Moving Pictures

Moving Pictures

An Introduction to Cinema

Russell Sharman

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– Abbie Hoffman, 1971

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About the Author

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Russell Leigh Sharman is a writer, filmmaker and anthropologist. He has written for Hollywood since 2008, working for dozens of studios and production companies, including Warner Bros., Fox, Disney, MRC, DeLine Pictures, 21 Laps, Participant Media, Montecito Pictures and Real FX. He is the writer/director of APARTMENT 4E, a feature adaptation of his stage play, as well as a number of award-wining short films and documentaries. His latest stage play, THE INTERROGATOR, was a semi-finalist for the O'Neill Playwriting Conference. He also has a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Oxford University and has nearly 25 years of teaching experience at colleges and universities across the country. He has received fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Whiting Foundation and others; has published and presented numerous essays on urban life, culture, cinema and aesthetics; and is the author of three books, THE TENANTS OF EAST HARLEM, NIGHTSHIFT NYC and MOVING PICTURES: AN INTRODUCTION TO CINEMA. He currently lives and works in Baltimore, MD.

And since I'm writing this in the third person, "he" would really like to hear from you if you have any comments or suggestions: russell.sharman@gmail.com.

I

An Introduction to Cinema

What is Cinema?

Is it the same as a *movie* or *film*? Does it include digital video, broadcast content, streaming media? Is it a highbrow term reserved only for European and art house feature films? Or is it a catch-all for any time a series of still images run together to produce the illusion of movement, whether in a multi-plex theater or the 5-inch screen of a smart phone?

Technically, the word itself derives from the ancient Greek, *kinema*, meaning movement. Historically, it's a shortened version of the French *cinematographe*, an invention of two brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumiere, that combined *kinema* with another Greek root, *graphien*, meaning to write or record.

The "recording of movement" seems as good a place as any to begin an exploration of the moving image. And *cinema* seems broad (or vague) enough to capture the essence of the form, whether we use it specifically in reference to that art house film, or to refer to the more commonplace production and consumption of *movies*, *TV, streaming series, videos, interactive gaming, VR, AR* or whatever new technology mediates our experience of the moving image. Because ultimately that's what all of the above have in common: the moving image. Cinema, in that sense, stands at the intersection of art and technology like nothing else. As an art form it would not exist without the technology required to capture the moving image. But the mere ability to record a moving image would be meaningless without the art required to capture our imagination.

But cinema is much more than the intersection of art and technology. It is also, and maybe more importantly, a powerful medium of communication. Like language itself, cinema is a surrounding and enveloping substance that carries with it what it means to be human in a specific time and place. That is to say, it *mediates* our experience of the world, helps us make sense of things, and in doing so, often helps shape the world itself. It's why we often find ourselves confronted by some extraordinary event and find the only way to describe it is: "It was like a movie."

In fact, for more than a century, filmmakers and audiences have collaborated on a massive, ongoing, largely unconscious social experiment: the development of a **cinematic language**, the fundamental and increasingly complex rules for how cinema communicates meaning. There is a syntax, a grammar, to cinema that has developed over time. And these rules, as with any language, are iterative, that is, they form and evolve through repetition, both within and between each generation. As children we are socialized into ways of seeing through children's programming, cartoons and YouTube videos. As adults we become more sophisticated in our understanding of the rules, able to innovate, re-combine, become creative with the language. And every generation or so, we are confronted with great leaps forward in technology that re-orient and often advance our understanding of how the language works.

And therein lies the critical difference between cinematic language and every other means of communication. The innovations and complexity of modern written languages have taken more than 5,000 years to develop. Multiply that by at least 10 for spoken language.

Cinematic language has taken just a little more than 100 years to come into its own.

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In January 1896 those two brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumiere, set up their *cinematographe*, a combination motion picture camera and projector, at a café in Lyon, France and presented their short film, *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station) to a paying audience. It was a simple film, aptly titled, of a train pulling into a station. The static camera positioned near the tracks capturing a few would-be passengers milling about as the train arrived, growing larger and larger in the frame until it steamed past and slowed to a stop. There was no editing, just one continuous shot. A mere 50 seconds long…

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And it blew the minds of everyone who saw it.

Accounts vary as to the specifics of the audience reaction. Some claim the moving image of a train hurtling toward the screen struck fear among those in attendance, driving them from their seats in a panic. Others underplay the reaction, noting only that no one had seen anything like it. Which, of course, wasn't entirely true either. It wasn't the first motion picture. The Lumiere brothers had projected a series of 10 short films in Paris the year before. An American inventor, Woodville Latham, had developed his own projection system that same year. And Thomas Edison had invented a similar apparatus before that.

But one thing is certain: that early film, as simple as it was, changed the way we see the world and ourselves. From the early *actualite* documentary short films of the Lumieres, to the wild, theatrical flights of fancy of Georges Melies, to the epic narrative films of Lois Weber and D. W. Griffith, the new medium slowly but surely developed its own unique cinematic language. Primitive at first, limited in its visual vocabulary, but with unlimited potential. And as filmmakers learned how to use that language to re-create the world around them through moving pictures, we learned right along with them. Soon we were no longer awed (much less terrified) by a two-dimensional image of a train pulling into a station, but we were no less enchanted by the possibilities of the medium with the addition of narrative structure, editing, production design, and (eventually) sound and color cinematography.

Since that January day in Lyon, we have all been active participants in this ongoing development of a cinematic language. As the novelty short films of those early pioneers gave way to a global entertainment industry centered on Hollywood and its factory-like production of discrete, 90-minute narrative feature films. As the invention of broadcast technology in the first half of the 20th century gave way to the rise of television programming and serialized story-telling. And as the internet revolution at the end of the 20th century gave way to the streaming content of the 21st, from binge-worthy series lasting years on end to one-minute videos on social media platforms like Snapchat and TikTok. Each evolution of the form borrowed from and built on what came before, both in terms of how filmmakers tell their stories and how we experience them. And in as much as we may be mystified and even amused by the audience reaction to that simple depiction of a train pulling into a station back in 1896, imagine how that same audience would respond to the last Avengers film projected in IMAX 3D.

We've certainly come a long, long way.

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This book is an exploration of that evolution of cinema, the art and technology of moving pictures. But it is also an introduction to the fundamentals of the form that have remained relatively constant for more than 100 years. Just as the text you are reading right now defies easy categorization – is it a book, an online resource, an open source text – modern cinema exists across multiple platforms – is it a movie, a video, theatrical, streaming – but the fundamentals of communication, the syntax, grammar and rules of language, written or cinematic, remain relatively constant.

The text is divided into two unequal sections: form and content. The first and longer of the two covers the basic principles of the form, the *means by which cinema communicates*. We'll start with a brief history of cinema to provide some historical context, then move on to an overview of how moving pictures work, literally and figuratively, from the neurological phenomena behind the illusion of movement, to the invisible techniques and generally agreed-upon conventions that form the basis of cinematic language. Then we'll take each aspect of how cinema is created in turn: production design, narrative structure, cinematography, editing, sound and performance. Whether it's released in a theater as a 2-hour spectacle or streaming online in 5-minute increments, every iteration of cinema includes these elements and they are each critical in our understanding of film form, how movies do what they do to us, and why we let them.

The second section takes all of this accumulated knowledge of *how* cinema communicates and applies it to *what, exactly, cinema is communicating*. That is, we'll take a long hard look at the content of cinema, how that has changed over time, and how, for better or worse, it often hasn't. This section will take seriously the idea that cinema both influences and is influenced by the society in which it is produced. And given the porous borders of the information age, that "society" is increasingly a global one. Cinema then, not unlike literature, can be viewed and analyzed as a kind of cultural document, a neutral reflection of society in a moment of time, or it can be viewed as a powerful tool for social change (or for the resistance of change as the case may be).

This emphasis on content inevitably leads to an exploration of power and representation. Who is on screen? Who is behind the camera? If cinema is as powerful a medium as I contend, it stands to reason that it matters deeply who controls the means of communication. To that end, we'll focus on two specific issues of representation: the role of women in cinema and the role of African Americans in cinema; both in terms of how they are portrayed on screen, and the ways women and Black filmmakers specifically have fought for control of their own cinematic narratives.

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There is an ancient story about a king who was so smitten by the song of a particular bird that he ordered his wisest and most accomplished scientists to identify its source. How could it sing so beautifully? What apparatus lay behind such a sweet sound? So they did the only thing they could think to do: they killed the bird and dissected it to find the source of its song. Of course, by killing the bird, they killed its song.

The analysis of an art form, even one as dominated by technology as cinema, always runs the risk of killing the source of its beauty. By taking it apart, piece by piece, there's a chance we'll lose sight of the whole, that ineffable quality that makes art so much more than the sum of its parts. Throughout this text, my hope is that by gaining a deeper understanding of how cinema works, in both form and content, you'll appreciate its beauty even more.

In other words, I don't want to kill the bird.

Because as much as cinema is an ongoing, collaborative social experiment, one in which we are all participants, it also carries with it a certain magic. And like any good magic show, we all know it's an illusion. We all know that even the world's greatest magician can't really make an object float or saw a person in half (without serious legal implications). It's all a trick. A sleight of hand that maintains the illusion. But we've all agreed to allow ourselves to be fooled. In fact, we've often paid good money for the privilege. Cinema is no different. A century of tricks used to fool an audience that's been in on it from the very beginning. We laugh or cry or scream at the screen, openly and unapologetically manipulated by the medium. And that's how we like it.

This text is dedicated to revealing the tricks without ruining the illusion. To look behind the curtain to see that the wizard is one of us. That in fact, we *are* the wizard (great movie by the way). Hopefully by doing so we will only deepen our appreciation of cinema in all its forms and enjoy the artistry of a well-crafted illusion that much more.

Video Attributions:

'L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat (Arrival of a Train)' by Lumière Brothers. by EcoworldReactor. Standard Vimeo License.
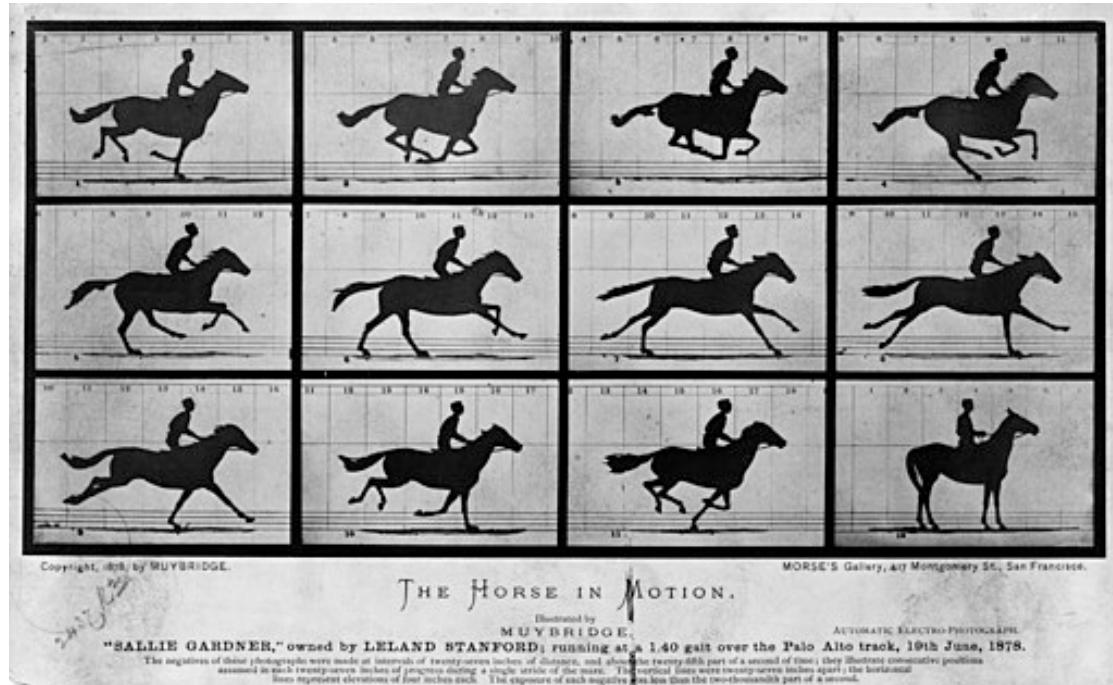
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A Brief History of Cinema

Leland Stanford was bored.

In 1872, Stanford was a wealthy robber baron, former Governor of California, and horse racing enthusiast with way too much time on his hands. Spending much of that time at the track, he became convinced that a horse at full gallop lifted all four hooves off the ground. His friends scoffed at the idea. Unfortunately, a horse's legs moved so fast that it was impossible to tell with the human eye. So he did what really wealthy people do when they want to settle a bet, he turned to a nature photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, and offered him $25,000 to photograph a horse mid gallop.

Six years later, after narrowly avoiding a murder conviction (but that's another story), Muybridge perfected a technique of photographing a horse in motion with a series of 12 cameras triggered in sequence. One of the photos clearly showed that all four of the horse's hooves left the ground at full gallop. Stanford won the bet and went on to found Stanford University. Muybridge pocketed the $25,000 and became famous for the invention of **series photography**, a critical first step toward motion pictures.

The Horse in Motion. Eadweard Muybridge, 1878.

Of course, the mechanical reproduction of an image had already been around for some time. The **Camera Obscura**, a technique for reproducing images by projecting a scene through a tiny hole that is inverted and reversed on the opposite wall or surface (think pinhole camera), had been around since at least the 5th century BCE, if not thousands of years earlier. But it wasn't until a couple of French inventors, Nicephore Niepce and Louis Daguerre, managed to capture an image through a chemical process known as photoetching in the 1820s that photography was born. By 1837, Niepce was dead (best not to ask too many questions about that) and Daguerre had perfected the technique of fixing an image on a photographic plate through a chemical reaction of silver, iodine and mercury. He called it a **daguerreotype**. After himself. Naturally.

But to create the illusion of movement from these still images would require further innovation. The basic concept of animation was already in the air through earlier inventions like the **magic lantern** and eventually the **zoetrope**. But a photo-realistic recreation of movement was unheard of. That's where Muybridge comes in. His technique of capturing a series of still images in quick succession laid the groundwork for other inventors like Thomas Edison, Woodville Latham and Auguste and Louis Lumiere to develop new ways of photographing and projecting movement. Crucial to this process was the development of strips of light-sensitive celluloid film to replace the bulky glass plates used by Muybridge. This enabled a single camera to record a series of high-speed exposures (rather than multiple cameras taking a single photo in sequence). It also enabled that same strip of film to be

projected at an equally high speed, creating the illusion of movement through a combination of optical and neurological phenomena. But more on that in the next chapter.

By 1893, 15 years after Muybridge won Stanford's bet, Edison had built the first "movie studio," a small, cramped, wood-frame hut covered in black tar paper with a hole in the roof to let in sunlight. His employees nicknamed it the **Black Maria** because it reminded them of the police prisoner transport wagons in use at the time (also known as "paddy wagons" with apologies to the Irish). One of the first films they produced was a 5 second "scene" of a man sneezing.

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Riveting stuff. But still, movies were born.

Sort of.

There was just one problem: the only way to view Edison's films was through a **kinetoscope**, a machine that allowed a single viewer to peer into a viewfinder and crank through the images. The ability to project the images to a paying audience would take another couple of years.

In 1895, Woodville Latham, a chemist and Confederate veteran of the Civil War, lured away a couple of Edison's employees and perfected the technique of motion picture projection. In that same year, over in France, Auguste and Louis Lumiere invented the **cinematographe** which could perform the same modern miracle. The Lumiere brothers would receive the lion's share of the credit, but Latham and the Lumieres essentially tied for first place in the invention of cinema as we know it.

Sort of.

It turns out there was *another* French inventor, Louis Le Prince (apparently we owe a lot to the French), who was experimenting with motion pictures and had apparently perfected the technique by 1890. But when he arrived in the US for a planned public demonstration that same year – potentially eclipsing Edison's claim on the technology – he mysteriously vanished from a train. His body and luggage, including his invention, were never found. Conspiracy theories about his untimely disappearance have circulated ever since (we're looking at you, Thomas Edison).

Those early years of cinema were marked by great leaps forward in technology, but not so much forward movement in terms of art. Whether it was Edison's 5-second film of a sneeze, or the Lumieres' 46-second film *Workers Leaving a Factory* (which is exactly what it sounds like), the films were wildly popular because no one had seen anything like them, not because they were breaking new ground narratively.

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There were, of course, notable exceptions. Alice Guy-Blaché was working as a secretary at a photography company when she saw the Lumieres' invention in 1895. The following year she wrote, directed and edited what many consider the first fully fictional film in cinema history, *The Cabbage Fairy* (1896):

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But it was George Melies who became the most well-known filmmaker-as-entertainer in those first few years. Melies was a showman in Paris with a flare for the dramatic. He was one of the first to see the Lumieres' *cinematographe* in action in 1895 and immediately saw its potential as a form of mass entertainment. Over the next couple of decades he produced hundreds of films that combined fanciful stage craft, optical illusions, and wild storylines that anticipated much of what was to come in the next century of cinema. His most famous film, *A Trip to the Moon*, produced in 1902, transported audiences to the surface of the moon on a rocket ship and sometimes even included hand-tinted images to approximate color cinematography.

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He was very much ahead of his time and would eventually be immortalized in Martin Scorsese's 2011 film *Hugo*.

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By the start of the 20th century, cinema had become a global phenomenon. Fortunately, many of those early filmmakers had caught up with Melies in terms of the art of cinema and its potential as an entertainment medium. In Germany, filmmakers like Fritz Lange and Robert Weine helped form one of the earliest examples of a unique and unified cinematic style, consisting of highly stylized, surreal production designs and modernist, even futuristic narrative conventions that came to be known as *German Expressionism*. Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) was a macabre nightmare of a film about a murderous hypnotist and is considered the world's first horror movie.

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And Lange's *Metropolis* (1927) was an epic science-fiction dystopian fantasy with an original running time of more than 2 hours.

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Meanwhile in Soviet Russia, Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein were experimenting with how the creative juxtaposition of images could influence how an audience thinks and feels about what they see on screen (also known as *editing*, a relatively new concept at the time). Through a series of experiments, Kuleshov demonstrated that it was this juxtaposition of images, not the discrete images themselves, that generated meaning, a phenomenon that came to be known as **The Kuleshov Effect**. Eisenstein, his friend and colleague, applied Kuleshov's theories to his own cinematic creations, including the concept of *montage*: a collage of moving images designed to create an emotional effect rather than a logical narrative sequence. Eisenstein's most famous use of this technique is in the Odessa steps sequence of his

historical epic, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

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But it was the United States that was destined to become the center of the cinematic universe, especially as it grew into a global mass entertainment medium. Lois Weber was an early innovator and the first American director, male or female, to make a narrative feature film, *The Merchant of Venice* (1914). Throughout her career, Weber would pursue subjects considered controversial at the time, such as abortion, birth control and capital punishment (it helped that she owned her own studio). But it wasn't just her subject matter that pushed the envelope. For example, in her short film, *Suspense* (1913) she pioneered the use of intercutting and basically invented split screen editing.

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Others, like D. W. Griffith, followed suit (though it's doubtful Griffith would have given Weber any credit). Like Weber, Griffith helped pioneer the full-length feature film and invented many of the narrative conventions, camera moves and editing techniques still in use today. Unfortunately, many of those innovations were first introduced in his ignoble, wildly racist (and wildly popular at the time) *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith followed that up the next year with the somewhat ironically-titled *Intolerance* (1916), a box office disappointment but notable for its larger than life sets, extravagant costumes, and complex story-line that made George Melies's creations seem quaint by comparison.

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Weber, Griffith and many other filmmakers and entrepreneurs would go on to establish film studios able to churn out hundreds of short and long-form content for the movie theaters popping up on almost every street corner.

CINEMA GOES HOLLYWOOD

This burgeoning new entertainment industry was not, however, located in southern California. Not yet, anyway. Almost all of the production facilities in business at the time were in New York, New Jersey or somewhere on the Eastern seaboard. Partly because the one man who still controlled the technology that made cinema possible was based there: Thomas Edison. Edison owned the patent for capturing and projecting motion pictures, essentially cornering the market on the new technology (R.I.P. Louis Le Prince). If you wanted to make a movie in the 1900s or 1910s, you had to pay Edison for the privilege.

Not surprisingly, a lot of would-be filmmakers bristled at Edison's control over the industry. And since patent law was difficult to enforce across state lines at the time, many of them saw California as an ideal place to start a career in filmmaking. Sure, the weather was nice. But it was also as far away from the northeast as you could possibly get within the continental United States, and a lot harder for Edison to

sue for patent violations.

By 1912, Los Angeles had replaced New York as the center of the film business, attracting filmmakers and entertainment entrepreneurs from around the world. World-renowned filmmakers like Ernst Lubitsch from Germany, Erich von Stroheim from Austria, and an impish comedian from England named Charlie Chaplin, all flocked to the massive new production facilities that sprang up around the city. Universal Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Warner Bros., all of them motion picture factories able to mass-produce dozens, sometimes hundreds of films per year. And they were surrounded by hundreds of other, smaller companies, all of them competing for screen space in thousands of new movie houses around the country.

One small neighborhood in the heart of Los Angeles became most closely associated with the burgeoning new industry: Hollywood.

By 1915, after a few years of failed lawsuits (and one imagines a fair number of temper-tantrums), Thomas Edison admitted defeat and dissolved his Motion Picture Patents Company.

In the heyday of those early years, some of those larger studios decided the best way to ensure an audience for their films was to own the theaters as well. They built extravagant movie palaces in large market cities, and hundreds more humble theaters in small towns, effectively controlling all aspects of the business: production, distribution and exhibition. In business terms that's called *vertical integration*. It's a practice that would get them in a lot of trouble with the U.S. government a couple of decades later, but in the meantime, it meant big profits with no end in sight.

Then, in 1927, everything changed.

Warner Bros. was a family-owned studio run by five brothers and smaller than some of the other larger companies like Universal and MGM. But one of those brothers, Sam, had a vision. Or rather, an ear. Up to that point, cinema was still a silent medium. But Sam was convinced that sound, and more specifically, sound that was synchronized to the image, was the future.

And almost everyone thought he was crazy.

It seems absurd now, but no one saw any reason to add sound to an already perfect, and very profitable, visual medium. What next? Color? Don't be ridiculous…

Fortunately, Sam Warner persisted, investing the company's profits into the technology required to not only record synchronized sound, but to reproduce it in their movie theaters around the country. Finally, on October 6th, 1927, Warner Bros. released *The Jazz Singer*, the first film to include synchronized dialog.

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Spoiler alert: It was a HUGE success. Unfortunately, Sam Warner didn't live to see it. He died of a brain infection on October 5th, the day before the premiere.

Suddenly, every studio was scrambling to catch up to Warner Bros. That meant a massive capital investment in sound technology, retrofitting production facilities *and* thousands of movie theaters. Not

every production company could afford the upgrade, and many struggled to compete in the new market for films with synchronized sound. And just when it seemed like it couldn't get worse for those smaller companies, it did. In October of 1929, the stock market crashed, plunging the nation into the Great Depression. Hundreds of production companies closed their doors for good.

At the start of the 1930s, after this tremendous consolidation in the industry, eight major studios were left standing: RKO Pictures, Paramount, MGM, Fox, Warner Bros., Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures and United Artists. Five of those – RKO, Paramount, MGM, Fox and Warner Bros. – also still owned extensive theater chains (aka **vertical integration**), an important source of their enormous profits, even during the Depression (apparently movies have always been a way to escape our troubles, at least for a couple of hours). But that didn't mean they could carry on with business as usual. They were forced to be as efficient as possible to maximize profits. Perhaps ironically, this led to a 20-year stretch, from 1927 to 1948, that would become known as The Golden Age, one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed periods in the history of Hollywood.

THE GOLDEN AGE

The so-called Golden Age of Hollywood was dominated by those eight powerful studios and defined by four crucial business decisions.
For a much more detailed analysis of this period (and a thoroughly entertaining read for film buffs), check out Thomas Schatz's [The Genius of the System](#).
First and foremost, at least for five of the eight, was the emphasis on vertical integration. By owning and controlling every aspect of the business, production, distribution and exhibition, those companies could minimize risk and maximize profit by monopolizing the screens in local theaters. Theatergoers would hand over their hard-earned nickels regardless of what was playing, and that meant the studios could cut costs and not lose paying customers. And even for those few independent theater chains, the studios minimized risk through practices such as **block booking** and **blind bidding**. Essentially, the studios would force theaters to buy a block of several films to screen (block booking), sometimes without even knowing what they were paying for (blind bidding). One or two might be prestige films with well-known actors and higher production values, but the rest would be low-budget westerns or thrillers that theaters would be forced to exhibit. The studios made money regardless.

The second crucial business decision was to centralize the production process. Rather than allow actual filmmakers – writers, directors, actors – to control the creative process, deciding what scripts to develop and which films to put into production, the major studios relied on one or two **central producers**. At Warner Bros. it was Jack Warner and Darryl Zanuck. At RKO it was David. O. Selznick. And at MGM it was Louis B. Mayer and 28 year-old Irving Thalberg.

Irving Thalberg. Central Producer at MGM.

Thalberg would become the greatest example of the central producer role, running the most profitable studio throughout the Golden Age. Thalberg personally oversaw every production on the MGM lot, hiring and firing every writer, director and actor, and often taking over as editor before the films were shipped off to theaters. And yet, he shunned fame and never put his name on any of MGM's productions. Always in ill-health, perhaps in part because of his inhuman workload, he died young, in 1936, at age 37.

The third business decision that ensured studios could control costs and maximize profits was to keep the "talent" – writers, directors and actors – on low-cost, iron-clad, multi-year contracts. As Hollywood moved into the Golden Age, filmmakers – especially actors – became internationally famous. Stardom was a new and exciting concept, and studios depended on it to sell tickets. But if any one of these new global celebrities had the power to demand a fee commensurate with their name recognition, it could bankrupt even the most successful studio. To protect against stars leveraging their fame for higher pay, and thus cutting in on their profits, the studios maintained a stable of actors on contracts that limited their salaries to low weekly rates for years on end no matter how successful their films might become. There were no per-film negotiations and certainly no profit sharing. And if an actor decided to sit out a film or two in protest, their contracts would be extended by however long they held out. Bette Davis, one of the biggest stars of the era, once fled to England to escape her draconian contract with Warner Bros. Warner Bros. sued the British production companies that might employ her and England sent her back. These same contracts applied to writers and directors, employed by the studio as staff, not the freelance creatives they are today. It was an ingenious (and diabolical) system that meant studios could keep their production costs incredibly low.

The fourth and final crucial business decision that made the Golden Age possible was the creative specialization, or **house style**, of each major studio. Rather than try to make every kind of movie for

every kind of taste, the studios knew they needed to specialize, to lean into what they did best. This decision, perhaps more than any of the others, is what made this period so creatively fertile. Despite all of the restrictions imposed by vertical integration, central producers, and talent contracts, the house style of a given studio meant that all of their resources went into making the very best version of certain kind of film. For MGM, it was the "prestige" picture. An MGM movie almost always centered on the elite class, lavish set designs, rags to riches stories, the perfect escapist, aspirational content for the 1930s. For Warner Bros. it was the gritty urban crime thriller: *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). They were cheap to make and audiences ate them up. Gangsters, hardboiled detectives, femme fatales, these were all consistent elements of Warner Bros. films of the period. And for Universal, it was the horror movie:

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Frankenstein (1931), *Dracula* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), all of them Universal pictures (and many of them inspired by the surreal production design of German Expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*).

