TEACHERS' NOTES

This study guide selects four film texts through which to introduce aspects of narrative and genre and their relationship to each other. Each section is offered as a complete unit for GCSE and AS/A level Media and Film Studies delivering information and activities on the context of production, genre, narrative and film language. There are also tasks and suggestions for activities.

Two of the film texts *Stagecoach* (1939) and *Double Indemnity* (1944) are investigated for their genre elements and for the way in which the genre, themes and style have developed over time. Students will be asked to look at contemporary 'reworked' examples of films either within the genre or which contain elements of the film's style and themes. *A Bout* de *Souffle* (1964) is explored as an example of a French New Wave film focusing particularly on
narrative and innovative camerawork; La (1995) is examined for its status as a 'youth again looking at genre and narrative.

The film language of the opening sequence of each film will be examined closely to demonstrate to students how narrative clues and generic elements are laid down and ho narrative 'promise' is established.

Each section could also serve as a 'taster' introduction to, the more detailed and extensive York Film Notes study guides available for of these film texts.

Students working on the tasks and activities will need to know a degree of film language. Important terms which they may use in their descriptions and analyses are in the next section.

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO READING A FILM

How do we, as an audience, know what is happening in a film? How are we able to 'read' this visual text? When we read poems, novels, short stories and plays in school we learn how writers create characters, themes and atmosphere. We learn that the written text has its own rules and conventions. Films and books are different kinds of texts
- one has been written by an author and the other has been constructed by a filmmaker or director.

Films tell stories in moving images, they are visual texts with their own set of rules and conventions that we, the audience, have learned to read.

Everything that we see in a film has been chosen to construct a story with a particular meaning with which we, the audience, will interact. We can examine the language of films to see how the meaning has been constructed.
The main elements to consider in mise en scène are: setting and props; costume and make-up; the expression and movement of the actors; lighting and colour; the way objects and people are positioned.

THE CAMERA

The choice of camera angle and size of shot is important in the way we react to what is shown on screen.

- close-up (CU) puts us very close to someone or something and is often used to show the expression on someone's face and what they are thinking

- mid shot (MS) is used to show us the top half of someone's body (or trunk)

- long shot (LS) is often used to show us where the action is taking place, it can be called an establishing shot

Some of the tools of film language are as follows:

LIGHTING
The choice of lighting and the way it is used is crucial for creating a particular atmosphere. The audience's attention can be guided by brightly lighting an object or a gesture which is important to the plot. Shadows can be used to build up suspense by keeping hidden something that the audience is keen to see. Someone in a film who is often in shadow is often a 'shady character'.

SOUND
The dialogue, the sound effects (FX) and musical soundtrack are essential to a film's mood and meaning. Dialogue or conversation between characters can give us a lot of information about what is happening in the story. Sound effects give us a sense of actually being there and makes what is happening more believable. Sound may also come from outside the frame, for example, a telephone ringing or a dog barking. A voice-over is when we hear someone's voice but do not see them. It gives us information about what is about to happen or about what has happened in the past.

It is also useful to remember that no sound at all can be effective in creating a dramatic atmosphere particularly just before something nasty is about to happen.
High and low angle shots are when the camera is placed above or below a character - a low angle shot taken almost from underneath a person makes them seem large and powerful and we, the audience, can feel threatened by this appearance. A high angle shot is when the camera looks down on someone making them look very small and vulnerable.

Camera movement also adds to our involvement in the action, e.g. a tracking shot is where the camera follows the action, moving along tracks laid for that purpose; a crane shot is where the camera mounted on a crane moves around above ground level.

EDITING

Editing is the name of the process of putting all the film footage which has been shot in the required order and joining it together. The style and speed of editing contribute to the mood and sense of the story. If the intention is to make the audience feel anxious and to create suspense the editing will be fast - the scenes will change frequently. If the mood intended is relaxed then the scenes will last longer and change less often. Some editing methods are: a straight cut; fade out - where the screen fades to black; a dissolve where one image is slowly brought in beneath another one.

TO THINK ABOUT:

MISE EN SCÈNE

Mise en scène is a French term which literally means 'put on stage'. It refers to everything we see on the screen, the composition and background of each scene. The characters' appearance - their costumes, make-up, hairstyles, acting styles and props - all these are key to the creation of a believable world and to the understanding of the story.
How do we know who the narrator is in a novel? How do we know who the narrator is in a film? How does the opening chapter of a novel establish the kind of story that it is going to be and who the main characters are? How is this done in the opening sequences of a film? What are the clues that we are given by the film language? What colours do we associate with particular moods?

