



2008 Teachers Manual

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INTRODUCTION

Children today are born and raised in a world that is more visually driven and media-saturated than ever before. As a result, many students are more media-savvy than their teachers and parents, but at the same time they often exhibit more complacency as viewers. Even though they may be able to engage with and relate to visual media in an extensive manner, they do not necessarily understand *how* they glean information from the movies and television shows they watch nearly every day.

People inherently understand visual images and narratives before they can grasp comparable concepts in written, or even spoken, words. Since we possess an elementary visual understanding from a very early age—and cultivating visual media comprehension is often not thought to be as critical as, say, reading comprehension to education and cultural participation—many of us unknowingly go through life with only a basic understanding of visual media.

By encouraging all Philadelphians to watch, study, and discuss a single film, *One Film* aims to foster critical viewing and to promote an expanded definition of literacy which includes visual media comprehension. In order to better facilitate your teaching of *Empire of the Sun*—the 2008 *One Film* featured selection—this manual has been designed to serve as an introduction to film language. Though most of the examples given here are specific to *Empire of the Sun*, the vocabulary and concepts covered are widely applicable to the study of all visual media texts.

Why learn the language of film?

Film and literature have a number of elements in common—e.g., characters, narrative, genre—and engage similar devices—e.g., foreshadowing, metaphor, allegory—but these commonalities can tempt students to analyze films the same way that they would a novel, when film and literature are distinct artistic forms. Just as there are specificities of language and discreet literary devices that one must be acquainted with to fully appreciate a novel, there is also a language of cinema and a variety of visual and aural techniques that are integral to a complete understanding of a film.

Just as a teacher of English literature needs to know the vocabulary and syntax of the English language, a teacher of film also needs to know the visual vocabulary and visual syntax of cinema. Once a person is able to recognize the choices that filmmakers make, an examined film’s construction becomes more transparent, and the viewer is better equipped to engage in analysis and navigate through filmic discourse.

To “make meaning”

In all forms of communication, messages are sent and received. In the case of conventional literature, an author sends information by writing (and publishing) a book, and readers receive information by reading it. In the case of conventional film, the process is more complicated and ordinarily involves dozens— if not hundreds—of people, but it proceeds along the same trajectory. Filmmakers send information by creating a film, and viewers receive information by watching (and listening to) it. In both cases, a reader/viewer relies on their understanding of the format and conventions of the medium—as well as their comprehension of the techniques used by the author/filmmaker—to imbue text or images with

meaning. In other words, the reader/viewer is “making meaning” of the book or film they are engaged with.

While the processes of making meaning of films and literary works are largely similar, there are, of course, obvious differences between the two modes of communication. Film provides more sensory information—(mostly spoken) words, images, and sounds—offering viewers two-dimensional depictions of the three-dimensional world that they can “inhabit,” and representing life in a way that no other media can.

OVERVIEW

Primary Categories

While there are a multitude of terms and concepts involved in the reading of a film, there are four primary areas into which most formal elements can be placed:

- **Editing**—the coordination of one **shot** with the next
- **Cinematography**—motion-picture photography; the use of light, the movement of the camera and lens, and the manipulation of the film stock in the making of a film
- **Mise-en-scene**—the director's control over what appears within the **frame**
- **Sound**—the audio portion of the film, including dialogue, music, and noise/effects

Elemental Terms

Each of the above aspects will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections. There are a few additional terms, though—which do not fit neatly into any of the above categories—that are critical to a deeper understanding of film. They include:

- **Diegesis**—the world of the film's **story**, including not only what is seen and heard on-screen, but also settings, characters, and events, the existence of which is presumed
 - A good rule of thumb is that if a character in the film can see, hear, or otherwise sense something—a sound, a prop, another character, etc.—it is part of the **diegesis**.
 - **Diegesis** will come into play most prominently in the discussion of sound.
 - **Diegetic** is the adjective form, as in **diegetic sound** (see the sound section).
- **Frame**—a single, still image on a strip of film; the smallest unit of film, and of film analysis
 - A series of thousands of **frames** are projected onto the screen in mechanized succession when a film is shown.
 - The illusion of a moving picture is created by a combination of this series of still images and the ways in which the human eye and brain function.
- **Narrative**—a film that is organized based on its segments being connected through a series of cause-and-effect relationships that occur in a definable time and space
 - The **plot** is only part of the narrative that is depicted in a film. **Narrative** includes all the events shown in a film and the causal relationships between them, as well as their order, duration, and setting.
 - The **story** is everything contained in the **plot**, as well as all things the viewer concludes or presumes have occurred or existed.
 - An example:
 - A film depicts a car pulling into a driveway, then a woman unlocking a front door, then this same woman reaching the top of a set of stairs in a home. *These are **plot** elements.*

- A viewer watching the film, though, infers that the woman was driving the car and was returning to her home. They conclude that she stopped the car, turned off the engine, opened the car door, walked to the door of the house, entered the house, closed the door behind her, put her keys down, and walked up the stairs—all of this in addition to the actions the film has explicitly depicted. *All of these together are the **story**.*

EDITING

Units of Film

Before we can discuss **editing**, which, in the simplest terms, is the coordination of one **shot** with the next, we need to define a “**shot**”, and other relevant “units” of film.

