto—and only moderate telephoto. But viewers may begin to sense that this escape is not real. And the unnatural, unmotivated shifting of lenses and focal lengths is part of the fantasy, part of the system of clues.

Walking

Time passes. Farquhar walks down a dreamy, unused road at 21:30. Overhanging tree limbs form a churchlike arch. No carts or wagons are seen, no human beings. Farquhar is tired. The shadows are long.

Home

At last Farquhar, at 23:15, reaches the grounds of his plantation. The gate to the property opens automatically for him. Home.

Overlapping editing

Abby leaves the house and runs toward him at 24:30. He sees her and runs to her, arms outstretched. She descends three stone steps. Now Enrico switches to telephoto. Backgrounds are blurred. Abby's face is optically distorted. Also, when you film someone running toward the camera in telephoto, her forward motion seems slowed, as if running in place. Cut to Abby. She descends the stone steps not once but three times (25:00). Cut to Farquhar. He seems unnaturally far away. Abby, Farquhar, Abby, Farquhar. Back and forth in space-altering telephoto. Finally they meet up in the same frame.

Match cut

But now the frame is shot with a normal lens (25:30). The telephoto perspective we are used to is replaced with trees that look realistically spaced and in focus, a signal that the fantasy is about to end. Farquhar is about to embrace Abby just as we hear a terrible snapping of a thick rope (26:00) and a death yell. Farquhar dips and throws his head back. Match cut to the bridge as Farquhar's head snaps back and he dangles from the end of the bridge rope.

Last paragraph of Bierce's story

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

Again, if you want to read about match cuts see [Chapter 6](#). De Casabianca's match cut is one of the most meaningful in the history of cinema. It ranks with the creative match cuts in *The Graduate* (Benjy slides from his raft in the pool onto Mrs. Robinson on the hotel bed), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (the ape man's flinging of the bone-weapon skyward to the elongated Pan Am space craft), and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Mike catching Sara as she stumbles in the twentieth century matched to his catching her in the nineteenth century)—films which came out several years after *Occurrence*. The match cut deftly brings an end to the fantasy, the hope, the hoping against hope, which is the all-too-human theme of the film. *Surely I'll be spared death*, we all believe. Or at least: *Not now*. Won't happen.

Here is a link to the complete story online:

goo.gl/vXG0zt

TRY THIS:

This whole chapter has been a "Try this." Try it.

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