THE WESTERN GENRE

Westerns take place historically during the short period between 1860 and 1890 when the American frontier was fought over, won and settled. During this time there was a sudden rush of mining camps, railways were built, bitter wars were fought with the Native Americans, there were cattle drives, the coming of the farmers and also the last days of the American Civil War. Geographically, westerns take place west of the Missouri/Mississippi Rivers.

The western is seen by many people as important in America's interpretation of its history and how it sees itself as a nation. It illustrates the conflict between individuals and community values and also presents the West as a symbol either of a desert or a garden.

*How might the settlers- cowboys and farmers see the West as a
desert? What are the qualities of
the West that might make them see
it as a garden? Think about the
hopes and aspirations of
individuals and communities and
about the obstacles that they might
have to overcome to achieve them.*

The narrow geographic boundary and the short period of time brought together a cross-section of social types representing a wide range of economic and social interests caught up in a struggle to survive and in a variety of activities. This period of history, to many people, represents a time when everything was possible, new beginnings were made and people could reinvent themselves. Options were open to everyone.

What has this got to do with a contemporary audience? One explanation is that the western genre, which fictionalises history, is changed and reworked for different audiences at different times
reflecting the feelings or the spirit of the time, for example *High Noon* (1952) in which a marshal faces confrontation alone, abandoned by the people of the town; *The Searchers* (1956) where the nomadic loner has to give way to the forces of civilisation; *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) which begins as a revenge western in which Clint Eastwood reworks the 'man-with-no-name' character and leads the pioneers to a new paradise; *The Quick and the Dead* (1995) a modern homage to the style and revenge themes of the spaghetti western with Sharon Stone as the revenge hero.

*How do you think this range of themes within a
single genre might reflect life or society at the time
of the production of these films?*

Also, some of the issues of westerns could have a contemporary significance. The predicament and conflicts of the Native Americans can be transferred
to how groups are treated and perceived today. How men and women fit into their community is also a current issue.

The western also has a universal appeal. Many people are fascinated with re-enacted history and there is also an older and more universal theme of discovery, conquering obstacles, challenges and perseverance. People like stories of adventurous open-air life which takes them away from the monotony of their own lives in the factory, office or at school. The plots are simple yet effective - a man rides into town, deals with trouble and rides out again. The climax of

westerns is very satisfying when good or order prevails (usually) and everything is settled in a blaze of guns. Also, westerns are larger than life - they do not present human beings as we know them with their petty preoccupations but as they 'ought' to be. They deal in myths, with legendary superhuman figures in a morality play and the triumph of good over evil with themes such as honour, patriotism and male friendship.

Which other film genres deal with legendary superhuman figures and worlds or civilisations where themes of honour and good versus evil are explored? If the themes are similar to the western what is it that distinguishes the genres?

ICONOGRAPHY

There are images that we associate with westerns, for example horse and rider standing out against the skyline, or a rocky landscape, guns, the sheriff's badge, the gambler's fancy waistcoat or the saloon girl's frilly petticoat. Actors such as John Wayne, Henry Fonda, Gary Cooper and Clint Eastwood are associated with the western and also form part of its visual landscape.

The elements that we associate with a particular film genre are called its iconography-- some elements of the western have already been identified, can you think of any more? What do you
expect to see in a western?

NARRATIVE

Film narratives can be seen as involving and introducing situations which are disrupted by a problem; the purpose of the narrative is to resolve this initial disruption and re-establish a new and satisfactory equilibrium. This creates a tension for the audience. On the one hand, the desire is for the problem to be solved, on the other hand, there is the desire for the narrative to continue in order to maintain and continue the pleasure that the audience is experiencing. Narratives have to operate strategies for both moving towards a solution and yet simultaneously putting it off it by complications.

The opening sequences of the western *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) demonstrates very clearly how peace and harmony is initially disrupted. Josey's paradise-like farm and home is brutally wrecked in these sequences and the film narrative shows how Josey works towards his revenge on the wreckers and how a state of peace and hope (equilibrium) is finally re established.

Can you think of other film narratives where peace is shattered and the rest of the narrative works towards re-establishing an equilibrium? How did the filmmaker introduce complications so that the solution did not arrive too quickly?