- **Take**—during production, the **shot** produced by one run of the camera
- **Shot**—in a film, one uninterrupted image with a single framing, either stationary or mobile
- **Scene**—a segment in a film that occurs in one specific time and in one place
- **Sequence**—a larger segment of film, often consisting of a number of scenes, having in common a **plot** point, an event, and a period of time

Transitions

The transitions between **shots** can be accomplished in a number of ways:

- **Cut**—the most common type of **edit** occurs when one **shot** ends and the next one immediately begins with no visible transition.
- **Fade in**—a black **frame** is gradually replaced by an image
 - This **edit** is typically used to show the passing of a significant amount of time.
 - A film will often begin with a fade in.
- **Fade out**—the **shot** is gradually replaced by a black **frame**.
 - The image appears to **dissolve** into black; this **edit** is typically used in a manner similar to punctuation in that it might indicate the end of a sequence, or the beginning of a significant shift in time.
 - A film will often end with a fade out.
- **Dissolve**—one **shot** fades out while another **shot** fades in; there is no blank screen in between.
- **Wipe**—when one **shot** replaces another by means of a line (or lines) moving across the screen
 - This transition is rarely used in mainstream filmmaking, but may be found on prominent display in the works of Akira Kurosawa and George Lucas.

Motivations for Edits

While an **edit** will typically have underlying motivations like **narrative** progression and **continuity** (see below), there can also be other reasons for a particular **editing** choice. These include:

- **Graphic relations**—putting two or more **shots** together based purely on the similarities in their visual characteristics
 - These characteristics include similarities in:

- Geometric shape between objects in different **shots**
 - Contrast—light or dark space within the **frames** of the **shots**
 - **Mise-en-scene**—the composition of elements within the **frames** of the **shots**
 - **Graphic editing** can also exploit differences between **shots**.
 - These include variations in the above characteristics.
 - As well as differences between the direction and speed of movement within the **shots**
- **Rhythmic editing**—when the director alters the length of **shots** in relation to each other, thus affecting the speed at which they come
 - This is used to control the pace of the action, by either using shorter **shots** to speed things up, thereby increasing urgency, or by using longer **shots** to calm things down.
- **Spatial relations**—establishing or reflecting the relative **locations** of characters and objects
 - This defines space within the **diegesis**.
 - When one **shot** follows another, in the absence of an **establishing shot** (a shot that shows the lay of the land, usually used after a change in **location**), the viewer can assume one of two things:
 - The two people, objects, etc. are in the same **location**, or
 - They are in two different **locations**, being shown simultaneously, which is called **cross-cutting** or **parallel editing**.
- **Temporal relations**—the arrangement of **shots** to reflect the passing or changing of time
 - Typically, **editing** is used to show events in simple, linear order.
 - But **editing** can also manipulate time via **flashback** or **flash-forward**.
 - **Elliptical editing** condenses time the way an ellipsis in writing removes part of an excerpt or quotation.
 - The differences between **plot** and **story** are in part the result of elliptical **editing**.
 - That is, the **plot** is an elided version, in some cases, of what happens in the **story**.
 - Time can be “expanded” by **editing**, by overlapping actions or repeating **shots**.
- **Continuity editing**—in most narrative films, the job of **editing** is to maintain continuity and consistency throughout the film.
 - This is an effort to maintain a smooth, unobtrusive flow from **shot** to **shot**.
 - Common techniques of **continuity editing** include:
 - **Shot-reverse-shot** is commonly used in the **editing** of a conversation between two characters.
 - One character will be speaking, and the **shot** of them will appear to represent the **point-of-view** of the character to whom their speaking.
 - This becomes clear when the other character starts speaking, and the **shot** of them comes from the **point-of-view** of the first character.
 - Not only have their **spatial** and **temporal** relations been established, but a bond between the characters has been hinted at by the **editing**.
 - **180-degree-rule (axis of action)**—the invisible line that passes across the **frame** through the main actors, establishing a “right” and a “left” of the **frame**.