But the fun and profits couldn't last forever.

Three important events conspired to bring an end the reign of the major studios and the Golden Age of Hollywood.

First, in 1943, Olivia de Havilland, a young actress known for her role as Melanie in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), sued Warner Bros. for adding six months to her contract, the amount of time she had been suspended by the studio for refusing to take roles she didn't want. She wasn't the first Hollywood actor to sue a studio over their stifling contracts. But she was the first to win her case. The court's decision in her favor set a precedent that quickly eroded the studios' power over talent. Soon actors became freelance performers, demanding fees that matched their box office draw and even profit participation in the success of their films. All of which took a sizeable chunk out the studios' revenue.

Then, in 1948, the U.S. government filed an anti-trust case against the major studios, finally recognizing that vertical integration constituted an unfair monopoly over the entertainment industry. The case went to the Supreme Court and in a landmark ruling known as **The Paramount Decision** (only because Paramount was listed first in the suit), the court ordered that all of the major studios sell off their theater chains and outlawed the practices of block booking and blind bidding. It was a financial disaster for the big studios. No longer able to shovel content to their own theater chains, studios had to actually consider what independent theaters wanted to screen and what paying audiences wanted to see. The result was a dramatic contraction in output as studios made fewer and fewer movies with increasingly expensive, freelance talent hoping to hit the moving target of audience interest.

And then it got worse.

In the wake of World War II, just as the Supreme Court was handing down The Paramount Decision, the television set was quickly becoming a common household item. By the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s, the rise of television entertainment meant fewer reasons to leave house and more reasons for the movie studios to panic. Some of them, like MGM, realized there was money to be made in licensing their film libraries to broadcasters. And some of them, like Universal, realized there was money to be made in leasing their vast production facilities to television producers. But all of them knew it was an

end of an era.

THE NEW HOLLYWOOD

The end of the Golden Age thrust Hollywood into two decades of uncertainty as the major studios struggled to compete with the new Golden Age of *Television* and their own inability to find the pulse of the American theater-going public. There were plenty of successes. MGM's focus on musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and historical extravaganzas like *Ben Hur* (1959), for example, helped keep them afloat. (Though those came too late for Louis B. Mayer, one of the founders of the studio. He was fired in 1951.) But throughout the 50s and 60s, studios found themselves spending more and more money on fewer and fewer films and making smaller and smaller profits. To make matters worse, many of these once family-owned companies were being bought up by larger, multi-national corporations. Universal was bought out by MCA (a talent agency) in 1958. Paramount by Gulf Western in 1966. And Warner Bros. by Seven Arts that same year. These new parent companies were often publicly traded with a board of directors beholden to shareholders. They expected results.

And that's when Warren Beatty, an ambitious young actor, walked into Jack Warner's office with a scandalous script about two mass murderers named Bonnie and Clyde in his hand. Inspired by the upstart, avant-garde filmmakers making waves in France with their edgy, experimental films like Agnes Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1955), Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) and Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) (we can't seem to get away from the French!), Beatty wanted to break the mold of the Warner Bros. gritty crime thriller. He wanted to make something bold, unpredictable, and transgressive. He begged the aging Warner brother to finance the film.

Maybe Jack Warner was at the end of his creative rope. Maybe he knew the movie business needed to start taking risks again. Maybe he was inspired by Beatty's artistic vision. Or maybe he had just sold the studio to Seven Arts and figured Beatty's crazy idea for a movie would be their problem, a parting shot before the last Warner left the building.

Whatever the reason, Warner Bros. bankrolled *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), tried to bury it on release, but ultimately had to admit they had a huge hit on their hands. It was as bold, unpredictable, and transgressive (for its time) as Beatty had hoped. And audiences, especially younger audiences, loved it.

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Six months later, an off-beat comedy no studio would touch called *The Graduate* (1967) opened to equally enthusiastic audiences and extraordinary profits. And two years after that, BBS, a fledgling production company bankrolled by its success in television, produced *Easy Rider* (1969), a drug-fueled, fever dream of a movie that captured a changing America, a seismic shift in the culture at the end of the 1960s. It cost less the $500,000 to make and earned nearly $60 million at the box office. Something had indeed changed. The major studios weren't sure exactly what It was, but they knew they wanted a piece

of it.

The next decade would become another creative renaissance for the film industry known as The New Hollywood.
If you want to know more about this fertile, drug-fueled portion of Hollywood history, check out Peter Biskind's Easy Riders, Raging Bulls.
Like the Golden Age which rose from the ashes of the Great Depression and the rise of synchronized sound, The New Hollywood rose from the ashes of The Paramount Decision and the rise of television. Unlike the Golden Age, however, The New Hollywood emphasized the authority of the director and star over the material, not the central producer. And rather than control costs to maximize profits, studios allowed the freelance artists they employed to experiment with the form and take creative risks. In fact, more and more filmmakers were smart enough to shoot on location rather than on the studio backlot where executives might micromanage their productions.

Those risks didn't always pay off, but when they did, they more than made up for the disappointments. Films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) broke every accepted norm of cinematography, sound design, narrative structure, editing, performance and even distribution models. And in the process broke every box office record.

But such creative fertility *and* unpredictability couldn't last forever. Not when there are billions of dollars at stake. The New Hollywood was done in by a one-two punch of films that were so successful, so astronomically profitable, they would have to coin a new term for them: **Blockbusters**.

The first was meant to be a run-of-the-mill Universal monster movie, a direct descendant of the studio's Golden Age classics like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. This time around, it would be a shark. A really big shark. And in a (futile) effort to save some money, they assigned a young, 28 year-old television director named Steven Spielberg to helm the project. *JAWS* (1975) cost $9 million to make (three times more than Universal budgeted) and took 159 days to shoot (three times longer the Universal had hoped), but it grossed more than $120 million in its first theatrical run. It hit Hollywood like a tidal wave. A simple genre movie with clear heroes and just enough eye-popping special effects to wow the audience. Best of all, there was no need for an expensive, star-studded cast or a well-known, temperamental director. The concept was the star. It was a formula the studios understood and knew they could replicate.

Two years later, 20th Century Fox released *Star Wars* (1977). Its success dwarfed that of *JAWS*.

Hollywood would never be the same.

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BIG MEDIA AND GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT

The rise of the blockbuster breathed new life into the Hollywood studio system, and by the 1980s, they had successfully wrested control of the filmmaking process from the young upstart artists of The New Hollywood era. But with increasing profits came increasing interest from investors and larger multi-national corporations looking to diversify their portfolios. The acquisition of major studios in the late 50s and 60s by mega-companies such as Gulf Western continued into the 80s and 90s.

For example, between 1969 and 2004, entrepreneur Kirk Kerkorian bought and sold MGM three times (mostly so he could put its name on a casino in Las Vegas) until finally selling it to Sony, the Japanese electronics company. In 1990, Warner Bros. merged with Time, Inc. to form Time Warner which was in turn purchased by AOL, an internet service provider, in 2000, then spun off into its own company again in 2009 before being purchased by AT&T in 2019. Throughout the 1980s, 20th Century Fox changed hands among private investors multiple times until finally falling into the hands of Australian media tycoon Rupert Murdoch. It was in turn acquired by Disney in 2019. But it's Universal that has the most colorful acquisition history. In 1990, MCA which owned Universal was acquired by Panasonic, another Japanese electronics company. In 1995, Panasonic sold it to Seagram, a Canadian beverage company, which in turn sold it to Vivendi, a French water utility in 2000 (the French again!). Vivendi sold the studio to General Electric, this time an *American* electronics company that already owned NBC. Finally, in 2011, GE sold NBC Universal to Comcast, the cable provider (which incidentally joined forces with Sony to purchase MGM back in 2004).

If all of that makes your head spin, you're not alone. In short, back in 1983, 90% of all American media was controlled by more than 50 distinct companies. By 2012, that same percentage was controlled by just 5. By 2019, it was down to 4: Comcast, Disney, AT&T and National Amusements.

This massive consolidation of American media companies has equally massive implications for cinema. Beholden to shareholders and the corporate bottom-line, Hollywood studios must be more efficient than ever, producing fewer and fewer movies at higher and higher budgets to attract more and more eyeballs. And if that sounds familiar, you've been paying attention. A similar consolidation occurred after the advent of sound and the financial havoc of the stock market crash of 1929. Only this time, major studios don't have the luxury of monopoly control through vertical integration (though they are dancing close to the edge with Comcast and AT&T, both internet and cable providers, controlling nearly half of all media in the United States). Instead, they've looked abroad to a new and growing global audience to ensure profitability.

Before 2008, international sales made up less than 20% of box office dollars. By 2008 it was 50%. By 2013 it had grown to more than 70% of Hollywood's bottom line. That's due in part to a massive investment in theaters around the world. In 2019, there were more than 200,000 cinema screens globally. Just under 44,000 were in the United States and Canada. More than 110,000 were in Asia alone.

You can see a comprehensive report on the global entertainment marketplace here:
https://www.motionpictures.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/MPA-2021-THEME-Report-FINAL.pdf
And the theaters themselves are not immune to consolidation. In 2013, Dalian Wanda, a Chinese company, bought the American theater chain AMC for $2.6 billion.

What does all of this mean for contemporary cinema? At the corporate Hollywood level, it means tailoring content for a global audience. That means building film franchises around globally recognizable characters and brands. If you're thinking Marvel and DC comics, you're on the right track. That means fewer original movies and more entertainment spectacles that in turn cost more money to make. The lessons Hollywood learned from the blockbusters *JAWS* and *Star Wars* in the 1970s seem to

have been carried to their logical conclusion.

But corporate Hollywood isn't the only hope for cinema.

A NEW HOPE

While much of this (very) brief history of cinema has focused on the media machine that is the Hollywood studio system, cinema – that is, the art of motion pictures – lives and breathes outside of that capital-intensive entertainment ecosystem. And it always has.

Alice Guy-Blachè, Georges Melies, Lois Weber, D.W. Griffith, and most of the very first cinema artists operated independently of any corporate studio. And during that great Golden Age of cinema, which was so dominated by Hollywood studios, independent producers like David O. Selznick were putting out massively popular films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and the perennially remade *A Star is Born* (1937). One of the most successful films of the era, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was arguably an "indie" picture (Selznick produced it with MGM as distributor). In fact, the New Hollywood of the 60s and 70s could not have taken hold at the corporate level without visionary filmmakers like Mike Nichols, Dennis Hopper and Hal Ashby working outside of the studio system:

As the technology required to make motion pictures became easier and cheaper to acquire, more and more cinema artists chose to work outside of the studio system. Towering figures like Shirley Clarke in the 1960s, John Cassavetes in the 1970s and Jim Jarmusch in the 1980s put out provocative and engaging cinema with limited distribution to match their limited budgets but often with enormous cultural impact. That trend continued into the 1990s and 2000s, supported by new production and distribution companies like Miramax (founded by the now disgraced Harvey Weinstein) that insisted on working outside of the studio system and often outside of Los Angeles itself.

That independent spirit in American cinema also created space for women and people of color to have a voice in the art form. A quick scan of the history above and you'll notice there are not a lot of women's names. And almost all of the men are white. But filmmakers like Shirley Clarke, Julie Dash and Allison Anders didn't wait around for Hollywood to give them permission to make great cinema. Nor did the filmmakers of the early so-called Blaxploitation movement (though their success was eventually and sadly co-opted by white filmmakers).

And as the massive corporate consolidation of the American media landscape has created a narrowing of cinematic content from the big studios, that indie spirit – along with a healthy dose of investor interest – has lead to new innovations in production and distribution models. Whether it's pre-selling foreign rights to a script to fund its production, or turning to streaming services for funding in return for exclusive rights to content, filmmakers continue to find new ways to push the boundaries of what is possible in cinema. Just take a look at the nominees for best picture at any of the recent Academy Awards ceremonies. Once dominated by studio-financed pictures, almost all of them are now independent productions.

But perhaps the most exciting new direction in cinema is not found in theaters at all. For more than a

century, cinema has been most closely associated with that roughly 90 minute, closed-ended feature film playing at a theater near you. And while that continues to be an important cinematic space, the rise of cable and streaming services in desperate need of content has created exciting new frontiers to explore for the medium. No longer restricted to those 90 or so minutes, cinema can sprawl over 100s of hours or even just a few cut into 30 minutes chunks. And while it's tempting to call this a new Golden Age of Television, even the term "television" no longer seems appropriate. We consume this content on all manner of devices, on our phones, laptops, even our wristwatches. Even theatrical content has picked up on the trend. What is the *Fast and Furious*, the *Transformers* or *The Avengers* franchises but multi-billion dollar episodic series distributed to theaters (and after a few months or even just a few days to our phones, laptops and wristwatches)?

Ultimately, regardless of how it's made or how we engage with it, all of the above still fits into one artistic medium: cinema, the art of the motion picture. The tools and techniques, the principals of form and content, are all exactly the same. And that will be true whatever comes next, whether it's VR, AR or a cinema-chip implanted in our visual cortex (heaven forbid…). Mise-en-scene, narrative, cinematography, editing, sound and acting will all still matter. And our understanding of how those tools and techniques not only shape the medium, but also shape our culture will also still matter. Maybe more than ever.

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2

How to Watch a Movie

Step One: Evolve an optic nerve that "refreshes" at a rate of about 13 to 30 hertz in a normal active state.
Okay, it's actually a lot more complicated than that. Optic nerves don't "refresh" in the way we normally think of that term. In fact, the optic nerve is part of a complex system that incudes your eyeballs, retinas and brain, each of which performs at varying degrees of efficiency and changes as we age. But the numbers here are a good rule of thumb for thinking about how quickly we can process images. For more on how the optic nerve works, check this out: https://wolfcrow.com/notes-by-dr-optoglass-motion-and-the-frame-rate-of-the-human-eye/
That's 13 to 30 cycles per second. Fortunately, that bit has already been taken care of over the past several million years. You have one of them in your head right now.
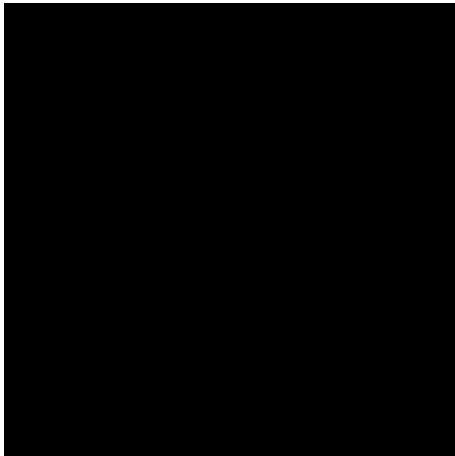
Step Two: Project a series of still images captured in sequence at a rate at least twice that of your optic nerve's ability to respond. Let's say 24 images, or frames, per second.

Step Three: Don't talk during the movie. That's super annoying.

Okay, that last part is optional (though it is super annoying), but here's the point: Cinema is built on a lie. It is not, in fact, a "motion" picture. It is, at a minimum, 24 still images flying past your retinas every second. Your brain interprets those dozens of photographs per second as movement, but it's actually just the **illusion of movement**, a trick of the mind known as **beta movement**: the neurological phenomenon that interprets two stimuli shown in quick succession as the movement of a single object.

An example of beta movement.

Because all of this happens so fast, faster than our optic nerves and synaptic responses can perceive, the mechanics are invisible. There may be 24 individual photographs flashing before our eyes every second, but all we *see* is one continuous moving picture. It's a trick. An illusion.

The same applies to cinematic language. The way cinema communicates is the product of many different tools and techniques, from production design to narrative structure to lighting, camera movement, sound design, performance and editing. But all of these are employed to manipulate the viewer without us ever noticing. In fact, that's kind of the point. The tools and techniques – the mechanics of the form – are invisible. There may be a thousand different elements flashing before our eyes – a subtle dolly-in here, a rack focus there, a bit of color in the set design that echoes in the wardrobe of the protagonist, a music cue that signals the emotional state of a character, a cut on an action that matches an identical action in the next scene, and on and on and on – but all we *see* is one continuous moving picture. A trick. An illusion.

In this chapter, we'll explore how cinematic language works, a bit like breaking down the grammar and rules of spoken language, then we'll take a look at how to watch cinema with these "rules" in mind. We may not be able to speed up the refresh rate of our optic nerve to catch each of those still images, but we can train our interpretive skills to see how filmmakers use the various tools and techniques at their disposal.

CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

Like any language, we can break cinematic language down to its most fundamental elements. Before grammar and syntax can shape meaning by arranging words or phrases in a particular order, the words themselves must be built up from letters, characters or symbols. The basic building blocks. In cinema, those basic building blocks are **shots**. A shot is one continuous capture of a span of action by a motion picture camera. It could last minutes ([or even hours](#)), or could last less than a second. Basically, a shot is everything that happens within the **frame** of the camera – that is, the visible border of the captured image – from the moment the director calls "Action!" to the moment she calls "Cut!"

These discrete shots rarely mean much in isolation. They are full of potential and may be quite interesting to look at on their own, but cinema is built up from the *juxtaposition* of these shots, dozens or hundreds of them, arranged in a particular order – a cinematic syntax – that renders a story with a collectively discernible meaning. We have a word for that too: **Editing**. Editing arranges shots into patterns that make up scenes, sequences and acts to tell a story, just like other forms of language communicate through words, sentences and paragraphs.

From these basic building blocks, we have developed a **cinematic language**, a set of rules and conventions by which cinema communicates meaning to the viewer. And by "we" I mean all of us, filmmakers and audiences alike, from the earliest motion picture to the latest VR experience. Cinematic language – just like any other language – is an organic, constantly evolving shared form of communication. It is an iterative process, one that is refined each time a filmmaker builds a story through a discrete number of shots, and each time an audience responds to that iteration, accepting or rejecting, but always engaging in the process. Together, we have developed a **visual lexicon**. A lexicon describes the shared set of meaningful units in any language. Think of it as the list of all available words and parts of words in a language we carry around in our heads. A visual lexicon is likewise the shared set of meaningful units in our collective cinematic language: images, angles, transitions and camera moves that we all understand *mean* something when employed in a motion picture.

But here's the trick: We're not supposed to notice any of it. The visual lexicon that underpins our cinematic language is invisible, or at least, it is meant to recede into the background of our comprehension. Cinema can't communicate without it, but if we pay too much attention to it, we'll miss what it all means. A nifty little paradox. But not so strange or unfamiliar when you think about it. It's precisely the same with any other language. As you read these characters, words, sentences and paragraphs, you are not stopping to parse each unit of meaning, analyze the syntax or double check the sentence structure. All those rules fade to the background of your own fluency and the meaning communicated becomes clear (or at least, I sure hope it does). And that goes double for spoken language. We speak and comprehend in a fluent flow of grammar and syntax, never pausing over the rules that have become second nature, invisible and unnoticed.

So, what are some of those meaningful units of our cinematic language? Perhaps not surprisingly, a lot of them are based on how we experience the world in our everyday lives. Camera placement, for example, can subtly orient our perspective on a character or situation. Place the camera mere inches from a character's face – known as a **close-up** – and we'll feel more intimately connected to their experience than if the camera were further away, as in a **medium shot** or **long shot**. Place the camera below the eyeline of a character, pointing up – known as a **low-angle shot** – and that character will feel dominant, powerful, worthy of respect. We are literally looking up to them. Place the camera at eye level, we feel like equals. Let the camera hover above a character or situation – known as a **high-angle shot** – and we feel like gods, looking down on everyone and everything. Each choice effects how we see and interpret the shot, scene and story.

We can say the same about **transitions** from shot to shot. Think of them as conjunctions in grammar, words meant to connect ideas seamlessly. The more obvious examples, like **fade-ins** and **fade-outs** or long **dissolves**, are still drawn from our experience. Think of a slow fade-out, where the screen drifts into blackness, as an echo of our experience of falling asleep, drifting out of consciousness. In fact, fade-outs are most often used in cinema to indicate the close of an act or segment of story, much like the end of a long day. And dissolves are not unlike the way we remember events from our own experience, one moment bleeding into and overlapping with another in our memory.

But perhaps the most common and least noticed transition, by design, is a hard cut that bridges some physical action on screen. It's called **cutting on action** and it's a critical part of our visual lexicon, enabling filmmakers to join shots, often from radically different angles and positions, while remaining largely invisible to the viewer. The concept is simple: whenever a filmmaker wants to cut from one shot to the next for a new angle on a scene, she ends the first shot in the middle of some on-screen action, opening a door or setting down a glass, then begins the next shot in the middle of that same action. The viewer's eye is drawn to the action on screen and not the cut itself, rendering the transition relatively seamless, if not invisible to the viewer.

Camera placement and transitions, along with camera movement, lighting style, color palette and a host of other elements make up the visual lexicon of cinematic language, all of which we will explore in the chapters to follow. In the hands of a gifted filmmaker, these subtle adjustments work together to create a coherent whole that communicates effectively (and invisibly). In the hands of not so gifted filmmakers, these choices can feel haphazard, unmotivated, or perhaps worse, "showy" – all style and no substance – creating a dissonant, ineffective cinematic experience. But even then, the techniques themselves remain largely invisible. We are simply left with the feeling that it was a "bad" movie, even if we can't quite explain why. (Though by the end of this book, you should be able to explain why in great detail, probably to the great annoyance of your date. You're welcome.)

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MEANING

Once we have a grasp on these small, meaningful units of our collective cinematic language we can begin to analyze how they work together to communicate bigger, more complex ideas.

Take the work of Lynne Ramsay, for example. As a director, Ramsay builds a cinematic experience by paying attention to the details, the little things we might otherwise never notice:

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Cinema, like literature, builds up meaning through the creative combination of these smaller units, but, also like literature, the whole is – or should be – much more than the sum of its parts. For example, *Moby Dick* is a novel that explores the nature of obsession, the futility of revenge and humanity's essential conflict with nature. But in the more than 200,000 words that make up that book, few if any of them communicate those ideas directly. In fact, we can distinguish between **explicit meaning**, that is the obvious, directly expressed meaning of a work of art, be it a novel, painting or film, and **implicit meaning**, the deeper, essential meaning, suggested but not necessarily directly expressed by any one element. *Moby Dick* is explicitly about a man trying to catch a whale, but as any literature professor will tell you, it was never *really* about the whale.

That comparison between cinema and literature is not accidental. Both start with the same fundamental element, that is, a story. As we will explore in a later chapter, before a single frame is photographed, cinema begins with the written word in the form of a screenplay. And like any literary form, screenplays are built around a narrative structure. Yes, that's a fancy way of saying story, but it's more than simply a

plot or an explicit sequence of events. A well-conceived narrative structure provides a foundation for that deeper, implicit meaning a filmmaker, or really any storyteller, will explore through their work.

Another way to think about that deeper, implicit meaning is as a **theme**, an idea that unifies every element of the work, gives it coherence and communicates what the work is *really* about. And really great cinema manages to suggest and express that theme through every shot, scene and sequence. Every camera angle and camera move, every line of dialogue and sound effect, every music cue and editing transition will underscore, emphasize and point to that theme without ever needing to spell it out or make it explicit. An essential part of analyzing cinema is the ability to identify that thematic intent and then trace its presence throughout.

Unless there is no thematic intent, or the filmmaker did not take the time to make it a unifying idea. Then you may have a "bad" movie on your hands. But at least you're well on your way to understanding why!

So far, this discussion of explicit and implicit meaning, theme, and narrative structure points to a deep kinship between cinema and literature. But cinema has far more tools and techniques at its disposal to communicate meaning, implicit or otherwise. Sound, performance and visual composition all point to deep ties with music, theater, and painting or photography as well. And while each of those art forms employ their own strategies for communicating explicit and implicit meaning, cinema draws on all of them at once in a complex, multi-layered system.

Let's take sound, for example. As you know from the brief history of cinema in the last chapter, cinema existed long before the introduction of synchronized sound in 1927, but since then, sound has become an equal partner with the moving image in the communication of meaning. Sound can shape the way we perceive an image, just as an image can change the way we perceive a sound. It's a relationship we call **co-expressive**.

This is perhaps most obvious in the use of music. A **non-diegetic** musical score, that is music that only the audience can hear as it exists outside the world of the characters, can drive us toward an action-packed climax, or sweep us up in a romantic moment. Or it can contradict what we see on the screen, creating a sense of unease at an otherwise happy family gathering or making us a laugh during a moment of excruciating violence. In fact, this powerful combination of moving image and music pre-dates synchronized sound. Even some of the earliest silent films were shipped to theaters with a musical score meant to be played during projection.

But as powerful as music can be, sound in cinema is much more than just music. **Sound design** includes music, but also dialog, sound effects and ambient sound to create a rich sonic context for what we see on the screen. From the crunch of leaves underfoot, to the steady hum of city traffic, to the subtle crackle of a cigarette burning, what we hear – and what we *don't* hear – can put us in the scene with the characters in a way that images alone could never do, and as a result, add immeasurably to the effective communication of both explicit and implicit meaning.

We can say the same about the relationship between cinema and theater. Both use a carefully planned **mise-en-scene** – the overall look of the production including set design, costume, make-up – to evoke a sense of place and visual continuity. And both employ the talents of well-trained actors to embody characters and enact the narrative structure laid out in the script.

Let's focus on acting for a moment. Theater, like cinema, relies on actors' performances to communicate

not only the subtleties of human behavior, but also the interplay of explicit and implicit meaning. How an actor interprets a line of dialog can make all the difference in how a performance shifts our perspective, draws us in or pushes us away. And nothing ruins a cinematic or theatrical experience like "bad" acting. But what do we really mean by that? Often it means the performance wasn't connected to the thematic intent of the story, the unifying idea that holds it all together. We'll even use words like, "The actor seemed like they were in a different movie from everyone else." That could be because the director didn't clarify a theme in the first place, or perhaps they didn't shape, or direct, an actor's performance toward one. It could also simply be poor casting.

All of the above applies to both cinema and theater, but cinema has one distinct advantage: the intimacy and flexibility of the camera. Unlike theater, where your experience of a performance is dictated by how far you are from the stage, the filmmaker has complete control over your point of view. She can pull you in close, allowing you to observe every tiny detail of a character's expression, or she can push you out further than the cheapest seats in a theater, showing you a vast and potentially limitless context. And perhaps most importantly, cinema can move between these points of view in the blink of an eye, manipulating space and time in a way live theater never can. And all of those choices effect how we engage the thematic intent of the story, how we connect to what that particular cinematic experience *really* means. And because of that, in cinema, whether we realize it or not, we identify most closely with the *camera*. No matter how much we feel for our hero up on the screen, we view it all through the lens of the camera.