Narrative structure can include the perilous journey of the wagon train or stagecoach which finally reaches new land or safety. We, the audience, want to see the stagecoach reach safety but we are also intrigued and excited by the pleasure and suspense of the adventures and dangers it encounters in successfully getting to its final destination.

When you are watching the film Stagecoach make a note of the different kinds of adventures and obstacles that challenge and disrupt the travellers' journey.

The characters in Stagecoach represent a cross-section of future western 'types'. We are introduced to the 'proper' heroine in the person of the cavalry officer's pregnant wife; the fallen woman in the person of the banished saloon girl; the chivalrous Southern gambler; the big-hearted alcoholic doctor; the comic salesman; the bluff, jolly uncomplicated driver; the gruff, straightforward, honest sheriff; the good outlaw looking for an honest start alongside attacking Native Americans and the Seventh Cavalry.

What are the advantages for the storyteller in having all these types making a journey together? Can you think of any other genres in film, television and literature where groups of people from different backgrounds need to make a journey?

STAGECOACH TASK - Opening Sequence

Look closely at the opening sequences of Stagecoach up to where the name of the director, John Ford appears on the credits (You will need to look at it at least twice)

• What elements of the western or western iconography, have we been introduced to by this time?
• What part does the music play in this introduction?
• Can you identify different types of music?
• Do they give us information or add to the atmosphere?

Look again at the opening sequences up to where the stagecoach sets off with all its passengers.

• What do we learn about each character before they get on the stagecoach? How do we learn about them?

Quite a lot of information is given through dialogue and also through film language.

• What details do we learn about Mrs Mallory's life?
• What is happening to Dallas?
• What is the banker up to?
• What do we learn about Ringo, the character we have not yet met?

Write as much as you know about each character up to this point and how you have found it out. The film language for example, close-ups, mise en scène tells us a great deal.

• What might be the conflicts of interests and values between this particular group of people?

Imagine what some of their conflicts might be about. We are also introduced to the idea that the stagecoach is about to set off on a more dangerous journey than usual.

• What do we know about the journey?
• Where is the stagecoach going and who, or what, might threaten the safety of the passengers?
• How are all these narrative clues established to raise the audience's excitement and expectations?

Before you watch the rest of the film, write down what you think might happen to the stagecoach and to each of its passengers and then see if your predictions are accurate.

JOHN FORD

The director John Ford made films about the romance of the West - they deal with silhouettes against the sky and men facing death calmly, honour, duty and nobility. Ford's filmmaking career spanned fifty years and Stagecoach was his first western in 1939 thus began a long association with John Wayne as a western hero. There is a strong sense of the community in his films - the pioneering spirit of settlers in a new land and the values upon which they build their community. The western hero values courage in the face of death and respect for women and the weak. Many of the characters portrayed in westerns actually existed, in fact, John Ford knew Wyatt Earp.

John Ford used to introduce himself by saying 'My name is John Ford. I make westerns.' Ford's film Stagecoach is seen by many as the prototype western. Its tight dramatic construction and virtually non-stop action seem, in many ways, to be typical of all westerns. The spirit of the film is typical of other Ford films where the wrongfully outlawed hero and the 'fallen woman heroine can start a new life on a frontier farm free from the criticism of a hypocritical society. This was the first time Ford used Monument Valley, Navada and this distinctive landscape became part of the iconography of the western

Double Indemnity is one of a group of films made in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s now known as 'film noir'. The term 'film noir' is French and literally means 'black film'; it comes from the name of a series of books published in France called Série Noire and Fleuve Noire which were mostly translations of American crime fiction writers such as James M Cain, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. These books were mainly about crime and often had a private detective as the hero who would fall for a treacherous woman (the femme fatale). Some of these novels were used as the basis for this group of films made during this period. James M Cain's novels were adapted for the films *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). Others include *Farewell, My Lovely* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946) (Raymond Chandler) and The Maltese Falcon (1941) (Dashiell Hammett). Several of these writers went to Hollywood and wrote screenplays for films associated with film noir. Raymond Chandler adapted James M Cain's novel for *Double Indemnity*

Some argue that film noir is a visual style and not a genre and that it has a set of visual motifs that can be applied to a wide range of films across different genres. It has also been said that because most of these films were produced in the 1940s and 1950s film noir is not a genre but a movement which can be
identified with a particular time, place and mood. Film genres need not belong to periods of time or countries even, for example, Italian westerns or contemporary British thrillers. Film noir has been described by some critics as a movement which reflects the gloomy and despairing mood of a particular time and picks up the general feeling of uncertainty and fear in America after the Second World War and also the accompanying feeling of the Cold War threat.