- The camera is not supposed to cross this line at a cut, which would reverse the direction of the action and disrupt the **spatial continuity**.
 - Crossing the line with a camera movement or gradually shifting the line with a series of short **shots** and cuts are both ways to cross the line and maintain continuity.
- **Montage**—the juxtaposition of images done to create an impression or convey an idea not present in any single **shot**
 - A conventional montage sequence uses a barrage of images **edited** together to encapsulate an idea, to show time passing, memories, etc.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

Motion-Picture Photography

The most practical way to think about **cinematography** is to think of it in terms of the aspects of still photography with which you are already familiar.

Camera Angle, Framing, and Distance

These elements all have to do with the distance from and, the relative position of, the camera to the object being filmed.

- **Camera angle/Angle of framing**—is always identified by describing the camera's **location** in relation to the object being filmed.
 - **High angle**—the camera is shooting from a higher spot looking down on the object.
 - **Straight on**—the camera and the object are on the same level.
 - **Low angle**—the camera is shooting up at the object.
- **Framing**—is using the edges of the film **frame** to determine what will be shown on-screen.
 - This affects the image, and hence its meaning, in a few ways.
 - The size and shape of the **frame**.
 - The definition of on-screen and off-screen space.
 - The way the framing changes during the progression of a **shot** or scene.
 - **Close-up**—an object shown at a large scale (larger than in real life) that takes up most of the screen
 - **Long shot**—the object on screen is shown to be very small
 - **Medium shot**—object shown to be of moderate size; for example, a person from the waist up
 - **Height of framing**—the camera's distance from the ground or surface on which it is placed, regardless of the camera angle; this can be varied, for example, to represent the different relative heights of characters.
 - **Distance of framing (camera distance)**—the distance of the **frame** from that which is being **shot**
 - **Mobile framing**—the framing shifts in relation to the object being photographed.

Photographic Image

As in still photography, the specific type of film stock used, as well as the light to which it is exposed, affects the characteristics of the image.

- **Film stock**—this is 35mm motion-picture film that needs to be developed into a negative after which a positive image is printed, much like conventional 35mm still film. Its appearance can be manipulated to exhibit certain characteristics:
 - **Contrast**—the degree of difference between the darkest and lightest portions of the **frame**
 - It is most noticeable in black and white, but also applies to color.

- **High contrast**—sharp differences between black and white (or dark and light) within a given **shot**
- **Low contrast**—lacks stark blacks and whites and consists of many shades of gray
- **Contrast** can be used to guide the viewer’s eye.
- **Exposure**—the extent to which the film is exposed to light while shooting.
 - Both color and black and white film can be over or underexposed.
 - **Overexposure**—too much light is allowed onto the film through the lens, resulting in washed-out images.
 - **Underexposure**—too little light is allowed onto the film through the lens, resulting in very dark and/or grainy images.

Camera Movement

This is the primary way, obviously, in which cinematography differs from still photography. The ability to move the camera facilitates the appearance of a three-dimensional **diegesis** and furthers the communicative nature of a **shot**.

- **Stationary movements**—the camera is fixed in one **location**, allowing for only the simplest of movements.
 - **Pan**—the camera is fixed in one spot, but it rotates or swivels horizontally; similar to a person’s movement when shaking one’s head.
 - **Tilt**—the camera is fixed in one spot, but rotates vertically; similar to a person’s movement when nodding.
- **Mobile shots**—the camera itself is moving, or it is affixed to another apparatus that is moving.
 - **Tracking shot**—the **frame**, by virtue of camera and/or lens movement, moves through the space of the film forward, backward, sideways, up or down.
 - **Crane shot**—the camera moves above the ground in any number of a wide range of motions, as if attached to an arm.
 - **Handheld shot**—the camera is in no way anchored, save by the operator’s hand, and whatever movements the operator performs or undergoes are reflected in the images photographed.
 - **Steadicam shot**—has the versatility and mobility of a handheld **shot**, but the camera is attached to the operator by a harness with a gyroscope, so it always films in smooth, level motions, regardless of the operator’s movements.

MISE-EN-SCENE

Definition and Origin

Mise-en-scene (*meez-on-sen*) is a French term used to describe the director's control over what appears within the film **frame**, and specifically, the visual and physical arrangement of the elements—props, sets, characters, and more—within the **frame**. It is a term borrowed from the theater, where it meant “staging the event.”

As a Point of Analysis

Mise-en-scene is especially useful in the critical consideration of a film when the viewer can identify changes and developments in it that are then attributed to shifts in character, narrative, theme, etc. In essence, you observe the change in one or more of the elements of **mise-en-scene** and ask yourself, “Why?”