And that central importance of the camera is why the most obvious tool cinema has at its disposal in communicating meaning is visual composition. Despite the above emphasis on the importance of sound, cinema is still described as a visual medium. Even the title of this chapter is How to *Watch* a Movie. Not so surprising when you think about the lineage of cinema and its origin in the fixed images of the camera obscura, daguerreotypes and series photography. All of which owe a debt to painting, both as an art form and a form of communication. In fact, the cinematic concept of **framing** has a clear connection to the literal frame, or physical border, of paintings. And one of the most powerful tools filmmakers – and photographers and painters – have at their disposal for communicating both explicit and implicit meaning is simply what they place inside the frame and what they leave out.

Another word for this is **composition**, the arrangement of people, objects and setting within the frame of an image. And if you've ever pulled out your phone to snap a selfie, or maybe a photo of your meal to post on social media (I know, I'm old, but really? Why is that a thing?), you are intimately aware of the power of composition. Adjusting your phone this way and that to get just the right angle, to include just the right bits of your outfit, maybe edge Greg out of the frame just in case things don't work out (sorry, Greg). Point is, composing a shot is a powerful way we tell stories about ourselves every day. Filmmakers, the really good ones, are masters of this technique. And once you understand this principle, you can start to analyze *how* a filmmaker uses composition to serve their underlying thematic intent, to help tell their story.

One of the most important ways a filmmaker uses composition to tell their story is through repetition, a pattern of recurring images that echoes a similar framing and connects to a central idea. And like the relationship between shots and editing – where individual shots only really make sense once they are juxtaposed with others – a well-composed image may be interesting or even beautiful on its own, but it only starts to make sense in relation to the implicit meaning or theme of the overall work when we see it as part of a pattern.

Take, for example, Stanley Kubrick and his use of one-point perspective:

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Or how Barry Jenkins uses color in *Moonlight* (2016):

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Or how Sofia Coppola tends to trap her protagonists in gilded cages:

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These recurring images are part of that largely invisible cinematic language. We aren't necessarily supposed to notice them, but we are meant to feel their effects. And it's not just visual patterns that can serve the filmmaker's purposes. Recurring patterns, or **motifs**, can emerge in the sound design, narrative structure, mise-en-scene, dialog and music.

But there is one distinction that should be made between how we think about composition and patterns in cinema and how we think about those concepts in photography or painting. While all of the above employ framing to achieve their effects, photography and painting are limited to what is fixed in that frame by the artist at the moment of creation. Only cinema adds an entirely new and distinct dimension to the composition: **movement**. That includes movement *within* the frame – as actors and objects move freely, recomposing themselves within the fixed frame of a shot – as well as movement *of* the frame itself, as the filmmaker moves the camera in the setting and around those same actors and objects. This increases the compositional possibilities exponentially for cinema, allowing filmmakers to layer in even more patterns that serve the story and help us connect to their thematic intent.

FORM, CONTENT AND THE POWER OF CINEMA

As we become more attuned to the various tools and techniques that filmmakers use to communicate their ideas, we will be able to better analyze their effectiveness. We'll be able to *see* what was once invisible. A kind of magic trick in itself. But as I tried to make clear from the beginning, my goal is not to focus solely on form, to dissect cinema into its constituent parts and lose sight of its overall power. Cinema, like any art form, is more than the sum of its parts. And it should be clear already that form and content go hand in hand. Pure form, all technique and no substance, is meaningless. And pure content, all story and no style, is didactic and, frankly, boring. How the story is told is as important as what the story is about.

However, just as we *can* analyze technique, the formal properties of cinema, to better understand *how* a story is communicated, we can also analyze content, that is, *what* stories are communicating to better understand how they fit into the wider cultural context. Cinema, again like literature, can represent

valuable cultural documents, reflecting our own ideas, values and morals back to us as filmmakers and audiences.

We'll spend more time on content analysis – the idea of cinema as a cultural document – in the last couple of chapters of this book, but I want to take a moment to highlight one aspect of that analysis in advance. I've discussed at length the idea of a cinematic language, and the fact that as a form of communication it is largely invisible or subconscious. Interestingly, the same can be said for cinematic content. Or, more specifically, the cultural norms that *shape* cinematic content. Cinema is an art form like any other, shaped by humans bound up in a given historical and cultural context. And no matter how enlightened and advanced those humans may be, that historical and cultural context is so vast and complex they cannot possibly grasp every aspect of how it shapes their view of the world. Inevitably, those cultural blind spots, the unexamined norms and values that makes us who we are, filter into the cinematic stories we tell and how we tell them.

The result is a kind of cultural feedback loop where cinema both influences and is influenced by the context in which it is created.

Because of this, on the whole, cinema is inherently conservative. That is to say, as a form of communication it is more effective at conserving or re-affirming a particular view of the world than challenging or changing it. This is due in part to the economic reality that cinema, historically a very expensive medium, must appeal to the masses to survive. As such, it tends to avoid offending our collective sensibilities, to make us feel better about who we already think we are. And it is also due in part to the social reality that the people who have historically had access to the capital required to produce that very expensive medium tend to all look alike. That is, mostly white, and mostly men. And when the same kind of people with the same kind of experiences tend to have the most consistent access to the medium, we tend to get the same kinds of stories, reproducing the same, often unexamined, norms, values and ideas.

But that doesn't mean cinema *can't* challenge the status quo, or at least reflect real, systemic change in the wider culture already underway. That's what makes the study of cinema, particularly in regard to content, so endlessly fascinating. Whether it's tracking the way cinema reflects the dominant cultural norms of a given period, or the way it sometimes rides the leading edge of change in those same norms, cinema is a window – or frame (see what I did there) – through which we can observe the mechanics of cultural production, the inner-workings of how meaning is produced, shared, and sometimes broken down over time.

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

One final word on how to watch a movie before we move on to the specific tools and techniques employed by filmmakers. In as much as cinema is a cultural phenomenon, a mass medium with a crucial role in the production of meaning, it's also an art form meant to entertain. And while I think one can assess the difference between a "good" movie and a "bad" movie in terms of its effectiveness, that has little to do with whether one likes it or not.

In other words, you don't have to necessarily *like* a movie to analyze its use of a unifying theme or the way the filmmaker employs mise-en-scene, narrative structure, cinematography, sound and editing to effectively communicate that theme. *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), arguably one of the greatest films ever made, is an incredibly *effective* motion picture. But it's not my favorite. Between you and me, I don't even really like it all that much. But I still show it to my students every semester. Which means I've seen it dozens and dozens of times and it never ceases to astonish in its formal technique and innovative use of cinematic language.

Fortunately, the opposite is also true: You can really, really like a movie that isn't necessarily all that good. Maybe there's no unifying theme, maybe the cinematography is all style and no substance (or no style *and* no substance), maybe the narrative structure is made out of toothpicks and the acting is equally thin and wooden. (That's right, *Twilight*, I'm looking at you.) Who cares? You like it. You've watched it more often than I've seen *Citizen Kane* and you *still* like it.

That's great. Embrace it. Because *taste* in cinema is subjective. But *analysis* of cinema doesn't have to be. You can analyze anything. Even things you don't like.

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Have You Noticed This About Sofia Coppola's Films? by Fandor. Standard YouTube License.

3

Mise-en-Scène

Allow me to introduce a word destined to impress your friends and family when you trot it out at the next cocktail party: **Mise-en-Scène**. And even if you don't frequent erudite cocktail parties, and who does these days (a shame, really), it's still a handy term to have around. It's French (obviously), and it literally means "putting on stage."

Why French? Because sometimes we just like to feel fancy. And let's face it, to an American, French is fancy.

But the idea is simple. Borrowed from theater, it refers to every element in the frame that contributes to the overall look of a film. And I mean everything: set design, costume, hair, make-up, color scheme,

framing, composition, lighting… Basically, if you can see it, it contributes to the mise-en-scène.

I could have started with any number of different tools or techniques filmmakers use to create a cinematic experience. Narrative might seem a more obvious starting point. Cinema can't exist without story, and chronologically speaking, it all starts with the screenplay. Or I could have led off with cinematography. After all, we often think of cinema as a *visual* medium. But mise-en-scène captures much more than any one tool or technique in isolation. It's more an aesthetic context in which everything else takes place, the unifying look, or even *feel*, of a film or series.

And this is probably as good a time as any to discuss the role of a **director** in cinema. There's a school of thought out there, known as the **auteur theory**, that claims the director is the "author" of a work of cinema, not unlike the author of a novel, and that they alone are ultimately responsible for what we see on the screen. The fact is, cinema requires dozens if not hundreds of professionals dedicated to bringing a story to life. The screenwriter writes the script, the production designer designs the sets, the cinematographer photographs the scenes, the sound crew captures the sound, the editor connects the shots together, and each of them have whole teams of experts working below them to make it all work on screen. But if there's any hope of that final product having a unified aesthetic, and a coherent, underlying theme that ties it all together, it needs a singular vision to give it *direction*. That, really, is the job of a director. To make sure everyone is moving in the same direction, making the same work of art. And they do that not so much by managing people – they have an **assistant director** and producers for that – they do it by managing mise-en-scène, shaping the overall look and feel of the final product. And while mise-en-scène has many moving parts and many different professionals in charge of shaping those individual parts into something coherent, it's the one element of cinema that is most clearly the responsibility of the director.

This talent for shaping mise-en-scène is one of the reasons we can so readily identify the work of great directors. Think about the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Agnes Varda, Wes Anderson, Yosujiro Ozu, Claire Denis or Steven Speilberg (and if some of those names are unfamiliar, seek them out!). If we know their work at all, most of us could pick out one of their films after just a few minutes, even if we had never seen it before. And not just because of some signature flourish or idiosyncratic visual habit (though that's often part of it), but because their films have a certain look to them, a certain aesthetic that saturates the screen.

Take the films of Claire Denis for example:

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Denis's films generate an enveloping atmosphere that you can almost taste and feel, and all of that is part of her consistent (and brilliant) use of mise-en-scène.

Or how about the films of Wes Anderson:

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Anderson's films consistently use symmetrical compositions, smooth, precise tracking shots and slow motion, but it's the overall effect, the mise-en-scène that makes the impression (check out more break-downs of Wes Anderson's style here and here).

Because mise-en-scène refers to this "overall look" it can feel rather broad (and even vague) as a concept. So let's break it down into four elements of design: **setting**, **character**, **lighting** and **composition.** We'll tackle each one in turn.

SETTING

Nothing we see on the screen in cinema is there by accident. Everything is carefully planned, arranged and even fabricated – sometimes using computer generated imagery (CGI) – to serve the story and create a unified aesthetic.

That goes double for the setting.

If mise-en-scène is the overall aesthetic context for a film or series, setting is the *literal* context, the space actors and objects inhabit for every scene. And this is much more than simply the location. It's how that location, whether it's an existing space occupied for filming or one purpose-built on a soundstage, is *designed* to serve the vision of the director.

As we saw in Chapter One, in the early days of motion pictures, when cinematic language was still in its infancy, not much thought was given to the design of a setting (or editing or performance and no one was even thinking about sound yet). But it didn't take long for filmmakers to realize they could employ the same tricks of set design they used in theater for the cinema.

One of the pioneers of this was the French filmmaker, Georges Méliès. Take, for example, his 1903 film The Kingdom of the Fairies:

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Méliès's use of elaborate sets, along with equally elaborate costumes, hair styles, make-up, and even the hand-tinting of the film itself, all contribute to the fantastical look and feel of the film. He brought a similar design sensibility to all of his films, including the ground-breaking 1902 film *A Trip to the Moon*.

A decade or so later, this attention to detail in the design elements of cinema had become commonplace. Indeed, many of the more well-known early silent films are famous for their sophisticated mise-en-scène, particular in regard to setting, often above all else.

Check out this scene again from D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916):

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The set design alone is staggering. Built in the middle of Los Angeles, it took four years just to dismantle it.

Or consider the opening of Fritz Lange's *Metropolis* (1927):

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The film draws us into a mechanized, dystopian future – one of the first science-fiction films in history – and its success lies in its careful design of the setting to serve that narrative purpose.

Once filmmakers realized the importance of setting as an element of design and what it contributed to the overall look of their films, it wasn't long before a position was created to oversee it all: the **production designer**. The production designer is the point person for the overall aesthetic design of a film or series. Working closely with the director, they help translate the aesthetic vision for the project – its mise-en-scène – to the various design departments, including set design, art department, costume, hair and make-up. But arguably their most important job is to make sure the *setting* matches that aesthetic vision, specifically through **set design** and **set decoration**.

Set design is exactly what is sounds like, the design and construction of the setting for any given scene in a film or series. Plenty of productions use existing locations and don't necessarily have to build much of anything (though that doesn't mean there isn't an element of design involved, as we shall see). But when a production requires complete control over the filming environment, production designers, along with conceptual artists, construction engineers, and sometimes a whole army of artisans, must create each setting, or **set**, from the ground up. And since these sets have to hold up under the strain of a large film crew working in and around them for days and even weeks, they require as much planning and careful construction as any other real-life home, building, or interplanetary city out there in the universe.

Take a look at the incredible detail involved in bringing the set design to life for *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017):

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D. W. Griffith can take a seat.

These sets may be built on site to blend in with the surrounding landscape, or they may be built within a large, windowless, sound-proof building called a **soundstage**. A soundstage provides the control over the environment production designers need to give the director exactly the look and feel she wants from a particular scene. On a big enough soundstage, a production designer can fabricate interiors and exteriors, sections of buildings, even small villages. And since it is all shielded from the outside, the production has complete control over lighting and sound. It can be dawn or twilight for 12 hours a day. And a shot will never be interrupted by an airplane flying loudly overhead.

The use of soundstages is particularly helpful when producing serialized content. A TV or streaming series, especially one that uses the same few locations over and over – the family home, the mobster's headquarters, the king's palace – needs access to those sets for months at a time, year after year, for as long as we keep watching. Of all those series you binge watch on the weekends (or during the week, when you should be reading this), almost all of them depend upon sets built from the ground up and housed on soundstages for years on end.

Of course, sometimes the setting of a particular production requires more than a production designer can

deliver with the materials available (or the time or the budget as the case may be). In that case, the setting must be augmented with **computer generated imagery** (CGI). The most common way this is implemented is through the use of **green screen technology**. The idea is fairly simple. The set is dressed with a backdrop of bright green (or blue, the actual color isn't terribly important) and the scene filmed as usual. Then, in post-production, software picks out that particular color and replaces it with imagery either filmed elsewhere or generated by digital artists, a process called **keying**. For this to work, no other object or article of clothing can match that shade of green, or it will be replaced as well. And with ever-improving technology, the sky is no longer the limit to what designers can offer up for the screen.

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Whether the production designer is building the set from the ground up on a soundstage, or simply using an existing location, the setting is still a kind of blank canvas until that space is filled with all of the important details that really tell the story. That's where set *design* meets set *decoration*. Still under the supervision of the production designer, set decorating falls to any number of skilled artisans in the **art department**. And they design everything from the color on the walls, to the texture of the drapes, to the style of the furniture, to every ashtray, book and family photo that might show up on screen. And that goes for existing locations as well. A film production using someone's actual home for a scene will likely replace all of the furniture, repaint the walls, and fill it with their own odds and ends that help tell the cinematic story. And then, hopefully, put it all back the way they found it when they're done.

Take a look at the ways the production designer for the Netflix series *The Crown* converts existing locations into a Buckingham Palace throne room or the Queen's private apartment:

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This is where storytelling through the physical environment – the setting – can really come alive. Every object placed just so on a set adds to the mise-en-scène and helps tell the story. Those objects could be in the background providing context – framed photos, a trophy, an antique clock – or they could be picked up and handled by characters in a scene – a glass of whisky, a pack of cigarettes, a loaded gun. We even have a name for those objects, **props**, short for "property" and also borrowed from theater, and a name for the person in charge of keeping track of them all, a **prop master**.

As should be clear by now, setting is one of the most important design elements in creating a consistent mise-en-scène. Not simply the location – a suburban home, a high-rise office building, a spaceport on Mos Eisley – but all of the details that fill that location, make it come alive as a lived-in space, and most importantly, help tell the cinematic story. And one way we can begin to really *see* the intention of the filmmaker, to understand how she is subtly (and maybe not so subtly) manipulating our emotions through cinematic language, is to pay attention to these details. The very details we're *not* supposed to notice.

CHARACTER

Character is a term that will come up a lot. We use it to describe how a screenwriter invents believable characters that inhabit a narrative structure. And we use it to describe how an actor inhabits that character in their performance. But we can also examine how the physical *design* of a character, through costume, make-up and hair style, not only contributes to the mise-en-scène, but also helps fully realize the work of both screenwriters and actors.

Typically, when we think of "character design" we might immediately think of fantastic creatures dreamed up in a special effects studio. They might be animated through CGI or fabricated from latex and worn by an actor. And all of that is a reasonable way to think about the concept of character design. But in some ways, that is just a much more extreme version of how I would like to frame the work of costume designers and hair and make-up professionals.

Just as a screenwriter must create – or design – a character on the page, and an actor must create – or design – their approach to inhabiting that character, the wardrobe, hair and make-up departments must also *design* how that character is going to look on screen. This design element is, of course, more obvious the less familiar the world of the character might be. The clothing, hair and make-up of characters inhabiting worlds in a distant time period or even more distant galaxy will inevitably draw our attention. (Though even there the intention is to add to the mise-en-scène without distracting us from the story.) But even when the context is closer to home, a story set in our time, in our culture, maybe even our own home town, every element of the clothes, the hair and the make-up is carefully chosen, sometimes made from scratch, to fit that context and those particular characters. In other words, each character's look is carefully *designed* to support the overall mise-en-scène and help tell the story.

Take costume design, for example. We often think of "costume" as another word for disguise or playing a character. But the last thing a filmmaker wants is the audience to think of their characters as actors in disguise or playing dress-up. They want us to see the characters. Period. The wardrobe should fit the time and place, and most importantly, the character. And once that is established, the designer can layer in more subtle hints about the larger context, the underlying theme, by adding a touch of color that serves as a visual motif, or introducing some alteration in the wardrobe that dramatize some narrative shift:

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What is important to note is that costume design in film is *not* about fashion or even what looks "good" on an actor. It's about what looks *right* on a character, what fits the setting and the overall look of the film.

These same principles can be applied to hair and make-up. As with costume design, it's easy to think of the more extreme examples of hair and make-up design, especially when the setting calls for something historic or other-worldly or… horrifying. The special effects make-up for the gory bits of your favorite horror films can sometimes take center stage. But more often, these elements are not meant to draw our attention at all. To achieve that, perhaps ironically, hair and make-up require even more attention from their respective designers. This is due in part to the technical requirements of filming. Bright lights that can reveal every distracting blemish or poorly applied foundation, and as camera and image technology improves, the techniques required to hide the fact that actors are even wearing make-up must be continually refined. But it is also because hair and make-up are incredibly personal and intimately connected to the character:

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And while all of this is tremendously important for the audience, it is even more important for the actor playing the character. We'll discuss the various ways an actor approaches their performance in detail in another chapter, but for now it's important to note how much actors rely upon the *design* of their character through costume, hair and make-up. Putting on the wardrobe, seeing themselves in another era, a different hair style, looking older or younger, helps the actor literally and metaphorical step into the life of someone else, and do so believably enough that we no longer see the actor, only the character in the story.

LIGHTING

The first two elements of design in mise-en-scène – setting and character – fall squarely under the supervision of the production designer and the art department. The next two – lighting and composition – fall to the **cinematographer** and the camera department but are just as important as elements of design in the overall look of the film. We will take a deeper dive into each in a later chapter on cinematography, but for now let's a take a quick look at how these elements fit into mise-en-scène.

As should be obvious, you can't have cinema without light. Light exposes the image and, of course, allows us to see it. But it's the creative use of light, or **lighting**, is what makes it an element design. A cinematographer can illuminate a given scene with **practical light**, that is, light from lamps and other fixtures that are part of the set design, **set lights**, light fixtures that are off camera and specifically designed to light a film set, or even **available light**, light from the sun or whatever permanent fixtures are at a given location. But in each case, the cinematographer is not simply throwing a light switch, they are *shaping* that light, making it work for the scene and the story as a whole. They do this by emphasizing different aspects of lighting direction and intensity. A **key light**, for example, is the main light that illuminates a subject. A **fill light** fills out the shadows a strong key light might create. And a **back light** helps separate the subject from the background. And it's the consistent use of a particular lighting design that makes it a powerful part of mise-en-scène.

Two basic approaches to lighting style can illustrate the point. **Low-key lighting** refers to a lighting design where the key light remains subtle and even subordinate to other lighting sources. The result? A high-contrast lighting design that make consistent use of harsh shadows. Another word for this is **chiaroscuro lighting** (this time we're stealing a fancy word from Italian). Think of old detective movies with the private eye stalking around the dark streets of San Francisco.

The Big Combo, 1955, Joseph H. Lewis, dir.

Classic low-key lighting design.

High-key lighting refers a lighting design where the key light remains the dominant source, resulting in a low-contrast, even flat or washed-out look to the image. Think of art-house dramas set in stark, snowy landscapes, or even big Hollywood comedies that try to avoid "interesting" shadows that might distract us from the joke.

In either case, the cinematographer, working closely with the director and production designer, is using light as an element of design, contributing to the overall mise-en-scène.

COMPOSITION

The fourth and final design element in considering mise-en-scène – one that I touched on in the last chapter and will receive much more attention in the chapter on cinematography – is composition. As discussed in Chapter Two, composition refers to the arrangement of people, objects and setting within the frame of an image. And because we are talking about *moving* pictures, there are really two important components of composition: framing, which even still photographers must master, and movement. In the case of cinematic composition, movement refers to movement within the frame as well as movement of the frame as the cinematographer moves the camera through the scene. All of which are critical aspects of how we experience mise-en-scène.

Like lighting, composition fall under the responsibility of the cinematographer. And while there are many technical and artistic considerations when it comes to framing and movement, cinematographers are also keenly aware of the design element of composition. In fact, they often describe at least part of their job as *designing* a shot. Part of this process involves arranging people, objects and setting in the frame to achieve a sense of balance and proportion, often dividing the frame into thirds horizontally and vertically to ensure proper distribution. We call this the **rule of thirds** and it's fairly common in photography. In fact, take out your phone right now, open the camera app, and you're likely to see a faint grid across the screen. That's there to help you balance the composition of your selfie according to the rule of thirds. Another important part of the process of designing a shot is the choreography involved in moving the camera through the scene, whether on wheels, on a crane or strapped to camera person.

Again, we'll spend more time on this subject in a later chapter, but take a look at how Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa approaches the composition of movement in designing his shots:

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Or how Andrea Arnold uses framing and composition to communicate isolation, captivity or a deep connection to the earth:

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A thoughtfully composed frame does more than create a pleasing image. It can isolate characters, focus our attention and draw us into the story – all without us ever really noticing the technique itself.

Unless we know to look for it.

CINEMATIC STYLE

Taken together, setting, character, lighting and composition make up the key elements of design in creating an effective and coherent mise-en-scène. As discussed earlier, it's one of the ways we can pick out the work of great filmmakers. A consistent mise-en-scène becomes a kind of signature style of a filmmaker.

But it can also mark the signature style of a particular genre or type of cinema. Take **film noir**, for example. Remember those detective movies I mentioned earlier? They are part of a whole trend in filmmaking that began in the 1940s with titles like *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946). These films and many more are part of a style of filmmaking that includes a gritty, urban setting, tough, no-nonsense characters, low key lighting, and off-balance compositions. Sometimes they feature a private detective on a case, but not always. Usually they were filmed in black and white, but not always. In fact, film noir – which literally means "dark film" in French (what is with all the French?!) – has been historically difficult to define because the specific elements can vary so widely. But one easy way to identify a film as part of that

tradition is by its mise-en-scène. Mise-en-scène isn't about any one element, it's that overall look, the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

And that can extend to a whole national trend in cinema as well. Because cinema is so deeply connected to a particular cultural context, part of that give and take in the cultural production of meaning, it should come as no surprise that there are certain periods in a given place and time where cinema can take on a kind of national style. Where cinema artists in that same place and time are all speaking the same cinematic language. As a result, produce a unified, identifiable style, which is another way of saying a consistent mise-en-scène.

One example of this can be found in the films produced in Germany around the time of the First World War. It was still early days in cinema, before the introduction of sound, and German filmmakers were experimenting with how far they could push the new medium (and their audience). The result was a style of film – a national cinematic mise-en-scène – that would come to be known as **German Expressionism**. These films were notable for their consistent use of surreal, exaggerated set design and very low key lighting schemes. The films were full of dark shadows and macabre settings. Films like Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920):

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Or F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922):

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In fact, we can trace the origins of modern horror films to German Expressionism. And I don't just mean borrowing the mise-en-scène. A lot of the first Hollywood horror movies were made by German filmmakers who pioneered German Expressionism and were fleeing Germany before the Second World War.

Another example of national style in cinema is **Italian Neorealism**, which coalesced around a consistent mise-en-scène in Italian cinema around the end of World War II until the mid-1950s. It was quite the opposite from German Expressionism. Italians, filmmakers included, were coming out of a brutal period of state repression and terrible violence. They had no patience for an escapist cinema with surreal settings and macabre monsters. They had just survived real monsters who were very much human. Films like Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945) and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) showed Italian life in a stark, almost documentary-like style. They often used non-professional actors, rarely built any sets, and avoided showy camera techniques. Take a look at a critical scene from De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* where the main character, Antonio, who depends upon his bicycle to provide for his family, is robbed while on the job:

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Notice the stark realism of the setting, the wardrobe, the way the camera tells us exactly what we need to know. Now check out this analysis of the film's mise-en-scène:

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online here: https://uark.pressbooks.pub/movingpictures/?p=139#oembed-16

It's a stylistic approach that could not be more different from the work of Weine or Murnau in Germany. Italian Neorealism was a film movement, unified around a particular mise-en-scène, that acted as a kind of collective, aesthetic catharsis through cinema.

Of course, any individual filmmaker can draw inspiration from any of these stylistic movements in their work. And sometimes, they can combine them in startlingly creative ways. Agnes Varda, the founding mother of the French New Wave of the 1950s and 60s, did just that in her very first film *La Pointe Courte* (1955). The film tells two stories, one grounded in a neo-realist aesthetic, which would come to define her work in documentary filmmaking, and the other grounded in a formalist, impressionistic mise-en-scène that would characterize much of her narrative work. The result is a surprisingly cohesive cinematic experience (and full disclosure, one of my all time favorites):

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That is the power of mise-en-scène in any context, the power to unify a cinematic experience, to provide the aesthetic context for whatever else the filmmaker might be up to. Drawing on setting, character, lighting and composition, mise-en-scène is more than any one technique, it's the overall look or even *feel* of a film, and it is far greater than the sum of its parts. Which is why I chose to start here in our exploration of how, exactly, cinema works the way it does.

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4

Narrative

Over the past century, cinema has evolved into an incredibly complex medium involving the art and science of capturing the moving image, the equally important and co-expressive craft of sound design, not to mention new innovations in virtual reality and immersive technologies that will push the boundaries of what is possible in the years to come.

But one thing hasn't changed: the importance of a good story.

No matter how innovative the visual delights, how creative the soundscape, or how many millions are spent on the production design and celebrity talent, if it isn't all in service of a compelling **narrative** we'll walk away unmoved and unsatisfied. And good storytelling, of course, has been around at least as long as humans have been able to put together complete sentences. Let's face it, probably longer.