'The streets were dark with something more than night.'
Raymond Chandler, The Simple Art of Murder

Unlike other genre descriptions, for example westerns, musicals, gangsters and science fiction, 'film noir' was not a term used by the film industry to market these films to their audiences but a category used by critics to describe a group of films which were identified as having enough elements in common to be grouped together into one category. These particular films came out of the thriller genre but were different because of their pessimistic mood and striking visual style.

However, genres can be identified through plot, visual imagery, settings, narrative development, characters, music and stars and we can apply all these elements to the study of film noir and to the film *Double Indemnity* in particular.

Double Indemnity is regarded by many as a classic film noir story. It is about a man who becomes involved with a woman to whom he is fatally attracted (he meets her through his job as an insurance salesman) and who then involves him in a criminal act (the murder of her husband). There is a strong sense of doomed fate in film noir films and the plot often involves the
woman betraying the man, or the man believing that she has done so. In *Double Indemnity* the woman is punished for her crimes and so is the hero. Walter Neff, the insurance salesman in

Double Indemnity, understands this when he wryly says: 'I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman.

VISUAL STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

Lighting

The most distinctive feature of film noir is its lighting. There are many night-time scenes in these films which were actually shot at night rather than using special filters in the day time, which was the usual Hollywood practice. Filming in this way with strong artificial lights produced highly contrasted areas of light and shade. Sometimes a source of light is shown through a set of Venetian blinds or a latticed window creating even more dramatic patterns of light and shade. This kind of lighting also results in dramatic shadows across the characters' faces which suggest a hidden, darker side of their personality. 'Low key' lighting of faces was in great contrast to the standard Hollywood 'high key' lighting style where faces were lit evenly eliminating shadows to try to provide a naturalistic look. This exaggerated, dramatic
style for visual effects was used to suggest a reflection of the characters' inner emotional state. (This style refers to the style of German Expressionist films of the 1 920s some of whose directors had fled to Hollywood in the 1930s during the rise of fascism - directors who worked on films associated with film noir such as Fritz Lang and the director of *Double Indemnity,* Billy Wilder).

Framing

Framing is also used in film noir to suggest the trapped nature of the characters with dramatic close-up shots to give a feeling of claustrophobia with high angle shots looking down on the characters to suggest how small and vulnerable they are in the context of the big city. Emphasis is given in the camera frame to a lamp, mirror or staircase to create an unsettling effect and to show how the character is dominated by his or her surroundings rather than in control of them.

Settings and iconography

Film noir is associated with an urban context, anonymous cities and low-life areas such as bars, nightclubs, motels and back streets in the dark. The male characters are dressed in city clothes such as trench coats, suits and hats with glamorous evening wear for the women. Cars, telephones and guns are all recurring images in film noir forming part of its iconography. Certain stars became associated with film noir like Robert Mitchum and Humphrey Bogart and femmes fatales such as Barbara Stanwyck, Gloria Grahame and Lana Turner.

Examine carefully all the objects that you see in Phyllis' house when she first meets Walter Neff and then see how often they recur throughout the film and when. What might be the significance of these items?

HEROES AND HEROINES

The hero of film noir films of the 1940s and 1950s are usually private investigators or men who work alone. They are portrayed as loners and often tough guys. It is the hero who usually describes the plot through a voice-over which makes the audience see events from his point of view and also gives them a sense (falsely) that he is in charge. The hero is inevitably fatally attracted to a woman who manipulates and betrays him.

The opening sequences of the film Double Indemnity firmly establish Walter Neff as the person from whose point of view we are going to hear the story. How does the filmmaker do this?

The female lead is always very physically attractive with tight-fitting clothes, jewellery and a way

of smoking cigarettes which draws attention to her body. She is usually mysterious and controls the hero with her changes of mood. She is known as a 'femme fatale' as she is dangerous and will lead him to his doom. These women are strong and active and can be seen as positive portrayals of women but they are also threatening and disruptive. Some critics have felt that this portrayal of women depicts how men felt about them when returning from long absences during the war. Women had gone to work outside the home and achieved economic and social independence and men's status as head of the household was challenged.

1. How does the filmmaker introduce us to Phyllis?
Describe her appearance and explain how the camera draws our attention to her.