- Even if you don't notice a change over the course of a film, examining the connections between **mise-en-scene** and the narrative or certain characters may also be useful.
- However, judging it in comparison to realism does not tend to be productive because standards of realism change over time.
 - Also, realism is relative in terms of the **diegesis**.
 - For example, we expect the **mise-en-scene** of a ripped-from-the-headlines police drama to be “realistic.”
 - But we do not expect this of a musical about the merry old Land of Oz.

Aspects of Mise-en-Scene

There are four main aspects of **mise-en-scene**—**setting**, **costume and make-up**, **figure expression and movement**, and **lighting**—but this is not to say that these elements of the film may only be considered in relation to one another, or that they are somehow discreet parts of the film. For example, while lighting very much affects how characters, settings, and props appear within the **frame**—which is why it is considered an aspect of **mise-en-scene**—the lighting of the film is the domain of the **cinematographer** and cannot be divorced entirely from matters of the **camera** and **film stock**.

- **Setting**—in its most basic sense is the conventional definition: time and place.
 - Are this time and place depicted by shooting at an actual **location**, though not necessarily the same **location** depicted in the film?
 - Typically used for more “serious” genres like historical films, political thrillers, etc.
 - Are this time and place depicted by shooting on a constructed set located in a studio, on a lot, or at some other industrial locale?
 - Up until the 1950s, most filming was done on **sets** because it was the best way to manage cumbersome equipment. Continued technological advancements have made **location** shooting an increasingly common industry practice
 - Sometimes sets are used to re-create in stunning detail actual **locations** that are unavailable for filming.

- On the other end of the spectrum, quite fanciful **sets** are often used for musicals and other imaginative genres or sequences within films.
 - **Props** may be considered along with **setting**, as such objects are often the elements most responsible for helping to create the (illusion of the) **setting**.
 - They are especially important when they become part of, or relevant to, the narrative.
 - If a prop is recurring, it can become something of a motif, whose presence serves to symbolize a theme, character, or emotion.
- **Costume and make-up**—are important elements of **mise-en-scene**.
 - Especially in a period war film like *Empire of the Sun*
 - **Costumes** give a sense of a historical moment, culture, and more.
 - **Make-up** helps to create glamour and beauty in many films, but in one like this it is used alternately to give the appearance of a genuine time and event, and also to depict injuries and more.
- **Figure expression and movement**—is the domain of the actor and the director. A convincing or unusual performance (executed by the actor and guided by the director) has considerable impact on the viewer’s reaction to a character.
- **Lighting**—is used to help set the tone, guide the viewer’s attention, and highlight certain elements within the **frame**.
 - This is done by the presence of lit areas and **shadows**.
 - Two types of **shadows**
 - **Attached shadows** occur when there are contours of a face, or a corner of a room, that light just doesn’t reach.
 - **Cast shadows** occur when an actor, object, etc. gets in between the light source and the surface onto which the **shadow** falls or is cast.
 - There are four main features of film lighting:
 - **Quality**—is it hard (sharp contrast) or soft?
 - **Direction**—describes the direction of the light from its source to the object.
 - **Front light** removes **shadow**.
 - **Side light** highlights features.
 - **Back light** creates silhouettes.
 - **Under/Bottom** light distorts features.
 - **Top light** creates dramatic/glamour **shots**.
 - **Source**—the type of light and the rationale for its usage
 - **Available light**—when a **shot** is lit using only the light native to the **location** (e.g., from the sun)
 - **Motivated light**—when the light source is acknowledged or overtly displayed within the **diegesis**
 - For example, when a **shot** has a character sitting by an uncovered window and it is lit by the light coming into that window
 - Motivated light may be available (as in the example above) or unavailable (placed by the filmmakers), as long as there is a plausible explanation for its presence within the **diegesis**.

- **Unmotivated light**—when a **shot** is lit in such a way as to make the lighting noticeable, but no **diegetic** basis for it is offered (e.g., many **shots** in many Oliver Stone films)
 - **Color**—has more to do with the sense of temperature of the light rather than the actual color, though that is a factor. White and blue light is “colder” than yellow or red light, which is “warm.”
 - **Chiaroscuro**—extremely dark and light areas within the same **frame**, a staple of film noir

Diegetic Space

Projected film creates a two-dimensional image, and it is one of the filmmaker’s jobs to manipulate space in ways that make this two-dimensional image appear more three-dimensional. Elements of **mise-en-scene** can be used to create contrasts that guide the viewer’s attention through the **frame**.

- Ways of showing spatial contrast:
 - Character or **prop** movement can give the appearance of an expansive **frame**.
 - Contrasts in **color** or **lighting** can be used to guide the viewer’s attention to different parts of the **frame**, emphasizing its “size.”
 - Utilize planes within the **frame**
 - Layers of space—e.g., fore, middle and background
 - Having different planes “occupied” to varying degrees creates a sense of depth.