In this chapter we'll examine what makes *cinematic* storytelling unique, how narrative structure shapes our experience of the moving image, how compelling characters move that narrative forward, how the theme and narrative intent inform everything from the mise-en-scène to the cinematography, music, sound design and editing, and how all of this can morph into different narrative forms, or **genres**, in cinema.

But before we explore the technique of crafting a compelling narrative for cinema, let's take a look at the essential tool in that process: the **screenplay**.

THE SCREENPLAY

The screenplay, or script, in cinema is many things at once. Though rarely meant to be read as literature, it is a literary genre unto itself, with its own unique form, conventions, and poetic economy. It is also often a sales pitch, at least in the early stages of production, the best version of the idea, on paper, to attract collaborators and, ultimately, the capital required to make a motion picture. But first and foremost, the screenplay is a technical document, a kind of blueprint for the finished film.

Ever seen a screenplay? Let's take a look at what one looks like:

EXT. UNIVERSITY CA

A bucolic, liberal
relaxing in small

INT. LECTURE HALL

A large lecture ha
STUDENTS. It's a f
most of them are s

Up front, a PROFES
trying desperately

Every element of the script page is there for a reason and helps everyone on the creative team stay on the same page. Literally. (Sorry, couldn't resist.) The scene heading, for example, lets everyone know at a quick glance if that particular scene is set inside or outside, INT or EXT, where, exactly, they are supposed to be, and what time of day it is. That information, of course, will affect every member of the crew, from the producers and assistant director responsible for scheduling, to the camera crew responsible for lighting the scene, to the production designer responsible for the look of the location, to the transportation crew responsible for getting everyone there safely.

But notice too how economical the writing must be. There is no room to probe the inner life of characters or spin off into detailed descriptions of the space. And that is one of the most important aspects of great screenwriting: the economy of language. Imagine you're watching a film or tv show and your roommate is in the other room making a nice medium rare New York strip and a mushroom risotto (ok, fine, a bowl of ramen). They don't want to miss anything, so you have to describe in detail everything you're seeing and hearing by yelling across the apartment. What do you include? What do you leave out? Obviously you want to include what characters are saying, but beyond that, probably just the essentials. In fact, as a general rule of thumb, every page of script should equal about a minute of screen time. That doesn't always work out exactly, but does tend to average out over the length of the screenplay. So there simply isn't time to include anything but the essentials and allow the other creative collaborators on the team the freedom to interpret the rest.

Let's take a look at another page from a screenplay and how that compares to what we see on the screen in the finished film:

26   **EXT. SMALL TOWN STREET -**

       Will pedals through the s
       jaw set.

       His feet pump faster.

       Gaining speed, faster and

27   **INT. WILL'S HOUSE - THE W**

       Sun once again forces its

       The ALARM sounds. The Wom

28   **INT. WILL'S HOUSE - DAY**

       The Woman steps out of he
       moves into the kitchen ar
       into the small back yard.

Now here's the scene as it was shot and edited from that screenplay:

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First, notice the clip is about one minute, equal to that one page of screenplay. Second, how does the script page compare to the finished scene? What do you notice in the script that *isn't* on the screen? And what do you notice about the finished film that *isn't* in the script? You'll likely notice that there is no mention in the screenplay about how the camera moves or how it frames the image. Nor do you notice anything about the music, or the boy's wardrobe, or that dog in the background, or the fact that it's raining. But you might notice mention of an alarm clock that doesn't show up on screen.

There are any number of reasons for some of the differences. Some of them are intentional. How the camera moves is the cinematographer's job, not the screenwriter's. Likewise, the boy's wardrobe is the concern of the production designer and wardrobe department (though the script *does* mention the woman's robe because that is important to the narrative, and that *is* the screenwriter's job). But some of the differences are due to the realities of production. Just like a blueprint is a *plan* for a building, the screenplay is a *plan* for a motion picture. Once you start building it, you have to confront and overcome hundreds, maybe thousands of variables you could not anticipate. Maybe the weather turns on the last day of filming and you've got to incorporate a thunderstorm into the story. Or a neighbor is out walking their dog and ends up in a shot, so you have to layer in a dog barking in the sound design and carry that over to the next scene. Or maybe once you're in post-production and the editor is putting it all together, they realize that last line would work much better over the next scene. And that alarm clock? Maybe the director decided that was too cliché once they were on the set and wanted to try something different with their actor. (All of the above are true. I should know, I wrote, directed and edited the film in question. Fortunately, all three of us got along reasonably well).

The most important thing to remember is that cinema is a collaborative medium. There's always a give and take between the script and the finished film, just like there is between the director and the screenwriter, cinematographer, production designer, sound designer, actors, editor, etc., etc. And as much as a screenplay can and should be a great read, it is, ultimately, a technical document, a plan for something exponentially more complex.

And now that we have a sense of what this technical document looks like, let's examine more generally how a screenplay works. That is, how it tells a uniquely *cinematic* story.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Here's the recipe for a good story:

1 protagonist.
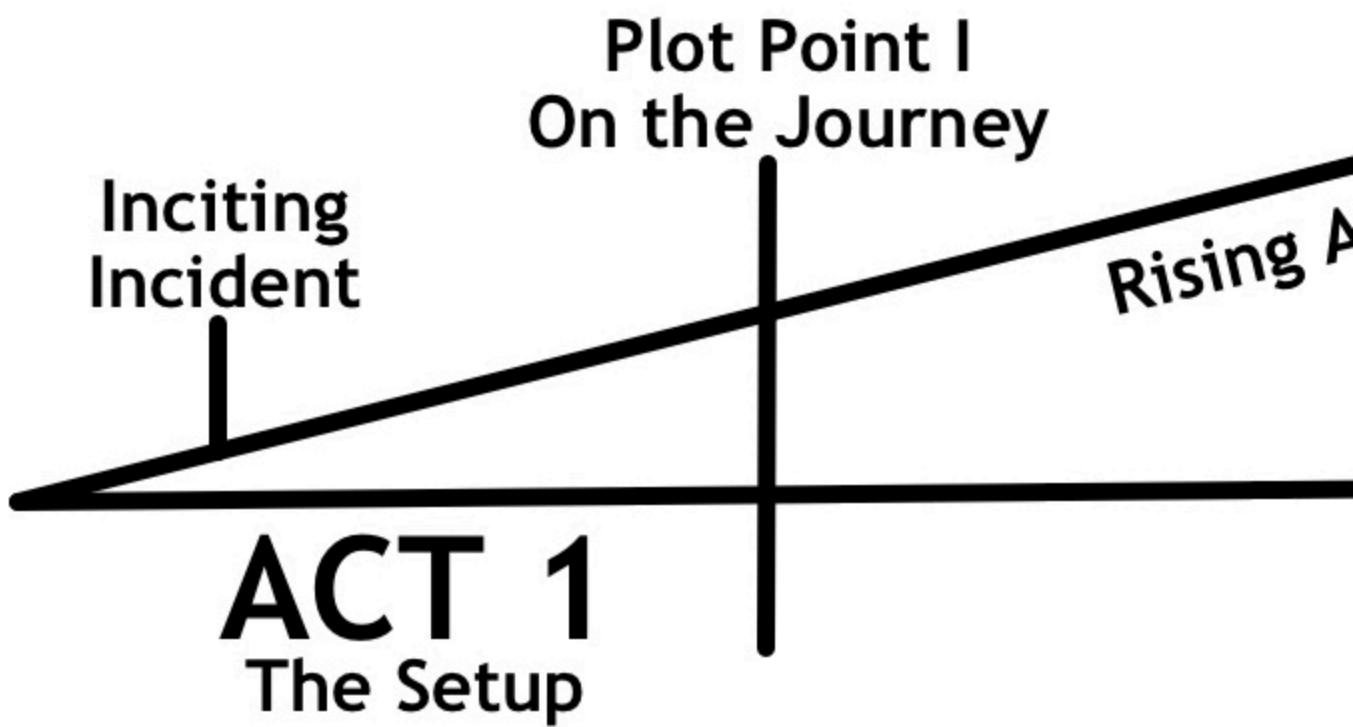
1 goal.

A whole bunch of obstacles.

That's it. Pretty much every story ever told can be boiled down to those three elements: A protagonist pursuing a goal confronted by obstacles. Cinematic storytelling draws from this same narrative source, and in that sense, is not so different from a good novel or even just a good yarn spun around the campfire. In fact, a lot of what we'll discuss here can apply to those other literary genres. Compelling characters are important no matter the form the story takes. Likewise, a clear theme or narrative intent from the storyteller. And sure, cinema, just like novels or short stories or even poetry, come in all shapes and sizes, otherwise known as **genres**, from thrillers to westerns, comedies to romance.

But I'd like to make the (somewhat controversial) case that cinema has developed its own unique structure, a rhythm to how a story is told cinematically. Not so much a "rule" to which all screenwriters must conform, more a pattern or set of patterns that writers have found most effective in communicating cinematically. This pattern has developed over time, evolved along with all of the other elements of cinematic language, and is, in fact, continuing to evolve as cinema moves into new, more open-ended forms like limited and streaming series. For now, let's examine just one cinematic form, the narrative feature film.

The closed-ended, narrative feature film, what we typically call a "movie" with a beginning, middle and an end and a running time anywhere from 90 minutes to over 2 hours, has been around for more than a century and served as a kind of foundational form in cinematic storytelling (though its cultural dominance has arguably lessened over the past decade or so, but we'll get to that). Over that time, and in Hollywood in particular, it has been refined and perfected into what we can describe as a **three-act structure:**

Plot Point I
On the Journey

Inciting
Incident

Rising A

ACT 1
The Setup

Act one, which generally runs to 25 or 30 pages (or the first 25 to 30 minutes of screen time), introduces the **protagonist**, sets up their world, and clarifies the goal they'll be pursuing for the rest of the story. It might also introduce a central **antagonist**, or it might wait until later. But typically, by page 25 or 30, we know who we're rooting for, what they want, and what's in their way. Maybe they've resisted going on the journey to that point, but by the end of act one, they are launched into act two, sometimes against their will.

Act two, which is usually about twice as long as act one, is all about the obstacles. Our protagonist must confront and overcome each one, and typically, the **stakes** get higher every time. That is, with every obstacle, the protagonist must risk more and more, making their journey more and more difficult. Often, those obstacles are put there by someone or something specific, the **antagonist**. But the obstacles could also be internal, some part of the protagonist's own psychology. Either way, there's usually a **midpoint**, right around page/minute 55 or 60, where the protagonist has a choice: they can turn back, give up on the pursuit of the goal, or double-down and never look back. Of course, they double-down. But by the end of act two, around page/minute 85 or 90, our protagonist meets their biggest obstacle yet. In fact, it seems to seal their fate. All hope is lost. They, and we, feel they will never reach their goal after all.

But that's not what we paid good money to see.

Act three, which is usually about the same length as act one, is all about our protagonist rallying to overcome that last obstacle leading to a climactic showdown and a resolution to their story. Usually that means they reach the goal defined in act one. But sometimes the journey clarifies a new goal, or they realize they always had what they were searching for and just needed to see it in themselves (insert eye roll here). But you get the idea, act three brings some kind of resolution.

This narrative structure as outlined above may seem all too familiar, and for some, its predictability is everything that's wrong with mainstream, Hollywood cinema. But I would argue that the cinematic three-act structure is one of the most important contributions to the global story-telling form in the past century. The Greeks had their tragedies, Shakespeare his five-act epics, Japanese poets the haiku. Hollywood has given us the three-act movie. And like the haiku, it is the structure of the three acts that, perhaps ironically, provides movies their creative freedom. We know the stories will resolve, the protagonist will reach their goal, that's why we show up at the theater, but it's the *how* – how this particular filmmaker is going to solve this particular problem – that keeps us in the seats. For all the rigidity of the haiku form (and come to think of it, that form of three lines of varying length echoes cinematic three act structure pretty nicely), no two poems are the same. Hopefully we can say the same of great cinema.

To be clear, the three-act structure is not an explicit industry standard or a rule to which screenwriters must conform. In fact, it is less a writing technique than it is an analytic tool, a way of breaking down cinematic stories for analysis. Unlike stage plays, there are no explicit act breaks in the script itself. And some writers actively work against that structure in an effort to push beyond expectations in cinema. The films of Quentin Tarantino, for example, often "break the rules" for how cinema is supposed to work (and as a result his scripts often read more like novels than screenplays). But even Tarantino accepts the importance of setting up audience expectations and, eventually, paying them off. Even he understands that the journey of a protagonist toward their goal is littered with obstacles and follows an arc toward resolution. And more often than not, the exceptions ultimately prove the "rule" of how effective the three-act structure has become. Not just because screenwriters find it useful, but because we, as the audience, have internalized it as part of our shared cinematic language:

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But as cinema has evolved into other forms, including television and streaming series, so too has narrative structure evolved. Beginning nearly half a century ago with the rise of broadcast television, cinematic storytelling for the small screen required an adjustment to the pace and rhythm of how a protagonist pursued their goal. Commercial interruptions, for example, came at regular intervals, forcing

writers into a four- or even five-act structure with cliffhangers at each break to make sure the audience didn't change the channel. Even today, broadcast television scripts still have explicit act breaks in the text to indicate where a commercial break might appear.

As binge-worthy streaming series have become the dominant form of cinematic entertainment, we see yet another evolution. With no commercial breaks, writers need not write a cliffhanger every 10 or 15 minutes. But they are keenly aware of how important it is that viewers hit play on the next episode. So, the narrative structure of a streaming series tends to apply the classic three-act structure to an entire eight- or ten-episode season, converting that eight- to ten-hour experience into one that echoes the ups and downs of a two-hour feature film. And, interestingly, that evolution of the form has in turn informed the narrative structure of the most popular feature film franchises. What are The Fast and the Furious or Transformers film franchises but multi-billion dollar series with each episode doled out every two or three years?

Which is why these innovations in the form represent an *evolution* of cinematic language, not a radical break. Just as cinematic storytelling itself is simply an *evolution* of the classic, age-old formula: A protagonist pursuing a goal confronted by obstacles.

COMPELLING CHARACTERS AND THE PRIMARY NARRATOR

Now, let's talk about that protagonist for a moment. Narrative structure may be a critical component of cinematic language, but ultimately, structure is another word for plot, and we don't go to the movies to root for plots, we root for people. If there isn't a compelling character or characters at the center story, all of the plot points (and special effects) in the world won't hold our attention or capture our imagination.

But what does it mean to be a compelling character? Some distinguish between **round** and **flat** characters. A round character is a complex, often conflicted character with a deep internal life who usually undergoes some kind of change over the course of the story. A flat character lacks that complexity, does not change at all over the course of the story, and is usually there only to help the more round characters on their journeys.

Obviously, most protagonists are, or should be, round characters. Though sometimes protagonists can be rather flat (check out any Steven Seagal flick from the 90s… or better yet, don't), and sometimes side characters who are only peripheral to the main story can be incredibly complex and undergo dramatic transformation. Still, a protagonist should at the very least be *interesting*, and that does not necessarily mean they are inherently *good*. In fact, often the most interesting protagonists are flawed in some fundamental way, and part of the fun is watching them struggle with that flaw. That's one reason Superman is such a difficult character to pull off on screen. He's just so… good. And he doesn't change all that much. But Batman? That guy is *dark*. And that's what makes him so much fun to watch (and perhaps why he's so much more successful at the box office).

Sometimes those flaws can be so deep and so disturbing that the character is no longer a protagonist and is more an **anti-hero**. An anti-hero is an unsympathetic hero pursuing an immoral goal, and somehow we end up rooting for them anyway. Think of basically every heist movie. Or every vigilante action movie. Or any Tarantino movie for that matter. The main characters are all essentially criminals intent on breaking the law. And we can't wait to see how they pull it off:

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To be clear, an anti-hero is *not* the same as an **antagonist**. The antagonist's role is to stop the hero from reaching their goal. In *The Dark Knight* (2008), Batman is the protagonist, the hero, and the Joker is the antagonist. But in *Joker* (2019), the Joker is the protagonist, in this case an anti-hero, and the police, ostensibly the "good guys", are the antagonists.

Whether protagonist or anti-hero, the central character of a cinematic narrative should always drive the story forward. We are on their journey, and it's their actions that move us through the plot.

But… they are *not* in control. That is to say, they are not, in fact, the primary narrator in cinema.

Let me explain.

When you read a novel, unless it is written in the first person, it's not any one character in the book telling you the story. One could argue it's the author herself, but the singular "voice" of the narrator is more an abstraction than a person.

The next time you are watching a film or series, take a step back and ask yourself: Who or what is telling this story? Not what character are we following or with whom do we most closely identify *in* the story, but who or what is actually relaying the events. Yes, there's the screenwriter and the director and ultimately the editor who are all responsible for narrative as we receive it. Just like the author of a novel. But moment to moment, the primary narrator in cinema is always the *camera*.

Let's face it, we're all voyeurs. We like sitting in the dark and peering into other people's lives unnoticed and undetected. That's what cinema is. And our window into those lives is the camera frame. The camera dictates where we look and when. The camera provides all the information we need to construct the narrative unspooling at 24 frames per second.

But more generally, we can distinguish between two kinds of narration, two ways the camera tells the story. Does the camera restrict our view to the experiences of just one character? Or does it allow us to follow all sorts of characters, round and flat, major and minor, protagonist and antagonist, wherever they might go? **Restricted narration** refers to stories that never leave the protagonist, restricting our access to any other character unless they are in the same space as our hero. **Omniscient narration** can follow any character, even minor ones, if it helps tell the story. But in both cases, it's the camera than controls the story. It's the camera that serves as the primary narrator.

THEME AND NARRATIVE INTENT

A clear narrative structure and compelling, round characters are crucial elements in our shared cinematic language. And once we understand these principles of how a screenplay works, how it goes about telling a story, we can look more deeply into what, exactly, it is trying to say. We'll spend more time on that towards the end of this book, but for now, it's important to distinguish between a plot – what *happens* in a film – and a **theme** – what the film is *really* about. *Star Wars* (1977) is about a farm boy saving a princess and defeating a planet-destroying weapon wielded by the evil Empire. That's the plot. But it's *really* about believing in oneself and the difference one brave person can make in the face of overwhelming evil. That is its **narrative intent**. It's that underlying idea that activates the plot, defines the characters, and leads us to a satisfying resolution.

That does not mean every film or series has a "message" like those saccharine after-school specials. But it does mean that great cinema is organized around an idea, an arguable point, that can focus the action and clarify character. A clear and well-planned narrative theme can serve as a unifying principle, informing every other element of the cinematic experience. Not just plot and character, but mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound design and editing as well. In *Star Wars*, the climactic Death Star sequence is a spectacular action set piece, but it also serves the central narrative theme. Luke Skywalker becomes the last pilot, one tiny fighter against a planet-sized weapon. And to defeat it, he must draw upon skills he learned back on the farm.

Compare that to the action set piece at the center of *G.I. Joe: Rise of Cobra* (2009). A missile filled with nanomites strikes the Eiffel Tower and destroys it in a blaze of CGI glory. What's a nanomite? Doesn't matter. The sequence is not connected to a clear theme because there is no clear theme, just a plot, a sequence of events where things happen. One is left with the impression that the only reason the Eiffel Tower scene exists is because someone thought it would look cool on screen. And it does. I guess. But it doesn't *move* us. It's meaningless, a mere plot point. And that's often why cinematic spectacles can leave us flat. They look cool, but have no unifying theme, no narrative intent aside from the spectacle itself.

But when that spectacle is tied to a clear theme, one that we can identify with and even argue over, then cinema can become transformative.

Take Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995) for example. The plot is fairly simple. A child's favorite toy is threatened by the arrival of a shiny new toy. His jealousy leads to them both becoming lost and working together to return home. A simple sequence of events. And with the innovation of 3D animation at the time, that might have been all it needed to hold our attention if not capture our imagination. But the movie is much more than that. It's *really* about friendship and the importance of self-sacrifice. And every scene serves that theme, serving either as counterpoint or confirmation. The plot, then, is not *simply* a random sequence of events, it is a carefully planned dramatization of the theme where every obstacle encountered reveals something important about the hero's journey. That's what makes *Toy Story* a classic, and not just another cartoon.

GENRE IN CINEMA

Genre is likely a term you've encountered before. We use it when analyzing literature to distinguish between different types of stories. The word itself is French (I know, the French again), and it literally means "a kind" or type. And yes, it's related to the word gender, as in a "type" of person. And even the word generic, as in, non-specific, plain or even uninteresting.

And that's the blessing and the curse of genre. It's a useful way to categorize types of cinematic narrative – westerns, romantic comedies, horror, superhero – but it also implies a non-specificity, a certain sameness to films of a type.

But sometimes… that's *exactly* what we want.

When we go to see a romantic comedy, we know we're going to see two people meet early on in the story and then spend about 90 minutes overcoming all sorts of obstacles to be together. There will likely be some terrible misunderstanding or other calamity late in the film that dooms their relationship (end of act two!), and then someone will run through an airport or stand outside in the rain to profess their true feelings and they'll finally be together. We know all of this before the opening credits. That's the point. We want to see *how* this particular filmmaker gets them there. But they better get there. That's why we paid for our ticket.

These similarities, and they extend to types of characters, settings, themes, even musical scores, are called **narrative conventions**. Cinematic genres, just like literary genres, are grouped according to these conventions. We know a Western when we see one because they share similar settings (the 19th century American west), characters (the lone gunslinger, the homesteading widow, the disillusioned sheriff) and themes (rugged individualism and frontier justice). The same with Science Fiction, Horror, Gangster movies, and the Musical.

Genre distinctions are handy for us as viewers when deciding what kinds of stories we want to engage, but they are even more handy for producers and studios when it comes to meeting the demand of audiences. Cinema is an incredibly capital intensive medium, and the more targeted the content, the more likely filmmakers will see a return on that investment. In that sense, genre is a convenient shorthand for both the people who consume cinema *and* the people who produce it:

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And as we discussed with the three-act structure, the apparent rigidity of narrative conventions when it comes to genre might seem like a recipe for boredom. A formula instead of an art form. But structure doesn't dictate predictability. It can just as easily inspire creativity. Just like that "predictable" romantic comedy, genre can pose a creative challenge to surprise an audience that already thinks it knows what's coming.

Of course, sometimes a filmmaker can lean into one genre, setting up expectations, and then really pull the rug out from under us:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0nqEu8LTOA

But perhaps more importantly, genre – again, like three-act structure – is really more an analytic technique than a writing tool. While some screenwriters work firmly and unequivocally within a particular genre, the narrative conventions we associate with certain types of films help us analyze how a particular filmmaker approaches the fundamental questions in any story: Who is the hero? What do they want? How are they going to get it?

1 protagonist.

1 goal.

A whole bunch of obstacles.

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5

Cinematography

Photography is the art of fixing an image in durable form through either a chemical or digital process. It requires a detailed, scientific knowledge of how light reflects off the lived environment and how that light reacts to various light-sensitive media. It also requires a sophisticated grasp of color temperature and the interplay of light and shadow. And an artist's sensibility to composition, the arrangement of objects and setting within the frame of the camera to achieve balance and visual interest. Not to mention a deep, technical understanding of the gear required, cameras, formats, lenses and their respective idiosyncrasies. And it helps if you know how to tell a story in a single image, frozen in time. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Now do that at least 24 times every second. That's *cinema*tography.

Capturing the moving image. For many of film lovers, and even just the casual viewer, this is what we show up for. But I've waited five chapters to discuss it because it's important to understand that cinematography – while it may often get the most glory – is only one part of how cinema works. Without a sophisticated mise-en-scéne and a narrative to follow, it's just a bunch of meaningless images. Not to mention the importance of editing, sound and performance. Put it all together and cinematography becomes the anchor point to a much larger cinematic experience.

The person responsible for all of this is the **cinematographer**, sometimes known as the **director of photography (DP)**. Their job is to translate the director's vision into usable footage, using all of the photographic skills listed above and only after making a series of crucial decisions which we will get to below. It is one of the most technical jobs in cinema, requiring as much science as it does art:

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And just as the production designer oversees a whole crew of craftspeople helping to fully realize the mise-en-scéne, the cinematographer also relies on a large team known as the **camera department**. The camera department includes the **camera operator**, the person actually handling the camera. I know, seems like that should be the cinematographer. And it often is. But on larger productions where you have multiple cameras or very complex shots, the cinematographer can only be in one place at a time. There's also the **1st assistant camera (1st AC)**, who is responsible for the camera components, swapping out lenses, and most importantly, keeping the camera in focus. Though that last job is sometimes given to another dedicated member of the team, the **focus puller**. Then you have the **2nd assistant camera (2nd AC)** who assists the 1st AC and often operates the **slate**, or **clapper** (more on that later).

A relatively new member of the camera department is the **Digital Imaging Technician (DIT)**. With the rise of digital cinematography, instead of a dedicated person responsible for loading film onto the camera (known as a **film loader**, so creative with the names), we now have a person solely responsible for organizing the digital files coming off the camera. And that can include quality control and **color correction** during the shoot.

Outside the dedicated camera department, the cinematographer also oversees the **lighting department** as well as the **grip department**, also known collectively as **grip and electric**. The lighting department is, well, responsible for all the lights required to shoot a scene. As should be obvious, lights require electricity. And electricity can be dangerous. Especially when you have 100 crew people running around trying to get a shot before lunch. So, the head of the lighting department is a skilled electrician, known as the **gaffer**. The gaffer has a first assistant as well, called a **best boy**. (I know, not very gender neutral. If the "best boy" is female, they might be called **best babe**, which is worse.) And then a whole crew of **electrics** who are responsible for putting the lights wherever the gaffer tells them to. **Grips** are there to move everything else that *isn't* a light. That includes lighting stands, flags, bounces, even cranes, dollies and the camera itself. The head of the grip department is the **key grip**, and one of their most important jobs is on-set safety. With so many literal moving parts, it is very easy for someone to get hurt.

That's a lot of people to keep track of for one cinematographer, but fortunately there is a tightly controlled hierarchy and they all know their jobs. A simple command from the cinematographer, "Flag off that 10k, we're going wide on the dolly," may sound like gibberish, but everyone on a film set knows exactly what to do. In fact, there's a whole cinema-specific vocabulary that film crews use to keep the shoot moving quickly and efficiently. From **apple boxes** to **barn doors** to **C-stands**, the lingo can get

downright bizarre. Clothespins are not clothespins, they're **C-47s** (and yes, [they use a lot of clothespins on a film set](#)), and breakfast isn't the morning meal, it's the first meal on set, which could be 6 o'clock in the evening. And if someone is in the bathroom, they're **10-100** (or **10-200** as the case may be), but they're definitely *not* **"in the can"**, which is what you say when a scene is completed.

But aside from the esoteric lingo on the set, there are a few key terms everyone should know. The first is the **shot**, the most basic building block of cinematography. As mentioned in Chapter Two, a shot is one continuous capture of a span of action by a motion picture camera. A finished film is made up of a series of these shots, of varying length, that ultimately tell the story. But during production, each shot may need to be repeated several (or dozens or even hundreds of) times until everyone gets it right. Every time they repeat the shot, it's called a **take**. And once the director and cinematographer feel they have the best version of that shot, it's time to move the camera – and everything associated with it – to a new shot, sometimes just a slightly different angle on the same scene. That's called a **set-up**. New set-ups require everyone on the crew to jump into action, re-arranging the camera, the lights, the set dressing, etc. That can take time. Lots of time. And it's one reason assistant directors, responsible for planning how long it will all take, think of the schedule in terms of the number of set-ups a crew can accomplish each day.