2. Why does the camera follow her legs through the
stairs rather than focus directly on them?

3*. Describe how the camera builds up our expectation that she will have power over Walter.*

DOUBLE INDEMNITY TASK - opening Sequences

•   How does the music signify this will be a dramatic film with a serious fate? Identify the moments when it changes in tempo.

•   Why does the camera look down on Walter Neff's car as it speeds through the night city nearly out of control?

When do we get to see Walter's face? Why has the filmmaker taken so long to give us this close-up? The camera does not move from Walter's face as he describes himself and 'confesses' to his boss. The whole of the narrative will be told to use in flashback and we will be brought back to the beginning with a complete understanding of Walter's situation. Then we move into daylight as the story unfolds, again following Walter's car, narrated by Walter as part of his 'confessional'. This is one of the few moments in the film where the action takes place in daylight. As soon as Walter enters Phyllis' house he enters a world of darkness, mystery and shadows.

We have already discussed film noir lighting - look at the way the light is filtered in the house.
•   How many sources of fractured light can you identify?

Why does the camera linger on Walter and Phyllis gazing at Phyllis in the mirror?

The sequence ends with Walter saying: 'How could I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle.' We know that he has already been drawn towards his doom.
•   What other clues are there in this sequence that will carry the narrative forward?
•   What do we learn about Phyllis, her husband and Walter Neff through dialogue and through the language of the filmmaker?

The Last Seduction (1993) Chinatown (1974) and Blade Runner (1982) are all films which have been considered to have elements of film noir style of theme. Take one of these films and compare its opening sequence with those of Double Indemnity. Would you classify it as film noir? If so, why?

BILLY WILDER

Billy Wilder was born in Vienna in 1906. He started off as *a* journalist and then moved into the German film industry as a scriptwriter. He left Germany and went to America where he joined Paramount Studios. He began by writing romances and then worked on a series of 'disenchanted' films: *Double Indemnity,* a thriller which demonstrated that crime arises from human greed and depravity; *The Lost* Weekend (1945), a clear and detailed account of alcoholism; *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), which mocks Hollywood glamour; Ace *in the Hole* (1951) which exposes the sensationalism of the press and *Stalag 17(1953)* a prisoner of war film which re-examines camaraderie. His caustic and witty dialogue are particularly evident in two of his films: *Double Indemnity* and Some *Like It Hot* (1959).

THE FRENCH NEW WAVE

The term New Wave was initially used to describe the new 'youth class' in French society in the late 1950s. This was later taken up in relation to the youth appeal of cinema and gradually the term came to refer to young film makers and actors rather than youth generally.

In the 1940s and 1950s a number of young writers and critics gradually came together around the screenings of early cinema classics and, later, commercial Hollywood films. One of the group was a novelist and a filmmaker called Alexandre Astruc who wrote an essay in 1948 called 'La Camera Stylo'. He argued for a cinema which was personal and in which the filmmaker could use the medium of film to 'write' with the camera-stylo (camera pen) as a painter or a novelist used a paintbrush or pen. This initial statement was continued and developed by Andre Bazin the directing force behind a magazine called Cahiers du Cinema which provided a platform for young critics. These critics included five young men who were later to become famous filmmakers themselves: Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer. There were a large number of films available to be seen in Paris at this time, just after the Second World War, which allowed the group to discuss and explore their responses to a range of films. The Cahiers du Cinema developed its position for the central 'authorial' voice in cinema - an approach which became known as 'la politique des auteurs' and was later known in Britain and America as the 'authorship' approach to film study. The approach argues that a director has an important and identifiable a voice in film as the author of a novel.

Are there any directors you can identify as having a particular voice? This could mean film style and/or themes that recur in his/her films. If you can think of any, write down what it is that distinguishes them from other filmmakers.

NEW APPROACHES TO MAINSTREAM CINEMA

This new approach to film was primarily seen as an attack on what was accepted as mainstream French cinema in the 1950s. This mainstream cinema was similar to that of Britain and Hollywood with relatively high budgets, established stars and sophisticated studio sets. The stories were often taken from literature. Truffaut criticised mainstream cinema as the 'cinema du papa'. New Wave films set out to be fresh and different. They were cheaply produced, often on location, and they set out to promote new, young stars and to appeal to new, young audiences.