SOUND

The audio portion of film—including **dialogue**, **voiceover**, **music**, and **noise/effects**—was not present in its current form for the first 30 years of the medium’s existence. The cinema enjoyed substantial success without it—through the use of narrators and musicians in the exhibition space—and it was initially viewed by some as an unnecessary addition to the form. Currently the beneficiary of tremendous technology and significant artistry from advancements by those who work in the field, sound is often overlooked in terms of its contribution to film, despite its ability to influence the information conveyed in a **shot** or **scene**, shade viewers’ emotions, and direct attention via **dialogue** or **off-screen sound**.

As a Point of Analysis

A film’s **sound** is just as thoroughly constructed for the purposes of artifice and the illusion of “reality” as are its images. **Sound** is created independently from the image in most cases and therefore can be manipulated just as thoroughly as image. As a result, it has the potential to be as interesting a point of analysis as the visual components of a film.

- Types of **sound**
 - **Dialogue**—the spoken words of the film
 - It is widely thought to be the most critical facet of sound.
 - It is used to convey **story** and character information.
 - **Music**—typically instrumental music known as the film’s **score**
 - But may also include songs performed (especially in a musical) or popular music listened to by characters within the film
 - Usually used to guide or accent emotion
 - Often found in gaps in the film’s dialogue
 - The **score** is one of the last things done for a film.
 - **Noise**—the sound effects used to create a more credible and detailed **diegesis**
 - Sometimes the noise used for the same purpose can vary based on the genre or tone of the film.
 - For example, the sound of a bomb exploding in *Empire of the Sun* will sound different from a bomb exploding in a contemporary action film like *The Matrix*.
 - Part of the difference is due to the disparate “historical moments” of the two films.
 - Part is due to the former being a historical epic while the latter is a futuristic science-fiction fantasy.

Sound, Editing, and Space

Different types of **sound** may be used to smooth over image **edits** in certain types of films.

- **Sound bridge**—is a **noise** or piece of **music** used to connect the transition between **shots** that occur in different times and/or places:
 - As an aural transition to smooth over the **cuts** in a **parallel-editing (cross-cutting)** sequence
 - To emphasize the fluid and ephemeral qualities of a **flashback** or **flash forward**

- **Dialogue overlap**—makes **shot-reverse-shot edits** less jarring by allowing the **dialogue** to continue uninterrupted while the **shot** changes, possibly multiple times.
 - This also allows the viewer to gauge the response of the character who's listening before the one who is speaking is done.
 - The observant viewer can learn a good deal about a character from his/her reactions to others.
- **Diegetic sound**—is **sound** (speech, **noise**, even **music**) that comes from someone or something within the **diegesis** (the world of the film).
 - Examples of **diegetic speech, noise, and music** include a character speaking, a telephone ringing, or a record playing, respectively.
 - Such sounds may be on-screen, meaning the source of the sound is visible within the **frame**.
 - Or off-screen, meaning the source of the sound cannot be seen, but is nevertheless present within the world of the film (e.g., police sirens during a bank robbery)
 - **External diegetic sound** clearly comes from a source within the scene and is objectively “available” for all within the film to hear
 - **Internal diegetic sound** might include hearing a character's thoughts; there is no visible link to a source in the scene, and hence it is subjective—only that character is privy to it.
- **Non-diegetic sound**—comes from outside the world of the film; characters cannot hear it.
 - This includes the music of the score, which is there for the viewer's benefit and cannot be heard by the characters.
 - It also includes omniscient narrators who are not involved with the **story**, e.g., the narration that provides a historical overview at the start of *Empire of the Sun*.

EXAMPLE: EDITING

The following **frames** are from the **montage sequence** depicting Jim's time in his family home immediately after the invasion of Shanghai. This **sequence** gives the viewer a sense of how he spends his time living there by himself. A **montage** is used to show the passing of time, and to allow the viewer to get an impression of what Jim is experiencing through the depiction of a combination of the different things he does en masse, rather than including a few larger examples.



The two **frames** below are taken from two **dissolves** that take place over a very short period of time just after the initial invasion of Shanghai. The first **dissolve** transitions from a **shot** of bodies being dragged out of **frame** on a bloody rooftop to a smoke-filled skyline **shot** of Shanghai, which in turn **dissolves** to Jim running down a deserted street.

The first **dissolve** conveys that some time has passed, during which the fighting has continued and spread throughout the city. The second **dissolve** suggests that even more time has passed and the situation is calmer than it was, or at least that Jim has had time to escape to a less dangerous area.

These shifts in time are also indicated by the different **lighting** in the three **shots** that share the two **dissolves**.