Obviously, a film set is a complicated place requiring a complex choreography of dozens if not hundreds of personnel all dedicated to rendering the moving picture. But there are many decisions a cinematographer has to make before they even arrive on set. These decisions – film or digital, black and white or color, lighting, lenses, framing and movement – are all made in collaboration with director and in service to the narrative and the overall mise-en-scéne. Some of them are incredibly technical, some are purely aesthetic, but each one of them will affect how we engage the cinematic experience.

FILM VERSUS DIGITAL

One of the first decisions a cinematographer must make is what medium she intends to use to record the images, a physical film stock or a digital sensor. While this is a highly technical decision, it is also an important aesthetic choice that will affect the overall look of the final image. Not only are there differences in the look of film versus digital recording generally, but there are also subtle distinctions in the various film stocks and manufacturers, as well as the different types of digital sensors that come with different camera systems. Let's take each one in turn.

Good old-fashioned film stock has been around since the dawn of cinema, though it has evolved quite a bit since those early days. In the beginning, the strips of light-sensitive material were made from nitrate, a highly flammable material, which was not so great when it was whirring through a projector past a hot lamp. It's one of the reasons many early films are lost to history. They simply burned up too easily. Today, film stock is made from a much sturdier plastic. And on that plastic is a gelatin coating containing thousands of microscopic grains of light-sensitive crystals called **silver halide**. When light hits those crystals, they darken, depending on the amount of light. (And if it's color film, there will be three separate layers of those crystals, one blue, one red and one green.) A chemical bath enhances that reaction to light, rendering a negative image that can then be projected.

Once a cinematographer commits to this analog, chemical process, there are still a lot of decisions to make. First, they must choose a **film gauge**, that is, the size of the film stock. The film gauge is determined by measuring from corner to corner the individual frames that will be exposed to light. The standard film gauge in cinema today is 35mm, but sizes range from as small as 8mm all the way up to 70mm. And each size will render a different look, with more or less detail once enlarged. They must also decide how sensitive the film will be to light. Highly sensitive, or "fast" film stock, that is film that reacts quickly to relatively low levels of light, contains relatively large silver halide crystals (more surface area to absorb the light). The benefit is the ability to film at night or other low-light situations. The drawback is a loss in **resolution**, or detail in the image, due to an increase in the crystals. or **grain**. Less sensitive, or "slower" film stock produces a crisper image (due to the smaller crystals), but requires more light.

There are many other decisions to be made that may affect the final image – the manufacturer, black and white versus color, the developing process – but using the physical medium of film stock renders an image that many filmmakers claim has a more organic look, a difference you can almost feel more than see. And that comes at a price. Film stock must be purchased by the foot, forcing filmmakers to plan every shot carefully to avoid wasting material. (Of course, many filmmakers see this as a *good* thing). Not to mention the fact that you don't *really* know what you have until you develop the film after a day of shooting. Or the fact that you have to assemble your final film by actually cutting and taping together physical strips of film. Or the fact that even if you choose to shoot on analog film stock, most of your audience is going to watch a digitized version in the multiplex or on their television, laptop or smartphone anyway.

For these and many other reasons, good old-fashioned film has fallen somewhat out of fashion in favor of the flexibility of **digital cinematography**. Digital cinematography is identical in every way to analog film cinematography – same basic equipment, same need to control exposure, shape light, compose the image, etc. – with one important difference: the light passing through the lens hits a digital image sensor instead of a strip of plastic film. That sensor uses software to analyze and convert the light bouncing off its surface into a series of still images (just like film stock) that are recorded onto flash memory or an external hard drive.

The advantages should be obvious. First and foremost, there are almost no limits on how much you can record, especially as digital data storage becomes cheaper and cheaper. And since the sensor is controlled by software, you can adjust settings such as light sensitivity at the press of a button rather than changing out the film stock.

But there are still lots of decisions to be made. Just as there are various film gauges, digital sensors come in all shapes and sizes, and every camera manufacturer produces their own subtle variations. And while most of us could probably never tell the difference, cinematographers are very particular about the way a Canon sensor renders color differently from a Sony sensor, or a RED sensor from an Arri sensor.

And then there's the issue of resolution. The standard for "high definition" is an image measuring 1,920 pixels by 1,080 pixels, also known as **1080p** (the "p" stands for progressive scan since the image is rendered line by line from top to bottom). Pixels are the smallest visible unit in a screen's ability to produce an image. Think of them as analogous to those tiny silver halide crystals in film stock. 1,920 by 1,080 pixels is a lot of detail, but most digital cinema today is recorded at a much higher resolution of at least 4,096 pixels by 2,160 pixels, or **4K**. And even that has become commonplace and somewhat outdated. In fact, you probably have a 4K camera in your pocket right now. It's in your phone. And as the technology improves, we'll see 6K, 8K and 10K become standard. All that information packed into

every image renders an incredible amount of detail (and also eats up a lot of storage space). Detail most of us, frankly, will not be able to see with naked eye.

But resolution isn't the only factor that affects image clarity. Cinematographers can also manipulate the **frame rate** to render super sharp imagery. For decades, the standard frame rate for cinema has been 24 frames per second. That produces a familiar, cinematic "look" to the finished film in part because of **motion blur**, the subtle blurring that occurs between still images passing at 24 fps. But film shot and projected at 48 or 96 or even 120 frames per second renders an ultra-sharp image with almost no motion blur as our brains process far more detail between each individual frame. To be fair, this is possible with analog film stock, but it is impractical to shoot that much film stock at that high a rate. Digital cinematography gives filmmakers like Ang Lee (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016), *Gemini Man* (2019)) and James Cameron (the *Avatar* series) the freedom to experiment with these higher frame rates combined with higher resolution sensors to produce images we literally have never seen before.

BLACK & WHITE VERSUS COLOR

Another decision cinematographers must make early in the process, in collaboration with the director, is whether to record the image in black and white or color. For many of you this may seem more a question of history. Old movies are black and white, modern movies are in color. Once the technology allowed for color cinematography, why would anyone look back? But there are a number of reasons why a filmmaker might *choose* to film in black and white over color, even today. They may want to evoke a certain period or emulate some of those "old" movies. Or, if the subject matter is relatively bleak, they may want the added thematic element of literally draining the color from the image. Or they may want to take advantage of the heightened reality and sharp contrast that black and white cinematography provides. Or maybe they want to foreground the performances. One of the greatest directors in cinema history, Orson Welles, once said black and white was the actor's friend because every performance is better without the distraction of color.

But I get it. It's not 1920. You don't ride a penny-farthing or listen to music on wax cylinders. Why would you watch a movie in black and white?

Maybe this will convince you:

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Whatever their reason, cinematographers must take several things into account once they choose between black and white and color. First, if they are shooting black and white on film, they typically have to use a film stock designed for black and white imagery. It is possible to print black and white from a color negative, but it won't render the light and shadows in quite the same way as a dedicated film stock. And, of course, if they are filming in color, different film stocks from different manufacturers will render colors differently depending on the desired effect. If they are using digital technology and want the final product to be black and white, the color is usually removed after filming in post-production. But they still have to balance lighting and exposure for how the image will render without

color. In either case, it's important to note that black and white cinematography requires just as much attention to detail in the filming process as color.

LIGHT AND LIGHTING

Whether shooting film or digital, black and white or color, one of the most powerful tools a cinematographer has to work with is light itself. Without light, there is no image and there can be no cinema. But simply having enough light to expose an image is not enough. A great cinematographer – heck, even a halfway decent one – knows that their job is to shape that light into something uniquely cinematic. To do that, they must have a deep understanding of the basic properties of light. Four properties, to be specific: **Source**, **Quality**, **Direction** and **Color**.

Source refers to both the origin and intensity of the light. There are two basic distinctions in terms of origin: natural or artificial. **Natural light** refers to light from the sun or moon (which is really just the sun bouncing off the moon, but you knew that), and **artificial light** refers to light generated from any number of different technologies, LED, incandescent, fluorescent, etc. Each source will have its own particular characteristics, exposing a shot in its own particular way. Artificial light allows a cinematographer an incredible amount of freedom to manipulate and shape the light. Scenes shot indoors on a soundstage can be made to look like daytime exteriors with enough artificial light. And scenes shot outdoors at night can also be augmented with artificial lights standing in for moonlight. But natural light can also be manipulated and shaped through filters, flags (large black fabric squares used to block off the sun's direct light) and diffusers.

Each new scene will require the cinematographer to consider their light source and how they want to shape it. And a big part of that calculation is **intensity**. How bright is the source and how is that going to affect exposure? We'll discuss **depth of field** later on, but how much light a cinematographer has to work with affects how much (or how little) of the shot can be in focus, and how balanced their exposure will be in the final image. Sometimes a cinematographer can get away with just using **available light**, that is the light from the pre-existing fixtures in a location (also called **practical lights**). But more often they want to control the intensity more precisely, so they use specialized lights to illuminate the scene from outside the frame of the image. The lamps and overhead lights you might see in a film or tv series are actually more props than true lighting sources. They indicate to the viewer where the light is coming from in a given shot – what cinematographers call **motivating** the light source and direction – but they rarely adding anything to the exposure of the scene.

Check out this short clip:

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The subject in the scene is lit by several bright artificial lights just off camera. The table lamp in the background is only there to "motivate" the light that illuminates the side of the subject's face. But it's really just a psychological trick. If you really think about it, a dim lamp behind and to the right of the subject should not illuminate his face at all, but our brain tells us, "Sure, that makes sense." That's

because we really *want* to believe, we don't want to think about a crew of people standing around bright lights while a camera records it all. We want to be fooled, and the cinematographer knows that.

The second property of light cinematographers have to think about is quality. This doesn't mean "good" or "bad," it's more about how the light "feels" in the shot. The easiest way to think about quality is in terms of **hard** or **soft** lighting. Hard lighting is intense and focused, creating harsh, dramatic shadows. Soft lighting is more diffused and even, filling the space with smooth, gradual transitions from light to dark. The difference is actually less about the light on the subject and more about the shadows cast by the subject. Are the shadows clearly defined with a hard edge? You've got hard lighting. Are the shadows fuzzy, less clearly defined or maybe even absent entirely? You've got soft lighting. Cinematographers can control the quality of light by adjusting the size of the light source and its distance from the subject. Typically, the smaller the light source and the closer to the subject, the harder the light:

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The third important property of light is direction. Where is the light coming from in the scene? Not the source, what *makes* the light, but what *direction* is it coming from? Left, right, below, above? Each decision will affect the look and feel of a scene, and practical lights in the set design can help motivate lighting direction. A single overhead lamp in an interrogation room will motivate a hard light from above. Large windows can help motivate a soft, diffused light from one side of the room.

Cinematographers plan their lighting set-up for any given scene by thinking carefully about what direction the light is coming from, starting with the main source of illumination, the **key light**. The key light is usually the brightest light on the set, used to properly expose the main subject. But just one bright light will feel like a spotlight, creating unwanted shadows. So, they use a **fill light**, usually less intense and a bit softer than the key light, to fill out those shadows. But those two lights shining on the front of your subject can make the scene feel a bit two-dimensional. To bring some depth to the image, they use a **back light**, usually a hard light that shines on the back of a subject's head (also called a **hair light**), to create some separation between the subject and the background. The brightness of each of these lights relative to each other is known as the **lighting ratio** and can be adjusted for various different effects. This lighting set-up is known as **three-point lighting**, and it's the most basic starting point for lighting a scene:

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Of course, three-point lighting is just that, a starting point. Really complex lighting schemes will require far more layers to the set-up. But even then, cinematographers will talk to their gaffers, electrics and grips in terms of key, fill and back lights.

The fourth property of light that every cinematographer must understand is color. And no, I don't mean red, blue and green light bulbs. I mean the subtle color cast that different light sources give off that will ultimately affect the exposed image. For example, a typical household incandescent light bulb uses a tungsten filament to produce light. That light usually has a warm, orange glow to it. But a fluorescent tube light in a ceiling fixture gives off a cooler, bluer light. In fact, we've come up with a way to measure these differences using the concept of **color temperature**. Color temperature is measured in degrees Kelvin. The lower the degree Kelvin, the warmer, or more "red" the light. The higher the degree

Kelvin, the cooler, more "blue" the light. The orange glow of a tungsten bulb is around 3200 Kelvin. Daylight is around 5600 Kelvin.

It can get a little confusing, I know. Check out this quick overview on the science behind color temperature and how we use it in cinema:

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As should be clear by now, color temperature matters a great deal when a cinematographer wants to set a particular mood. For example, a romantic scene in a candle-lit restaurant should have a warm, orange glow. Fortunately, you don't need to rely on a thousand candles to achieve that effect. Most modern LED (light-emitting diode) lights can be adjusted according to color temperature. All you have to do is dial in 2000K to your key, fill and back lights, and you get the equivalent of the warm glow of candlelight without the fire hazard.

Source, quality, direction and color are the four most important properties of light cinematographers must master to create great cinema. And once we understand these same properties, we can start to understand how cinematographers combine them to achieve an effective lighting **style** in any given scene, film or series. For example, by lowering or removing the key light and relying more on indirect, relatively hard fill and back lights, you create deep shadows and high contrast in a scene. As mentioned in Chapter Three, this is style of lighting is known as **low-key lighting** (because of the lack of a dominant key light, not because it's laid back), used to evoke mystery and even terror.

Check out this short video essay on one of the greatest living cinematographers, Roger Deakins, and how he approaches lighting style in his work:

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THE LENS

Another powerful tool a cinematographer has to work with is, of course, the camera. And there is a lot that goes into how that particular apparatus works and the nuances between different formats and manufacturers. But I want to focus on the one component that is interchangeable and allows for endless variety: the **lens**. No matter what camera a cinematographer chooses, it's the lens that determines the clarity, framing, depth of field and exposure of the image. Just by changing the lens, without moving the camera at all, you can radically transform the look of a shot.

The principle behind a camera lens is a pretty simple. A piece of curved glass (or several pieces depending on the lens), held in place on the front of the camera, focuses light through an adjustable aperture (a fancy word for "hole") and onto light-sensitive material (film or a digital sensor). The aperture controls the amount of light entering the camera, and the glass "elements" control the sharpness of the image by moving closer or further away in tiny increments from the aperture. The overall distance

between the sensor and the point at which the light passes through those glass elements is called the **focal length**
Okay, so it's a little more complicated than that. Technically, focal length is measured from the point where the light converges in the middle of the glass elements, known as the optical center, before it is refracted back out toward the aperture and sensor. Feel better?
and is measured in millimeters. So, in a 50mm lens the distance between the sensor of the camera and the point where the light passes through the glass of the lens is 50 millimeters.

Focal length determines both the **angle of view** and the **magnification** of the image. The shorter the focal length, the wider the angle of view and the smaller the magnification. The longer the focal length, the narrower the angle of view and the greater the magnification. Any lens below 35mm is generally considered a "wide-angle lens" because of its relatively short focal length. Any lens above 70mm is considered a "telephoto lens" because it greatly magnifies the image.

Lenses can be divided into two basic types based on how they treat focal length: **zoom** and **prime**. Zoom lenses allow you to adjust the focal length by sliding the glass elements closer to or further away from the sensor, thus greatly magnifying the image or widening the angle of view without swapping out the lens itself. Prime lenses have a fixed focal length. What you see is what you get. Now I know what you're thinking. Why not just slap a zoom lens on there and choose your own focal length? But actually, cinematographers almost always use prime lenses when filming. For one thing, zoom lenses tend to have many more glass elements than primes and that can affect the quality of the image. But more importantly, prime lenses force the cinematographer to be more deliberate and intentional about the angle of view and magnification of a particular shot.

Confused yet? Maybe this will help:

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Still confused? Here's an explanation in just 23 seconds:

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Angle of view and magnification are important in terms of what's visible in the frame, but just as important is what appears to be in sharp focus. Lenses also allow cinematographers to control the depth of the image by either isolating a subject as the only element we see clearly in a particular shot or allowing us to see everything in the background and foreground equally. This is called **depth of field**, the range of distance in front of the camera in which subjects are in sharp focus.

Take a look at this image:

Note how the figure of the man lighting his cigarette is isolated from the background, focusing our attention on the spark from the lighter. This is an example of **narrow depth of field**. The range of distance in front of the camera in which subjects are in sharp focus is relatively small, creating less depth to the image.

Now check out this image:

Note that everything seems to be equally in focus, allowing us to pick out all of the details of the set design. This is an example of a **wide depth of field** or **deep focus**.

But since cinematography is all about *moving* pictures, this is not necessarily a binary choice. A cinematographer can *change* the depth of field within a shot to shift our attention from one subject to another. This is called a **rack focus** or **pull focus**:

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Now that you know what it is, you'll see it *all the time* in film and tv. In fact, there's usually one person on set whose only job is to manage those shifts in the depth of field within a shot. They're called, appropriately enough, a **focus puller**.

FRAMING THE SHOT

Composition, the arrangement of people, objects and setting within the frame of an image, has already come up a few times in previous chapters. That's because how a cinematographer composes the image, how they *design* each shot, is one of the most important elements in cinematic storytelling. How those people, objects and setting are arranged with in the border of the image can bring balance or imbalance, reveal or hide information, indicate power or weakness, all without a word of dialog, an edit or even a character on the screen.

But before a cinematographer can start to think about how to properly compose a shot, they have one more decision to make: the shape of their frame. Okay, every frame (for now) is some variation on a rectangle. But the proportions of that rectangle will dictate how people, objects and setting are arranged within it. This is known as the **aspect ratio**, the width of the frame relative to its height. The current standard for motion pictures is 16:9, or 1.78:1, a rectangle that is almost twice as wide as it is tall. But in the early days of cinema, the standard was much closer to a square, 4:3, sometimes called the **academy ratio**. And sometimes filmmakers opt for a much wider frame, as wide as 2.35:1. That aspect ratio is a particular favorite of Quentin Tarantino. Whatever aspect ratio a filmmaker chooses will affect the choices they make regarding composition. Check out this quick comparison:

1.33:1 (4:3)
Academy Ratio

1.78:1 (16:9)
Standard US

Once a filmmaker has chosen their aspect ratio, the most basic starting point for composition, one we all intuitively understand from our own experience snapping photos with our phones, is balance. Images that are well-balanced use the space within the frame to evenly distribute visual interest, creating a proportional, pleasing composition. (Unless that's not what you're going for, but we'll get to that). One way to achieve that balance is the **rule of thirds**. The idea is to divide the frame into thirds horizontally and vertically and line up areas of visual interest at the intersection of those points. Here's an example:

By arranging the actors along the intersection of the grid lines, the composition feels well-balanced and proportional. It has the added benefit of helping to tell the story, where the two characters share the screen as equals.

Now take a look at another image from the same film:

In this composition, the subjects are still evenly distributed within the frame, but the relative size difference between the characters indicates an unequal power dynamic. Again, helping to tell the story.

The rule of thirds is all about balance and proportion in the composition, to bring a sense of symmetry to the image. Some filmmakers take this notion of symmetry in composition to the extreme. Check out this supercut of Wes Anderson's apparent obsession with symmetry in his films:

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This consistent use of balanced composition is one of the elements that makes a Wes Anderson film a Wes Anderson film. That pattern in his framing is part of his signature mise-en-scéne.

But just like three-point lighting, the rule of thirds is really just a starting point for understanding how composition can be used to help tell a cinematic story. Framing the shot is really about directing our attention, showing us where to look in the shot or scene, and ultimately how to *feel* about it. There are lots of ways to do this.

Take a look at how Nicholas Winding Refn uses another way to divide up the frame, a quadrant approach, to direct our attention in a given shot or sequence:

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Or how Japanese master filmmaker Akira Kurosawa combines framing and movement to constantly redefine relationships and motivations using simple geometry:

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Sometimes a filmmaker will direct our attention by framing the subject *within* another frame in the composition. Check out how Wong Kar-Wai uses this technique in the stunning romance *In the Mood for Love* (2000):

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All of these examples demonstrate how filmmakers use framing to direct our attention and help tell the story. And as discussed in Chapter Two, these techniques contribute to our shared cinematic language, as filmmakers *and* viewers. Some of the more obvious ways filmmakers employ framing as form of communication is by using imagery we already intuitively understand from our everyday lives. Take, for example, the apparent proximity of the subject to the camera. As discussed in Chapter Two, a **close-up** creates a sense of intimacy with the subject, just like it would in real life if we stood within inches of another person (hopefully with their permission, because if not, that's just creepy). If the subject appears far away, as in an **extreme long shot**, that communicates a sense of disconnection or *emotional* distance from the subject. In fact, directors and cinematographers have a convenient shorthand for how close or far way the subject should appear, a code for where to place the camera (or what focal length to use). A

close up and extreme long shot are obvious enough. But there is also the **extreme close-up**, **medium close-up**, **medium shot**, **medium long**, **long** etc. Each term means something specific in terms of composition. A medium long shot, for example, will typically compose a character from the knees up. A medium shot will be from the waist up. Having a specific term for a specific composition saves time (and money) on the set during production.

Another way filmmakers can communicate through composition using imagery we already intuitively understand is by adjusting the angle of view. If a cinematographer frames the shot below the eyeline of a character – so we are literally looking up to them – that character will feel dominant and powerful. Frame the subject in profile and the character will feel a bit more mysterious, leaving us wanting to know more about them.

A filmmaker can also "break" the rules of balance and proportion for a desired effect. For example, if a cinematographer intentionally creates an asymmetrical, unbalanced image, it will likewise make the viewer feel uneasy and off balance. Or they can compose the image so the main subject is isolated and small relative to the rest of the frame, creating what is known as **negative space**. This can help communicate a character's isolation or powerlessness in a scene.

Want more examples? Check out this video essay on how filmmakers use composition to tell a cinematic story:

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MOVING THE CAMERA

Much of the above discussion about composition is as true for still photography and painting as it is for cinematography. But what makes cinema special is, of course, **movement**, both in terms of how subjects move within the frame – also known as **blocking** – and how the frame itself moves through a scene. And while the blocking of actors in a scene is important, I want to focus on how a cinematographer can move their camera within a single shot to reframe an image and potentially change the meaning of the scene.

There are many different ways a camera can move. Let's take a look at some of the simplest, starting with **pans** and **tilts**. A tilt is simply moving the camera up or down from a fixed point, usually a tripod. A pan is simply rotating the camera from side to side, also from a fixed point. Here's an example of a pan:

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The effect is the same as if you simply turned your head from left to right, keeping your eyes straight ahead. But by moving the frame, the cinematographer is able to radically reorient our point of view while also creating a sense of anticipation as to what will be revealed.

But if you want the camera to actually move through the space, not simply move left to right or up and down, there are a few options. You could just pick it up and move it. That's called, appropriately enough, a **handheld shot**. But if you want that movement to be more subtle, or at least a lot smoother, you'll want more precise control over how the camera moves. One way to achieve that is to put it on wheels. Sometimes those wheels are stuck on a track that grips have laid down for a particular shot, and sometimes they're just well-oiled wheels that will go wherever the grip pushes them. Either way, this is called a **dolly shot**. Dolly shots come in all sort of flavors. You can **dolly in** or **dolly out**, that is, move toward or away from a stationary subject. Here's an example of a dolly out combined with a tilt:

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you can set up a **tracking shot** that tracks along with a subject in motion (and may or may not be on actual tracks). Here's a simple tracking shot of two kids on their bicycles:

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In this case, the camera was mounted on the back of a van, tracking in front of the subjects, leading them forward. Notice too how towards the end of the shot the camera shifts subtly to reframe the image on just the girl, indicating a subtle shift in emphasis in the story.

You can also put the camera on a crane to achieve a really dramatic shift in the point of view, like this **crane shot** from *High Noon* (1952, Fred Zinneman, dir.):

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Notice how effective this shift in perspective is in making the character seem isolated, small and powerless without even knowing the context or the rest of the story (it's an amazing film and you should go watch it right now).

If you want the freedom of physically carrying the camera around through a scene, but still want the smooth motion of a dolly, you can use a special rig called a **steadicam**. Steadicam is actually a brand name for a camera stabilizer that has become a somewhat generic term (like Kleenex or Xerox... does anyone still say Xerox?). The camera is strapped to the camera operator using a system of counterweights, gimbals and gyroscopes (it feels like I'm making those words up, but I'm not):

Steadicam and operator.

The result is incredibly smooth motion regardless of terrain.

Here's one of the most famous steadicam shots in cinema history from Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990):

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Try following those two actors through all of that with a camera on wheels!

Pans, tilts, dollies, cranes and steadicams, regardless of how a filmmaker moves the camera, one question they must always answer first is: Why move the camera at all? That is, is the movement **motivated**? In the case of Scorsese's steadicam shot above, we're following the main characters into a nightclub. Motivation enough to move with them. Or that crane shot from *High Noon*, the move reveals something important about the character. Again, solid motivation. But what happens when a camera move is *un*motivated? If the camera moves simply because the filmmaker thinks it "looks cool"? (I'm looking at you Michael Bay). Most often, an unmotivated camera move that isn't serving the story reminds the viewer they are watching a movie. The move becomes *visible* instead of *invisible*, and usually, that's the last thing a filmmaker wants. All of this is supposed to be invisible, remember?

But sometimes a filmmaker intentionally moves the camera without clear motivation to achieve a certain

effect. For example, a tracking shot can move laterally through a scene with or without subjects in motion. Since there is no *reason* to move the camera, the movement can feel unmotivated and therefore more *noticeable* to the viewer. So why do it? Here's a deep dive into how effective a lateral tracking shot can be:

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Maybe the best example of a really effective but completely unmotivated camera movement is one of filmmaker Spike Lee's signature camera moves: The Spike Lee Dolly. At least once every film, Spike Lee will put one or more characters on the same dolly as the camera and move them *both* through the scene. It's disorienting and a little bizarre, but creates a fascinating image that can draw the viewer into the psychology of the character:

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Well planned and thoughtful camera movement, usually the motivated kind, can not only help tell the story, it can also radically transform our relationship to the story. It doesn't always have to be flashy. It could just be a subtle shift in perspective. A slight pan, or a minute push in on a dolly. But it can change everything:

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THE LONG TAKE

The last point I'd like to make regarding cinematography is how really great cinematographers can combine *all* of the above into one, continuous bravura shot that manages to move the story forward without a single edit. Don't get me wrong, editing is important, and we'll get to that next. But sometimes a filmmaker finds a way to move through a scene, choreographing the actors and the camera department in such a way that the story unfolds in one long, continuous take. And it can be breathtaking.

In fact, the shot above from *Goodfellas* is a pretty good example. Notice how Scorsese moves the camera through several different settings without ever needing to cut away from the shot. But the most famous **long take** is probably Orson Welles's opening shot from *Touch of Evil* (1958). Seriously, check this out:

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Imagine the planning required to choreograph that sequence. Everything had to work like clockwork (pun intended). And yet nothing was sacrificed in terms of cinematic storytelling. Welles is able to move in and out of close-ups, medium shots and long shots, overhead crane shots and smooth tracking shots, directing our attention, revealing information and creating suspense. All without a single cut.