The decline in the French film industry in the late 1950s followed that of other European film industries and Britain. It meant that there was an opening for smaller production companies with smaller budgets. The structure of the production industry in France was different from that in America with lots of small production companies and the possibility of raising financial backing for a single film.

The technological innovations of the late 1950s also produced lightweight cameras such as Camiflex which allowed cinematographers to work effectively on location in the streets of Paris. They also experimented with lighting and worked with new film stock which created a new style which later influenced British and American cinematographers.

Look at the lighting in the opening sequences of A Bout de Souffle (up to where Michel runs away from the policeman) and comment on its 'naturalness'. Is it different in the Paris streets from when Michel is driving into the country? What is the effect that the filmmaker has achieved in both locations?

In the 1960s in Europe and in America cinema audiences were declining but the proportion of young people in the audience was increasing. A young, educated audience was growing and was interested in intelligent, entertaining and contemporary French films. This new, young group of directors was ready to produce films for this audience - Truffaut, Godard and Chabrol - were all in their twenties at this time. These New Wave directors also displayed sexuality and sexual activity more openly on the screen - an important new attraction to audiences, particularly British. Although the Cahiers group of directors have sustained the most critical attention it was more commercial directors who first gained recognition -Roger Vadim's *Et Dieu Crea la femme* with Brigitte Bardot - had enormous impact and influence in terms of sexual liberation.

THE CAHIERS GROUP

The most well-known examples of New Wave films among the Cahiers group of directors are probably films by Godard and Truffaut. *A Bout de Souffle* (Breathless) with Michel, the main character and his mannerisms, copied from Humphrey Bogart, its editing and natural lighting seems still to have a contemporary feel. *Les Quatre Cent coups* is a film in which Truffaut recreates much of his own teenage experiences and has a similar sense of contemporary relevance. Other directors in the Cahiers group included Chabrol, Rohmer and Rivette. The films of these directors were all very different but they did share some characteristics:

• *Many were made on low budgets*

• *The Cahiers group often worked on each other's films and shared crews*

• *Stories were often based on 'pulp' American fiction*

• *Characters were often young and reckless*

• *Filming was on location, usually in Paris*

• *The cinematography was often improvised and innovatory*

• *The films had frequent references and 'hommages' to Hollywood*

• *They produced their own stars such as Jean-Paul Belmondo, Anna Karma, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Jeanne Moreau and Anouk Aimee*

   What are the references to American culture that you can see in the opening sequences of A Bout de Souffle?

The Cahiers group of directors had a considerable impact on Hollywood and other national cinemas. The immediate impact was to encourage new directors in similar situations in the UK and other European countries to try something new. Another more long-term effect was to introduce formal innovation and a new self-consciousness into Hollywood films - Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was one of the first films to be talked about in terms of a 'European sensibility' and Robert Altman and Woody Allen were seen as introducing a different approach to film making influenced by European cinema. *Pulp Fiction* directed by Quentin Tarantino (1994) has an unconventional narrative which can be traced to the influence of the French New Wave. (The production company of *Pulp Fiction* 'A Band Apart' is the title of a film by Jean-Luc Godard. Godard's comment on this is: *'Tarantino named his production company after one of my films. He'd have done better to give me some money.'*)

A BOUT DE SOUFFLE TASK - Opening Sequences

In the opening sequences of *A Bout de Souffle* we first see Michel in close-up; he is wearing a comically-tilted gangster hat and we see the Bogart mannerism which recurs throughout the film. He is watching a girl find a car that he can break into.

- What is unusual about the way the camera cuts to the face of the girl? Is there anything that you might comment on about other camera angles in this scene?
- Comment on the sound that you hear.

We share Michel's point of view as the camera travels with him in the stolen car and he comments on hitchhikers and the French countryside. Then he turns to the camera and talks to the audience.
- Why did the filmmaker introduce this moment do you think?
- What effect does it have on the audience?

Michel plays with the gun that he discovers in the car and then pretence becomes reality as he shoots the policeman and runs away across the fields. The filmmaker does not let us share Michel's emotions at that point as we see him flee from the scene; we see him only in long shot.
- Why has Godard chosen to film him in this way?

In 1983 Jim McBride, an American film director, remade the film as *Breathless* with Richard Gere in the starring role. Look at the opening sequences of this film up to the same moment when the policeman is shot and Jesse, the hero, runs away.

- What do we hear on the soundtrack that allows us to locate the film? This is an important narrative clue.
- What is similar about Michel and Jesse in terms of dress, mannerisms and character?
- What has the director done to make Jesse appeal to a more mainstream audience?