EXAMPLE: CINEMATOGRAPHY

The **high-angle shot** in the **frame** below is also a **long shot** and an **establishing shot** because in addition to the camera looking down on that which is being **shot**, the camera is far away from it, and the **shot** serves to establish the geography of this important **location** (an entry point into Shanghai) and the **spatial relationship** between the figures within it.



The **frame** below is a **close-up** on Jim's father that serves two purposes. First, it is **shot** from Jim's **point-of-view** and reveals the way he is examining his father's face for some clue as to why he is burning papers. Second, it also gives the viewer a closer look at him to facilitate the reading of his **expression**, which foreshadows the coming turmoil and leads the viewer to wonder what he knows (or has done) to make the burning of the papers necessary.



EXAMPLE: MISE-EN-SCENE

The following **frame** shows a smart use of **props**. The full refrigerator conveys just how well-to-do the family is, especially in contrast to their servants and other locals. It also cleverly and ironically foreshadows the unrest to come . . .

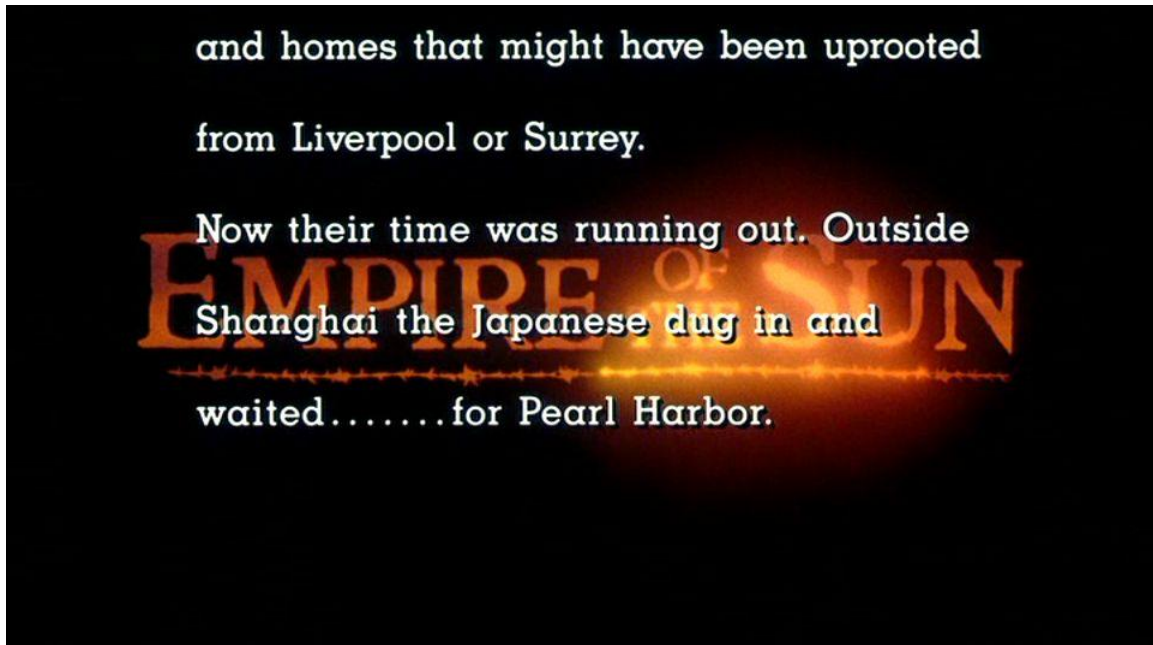


. . . after the Japanese invade Shanghai and seize the property of all its residents. Note the **frame** below from a comparable **shot** to that above. The **angle** and content (despite the difference in **camera distance**) of the **shots** is similar, but the significant difference in the state of the **props**—especially the empty refrigerator—is indicative of the drastic change that has come to Jim's world.



EXAMPLE: SOUND

The **frame** below depicts the text of the **non-diegetic narration** that the viewer hears at the start of the film.



The music that comes from the phonograph in the **frame** below is **diegetic music**, since its source is from within the world of the film, and it can be heard by the characters.



EXAMPLE: MULTIPLE ELEMENTS

The **frame** below is an excellent example of several aspects of film being used in concert to create tension and depict a fraught situation.

The **costumes** create a stark contrast between the world of the Britons inside the car and the local citizens outside. There is a clear distinction between the bright colors (conveying frivolity and wealth) of the party **costumes** and the drab clothes (conveying mundanity and poverty) of the locals or the dark, forbidding policemen's uniforms.

Also, out of **focus**, but in the foreground, are barricades and barbed wire, indicative of the political unrest that is all around people like Jim's family but from which they seem largely removed. Its presence in the foreground is a reminder of the strife and a clue to the coming escalation.