Now check out how filmmakers like Sam Mendes are still imitating that iconic shot in films like *Spectre* (2015):

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Sometimes these long takes are much less noticeable. Take a look at how a filmmaker like Steven Spielberg, not necessarily known for bravura camera moves, still finds ways to use the occasional long take to serve the story:

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6

Editing

They say a film is made three times. The first is by the screenwriter. The second by the director and crew. And the third is by the **editor** in **post-production**.

I don't know who "they" are, but I think they're onto something.

When the screenwriter hands the script off to the director, it is no longer a literary document, it's a blueprint for a much larger, more complex creation. The production process is essentially an act of translation, taking all of those words on the page and turning them into shots, scenes and sequences. And at the end of that process, the director hands off a mountain of film and/or data, hours of images, to the editor for them to sift through, select, arrange and assemble into a coherent story. That too is, essentially, an act of translation.

The amount of film or data can vary. During the Golden Age of Hollywood last century, most feature films shot about 10 times more film than they needed, otherwise known as a **shooting ratio** of 10:1. That includes all of the re-takes, spoiled shots, multiple angles on the same scene, subtle variations in performance for each shot, and even whole scenes that will never end up in the finished film. And the editors had to look at all of it, sorting through 10 hours of footage

Footage is a common way to refer to the recorded moving image, whether it's on celluloid film or digital media. The term comes from the fact that physical film was measured in feet, with a standard reel of 35mm film measuring 1000 feet (or about 11 minutes at 24 frames per second). The technology has changed, but the terminology has stuck.

for every hour of film in the final cut.

They didn't know it then, but they were lucky.

With the rise of digital cinema, that ratio has *exploded*. Today, it is relatively common for a film to have 50 or 100 times more footage than will appear in the final cut. The filmmakers behind *Deadpool* (2016), for example, shot 555 hours of raw footage for a final film of just 108 minutes. That's a shooting ratio of 308:1. It would take 40 hours a week for 14 weeks just to watch all of the raw footage, much less select and arrange it all into an edited film!

https://vashivisuals.com/shooting-ratios-of-feature-films/

So, one of the primary roles of the editor is to simply manage this tidal wave of moving images in post-production. But they do much more than that. And their work is rarely limited to just post-production. Many editors are involved in pre-production, helping to plan the shots with the end product in mind, and many more are on set during production to ensure the director and crew are getting all of the footage they need to knit the story together visually.

But, of course, it's in the edit room, after all the cameras have stopped rolling, that editors begin their true work. And yes, that work involves selecting what shots to use and how to use them, but more importantly, editing is where the grammar and syntax of cinematic language really come together. Just as linguistic meaning is built up from a set sequence of words, phrases and sentences, cinematic meaning is built up from a sequence of shots and scenes. A word (or a shot) in isolation may have a certain semantic content, but it is the juxtaposition of that word (or shot) in a sentence (or scene) that gives it its full power to communicate. As such, editing is fundamental to how cinema communicates with an audience. And just as it is with any other language, much of its power comes from the fact that we rarely notice how it works, the mechanism is second nature, intuitive, invisible.

But before we get to the nuts of bolts of how editors put together cinema, let's look at how the art of editing has evolved over the past century. To do that, we have to go back to the beginning. And we have to go to Russia.

SOVIET MONTAGE AND THE KULESHOV EFFECT

As you may recall, the earliest motion pictures were often single-take *actualités*, unedited views of a man sneezing, workers leaving a factory or a train pulling into a station. It took a few years before filmmakers understood the storytelling power of the medium, before they realized there was such a thing as cinematic language. Filmmakers like Georges Melies seemed to catch on quickly, not only using mise-en-scène and in-camera special effects, but also employing the edit, the joining together of discrete shots in a sequence to tell a story. But it was the Russians, in this early period, that focused specifically on editing as the essence of cinema. And one Russian in particular, **Lev Kuleshov**.

Lev Kuleshov was an art school dropout living in Moscow when he directed his first film in 1917. He was only 18 years old. By the time he was 20, he had helped found one of the first film schools in the world in Moscow. And he was keenly interested in film theory, more specifically, film editing and how it worked on an audience. He had a hunch that the power of cinema was not found in any one shot, but in the *juxtaposition* of shots. So, he performed an experiment. He cut together a short film and showed it to audiences in 1918. Here's the film:

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After viewing the film, the audience raved about the actor and his performance (he was a very famous actor at the time in Russia). They praised the subtly with which he expressed his aching hunger upon viewing the soup, and the mournful sadness upon seeing the child in a coffin, and the longing desire upon seeing the scantily clad woman. The only problem? It was the exact same shot of the actor every time! The audience was projecting their own emotion and meaning onto the actor's expression because of the juxtaposition of the other images. This phenomenon – how we derive more meaning from the juxtaposition of two shots than from any single shot in isolation – became known as **The Kuleshov Effect**.

Other Russian filmmakers took up this fascination with how editing works on an audience, both emotionally and psychologically, and developed an approach to filmmaking known as the **Soviet Montage Movement**. Montage is simply the French term for "assembly" or "editing" (even the Russians had to borrow words from the French!), but Russian filmmakers of the 1920s were pushing the boundaries of what was possible, testing the limits of the Kuleshov Effect. And in the process, they were accelerating the evolution of cinematic language, bringing a sophisticated complexity to how cinema communicates meaning.

The most famous of these early proponents of the Soviet Montage Movement was **Sergei Eisenstein**. Once a student of Kuleshov's (though actually a year older), Eisenstein would become one of the most prolific members of the movement. Perhaps his most well-known film, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), contains a sequence that has become one of the most famous examples of Soviet montage, and frankly, one of the most famous sequences in cinema period. It's known as **The Odessa Steps Sequence**. You may remember it from Chapter One. Let's take another look:

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One thing you might notice about that sequence: It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, at least in terms of a logical narrative. But Eisenstein was more interested in creating an emotional effect. And he does it by juxtaposing images of violence with images of innocence, repeating images and shots, lingering on some images, and flashing on others. He wants you to *feel* the terror of those peasants being massacred by the

troops, even if you don't completely understand the geography or linear sequence of events. That's the power of the montage as Eisenstein used it: A collage of moving images designed to create an emotional effect rather than a logical narrative sequence.

EDITING SPACE AND TIME

In the hundred or so years since Kuleshov and Eisenstein, we've learned a lot about how editing works, both as filmmakers and as audience members. In fact, we know it so well we hardly have to give it much thought. We've fully accepted the idea that cinema uses editing to not only manipulate our emotions through techniques like the Kuleshov Effect, but also to manipulate space and time itself. When a film or tv episode cuts from one location to another, we rarely wonder whether the characters on screen teleported or otherwise broke the laws of physics (unless of course it's a film about wizards). We intuitively understand that edits allow the camera – and by implication the viewer – to jump across space and across time to keep the story moving at a steady clip.

The most obvious example of this is the **ellipsis**, an edit that slices out time or events we don't *need* to see to follow the story. Imagine a scene where a car pulls up in front of a house, then cuts to a woman at the door ringing the doorbell. We don't *need* to spend the screen time watching her shut off the car, climb out, shut and lock the door, and walk all the way up to the house. The cut is an ellipsis, and none of us will wonder if she somehow teleported from her car to the front door (unless, again, she's a wizard). And if you think about it for a moment, you'll realize ellipses are crucial to telling a story cinematically. If we had to show every moment in every character's experience, films would take years or even decades to make much less watch!

Other ways cinema manipulates time include sequences like **flashbacks** and **flashforwards**. Filmmakers use these when they want to show events from a character's past, or foreshadow what's coming in the future. They're also a great indicator of how far cinematic language has evolved over time. Back in the Golden Age of Hollywood, when editors were first experimenting with techniques like flashbacks, they needed ways to signal to the audience, "Hey, we're about to go back in time!" They would employ music – usually harp music (I'm not sure why, but it was a thing) – and visual cues like blurred focus or warped images to indicate a flashback. As audiences became more fluent in this new addition to cinematic language, they didn't need the visual cues anymore. Today, movies often move backwards and forwards in time, trusting the audience to "read" the scene in its proper context without any prompts. Think of films like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) which plays with time throughout, re-arranging the sequence of events in the plot for dramatic effect and forcing the viewer to keep up. Or a more recent film like Greta Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women* (2019) which also moves backwards and forwards in time, hinting at the shift through mise-en-scène and subtle changes in performance.

Another, much more subtle way editing manipulates time is in the overall **rhythm** of the cinematic experience. And no, I don't mean the music. Though that can help. I mean the pace of the finished film, how the edits speed up or slow down to serve the story, producing a kind of rhythm to the edit.

Take the work of Kelly Reichardt for example. As both director and editor on almost all of her films, she creates a specific rhythm that echoes the time and space of her characters:

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Sometimes an editor lets each shot play out, giving plenty of space between the cuts, creating a slow, even rhythm to a scene. Or they might cut from image to image quickly, letting each flash across the screen for mere moments, creating a fast-paced, edge-of-your seat rhythm. In either case, the editor has to consider how long do we *need* to see each shot. In fact, there's a scientific term for how long it takes us to register visual information: the **content curve**. A relatively simple shot of a child's smile might have a very short content curve. A more complex shot with multiple planes of view and maybe even text to read would have a much longer content curve. Editing is all about balancing the content curve with the needs of the story and intent of the director for the overall rhythm of each scene and the finished film as a whole.

This is why editing is much more than simply assembling the shots. It is an art that requires an intuitive sense of how a scene, sequence and finished film should move, how it should *feel*. In fact, most editors describe their process as both technical and intuitive, requiring thinking *and* feeling:

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CONTINUITY EDITING

Maybe it's obvious, but if editing is where the grammar and syntax of cinematic language come together, then the whole point is to make whatever we see on screen make as much sense as possible. Just like a writer wants to draw the reader into the story, not remind them they're reading a book, an editor's job, first and foremost, is to draw the viewer into the cinematic experience, not remind them they're watching a movie. (Unless that's exactly what the filmmaker wants to do, but more on that later.) The last thing most editors want to do is draw attention to the editing itself. We call this approach to editing **continuity editing**, or more to the point, **invisible editing**.

The goal of continuity editing is to create a continuous flow of images and sound, a linear, logical progression, shot to shot and scene to scene, constantly orienting the viewer in space and time and carrying them through the narrative. All without ever making any of that obvious or obtrusive. It involves a number of different techniques, from **cutting-on-action** to **match cuts** and **transitions**, and from maintaining **screen direction** to the **master shot and coverage technique** and the **180 degree rule**. Let's take a look at these and other tricks editors use to hide their handiwork.

Cutting on Action

The first problem an editor faces is how and when to cut from one shot to the next without disorienting the viewer or breaking continuity, that is, the continuous flow of the narrative. Back in Chapter Two, I discussed one of the most common techniques is to "hide" the cut in the middle of some on-screen action. Called, appropriately enough, **cutting-on-action**, the trick is to end one shot in the middle of an

action – a character sitting down in a chair or climbing into a car – and start the next in the middle of the same action. Our eyes are drawn to the action on screen and not the cut itself. The edit disappears as we track the movement of the character. Here's a quick example:

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The two shots are radically different in terms of the geography of the scene – one outside of the truck, the other inside – but by cutting on the action of the character entering the truck, it *feels* like one continuous moment. Of course we *notice* the cut, but it does not distract from the scene or call attention to itself.

And now that you know what to look for, you'll see this technique used in just about every film or tv show, over and over, *all the time*.

Match Cuts

Cutting-on-action is arguably the most common continuity editing trick, but there are plenty of other cuts that use the technique of matching some visual element between two contiguous shots, also known as a **match cut**. There are **eyeline match cuts** that cut from a shot of a character looking off camera to a shot of whatever it is they are looking at, **graphic match cuts** that cut between two images that look similar (the barrel of a gun to James Bond in an underground tunnel, for example), and even **subject match cuts** that cut between two similar ideas or concepts (a flame from a matchstick to the sun rising over the desert in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)).

Almost all of these examples rely on a hard cut from one shot to the next, but sometimes an editor simply can't hide the edit with some matching action, image or idea. Instead, they have to transition the viewer from one shot to the next, or one scene to the next, in the most organic, unobtrusive way possible. We call these, well, **transitions**. As discussed in Chapter Two, you can think of these as conjunctions in grammar, words meant to connect ideas seamlessly. The more obvious examples, like **fade-ins** and **fade-outs** or long **dissolves**, are drawn from our own experience. A slow fade-out, where the screen drifts into blackness, reflects our experience of falling asleep, drifting out of consciousness. And dissolves, where one shot blends into the next, reflect how one moment bleeds into and overlaps with another in our memory. But some transitions, like **wipes** and **iris outs**, are peculiar to motion pictures and have no relation to how we normally see the world. Sure, they might "call attention to themselves," but somehow they still do the trick, moving the viewer from one shot or scene to the next without distracting from the story itself.

Wondering what some of these match cuts and transitions look like? Check out several examples of each (along with some not-so-invisible edits like **jump** cuts) here:

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Screen Direction

Maintaining consistent **screen direction** is another technique editors use to keep us focused on the story and keep their work invisible. Take a look at this scene from Casablanca:

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We are entering the main setting for the film, a crowded, somewhat chaotic tavern in Morocco. Notice how the camera moves consistently from right to left, and that the blocking of the actors (that is, how they move in the frame) is also predominantly from right to left, until we settle on the piano player, Sam. The flow of images introduces the tavern as if the viewer were entering as a patron for the first time. This consistent screen direction helps establish the geography of the scene, orienting the viewer to the physical space. An editor concerned about continuity never wants the audience to ask "Where are we?" or "What's going on?" And obviously, this isn't something an editor can do after the fact all by themselves. It requires a plan from the beginning, with the director, the cinematographer, the production designer and the editor all working together to ensure they have the moving images they need to execute the scene.

Some filmmakers can take this commitment to consistent screen direction to the extreme to serve the narrative and emphasize a theme. Check out this analysis of Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013):

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Master Shot and Coverage

Consistent screen direction is an important part of how continuity editing ensures the audience is always aware of where everyone is located in relation to the setting and each other. Another common technique to achieve the same goal is to approach each scene with a **master shot and coverage**.

The idea is fairly simple. On set during production, the filmmaker films a scene from one, wide **master shot** that includes all of the actors and action in one frame from start to finish. Then, they film **coverage**, that is, they "cover" that same scene from multiple angles, isolating characters, moving in closer, and almost always filming the entire scene again from start to finish with each new set-up. When they're done, they have filmed the entire scene many, many times from many different perspectives.

And that's where the editor comes in.

It's the editor's job to build the scene from that raw material, usually starting with the **master shot** to establish the geography of the scene, then cutting to the **coverage** as the scene plays out, using the best takes and angles to express the thematic intent. They can stay on each character for their lines of dialogue, or cut to another character for a reaction. They can also cut back to the master shot whenever they choose to re-establish the geography or re-set the tone of the scene. But maybe most importantly, by having so many options, the editor can cut around poor performances or condense the scene by dropping lines of dialogue between edits. Done well, the viewer is drawn into the interaction of the characters, never stopping to ask where they are or who is talking to whom, and hopefully never even noticing a cut.
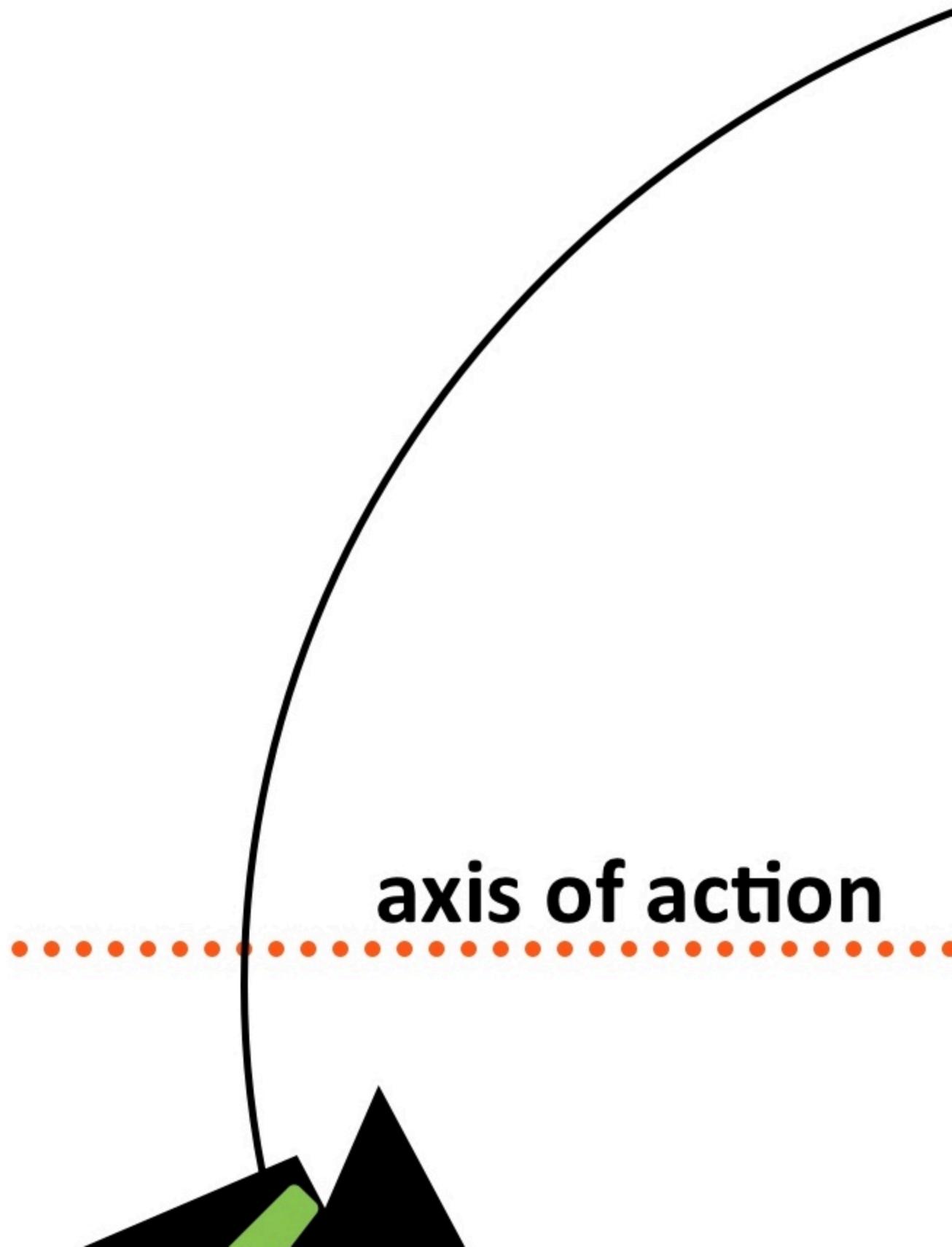
Let's take a look at a scene from Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash* (2014), shot and edited in the classic master shot and coverage technique:

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The scene opens with a master shot. We see both characters, Andrew and Nicole, in the same frame, sitting at a table in a café. The next shot is from the coverage, over Nicole's shoulder, on Andrew as he reacts to her first line of dialogue. Then on Nicole, over Andrew's shoulder as she reacts to his line. The editor, Tom Cross, moves back and forth between these two shots until Andrew asks a question tied to the film's main theme, "What do you do?" Then he switches to close-up coverage of the two characters. Tension builds, until there is a subtle clash between them, a moment of conflict. And what does the editor do? He cuts back to the master shot, resetting the scene emotionally and reorienting the viewer to the space. The two characters begin to reconnect, and the editor returns to the coverage, again shifting to close-ups until the two find a point of connection (symbolized by an **insert shot** of their shoes gently touching). The rhythm of this scene is built from the raw materials, the master shot and the coverage, that the editor has to work with. But more than just presenting the scene as written, the editor has the power to emphasize the storytelling by when to cut and what shots to use.

The master shot and coverage technique gives the editor an incredible amount of freedom to shape a scene, but there is one thing they *can't* do. A rule they must follow. And I don't mean one of those artistic rules that are meant to be broken. Break this rule, and it will break the continuity of any scene. It's called the **180 degree rule** and it's related to the master shot and coverage technique.

Basically, the 180 degree rule defines an **axis of action**, an imaginary line that runs through the characters in a scene, that the camera *cannot* cross:

axis of action

Once the master shot establishes which side of the action the camera will capture, the coverage must stay on that side throughout the scene. The camera can rotate 180 degrees around its subject, but if it crosses that imaginary line and inches past 180 degrees, the subjects in the frame will reverse positions and will no longer be looking at each other from shot to shot. Take a look at that scene from Whiplash again. Notice how the master shot establishes the camera on Andrew's left and Nicole's right. Every subsequent angle of coverage stays on that side of the table, Andrew always looking right to left, and Nicole always looking left to right. If the camera were to **jump the line**, Andrew would appear to be looking in the opposite direction, confusing the viewer and breaking continuity.

Now, I know I just wrote that this is not one of those artistic rules that was meant to be broken. But the fact is, editors *can* break the rule if they actually *want* to disorient the viewer, to put them into the psychology of a character or scene. Or if they need to jump the line to keep the narrative going, they can use a new master shot to reorient the axis of action.

Parallel Editing

All of these techniques, cutting-on-action, match cuts, transitions, consistent screen direction and the master shot and coverage technique are all ways that editors can keep their craft invisible and maintain continuity. But what does an editor do when there is more than one narrative playing out at the same time? How do you show both *and* maintain continuity? One solution is to use **cross-cutting**, cutting back and forth between two or more narratives, also known as **parallel editing**.

Parallel editing has actually been around for quite some time. Perhaps one of the most famous early examples is from D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920). Kuleshov had already demonstrated the power of juxtaposing shots to create an emotional effect. But Griffith, among others, showed that you could also create a sense of thrilling anxiety by juxtaposing two or more lines of action, cross-cutting from one to another in a rhythmic pattern. In a climactic scene from the film, a man races to save a woman adrift on a frozen river and heading straight for a dangerous waterfall. To establish these lines of action and to increase our own sense of dread and anxiety, the editor cuts from the man to the woman to the waterfall in a regular, rhythmic pattern, cross-cutting between them to constantly remind the audience of the impending doom as we cheer on our hero until the lines of action finally converge. Here's the scene:

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By cross-cutting in a regular pattern – man, woman, man, waterfall, woman, man, woman, waterfall – the audience is not only drawn into the action, they are also no longer paying attention to the editing itself, thus maintaining continuity.

This technique has become so common, so integral to our shared cinematic language, that editors can use our fluency against us, subverting expectations by playing with the form. Check out this (rather disturbing) clip from Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991):

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The scene uses the same parallel editing technique as *Way Down East*, using cross-cutting to increase our anxiety as two lines of action converge. But in this case, the editor subverts our expectations by

revealing there were actually *three* lines of action, not two. But the trick only works if parallel action is already part of our cinematic language.

DISCONTINUITY EDITING

Continuity, or "invisible" editing is all about hiding the techniques of filmmaking, allowing an audience to be carried away by the cinematic experience and never reminding them they are watching a motion picture. But what if that's exactly what you *want* to do? What if you *want* to break the usual continuity of cinema? Maybe you want to dramatize the fractured mind of a character. Or maybe you want to comment on the act of watching a film itself. There may be any number of reasons an editor might break the rules outlined above. And the really talented ones know how to do it on purpose and to great effect.

In some ways, this brings us back full circle to Soviet montage editing. Eisenstein was more interested in creating an emotional effect than creating a linear narrative. Take another look at his edit of the Odessa steps sequence above. In it, he knits together a series of discontinuous shots that do very little to establish geography or the spatial relationships of characters in the scene. In fact, we may be constantly asking the questions "Where are we?" and "What's going on?" But for Eisenstein, that was precisely the point. He wants you to feel disoriented.

One of the most common discontinuity tricks is the **jump cut**, a cut between two shots of the same subject with little or no variation in framing. Here's a quick example:

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In this case, the jump cut is used for comedic effect to show the passage of time. But it can also be used to dramatize a chaotic or disoriented situation or state of mind. For example, check out this clip from Jean Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960), especially the last 30 seconds or so:

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As the main character is cornered by the police, Godard uses jump cuts and reverse screen direction to deliberately confuse and disorient the viewer, putting them in the character's state of mind. Godard, part of the French New Wave of filmmakers in the 1960s and 70s, would become known for his consistent use of discontinuity editing in his films.

A more modern example of discontinuity editing, and my personal favorite, is Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey* (1999). The film follows a British ex-con as he visits Los Angeles in search of his daughter's killer. A pretty straight-forward thriller. But Soderbergh is not terribly interested in a straight-forward thriller. Instead, he tells the story through the main character's fractured memory. And his editor, Sarah Flack, uses discontinuity editing to dramatize that narrative idea. But don't take my word for it. Check out this video essay that covers just about everything I love about Flack's editing in Soderbergh's film:

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Ultimately, Flack's editing choices in *The Limey*, despite the disorientation and discontinuity, serve the thematic intent of the film. And that's the editor's job. To piece together the shots, scenes and sequences into a coherent – if not always continuous – order, a syntax built from our shared cinematic language.

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Sound

 Just listen for a moment.

What do you hear?

Maybe you're in a coffeeshop, surrounded by the bustle of other customers, the busywork of baristas, the sound of the city just outside. Maybe you're in your room, a dog barking in the distance outside, cars passing, music playing in the background, maybe even the television. (Which, frankly, is just rude. I expect your undivided attention!) Maybe you're alone in the library. It's quiet. But is it really? Distant footsteps among the stacks. The hum of the air conditioning…

Unless you're reading this in a sensory deprivation chamber, you are surrounded by sound. The soundscape around us shapes our understanding of the world, becoming its own meaningful context for every other sense perception. Most of the time, it barely registers, we don't attend to it unless we are listening for something in particular. But take it away and we feel lost, vulnerable, disoriented.

Not surprisingly, sound provides an equally meaningful context for cinema. Or at least, it shouldn't be surprising. But then again, it wasn't until 1927 that Sam Warner figured out how to marry sound and image in *The Jazz Singer*, the first film with synchronized dialogue. Before that, no one much cared that cinema was a purely visual medium. And as Sam toiled away at the new technology, most of the other movie moguls in Hollywood assumed it was a passing fad. That no one really wanted to *hear* the actors talking.

In the century or so since they were all proven wrong, sound has become **co-expressive** with cinematography, that is, it shapes how we see what's on screen, just as the images we see influence how we perceive the sounds.

Just listen to how French filmmaker Agnès Varda has used sound and image together over the last half century:

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And like cinematography, sound recording and reproduction has increased in sophistication and technical complexity, developing its own important contribution to cinematic language along the way. So much so that when we talk about the use of sound in cinema we talk about it in terms of **sound design**, a detailed plan for the immersive effects of a motion picture's soundscape that begins in pre-production before a single frame is shot and extends to the very end of post-production, often the final element in the entire process.