Examine closely a short sequence from both films within the opening sequences and compare camera shots.
- How would you describe *Breathless* in terms of genre?
- What are the elements that would 'sell' it to an American audience?

JEAN-LUC GODARD

Godard is both experimental and political in his filmmaking. He tries new ways of constructing a film and experiments with narrative, with sound and with the way the image is constructed. He challenges the way the narrative progresses and the way equilibrium is restored in mainstream film. He uses techniques which do not allow the audience to identify too closely with the heroes and heroines of his films. He brings into question the transparency and 'seamlessness' of mainstream film reminding audiences that they are watching a construction. He challenges the audience's expectations of pleasure and 'entertainment'. His films make demands on the audience and are a commentary on society, art and cinema.

- *Discuss and explain these two comments about film by Godard:*

  'It is not a just image, it is just an image.'
  'Film is not the reflection of reality it is the reality of the reflection.'

  In a recent interview (11 February 2000. The Guardian) Godard comments on the current audience for his films:

  'They're fewer than they used to be, because it's too difficult, because the world has changed. They go to the cinema a lot less and so do I. But if they do go, they'll give 80% of themselves to the film. If you go and see Titanic, you only give the film 10% of your personality Good films get smaller audiences but more of the viewer.

- *What do you think Godard means by this? Explain his view of different audience reaction to different types of film. Could you define the different audiences?*

YOUTH FILMS

Youth films usually portray rebellious young people who would not fit in with adult expectations; they challenge authority such as the police, school, parents and adults in general. Attitudes are often displayed through clothes, music, speech and behaviour. Youth films began as a post-war phenomenon defined by representation of the target audience, in other words, who they were made for. Although they were publicised as otherwise they were usually very moral. They were made to target young audiences at a time when cinema was in crisis, largely due to television. They reflected contemporary fears about young people and the rise of a youth culture - affluence, deviance, delinquency, sexual deviation. In Hollywood in the 1950s, Marion Brando and James Dean represented this new phenomenon - the rebel who is apparently against all established norms of behaviour.

What is the contemporary representation of this rebel? Is there one? Identify stars who play recognisable youth characters and the films they have appeared in.

What aspects of La Haine make it a youth film, do you think?
Youth films often represent youth as a social problem. It is a subject that British films have frequently dealt with, for example Ken Loach a British director, has made films about young people and their social context, for example *Kes* (1969) and *Looks and Smiles* (1982). Hollywood youth films often exaggerate problems for dramatic effect without really investigating the problems or possible solutions. *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) is an example of an American youth problem film which explodes into violence. British social problem films are often more concerned with realism both in terms of representation (the characters are usually closer to those in real life) and in terms of how the story turns out.

Compare any British and Hollywood film dealing with young people. You might like to choose Ratcatcher (1999), The War Zone (1986) or Trainspotting (1995) which are British films and compare them with, say, Clueless (1995), Ten Things I Hate About You (1999) or Boyz N the Hood (1991).
Or pick any two films of your own choice which deal with youth. What are the problems within the films and how does the film maker represent them? Do British and American directors deal with similar topics in a different way?

It might also be interesting to make a direct comparison of La Haine with an American youth film and to ask about locations, culture (male or female, American or French), time period (La Haine happens over 24 hours). How realist or escapist it is? Does it depict the everyday lives of people in a recognisable location or could it be anywhere? When you have defined the differences try to pull together some similarities.

THE COMMUNITY, THE POLICE

La Haine deals with young people's lives on the housing estates on the outskirts of Paris and, in particular, the relationship of young people with the police. *(La Haine* means 'hate' which is what the youth feel about the police.) Mathieu Kassovitz, the writer! director, is a young Jewish Frenchman who feels that he has an affinity for these communities. The three central characters come from three minority groups - Jewish, Arab and African French. In America, *La Haine* has been compared to *Boyz N the Hood* because of the important central role the gun plays and also to Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989) when a minor racial conflict gets out of hand. It has also been compared to *Trainspotting* and to the films of Ken Loach (a filmmaker who is popular in France).

La Haine a small, low budget film, was very successful at the box office and was highly praised by critics. It had an extended run in cinemas in France and was shown to the French Cabinet as an example of how young people felt. Mathieu Kassovitz won the Cannes best director prize in 1995.