Finally, the **figure expression** of the character in the car leads the viewer to anticipate something noteworthy just out of the **frame**—creating suspense—and also reveals the character's discomfort with what he is watching.



CONCLUSION

About Formal Analysis

This introduction to cinematic language was designed to facilitate your analysis, discussion, and teaching of film, with a specific focus on *Empire of the Sun*. The examples of particular shots and scenes have provided a sense of the ways in which recognizing and comprehending film language can empower viewers to have more appreciation for—and glean more meaning from—aspects of a given film. If our consideration of *Empire of the Sun* were to stop there, at least we would have begun to participate in the process of making meaning of the film, and certainly we would possess a markedly greater appreciation of the film than if we had remained merely passive viewers.

However, deeper understanding of a particular film requires going beyond examinations of isolated instances of the specific uses of certain techniques. Deeper understanding requires that we use our knowledge of cinematic methods and filmmakers' choices to recognize motifs in image and sound that run through the entire film, patterns in the usage of certain facets of film language, or even a formal system of symbols and meaning.

Such analysis is, to a degree, subjective—like any textual study—both benefiting from and hampered by the interests, ideology, and chosen critical lenses of the individual crafting the analysis. Such studies typically require multiple close viewings of a film, and even these might result in the discovery of motifs that recur only intermittently, incomplete patterns of usage, and symbolic meanings that at times seem contradictory. Do not be discouraged by this. There may, in fact, be no consistent, deeper meaning to many aspects of a film, or the meanings that you find may not be supported by statements of the filmmakers' intentions. Neither case is grounds for abandonment of your consideration of a film. For one thing, there is much to be learned by going through the process of textual analysis and employing your understanding of cinematic grammar in an effort to get more out of films. You, your colleagues, and your students will discuss all of your ideas and reach conclusions as to whether the meaningful choices or patterns you are identifying are, in fact, there. If you see enough examples and are able to state your case in a clear, informed manner, who is to say you are not onto something? In this regard, film analysis is just like literary analysis.

As to filmmakers' stated intentions: they are, to an extent, irrelevant to the viewer. If we acknowledge that the word or sentence choices we make in our daily lives, or that authors make in crafting their novels, are not always made purposefully or consciously, but may, nonetheless, be insightful about the thoughts, opinions, etc. of the person who made them, then the same can be said of filmmakers and the choices they make.

Some Thoughts on *Empire of the Sun*

In this section, I am going to share some of my observations and ideas about Empire of the Sun. You may find that some of them add to your appreciation of the film or facilitate the formulation of your own observations. You may also conclude that some of them have little validity. In either case, they will hopefully encourage your further consideration of the film, and be useful in helping your students to engage analytically.

The mise-en-scene is a very rich aspect of *Empire of the Sun*, beyond the usual ways in which the settings, costumes, and props of period films—especially those set abroad—tend to be more vibrant than those of ordinary films.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous prop in the film is Jim's suitcase. Indeed, the choice to include a shot of it, floating in the harbor, as the last of the film was an interesting one. Since it is Jim's most constant companion throughout much of the film, it can be seen to serve as a proxy for the boy. Rather than concluding with Jim's reunion with his parents, Spielberg extends the film for the sole purpose of including the shot of the floating suitcase. Jim abandons the suitcase in a moment of hopelessness, just as he probably gave up hope that he would ever find his parents and return to his previous life. To underscore the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that Jim overcame to survive the war and be reunited with his parents, we are shown the suitcase that, against all odds, has survived its journey intact, and seemingly not much worse for wear. Just as Jim was able to metaphorically keep his head above water during the war, so too was the suitcase able to stay afloat, avoiding destruction and eventually returning to where it came from.

There is also the inclusion of a number of billboards in the film. There is a billboard of a Chinese general being dismantled in the background, a couple of billboards (in Chinese) for, it appears, consumer products of some kind, and the enormous billboard for *Gone with the Wind*. These billboards are periodic reminders of the way life was before the war started. The billboard of the general represents Chinese sovereignty that once existed and would again. The billboard advertisements, although in Chinese, are most strongly reminiscent of the privileged life the British residents of Shanghai lead which, it could be argued, led to better lives for some—though not most—of the locals.

The *Gone with the Wind* billboard is interesting because it is so emblematic of the manner in which Western culture seemed to have invaded Shanghai—though it is interesting that an American creation is used for this purpose when the British presence is so much more substantial. It is enormous, brightly colored, and, at least partially, in English—a probable metaphor for cultural imperialism.