SOUND RECORDING

Before we get to how that soundscape is shaped in the post-production process, let's look at how (and what) sound is recorded during production. The **production sound department** is made up of several specialists dedicated to recording clean sound on set as the camera rolls. They include the on-set **location sound recordist** or **location sound mixer,** who oversees the recording of on-set sound and mixes the various sources in real-time during production, **boom operators**, who hold microphones on long poles to pick up dialogue as close to actors as possible without being seen on camera (it helps if they are very tall, and relatively strong, those poles get heavy after a while), and **assistant sound technicians**, responsible for organizing the equipment and generally assisting the sound mixer.

And just like the camera department, the sound department has their own set of specialized equipment to make their work possible. Obviously, there are **microphones** involved. But sound recordists can be as particular about their microphones, what brand, type and technology, as cinematographers are about their cameras. Microphones can be omni-directional or directional, cardioid or super-cardioid, mono or stereo, and each one will pick up sounds in a distinctly different way. You can use a shotgun mic on a boom pole to target a sound source from a reasonable distance with a shielded cable. Or you can use a tiny lavalier mic taped to the collar of an actor that sends an audio signal wirelessly to the recorder. Or you can use all of the above in an endless number of configurations all feeding into the same field mixer for the recordist to monitor and record.

Now you may be wondering, isn't there a microphone right there on the camera? Why not just use that and save all that headache?

First of all, if you asked that out loud, every sound recordist in the universe just collectively screamed in agony. Second, the reason they're all so upset is that cameras are designed to record an image, not sound. And while they may have a relatively cheap omni-directional microphone built-in, or even inputs for higher-quality microphones, nothing can replace the trained ears of a location sound mixer precisely controlling the various streams of audio into equipment designed to do just that. Which is why, even now, most cinema uses **dual-system recording**, that is, recording sound *separate* from image during production.

Dual-system recording allows for a more precise control over the location sound, but it also comes with its own problem: synchronization. If the sound is recorded separately from the image, how do you sync them up when you're ready to edit? Glad you asked. Ever seen one of these:

The Slate.

We have lots of names for it, clapper, sticks, sound marker, but the most common is **slate**, based on the fact that in the early days it was made out of slate, the same stuff they use to make chalkboards. It serves two purposes. The first is to visually mark the beginning of each take with the key details of the production as well as the scene, shot, and take number. This comes in handy for the editor as they are combing through all of the footage in post-production. The second is to set a mark for sound synchronization. A crew member, usually the second camera assistant, holds the slate in front of the camera and near a microphone and verbally counts off the scene, shot and take number, then SLAPS the slate closed. In post-production, the editors, usually an assistant editor (cause let's face it, this is tedious work), can line up the exact frame where the slate closes with the exact moment the SLAP is recorded on the microphone. After that, the rest of the shot is synchronized.

In fact, this whole process, repeated for every take during production, is a kind of call-and-response ritual:

1st Assistant Director: "Quiet on the set! Roll sound!"

Sound mixer: "Sound speed!"

1st AD: "Roll camera!"

Cinematographer: "Rolling!"

2nd Assistant Camera: "Scene 1 Apple Take 1" SLAP!

Cinematographer: "Hold for focus. Camera set!"

Director: "And… ACTION!"

Every. Single. Time. And note that the 2nd AC mentions the scene number, 1, the shot, Apple (for shot "A" of scene 1), and the take number, 1.

But wait… sound speed? That's another of those little anachronisms of cinema. For much of cinema sound history, sound was recorded onto magnetic tape on a clunky reel-to-reel recorder. It would take a moment for the recorder to get up to "speed" once the recordist hit record, so everyone would have to wait until they called out "sound speed!" We use digital recording these days with no lag time at all, but the ritual never changed.

Sometimes, 2nd ACs can have a lot of fun with this little ritual. Check out Geraldine Brezca's spin on the tradition throughout Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009):

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Now that we have a sense of *how* things get recorded on set during production, we should probably cover *what* gets recorded. The answer: not much. Or at least a lot less than you might think. In fact, the focus of on-set recording is really just clean dialogue. That's it. Everything else, background sounds, birds chirping, music on a radio, even footsteps, are almost always recorded *after* production. The main job of location sound recordists is to isolate dialogue and shut out every other sound.

Why? Because sound editors, the folks who take over from the recordists during post-production, want to control *everything*. Remember how nothing is on screen by accident? The same goes for sound. Clean dialogue has to match the performance we see on screen, but everything else can be shaped to serve the story by layering in one sound at a time.

There is one exception. Another little ritual everyone gets used to on a set. At the end of a scene, when all of the shots are done, the location sound recordist will whisper to the 1st AD, and the 1st AD will call out: "Hold for room tone!" And then everyone stops in their tracks and holds still, remaining completely silent for at least 60 seconds.

It's awkward:

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But what is **room tone**? Every space, interior or exterior, has its own unique, underlying ambient sound. What we sometimes call a **sound floor**. During production, as the actors deliver their lines, the microphones pick up this sound floor along with the dialogue. But in post-production, as the editors pick and choose the takes they want to use, there will inevitably be gaps in the audio, moments of dead air. Room tone recordings can be used to fill in those gaps and match the sound floor of the recorded dialogue.

Of course, as I mentioned, it can be a bit awkward. But it can also be kind of beautiful in its own way:

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Room tone is just another example of how **sound editors** control every aspect of the sound in the cinematic experience.

SOUND EDITING

In the last chapter, we focused on editing the visual elements in a motion picture. How the shots fit together to creative a narrative flow and communicate with the audience. As it turns out, sound requires a similar approach in post-production and is often even *more* "invisible" than the techniques of picture editing. (In fact, if there are any sound editors reading this book, they probably noticed that picture editing got a whole chapter and all they get is this one crumby section. Typical.)

But sound editing is much more than simply joining up the sounds that already exist. It involves *creating* all of the sounds that weren't recorded on set to make up the rich soundscape of the finished motion picture. In that sense, it is literally more "creative" than picture editing! (How's that, sound editors? Feel better now?)

One important bit of post-production sound creation has to do with dialogue. Sometimes, because of distracting ambient sounds or a poorly placed microphone, an actor's dialogue for that perfect take is unusable. (C'mon, location sound recordist, you had one job!) In that case, sound editors bring in the actors to perform **ADR**, short for Automated Dialogue Replacement (sometimes also referred to as Additional Dialogue Recording, or "looping"). They simply play the scene in a repeating "loop" as the actors record the lines over and over until it matches the performance on screen. Then the sound editors adjust the quality of the recording to match the setting of the scene.

But what about all those other sounds that weren't recorded on set? The birds chirping, the cars passing, even those footsteps? Those too have to be created and gathered together in post-production and layered into the sound design. Many of these sounds already exist in extensive sound libraries, pre-recorded by sound technicians and made available for editors. But many of them must be created to match exactly what the audience will see on screen. That's where **foley artists** come in.

Foley artists are a special breed of technician, part sound recordist and part performance artist. Their job is to fill in the missing sounds in a given scene. By any means necessary:

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Foley artists have to get creative when it comes to imitating common (and not-so-common) sounds. But sound editors must go beyond recreating the most obvious sounds associated with a scene. Every rustle of clothing, a hand on a cup, brushing a hair behind an ear. It's these tiny details, most of which we would never notice unless they *weren't* there, that help create continuity in the final edit.

Yes, there's a that word again: **continuity**. Editing picture for continuity means creating a narrative flow that keeps the audience engaged with the story. Editing sound for continuity has the same goal but relies on different techniques. For example, if we see someone walking on gravel, but hear them walking on a hard wood floor, that break with continuity – or in this case, logic – will take us out of the narrative. The soundscape must match the cinematography to maintain continuity. And since so much of the sound we hear in cinema is created and added in post-production, that requires an incredible attention to detail.

But there are other ways editors can use sound to support the principle of narrative continuity, and not always by matching exactly what we see on screen. For example, a **sound bridge** can be used to help transition from one shot to another by overlapping the sound of each shot. This can be done in anticipation of the next shot by bringing up the audio before we cut to it on screen, known as a **J-cut**, or by continuing the audio of the previous shot into the first few seconds of the next, known as an **L-cut**. This technique is most noticeable in transitions between radically different scenes, but editors use it constantly in more subtle ways, especially in dialogue-heavy scenes. Here are some quick examples:

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And just like picture editing, sound editing can also work against audience expectations, leaning into **discontinuity** with the use of **asynchronous** sounds that seem related to what we're seeing on screen but are otherwise out of sync. These are sound tricks, intended to either directly contrast what we see on screen, or to provide just enough disorientation to set us on edge. Here's one famous example of asynchronous sound from Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935):

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The woman opening the train compartment door discovers a dead body, but instead of hearing her scream, we hear the train whistle. In this case we get an asynchronous sound combined with a J-cut.

Production sound recording and sound editing are all part of the overall **sound design** of cinema, and there are lots of moving parts to track throughout the process. Take a look at how one filmmaker, David Fincher (along with Christopher Nolan, George Lucas, and a few others), uses all of these elements of sound design to embrace the idea of sound as co-expressive with the moving image:

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SOUND MIXING

Once all of the sound editing is done and matched up with the image, the whole process moves to the **sound mixer** to finalize the project. And if you've ever wondered why there are two Academy Awards for sound, one for sound editing and one for sound mixing, this is why. (Or maybe you've never wondered that because that's when you decided to grab a snack. I mean, who pays attention to Best Sound Mixing?) Sound mixers must take all of the various sound elements brought together by the editors, including the music composed for the score (more on that later), and balance them perfectly so the audience hears exactly what the filmmakers wants them to hear from shot to shot and scene to scene.

This is a very delicate process. One the one hand, the sound mix can be objectively calibrated according to a precise decibel level, or degree of loudness, for each layer of sound. Dialogue within a certain acceptable range of loudness, music in its range, sound effects in theirs. Basic math. On the other hand, the mix can and should be a subjective process, actual humans in a room making adjustments based on the feel of each shot and scene. Most of the time, it's both. And when it's done well, the audience will feel immersed in each scene, hearing every line of dialogue clearly even when there are car crashes, explosions and a driving musical score.

For example, check out this deconstruction of the sound design from a single scene from *The Bourne Identity* (2002):
If you want to see more videos like this one, check out InDepth Sound Design's YouTube channel, it's pretty cool: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIaYa00v3fMxuE5vIWJoY3w

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Sound mixing is one of those technical aspects of filmmaking that has evolved over the decades, especially as the technology for sound recording and reproduction has changed in more recent years. Starting with the birth of cinema sound in 1927, movie houses had to be rigged for sound reproduction. Which usually meant a couple of massive, low-quality speakers. But by 1940, sound mixers already experimenting with the concept of **surround sound** and the ability to move the various channels of sound around a theater through multiple speakers to match the action on screen.

As the century rolled on, newer, hi-fidelity sound reproduction found its way into theaters allowing for more sophisticated surround sound systems, and consequently, more work for sound mixers to create an immersive experience for audiences. George Lucas introduced THX in 1983, a theatrical standard for sound reproduction in theaters to coincide with the release of *Return of the Jedi*. In 1987, a French engineer pioneered 5.1 surround sound, which standardized splitting the audio into 6 distinct channels, two in the front, two in the rear, one in the center and one just for low bass sound. And as recently as 2012, Dolby introduced Dolby Atmos, a new surround sound technology that adds height to the available options for sound mixers. Now sound can appear to be coming from in front, behind, below or above audiences, creating a 3-D aural experience.

And every element in the final sound track has to be calibrated and assigned by the sound mixer. Check out how complex the process was for the sound mixers on *Ford v Ferrari* (2019):

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Finding the right mix of sound is critical for any cinematic experience, but one element that many filmmakers (and audiences) neglect is the use of **silence**. The absence of sound can be just as powerful, if not more powerful than the many layers of sound in the final track. Silence can punctuate an emotional moment or put us in the headspace of a character in a way that visuals alone simply cannot.

Check out how skillfully Martin Scorsese uses silence throughout his films:

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Of course, in most of these examples silence refers to the lack of dialogue, or a dampening of the ambient sound. Rarely is a filmmaker brave enough to remove all sound completely from a soundtrack. Dead air has a very different quality to it than simply lowering the volume on the mix. But a few brave souls have given it a try. Here's French New Wave experimental filmmaker Jean Luc Godard playing an aural joke in *Band à part* (1964):

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It's not actually a full minute of dead air – it's more like 36 seconds – but it feels like an hour.

Compare that to this scene from the more recent film *Gravity* (2013):

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That was also 36 seconds. Perhaps a little wink from the director Alfonso Cuaròn to the French master Godard. But both are startling examples of the rare attempt to completely remove all sound to great effect.

MUSIC

One of the most recognizable elements in the sound of cinema is, of course, music. And its importance actually pre-dates the synchronization of sound in 1927. Musical accompaniment was almost always part of the theatrical experience in the silent era, and films were often shipped to theaters with a written score to be performed during the screening. Predictably, the first "talking picture" was a musical and had more singing than actual talking.

As the use of sound in cinema has become more and more sophisticated over the last century, music has remained central to how filmmakers communicate effectively (and sometimes not so effectively) with an audience. At its best, music can draw us into a cinematic experience, immersing us in a series of

authentic, emotional moments. At its worst, it can ruin the experience altogether, telling us how to feel from scene to scene with an annoying persistence.

But before we try to sort out the best from the worst, let's clarify some technical details about how and what type of music is used in cinema. First, we need to distinguish between **diegetic** and **non-diegetic** music. If the music we hear is also heard by the characters on screen, that is, it is part of the world of the film or tv series, then it is **diegetic** music. If the music is *not* a part of the world of the film or tv series, and only the audience can hear it, then it is **non-diegetic** music. Too abstract? Okay, if a song is playing on a radio in a scene, and the characters are dancing to it, then it is diegetic. But if scary, high-pitched violins start playing as the Final Girl considers going down into the basement to see if the killer is down there (and we all *know* the killer is down there because those damn violins are playing even though she can't hear them!), then it is non-diegetic.

Diegetic versus non-diegetic sound is a critical concept in the analysis of cinema, and crafty filmmakers can play with our expectations once we know the difference (even if we didn't know the terms before now). For example, non-diegetic music can communicate one emotion for the audience, while diegetic music communicates something entirely different for the characters on screen. Think about the movie *JAWS* (1975). Even if you haven't seen it, you know those two, deep notes – *da dum… da dum* – that start out slow then build and build, letting us know the shark is about to attack. Meanwhile, the kids in the water are listening to pop music, completely oblivious to the fact that one of them is about to be eaten alive!

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And this concept applies to more than just music. Titles, for example, are a non-diegetic element of mise-en-scene. The audience can see them, but the characters can't.

Second, we need to distinguish between a **score** written by a **composer**, and what we could call a **soundtrack** of popular music used throughout that same motion picture. The use of popular music in film has a long history, and many of the early musicals in the 1930s, 40s and 50s were designed around popular songs of the day. These days, most films or tv series have a **music supervisor** who is responsible to identifying and acquiring the rights for any popular or pre-existing music the filmmakers want to use in the final edit. Sometimes those songs are diegetic – that is, they are played on screen for the characters to hear and respond to – or they are non-diegetic – that is, they are just for the audience to put us in a certain mood or frame of mind. Either way, they are almost *always* added in post-production after filming is complete. Even if they are meant to be diegetic, playing the actual song during filming would make editing between takes of dialogue impossible. The actors have to just pretend they are listening to the song in the scene. Which is fine, since pretending is what they do for a living.

But the type of music that gets the most attention in formal analysis is the score, the original composition written and recorded for a specific motion picture. A film score, unlike popular music, is *always* non-diegetic. It's just for us in the audience. If the kids in the water could hear the theme from *JAWS* they'd get out of the damn water and we wouldn't have a movie to watch. It is also *always* recorded after the final edit of the picture is complete. That's because the score must be timed to the rhythm of the finished film, each note tied to a moment on screen to achieve the desired effect. Changes in the edit will require changes in the score to match.

It is in the score that a film can take full advantage of music's expressive, emotional range. But it's also

where filmmakers can go terribly wrong. Music in film should be co-expressive with the moving image, working in concert to tell the story (pun intended, see what I did there?). The most forgettable scores simply mirror the action on screen. Instead of adding another dimension, what we see is what we hear. Far worse is a score that does little more than tell us what to feel and when to feel it. The musical equivalent of a big APPLAUSE sign.

These tendencies in cinematic music are what led philosopher and music critic Theodor Adorno to complain that the standard approach to film scores was to simply "interpret the meaning of the action of the less intelligent members of the audience." Ouch. But, in a way, he's not wrong. Not about the less intelligent bit. But about how filmmakers *assume* a lack of intelligence, or maybe awareness, of the power of music in cinema. Take the Marvel Cinematic Universe for example. You all know the theme to *JAWS*. You probably also know the musical theme for *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, maybe even *Harry Potter*. But can you hum a single tune from *any* Marvel movie? Weird, right? Check this out:

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The best cinema scores can do so much more than simply mirror the action or tell us how to feel. They can set a tone, play with tempo, subvert expectations. Music designed for cinema with the same care and thematic awareness as the cinematography, mise-en-scene or editing, can transform our experience without us even realizing how and why it is happening.

Take composer Hans Zimmer for example. Zimmer has composed scores for more than 150 films, working with dozens of filmmakers. And he understands how music can support and enhance a narrative theme, creating a cohesive whole. In his work with Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), his compositions explore the recurring theme of time:

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Musical scores can also emphasize a moment or signal an important character. Composers use recurring themes, or **motifs**, as a kind of signature (or even a brand) for a film or tv series. The most famous of these are the ones you can probably hum to yourself right now, again like *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, maybe even *Harry Potter*. Composers can use this same concept for a specific character as well, known as a **leitmotif**. Think of those two ominous notes we associate with the shark in *JAWS*. That's a leitmotif. Or the triumphant horns we hear every time Indiana Jones shows up in *Raiders*. That's a leitmotif.

Oh, and all those movies I mentioned just now? They all have the same composer. His name is John Williams. And he's a legend:

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8

Acting

It's 1964 at the National Theatre in London. Maggie Smith and Laurence Olivier are starring in what

would become a legendary production of Shakespeare's *Othello*. They've been at it for months. Each night, Olivier, one of the great stage and screen actors of the 20th century, tries something a little different, experimenting, tweaking, trying desperately to get it right.

Then, one night, all of the pieces fall into place and Olivier gives one of the all-time great performances in the history of theater. Maggie Smith, his co-star, rushes to his dressing room afterwards to congratulate him.

But when she enters, she finds Olivier alone, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Larry, what's the matter?" She asks. "Why are you so upset? That was the most brilliant performance I've ever seen."

Olivier looks up, still sobbing, and replies, "Yes, I know. And I don't know how I did it!"
This story has been told many times over the years, most recently by actor Brian Dennehy:
https://www.npr.org/2020/04/24/843918935/remembering-tony-award-winning-character-actor-brian-dennehy

Professional actors are in many ways like professional athletes.
Throughout this chapter I use the term "actor" to refer to both male and female actors. The term "actress" while still in use, most notably by the Academy of Motion Picutre Arts and Sciences, strikes me as anachronistic, especially given the history of gender discrimination in the industry. See Chapter Nine for more on that.
They spend a lifetime training, perfecting their technique, honing their bodies to be the perfect instrument of their craft. And yet, the perfect performance, on the field or on the screen, is still more than the sum of its parts, a mysterious alchemy of timing, like catching lightning in a bottle. The pros themselves don't always understand how it all comes together.

But that doesn't mean we can't apply the same analytical approach we've used for mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing to help us understand the role of the acting in the cinematic experience. At the very least we can try to distinguish "good" acting from "bad" acting. That one is pretty simple, actually. Good acting doesn't look like *acting* at all. And it turns out, that is *really* hard to do.
Fortunately, we can do much more than that. We can examine how performance styles have evolved along with the rest of cinematic language over the past century. We can look at various school of acting, how the technique is taught and applied from different perspectives. And we can look at how acting for cinema presents its own unique challenges, as well as a few advantages.

THE EVOLUTION OF PERFORMANCE

Acting, as a profession, has been around a while. The Greeks were doing it as early as 534 BCE when Thespis, the world's first "actor", stepped onto a stage in Athens (it's why we sometimes call actors *thespians*). By the time Alice Guy-Blaché was framing up that fairy in the baby patch for the world's first narrative film in 1896, the profession had already been around for more than two thousand years. But all of that accumulated experience was centered around live performance, an actor on a stage in

front of an audience. As soon as Alice started cranking film through her *cinematographe*, acting began a new evolutionary line of descent.

It was a rough start.

As with most of the formal elements of cinema that we've explored, acting for the camera has had to evolve along with cinematic language, gaining in nuance and complexity as the years progressed. Just as editors learned how to hide a shift in camera angle by cutting on action, or cinematographers learned how to move the camera in a way that drew audiences deeper into the story, actors had to learn how to replace their relationship with a live audience with a relationship with the camera, always there but rarely acknowledged. In their earliest incarnations, screen performances were little different from those on the stage. And since actors were used to going big with their expressions and gestures to make sure the folks in the cheap seats could still read their performance, they did the same in front of the camera. The only problem was, the camera was capable of far greater intimacy than anyone expected or even really understood. At least at first.

It's one reason why some folks today find it hard to connect with films of the silent era, or even the Golden Age of Hollywood. The performances often have a theatrical quality to them, a tendency to *indicate* an emotion aimed at those cheap seats, rather than embodying an emotion with subtlety. But it is important to remember that the evolution of cinematic language implicates the filmmakers *and* the audience. That more theatrical style of acting on the screen worked for movie-goers at the time. It's all they knew. Both actors and audiences needed time to fully grasp the powerful intimacy of the camera.

But there were exceptions.

One of the most powerful is Reneé Jeanne Falconetti's performance in Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc.* Dreyer's original cut of the film was lost for decades until it was found in a janitor's closet in Norway in the 1980s. And somehow that seems fitting since Falconetti's performance feels like a cinematic time machine, as if a modern actor somehow traveled back to 1928 to give the performance of a lifetime. It helped that Dreyer understood where to put the camera to capture it all. Here's a short scene:

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It feels curiously modern in comparison to what we typically see in films from that period.

Here's another exceptional performance from D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919):

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That's Lilian Gish in emotional agony as her abusive father terrorizes her with a hatchet. Her performance was so authentic in the moment that Griffith stopped the scene, convinced Gish was actually having a nervous breakdown. Of course, she was only *acting*. But that **naturalistic** style was so uncommon, it was hard to tell.

There were other exceptions, certainly, but it's important to note that these early examples of **naturalism** in film acting were not necessarily *better* than the more common "theatrical" performances

of the silent era and the Golden Age. They were just a different approach to the craft, and appropriate for the context and content of early cinema. And while modern audiences might prefer that style, that may only be because they align more closely with modern approaches to the craft. Just like those early audiences, it's all we know. But less naturalistic performances can be just as "good" – emotionally resonant and consistent with the thematic intent of the story – in context.

Take this one, for example:

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James Cagney and Mae Clarke in *Public Enemy* (1931). The clipped delivery of Cagney's hardened gangster, the plaintive cooing of Clarke's long-suffering girlfriend, they fall neatly into that category of Golden Age theatrical performances, not necessarily naturalistic, but certainly consistent with a moralistic tale of criminals getting their just deserts.

Or this one:

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That's Greta Garbo in *The Grand Hotel* (1932). It might feel a bit melodramatic by today's standards, but Garbo's "I want to be alone…" is as emotionally resonant as they come.

TWO SCHOOLS OF ACTING

The evolution of performance in cinema hit an inflection point around the time the Golden Age gave way to the New Hollywood in the 1960s. The young, energetic actors, writers and directors who took over cinema in the United States, at least until the blockbusters of *JAWS* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), brought with them a new naturalistic acting style, which curiously enough, actually started in avant-garde theater of the 1930s and 40s. It was part of a whole new approach to performance, a new school of acting, called the **Stanislavski Method**, or just The Method for short.

But the **Classical School** of acting, with its emphasis on the text and the precision of performance, had been around at least since Thespis himself. It wasn't going to simply fade away. Both have their own unique take on technique, and both ultimately have the same goal, to render a performance that moves the audience. Let's take a look at each one.

THE CLASSICAL SCHOOL

As I mention above, the Classical School has been around a while, likely since Thespis first took the stage, but the modern classical approach is rooted in the British tradition of Shakespearean performance. Then as now the technique relies heavily on the text, the script itself, rather than the actor's own emotional history. As such, a classically trained actor's performance is action-oriented, caring more about what they are *doing* in the scene than what they are *feeling*, and precise, with little room for improvisation.

We most often associate classical acting with Shakespeare, and the long tradition of treating the playwright's text as something sacred and unchangeable. That same reverence is brought to the cinema with this technique. But that's not to suggest that a classically trained actor can't breathe emotional life into a role. Remember Laurence Olivier from the opening of this chapter? Here he is playing Hamlet in, you guessed it, *Hamlet* (1948):

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His performance is true to the text, but not without emotion. It's just that Olivier, like most classically trained actors, trusts the words to do the heavy lifting.

But maybe you want a more up-to-date example of the classical approach. How about this:

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Morgan Freeman took on the role of Nelson Mandela for *Invictus* (2009) and approached it as a classically trained actor, trusting the script to convey what mattered most. In his own words, "The biggest challenge that I had was to sound like him. Everything else was kind of easy, to walk like him. I didn't have any agenda as it were in playing the role. The agenda is incorporated into the script and all I had to do was learn my lines."

THE METHOD

In contrast to the Classical School of acting, the Stanislavski Method, or Method Acting as it is commonly known, is emotionally oriented, committed to an emotional realism, sometimes at the expense of whatever might be in the script. It began in Russia at the end of the 19th century with a theater director, Konstantin Stanislavski, upending centuries of classical technique by encouraging his actors to let go of their grip on the text and trust their own emotional experience to guide their performance. The result was a more inward-looking, internal, often improvisational approach to acting, not to mention a more naturalistic style, and it became a slow-moving revolution in stage and screen performance throughout the 20th century.

Stanislavski's ideas were published in English for the first time in 1936 in the book, *An Actor Prepares*, and it quickly gained influence among young acting students and teachers, especially in New York in the 1940s and 50s. One of the strongest proponents of the new "method" was Lee Strasberg and his Group Theater, founded in the 1930s. He would go on to run the Actors Studio in the 1950s, working

with the first crop of Stanislavski Method actors and directors to break into Hollywood. They included directors like Elia Kazan, as well as actors like Geraldine Page, Joanne Woodward, James Dean, Paul Newman and Marlon Brando.

Brando was perhaps the most famous of these new method actors to hit the screen. He exploded into popular culture in 1951 as Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. One of his first and most defining roles. He was tough, volatile, sometimes brutal, but audiences had seen all of that before. It was his emotional vulnerability, his raw unpredictability that took everyone by surprise:

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Brando went on to another landmark role in *On the Waterfront* in 1954 (which reunited him with director Elia Kazan and many of his other Actors Studio colleagues), along with dozens more including, eventually, New Hollywood films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). His performances were marked by a riveting intensity as well as a tendency to mumble, even chew gum while delivering his lines. It was all in service of his pursuit of an emotional truth, an embodiment of character, that relied less and less on the actual words on the page and more and more on a commitment to naturalism. By the time of his death in 2004, the New York Times wrote, "Simply put, in film acting, there is before Brando, and there is after Brando. And they are like different worlds."