Empire magazine, December 1995, describes the film as:

   a 'message' picture, so hyper realistic and visceral that the estate's claustrophobia and the no-hope scenario of its youthful population filter through like a scream.

What is the message of this film?
   What makes the scenario 'no hope? Do you leave the film with any optimism?

In an interview Kassovitz explained that the film was provoked by the death in police custody of a young banlleusard (suburb dweller): *'What I wanted to do was tell the story of a guy who gets up in the morning and by the evening has got himself killed.'* La Haine unfolds over a troubled 24 hours, an uneasy morning-after calm having settled on the estate where Vinz, Said and Hubert live. A police weapon lost during the rioting the night before is in Vinz's hands and becomes the film's dramatic motor. The film explores the growing tension within the trio of friends. Vinz is an explosive, impetuous character, a loose cannon who threatens to explode at any moment. The camerawork echoes the edginess of the group moving them on wherever they happen to come to rest.

Comment on aspects of the
   camerawork that you particularly notice during the film. What gives it a documentary feel and how does the camera convey the mounting tension between the friends and in the world that they inhabit?

The film presents itself in a documentary style; there is also an authentic sense of detail which adds dimension to this particular genre.

Identify the detail in the film which gives the audience a sense of place and an authenticity about the young boys' lives.

The trio travel into Paris on an increasingly nightmarish journey. One of the slogans that we see is 'Le monde est a vous' (the world belongs to you) which they change to read 'a nous' (to us). The irony here is that Paris does not belong to them - it becomes an increasingly bleak assault course ending up with their brutal treatment in police custody.

Pick out two of three 'nightmarish' moments which are emphasised by the camerawork. State how the camera angles and the framing add to their dark experiences.

The three boys try to pick up some young, sophisticated women at an art gallery but clumsily find themselves out of their depth and they then react violently and offensively. This incident underlines their isolation both within the relationships they have with each other and the violent relationship that they have with the police. These are strong themes throughout the film.

Although most of the film is intense there are also moments of playfulness and warmth. Identify moments like these and then find contrasting scenes of intensity. Comment on how the mis en scene, camerawork and editing add to these moments

AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

American popular culture has had attention from the French left and artistic community since the 1920s. As in *A Bout de Souffle* American culture is very important in *La Haine.* There are frequent references to it in *La Haine* such as the guns, the music and posters in Hubert's bedroom and Vinz's recreation of a famous scene from *Taxi Driver* (1976).

What others can you identify?
What is their significance in the film?

THEMES AND STYLE

1. What is the central theme of La Haine Is the film concerned with race? Is it significant that the three central characters are from three different ethnic groups?

2 Do we see them as types or as fully-rounded characters?

3. How does the music in the film and the camerawork make the film a youth film? Is the success of the film bound up with these two aspects?

4.   The time span of the film is a day. How does this affect the tension and behaviour of the characters? Does it affect the way we read the film?

5. Is our understanding of the community increased by the film's portrayal of these three main characters? Is our understanding of French and male culture increased?

LA Haine - opening sequences task

'Kassovitz combats the inertia and boredom of his frustrated antagonists with a thrusting, jiving camera style which harries and punctuates their rambling, often very funny dialogue.' Time Out Film Guide, 2000

- Do the opening sequences of the film give us a sense of this camera style?
- Can you find examples?
- Do we get any flavour of this kind of dialogue?
- What do we see immediately the film begins?
- What are the sounds that we hear?
- Why does the filmmaker go directly to newsreel footage?
- What effect does this have on us, the audience?
- How does it form our expectations?
- Are we able to say at this point what kind of film this is? If so, what are the clues that we have already been given?

- Why does the filmmaker remind us of time passing by giving us a regular time check?
- Where do we meet the three friends?
- What information does the location give us about them?

MATHIEU KASSOVITZ

Mathieu Kassovitz is the director and screen writer of *La Haine.* Kassovitz made short films before moving onto features and his first feature called *Métisse* (1993) is available in the US known as *Café Au Lait* (a mixed-race person). His first experiece of cinema was as an actor and he was also in *A Self-Made Hero (Un Hero Tres Discret)* where he was highly praised for his performance. After the success of *La Haine* he made a third feature *Assassins* (1977). This film investigates the media and its treatment of violence as *La Haine* scrutinised the police. Unlike *La Haine, Assassins* was not well received at Cannes. Kassovitz has continued to act and is currently working (directing) on a period drama which is an adaptation of a recent suspense novel.