More so than for this note of commentary, the billboard for *Gone with the Wind* is important because *Empire of the Sun* bears more than a passing resemblance to the classic Civil War-set film. The billboard makes a direct reference to the film, but almost as recognizable of an allusion is the crane shot that marks Jim's arrival at the internment camp. As he picks up a rock and walks up the small hill toward the camp, the camera rises fairly high into the sky, taking in the masses of people, clutter, and chaos contained within the camp. This shot is similar in scope and composition to the famous shot of the field of wounded Confederate soldiers in *Gone with the Wind*.

Furthermore, both of these films are about subcultures—plantation society in the antebellum American South and the British enclave in Shanghai—that pride themselves on their civility, refinement, and erudition, and that are torn apart by wars from which they consider themselves largely removed. In both cases, these subcultures were forced to give up their material possessions, their social stations, their freedom, and, in many cases, their pride. Ultimately, these groups survived their ordeals, but they would never entirely regain the stature or lifestyles they had previously enjoyed. The bright spot in each story is a heretofore powerless, dependent, entitled individual who survives their tribulations to emerge as a stronger, more mature, more substantial person. In *Gone with the Wind* this character is Scarlett O'Hara, and in *Empire of the Sun* it is Jim.

In *Empire of the Sun* there are also thoughtful references to other moments within the film itself. On a couple of occasions the interned Britons loudly bang their metal food bowls to express their displeasure or to demand food. This sort of group behavior recalls the masses in and around Shanghai who mob and beg the wealthy British people for food and money as they make their way to Christmas celebrations. This comparison underscores the change in status the British have undergone during this time and makes a point about the ephemeral nature of class in society.

Similarly, once the war is over and Jim has made his way back to the deserted internment camp, he rides a bicycle around the empty buildings in which he once lived, just as he rode around his parents' house in Shanghai shortly after he was separated from them. In both instances, Jim is celebrating, or acknowledging, a newfound freedom in a place he had previously found constricting or in which his behavior was regimented, albeit to differing degrees.

Finally, *Empire of the Sun* is also interesting because of how it is viewed specifically as a Steven Spielberg film. While it stands out—along with *The Color Purple*, *Schindler's List*, *Amistad*, and *Munich*—as one of the director's "literary" films, we can see within it elements that span across the filmmaker's work.

Aesthetically, Spielberg uses his trademark take on the shot-reverse-shot technique. As we have seen countless times in spectacular moments from Spielberg's films—perhaps most vividly in the first appearance of dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*—he likes to show the protagonist's awestruck reaction to something before revealing that "something" in a shot from the protagonist's point of view. Spielberg uses this technique a few times in *Empire of the Sun*, most notably during the Allies' air raid on the internment camp. Among other things, this fosters the viewer's identification with the protagonist, because he is having, presumably, the same reaction we are about to once we are shown the stunning sight—e.g., dinosaur, fighter plane, etc.

More broadly, *Empire of the Sun* is, in a sense, an adventure story or quest told from the point of view of a boy. This is a common Spielberg trope seen to varying degrees in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Hook*, *Jurassic Park*, *Artificial Intelligence: AI*, and *Catch Me If You Can*.

Specifically, this film shares a thematic element with *Close Encounters*, *E.T.*, and *Schindler's List*, namely, the important role chance plays in our lives. In the first two films, the protagonists are seemingly randomly chosen for their rendezvous with alien life forms. Of course, they turn out to be exceptional choices uniquely suited for the responsibilities placed upon them, but they still had to rise to the occasion—rather than asking, "Why me?"—and overcome obstacles, making the most out of the opportunities they're given. This is precisely how Jim approaches his travails in *Empire of the Sun*. In *Schindler's List*, Spielberg makes a point of depicting the random nature of the Nazis' barbarity, which only serves to intensify it. Being in a slightly different spot in the crowd, modifying one's behavior the smallest amount, or a marginal difference in timing is all that stood between horrible death and meager survival—both in the Holocaust and in the environment in which Jim found himself during World War II.

There are undoubtedly many more elements of *Empire of the Sun* worth exploring, but hopefully you have been given a sense of how to look at this film *as a film* and how to apply your new, cinematic gaze to get the most out of this and other films. In teaching this film you have the benefit of discussing a work by the most prominent filmmaker of our time, and as such, there is a wealth of information available about him and *Empire of the Sun*. In addition to several books on Spielberg and his films, there are a multitude of interesting reviews of this film written by intelligent critics for reputable publications.

Many of them can be found in databases such as LexisNexis, on the websites of individual publications, or through search sites such as www.mrqe.com (Movie Review Query Engine). These and other resources—and, importantly, your own observations and analysis of the film—will provide a firm basis for your discussion of *Empire of the Sun* with your students.