In the ensuing years, the new Method attracted wave after wave of young actors entranced by the naturalism of actors like Brando. Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, Sally Field, Anne Bancroft and Dustin Hoffman are just a few of the actors who passed through Strasberg's Actors Studio. And that was just one of many studios, theaters and acting schools dedicated to Stanislavksi's method.

As more and more of these younger method actors entered the ranks of Hollywood cinema, they inevitably collided with the more classically trained actors that still dominated the industry. Neither had much patience for the other. One of Dustin Hoffman's early film roles was in the 1976 thriller *Marathon Man*. His co-star was Laurence Olivier. Yeah, that guy. For one scene, Hoffman's character hadn't slept for three days. So, true to the Stanislavski method, Hoffman stayed up three nights in a row so he could really *feel* what it was like to be sleep deprived. When he bragged about this achievement to Olivier on set, Olivier smiled and said, "Why don't you just try acting?"

Stanislavski's method continued to gain popularity among American acting schools in the 20th century and remains a popular approach to training and performance. Today there are several variations on the technique, promoted by acting gurus in the tradition of Lee Strasberg and Stanislavski himself. Sanford Meisner is probably the most famous example. The Meisner Technique employs the same commitment to naturalism, but adds a new emphasis on being in the moment, acting and reacting instead of thinking. (In that sense, the Meisner Technique is a hybrid between the Classical School and the Method.) And contemporary actors such as Daniel Day Lewis, Charlize Theron, Cate Blanchette, Christian Bale and Joaquin Phoenix are all examples of actors who, in one form or another, pursue the goals established by Stanislavski. Some of them, of course, famously take that pursuit to the extreme, losing an unhealthy amount of weight for a role, or never breaking character on or off the set during production. Not all of them call themselves "method" actors, the term has become almost self-satirizing. Some of them would even consider themselves "classically" trained. And in some ways, that's the greatest influence of Stanislavski. His method pushed all actors, regardless of their training, toward greater realism, toward a naturalism in performance that doesn't simply represent the ideas of a writer but embodies a character's emotional truth:

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ACTING FOR CINEMA

Any of the above approaches to acting, and many more besides, can apply to any form of performance, whether on the stage or on a screen. But what makes acting specifically for cinema unique? For one thing, as an instrument of mass media, cinema is wildly more accessible than live theater. And that means the profession will invariable intersect with popular culture in a much more obvious way, blurring the line between becoming a character and simply becoming a celebrity. But there are also the peculiar challenges of cinema production that theater actors never have to confront, as well as the distinct advantages of production, such as an actor's relationship to the camera, and maybe just as important, the actor's relationship with the editor.

MOVIE STARS AND "CHARACTER" ACTORS

If you've learned anything about cinema in these chapters so far, hopefully it's that cinema requires dozens if not hundreds of professionals all working together to create the finished product. Production designers, sound technicians, editors, screenwriters, not to mention grips, gaffers, caterers, hair stylists, make-up artists, carpenters, truck drivers, the list goes on and on. But how many production designers can you name? Editors? What about screenwriters? Of all those talented individuals who work behind the camera, you might be able to name a few directors, but that's about it.

Now, how about actors? How many of those can you name?

Exactly. That's by design, of course. The entertainment industry has long understood the value of "stardom" and the power of celebrity to sell tickets. The early fan magazines were all controlled by the studios, creating and sustaining a culture of devotion to the movie stars that populated their films, and eventually, their television shows. Audiences flocked to movies like *Casablanca* (1942), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Key Largo* (1948) to see Humphrey Bogart, not Rick Blaine, Philip Marlow or Frank McCloud (his characters in each one).

And that tradition has continued. How many of you rushed to see *Shutter Island* (2010) because of Teddy Daniels? Or *The Revenant* (2015) because of Hugh Glass? *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* (2019) because of Rick Dalton? Chances are you saw those films because Leonardo DiCaprio played each of those characters. Okay, it helped that they were directed by Martin Scorsese, Alejandro Iñárritu and Quentin Tarantino, but seeing Leo on the marquee didn't hurt. And no matter how hard he tries to lose himself in each role, we still see Leo up there on the screen. It's why we paid the price of admission. He is a **movie star** after all.

This is the dilemma of the movie star in the entertainment ecosystem. The one thing that keeps them

employed and well-paid as an actor, their celebrity, is the very thing that consistently undermines all of the hard work that goes into building a believable character. It also makes formal analysis of performance a somewhat fraught process. How does one disentangle the charisma and magnetism of a "star" from the character they are playing on screen? Sometimes that means evaluating a performance not on its own merits, but by just how much we forget who they are in real life.

Of course, given all of the discussion above about technique, the last thing a professional actor wants is for anyone to remember they are, in fact, an actor while they are on screen. But there are plenty of professionals who avoid this problem by building careers that avoid the spotlight, playing secondary, often eccentric characters that we remember far more readily than we do the actors who play them. We often refer to them as **character actors**, which is a kind of backwards compliment. Shouldn't all actors be "character" actors? Still, unburdened by fame, character actors can truly lose themselves in a role, bringing authenticity to the narrative by supporting the "star" at its center. Even if all we can say about them is, "Oh yeah, he's that guy from that thing…"

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This distinction between movie stars and character actors may seem somewhat arbitrary. Aren't "character actors" just actors who aren't famous (yet)? And aren't "movie stars" just actors trying to do their job despite their celebrity? I mean, it's not their fault they're famous. I think both are true, but it points to one of the unique challenges of acting for cinema. Unlike acting for the theater, cinema is part of a larger, capital intensive, highly technical medium. One performance can be seen by billions of people for a potentially limitless number of times. And that social/economic reality impacts both the way actors approach the work, and the way we approach their performances.

But that's just one of the ways acting for cinema presents its own unique set of challenges for actors. The basic realities of production are an endless series of obstacles actors have to overcome to give a consistent, believably human performance.

THE CHALLENGES OF PRODUCTION

Let's start with the most basic obstacle that everyone on a film set must confront and somehow overcome: time. There usually isn't very much of it. Not only does it take a long time to set up, execute and dismantle every shot for every scene and sequence, the overall schedule is hemmed in by the competing schedules of other productions running long or needing to start on time tying up the cast and crew. The most immediate impact this time crunch has on actors is an extremely **limited time for rehearsals**. In live theater, actors might have 4 to 6 weeks to rehearse their roles. In cinema, they're lucky if they get a day or two. Often that means "rehearsals" are really just the first few takes of every shot, working out how to deliver the lines, how to move in the space (known as **blocking**), how to play off the other actors.

And if the lack of rehearsal time weren't bad enough, most films are **shot out of sequence**. That is, the scenes shot each day do not follow the linear narrative of the script. There are lots of reasons for this. For one, scenes that must be shot at night must be grouped together so the cast and crew can get enough

rest between each "day". And sometimes the production only has access to a particular location for a limited time, so all of the scenes set in that location must be grouped together as well. Or maybe a particular actor can only be on set for a limited time because of other obligations (see above regarding time), so all of the scenes with that actor must be grouped together. The net result is that from day to day (or night to night) actors must constantly re-orient themselves to where they are in the story. In theater, actors play the narrative through all at once, allowing their journey as a character to play out in real time. In cinema, actors bounce around the script playing bits and pieces of that journey, hoping the editor can find something consistent to cut together in the end.

And if shooting out of sequence weren't bad enough, think about the near constant **interruptions between each shot**. On stage, once the curtain goes up, the actors are on their own, carrying the story through to the end with no interruptions except maybe an intermission (or a noisy cell phone). In cinema, each shot is a complex, collaborative choreography of set design, lighting, sound recording and cinematography. To shoot one simple scene using the master shot and coverage technique requires at least three set-ups, often many more. And each set-up requires adjustments to lighting, set decoration, camera placement, all of which can sometimes take hours. Not to mention how often a take is interrupted or unusable because of an issue with the sound, or the cinematographer making small adjustments. Somehow, through all of that, the actors are supposed to deliver a consistent performance from shot to shot all while pretending they are not on a film set with a giant camera a few inches from their face.

One of the best examples of just how difficult this process can be is in Tom DiCillo's indie masterpiece about indie filmmaking, *Living in Oblivion* (1995):

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So, you've got limited rehearsal time, shooting out of sequence *and* the interruptions between each setup and shot. All of which makes acting for cinema hard enough. But on top of all of that, with every new setup, the scene must be performed and shot over and over again until everyone is happy. A single 5-minute scene in a finished film may have taken hours if not days to complete with the actors repeating the scene dozens if not 100s of times, over and over, bringing the same intensity and emotional vulnerability *every single time*.

Check out this scene from David Fincher's *The Social Network* (2010):

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It's a 5-minute scene. By my count, there are 5 setups, one master, two medium shots and two close ups. Fincher cheated a bit by using two cameras which cut down on the number of times they needed to move the camera, but they still took 2 days to shoot that scene in 99 takes. That means Jesse Eisenberg and Rooney Mara did the whole scene 99 times in row over two days to get it right. Exhausting!

Oh, and those close ups where you only see one actor? Sometimes that actor is performing their side of the scene to an empty chair. Maybe their scene partner had another obligation. Maybe they had to reshoot that side of the scene weeks later and the other actor wasn't available. Or maybe they just got bored and left. We'll never know, but acting one side of a scene to no one, though relatively rare even in cinema, would never happen on stage.

These issues have all been part of cinema and the challenges of production for actors from the very beginning. After all, cinema relies as much on technology as it does on art, so it should be no surprise (especially if you've read this far) that the process is incredibly complex with many moving parts. And each new innovation in the technology of cinema has required a certain amount of adaptation, both for the crew *and* for the cast.

Take the introduction of sound in 1927, for example. Not only did production facilities and theaters have to adapt the new technology, including the birth of a whole new department on the crew, but actors had to add an entirely new dimension to their performance. Yes, they were used to speaking on the stage, that part wasn't necessarily new. But the introduction of recording equipment, often fastened to their costume and tethered to a sound recordist, was a new obstacle to overcome in the pursuit of an authentic, "natural" performance. Just when they were getting used to the camera in their face, they had to remember where the microphone was hiding:

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The **influence of new technology** on an actor's job has never really slowed down. Sometimes it has made the actor's job easier, such as smaller microphones and wireless technology, and sometimes it has made it a lot more complicated. The increase in Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) in the past few decades has meant actors are often on a soundstage surrounded by bright green walls acting a scene that will eventually take place in outer space or on another planet or even just a faraway location the production couldn't afford to travel to. To make matters even more complicated, new **motion capture** technology enables productions to not only transform the setting, but also the actors own body. Check out what Benedict Cumberbatch had to go through to play Smaug, a talking dragon in *The Hobbit* trilogy:

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Okay, so those are all of the challenges actors face when working in cinema. What about some of the advantages?

I'M READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP

It's one of the more famous final lines in cinema history. *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950, Norma Desmond, once a great silent actor, now a delusional recluse, is about to be arrested for murdering a screenwriter. She turns to the press, thinking they are the camera crew on the set of a new Cecile B. DeMille picture, and utters, "Alright, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up."

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Okay, so that's super creepy. But, Norma's no fool. The close-up is a powerful thing. And it's one of the most important not-so-secret weapons for an actor in cinema. You see, great actors understand that the

most important relationship in a scene is not between them and the other actors, it's between them and the *camera*. The camera *is* the audience, that's who they're playing to. And unlike theater, where your intimacy with the actors is dictated by how much you were willing to pay – the rich folks get front row center and the rest of us end up in the balcony staring at the top of the actors' heads – in cinema our intimacy with the actors is dictated by how close the camera can get. Take another look at the clips I shared at the beginning of this chapter. Lilian Gish and her emotional breakdown in the closet as her father hacks his way in to kill her. Or even more devastating, Falconetti as Joan of Arc being cross examined by the priests. Shoot those scenes wide and you've still got compelling cinema. Cut to the close-up, and you've got something the transcends the medium. You've got a human connection.

Let's look at one more example of the power of the close-up. It's from *Birth*, a 2004 thriller starring Nicole Kidman. The basic plot, as strange as it sounds, is that Kidman's character lost the love of her life, her husband, years earlier. Then one day, a young boy shows up at her apartment claiming to be the reincarnation of her dead husband. He knows much more than he should about their life together and it shakes her to the core. Soon after this revelation, she goes to the opera. The director, Jonathan Glazer, chose to shoot the scene as one long take, starting in a wide shot that moves into a close-up. There is no dialogue. Just two solid minutes on Kidman's face as she processes this impossible news:

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For those two minutes, you see a thousand different reactions play across her infinitely expressive face. Every twitch of her eye, every tear held back. It is a masterclass in subtlety and emotional vulnerability. Now, imagine seeing this on a stage from 100 feet away, much less in the balcony. It just doesn't work. This is where actors can shine on screen in a way they never could on stage.

A COLLABORATIVE MEDIUM

We often think of the actor's role as singular, solitary. From Action! to Cut! the actor is the only one in complete control of their performance. But that performance is only one part of a much larger artistic and technical endeavor, one that requires collaboration between and among everyone involved. Take the actor's relationship with a director, for example. In a productive collaboration, an actor relies on their director to understand the shape of the completed narrative, how every piece will contribute to a unified aesthetic, as well as how the various technical requirements will be accomplished and add to the story. That enables them to focus on the scene in front of them, trusting that any input from the director is part of that larger design. When an actor *doesn't* trust their director, the results can be disastrous. But when they do, they can take risks and make choices in the moment that add up to something greater than any one individual performance.

Take a look at how the great Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray can use something as simple as eye contact in *The Big City* (1963) to build up a narrative arc for his characters:

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From scene to scene, Ray no doubt directed his actors in the specific timing of their eye contact, knowing he wanted to use that as a thematic element. It might not have made perfect sense in the moment to an actor in a given scene, but they trusted their director to have a larger narrative purpose in mind.

Sometimes a director's larger narrative purpose can extend beyond any single film. In the same way they may favor a certain framing or camera movement to express some unifying aesthetic of their work, they may direct their actors toward a particular way of interacting with each other or the environment. For example, Jane Campion tends to isolate and feature human touch throughout her films and tv series:

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The relationship between the actor and director is, or should be, *collaborative*. That is, both have agency in the process. (Though there are some truly terrifying developments in technology that would remove that agency from the actor entirely.) But when the cameras stop rolling and the sets are dismantled, the actor's job is done. And it's the editor that must sift through those 99 takes of that one scene and make some sense of it. It's the editor that can shape and mold a performance over the running time of a film or tv episode, selecting the take that best dramatizes theme and narrative intent *and* works with what came before and what comes next.

It's a fascinating process, and it can radically alter the raw performances in any given scene:

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Of course, this is all done in concert with the director, but that's the point. A motion picture is a collaboration, the result of a thousand moving parts built and maintained by a thousand different artist and technicians all applying the tools and techniques that have taken a century to evolve into the cinematic language we all share, as filmmakers and audiences. And will likely keep on evolving, changing and adapting for centuries to come.

So now that we know *how* cinema works, maybe we should take a look at *what* it's trying to say…

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II

Representation in Cinema

I've spent the last several chapters discussing in great detail how cinema communicates, how it uses its own unique and evolving cinematic language to connect with and engage its audience. Namely, you.

With a firm grasp on the tools and techniques employed by filmmakers, we can break the medium down to its constituent parts, analyze how mise-en-scene, narrative structure, framing, composition, camera movement, lighting, sound design, editing, performance and a thousand other components add up to an affecting cinematic experience. Or how they add up to a deeply disappointing one. But at least we'll know why.

Most introductory textbooks stop there. And with good reason. That's plenty of information to absorb, much less master, for one semester. But it stands to reason that if we spent all this time understanding *how* cinema communicates, we should probably also spend some time thinking about *what*, exactly, it is trying to say.

Way back in Chapter Two, I brought up the idea that the cultural norms that shape cinematic content, much like cinematic language, are largely invisible or unconscious. Cinema, like any other art form, is created by artists who are themselves bound up in a given historical and cultural context. And no matter how enlightened and advanced they may be, they cannot possibly grasp every aspect of how that historical and cultural context shapes their view of the world. Inevitably, the unexamined norms and values that makes us who we are filter into the cinematic stories we tell.

The result is a kind of cultural feedback loop where cinema both influences and is influenced by the context in which it is created.

Because that process is largely invisible and unconscious, cinema remains more effective at re-affirming a particular view of the world than challenging or changing it. That is to say, it is an inherently conservative medium. Not in the partisan sense, but in the sense of maintaining or "conserving" the status quo. Part of the problem (if you accept that this is a problem) is the economic reality that cinema must appeal to the masses to survive. It costs a LOT of money to make a feature film or tv series. So, filmmakers and their financiers tend to avoid offending our collective sensibilities. They want us to buy more tickets and pay more streaming fees, so they're going to err on the side of making us feel better about who we already think we are.

But there's another really important reason why cinema does not tend to challenge the status quo. The reality is that the people who have historically had access to the capital required to produce this very expensive medium… well, they tend to all look alike. That is, mostly white, and mostly men. And as I mentioned back in Chapter Two, when the same kind of people with the same kind of experiences tend to have the most consistent access to the medium, we tend to get the same kinds of stories, reproducing the same, often unexamined, norms, values and ideas.

This cultural and economic dynamic has shaped cinematic content from the beginning. And by pulling our focus from form to content, from cinema as a technical medium to cinema as a cultural document, we can better understand what cinema has to say about who we think we are.

This emphasis on how culture shapes content (and vice versa) inevitably leads to the issue of representation. Not only in the sense of who is on screen and how we see them, but perhaps even more importantly, who is *behind the camera*. After all, whoever controls the means of communication controls the message.

Obviously, a deep dive into the issue of representation in cinema could easily fill its own, stand-alone introductory text.
In fact, it has. Harry Bernshoff and Sean Griffin's [America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender,

[and Sexuality at the Movies](#) is a stunningly thorough treatment of the topic from multiple angles. You should check it out.

Which is probably why most textbooks on formal film analysis avoid the topic altogether. But hey, we've come this far, why not put all of that newfound knowledge about *how* cinema communicates to at least a couple of examples of *what* it's trying to say.

To that end, I'm going to focus on two specific case studies in cinematic representation. Now, the options are endless. I could have easily written chapters on gender and sexuality or race and ethnicity or even issues of inequality and class as general topics of representation in cinema. But I think there is power in specificity. The more focused we can be in our analysis, the more fruitful the exploration. So, I'm going to zero in on the role of women in cinema and the role of African Americans in cinema; both in terms of how they are portrayed on screen, and the ways women and Black filmmakers specifically have fought for control of their own cinematic narratives.

This emphasis is due in part to the historical moment. The #MeToo Movement has led to the beginnings of real systemic change in the entertainment industry for women, and placing that cultural shift in cinematic context seems particularly important. The same could be said for the recent #OscarsSoWhite campaign, and cinematic representations of African Americans. But even more recently, the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter movement has forced a deep and hopefully lasting examination of who we think we are as a society. And I would argue cinema has an important role to play in that process, both historically and moving forward.

But I encourage you not to stop here. Use this as an opportunity to explore issues of representation for Native Americans, Asian Americans and the Latinx community. How does cinema influence our understanding of masculinity? Immigration? Mental health?

The list is as long as our collective experience.

9

Women in Cinema

"It seems like a silly, girlish thing to do."

That's what Léon Gaumont, owner of a Parisian photography company, said to his secretary, Alice Guy-Blaché, when she asked if she could film a few scenes with the new cinematograph in 1896. They had just come from the exhibition where the Lumiere brothers had unveiled their invention with such riveting classics as *Workers Leaving a Factory* and *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (okay, that's sarcasm, they were super boring). But Alice saw the potential of the new technology. She saw a whole new way to tell a story. And she wanted to see what she could do with it. Her boss was less enthusiastic, "On one condition: that your office work doesn't suffer."

So, after hours, Alice wrote, directed and edited *The Cabbage Fairy* (1896), a short, one-minute film about a young woman plucking babies out of a cabbage patch:

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By all accounts, it was the first entirely fictional film ever produced. Before Georges Melies. Before D. W. Griffith. In fact, Alice Guy-Blaché would go on to establish her own studio, Solax Pictures, in the United States in 1910, and make as many as 1,000 films over the course of her lifetime. Many of those films featured women in principle roles or gave women at least equal weight to men. She experimented with synchronized sound, color cinematography, and pushed the boundaries of what was possible in cinematic storytelling.

She was a force of nature in the fledgling film industry. One of a kind.

And that was the problem.

For those first several years of her professional life, she was one of the *only* women making cinema *in the world*. Others would follow, of course, including Lois Weber (who got her start by working for Guy-Blaché), the great Mabel Normand (the female Charlie Chaplin… or maybe Chaplin was the male Mabel Norman), and eventually, during the Golden Age, the trailblazing Ida Lupino (who also formed her own small studio). And there were many women employed as writers and, especially, editors in the early film industry. But the fact was, that industry was (and unfortunately still is) dominated by men:

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I know. What's new, right? An industry dominated by men that historically marginalizes women, forcing them to work twice as hard to achieve half as much. It's an all-too-common theme in modern history. But there's something much more important at work here than "simply" unfair labor practices. The films produced out of this imbalance became part of our shared cultural experience, they showed us ourselves to ourselves, or at least a version of ourselves. And that version was shaped almost entirely by men.

Just take a look at the earliest films ever made. George Melies' *A Trip to the Moon*, for example. An intrepid group of astronomers – all men – set off on a scientific expedition to the moon (shot from a cannon inexplicably surrounded by bevy of young women in skimpy sailor suits). Remember Lev Kuleshov's experiment with editing? It pointedly featured a man "reacting" to a scantily-clad woman. Heck, even Edison's early 5-second film *The Sneeze* is an uninspired image of a *man* sneezing.

Guy-Blaché's first film? It featured a woman without a man in sight.

Perhaps if there were more Alice Guy-Blachés and fewer D. W. Griffiths in those early years I wouldn't need to write this chapter (but, come on, who are we kidding?). But the net result of this lopsided control over one of the most influential forms of mass media in the 20th century was a seemingly infinite loop of images crafted by men and re-enforcing the idea that women were the "weaker sex". In fact, in almost all of those early films women characters were relegated to two conflicting roles: the virginal, saintly Madonna in need of saving; or the debased, fallen "loose" woman who must be cast out if not eliminated.

It was right out of Freud. Literally. Sigmund Freud had a term for it: The **Madonna-Whore Complex**. It explained what he observed as a paradox of male desire: the degraded "loose" women men desired were not worthy of love; and yet the women worthy of men's love were too pure to be desired. Film critics have applied this concept to the (mostly male) portrayal of women in early film, a kind of psychoanalysis of cinema, and have found a startling pattern of women cast as either the chaste "damsel

in distress" or the wanton temptress. Remember this scene back in the chapter on editing:

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It's from D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920). I used it to demonstrate an early example of parallel action, an element of cinematic form. But what about the content? Well, it's about a young woman, played by Lilian Gish, who is tricked into a fake marriage, gets pregnant, is abandoned by the father, loses the baby, tries to start over in a new town and when her "disgraceful" past is exposed, is cast out into the snow by the town mayor. Sheesh. Fortunately, the mayor's own son heroically saves her. A kind of two-for-one in the Madonna-Whore Complex.

And it turns out Gish and Griffiths made a habit of leaning hard into this trope. Remember this scene:

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It's from Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). I used it to demonstrate an early example of acting style, another element of cinematic form. And the content? This one is about a young woman, again played by Gish, who is brutalized by her abusive father and finds solace in the (chaste) arms of a Chinese immigrant. When her father finds out, he beats her. To death. The Chinese immigrant, played by Richard Barthelmess (the same actor who saves Gish in *Way Down East*, and no, he was not Asian), kills her father and then kills himself. This one has all the trappings of the Madonna-Whore Complex *and* xenophobic racism. Griffith was on a roll.

Theda Bara.

But perhaps the best (worst?) example of the Madonna-Whore Complex in early cinema, at least in terms of the villainous temptress aspect, would have to be Theda Bara. Bara was arguably cinema's first

sex symbol, appearing in over 40 films during the silent era. The term "vamp" was actually coined to refer to her recurring character, an intoxicating temptress who could lure even the most morally upright men into sin. Rumors circulated that she was born in the Sahara, a mysterious and wanton woman.

The truth is, she was born Theodosia Goodman, and her father was a tailor from Cincinnati. The name Theda Bara? Fox Studios made it up. It's an anagram for "Arab Death" (Oh, how I wish *I* were making this up).

These are just a few examples of early cinema's narrow view of women and the roles they were allowed to play. But how does this happen? Are the men behind the camera all raging misogynists? Maybe. But it's not that simple. To understand how this pattern developed and what effect it has on society, we have to understand how certain kinds of power work, and what happens when that power intersects with mass media.

The first concept we need to understand is **hegemony**. In the most basic sense, hegemony refers to any political or social dominance of one group over another. Now, any good colonizer will tell you that anyone with a large enough army can exert a certain amount of control over another nation or region simply by brute force. But violence will only get you so far. Sooner or later, the oppressed will resist violence with violence. Instead, what if you could convince them their oppression is somehow beneficial, or even divinely ordained? What if you could establish a set of cultural institutions – politics, education, religion, the arts, etc – that built this narrative of colonization as the "natural order of things" from the ground up? What if the oppressed *internalized* this narrative and actually participated in their own repression? Well, then you'd have a hegemony on your hands. And perhaps the most insidious aspect of this form of power? It works both ways. Those in power *also* internalize that narrative, believing that their oppression of whole nations and regions is somehow divinely ordained and, ultimately, for everyone's own good.

Don't believe me? Just ask the British Empire how they managed to rule over 1/4 of the earth's population at the height of their power.

The second concept we need to understand is **patriarchy**. The term refers to any cultural system in which men hold the primary power (political, social, economic, moral), including authority over women. To be clear, just because a nation elects a woman as head of state (I'm looking at you, basically every modern democracy *except* the United States) doesn't mean they've suddenly ushered in a matriarchy. Patriarchies are complex, historically produced and institutionally affirmed systems where power is multi-layered and distributed unevenly throughout society. A woman president of the United States, for example, would not instantly shift that balance of power (any more than an African American president instantly eradicated racism).

So, two big ideas – hegemony and patriarchy – put them together and what do you got? That's right, **hegemonic patriarchy**: a cultural system in which men hold the primary power to manipulate meaning and values such that even women perceive their own subjugation as the natural order of things. Whew. Quite a mouthful. Let's break it down. This is a system in which men wield extraordinary power over women, not through physical violence (though all too often that is employed as well), but through an array of cultural institutions that convince women that their oppression is somehow for their own benefit, divinely ordained, the "natural order of things." And the trick is, men come to believe it too, convinced by that same narrative. The result is that no one, neither the oppressed not the oppressor, recognizes it as a cultural invention, a product of history. They all believe it to be a truth that exists outside of themselves, and no one thinks to challenge it.

Okay, I know. This book is supposed to be about movies. What does hegemonic patriarchy have to do with cinema? Well, it turns out, mass media is one of the most effective means of communicating the values and ideas that prop up hegemonic systems. And cinema, a medium that has historically been controlled almost entirely by men (and white men at that, but more on that later), is one of the most effective examples of mass media. In fact, for the previous eight chapters I've discussed in great detail how cinema manipulates meaning through a host of tools and techniques that remain largely invisible, by design, to most viewers. And that's exactly how we like it. We *want* to be manipulated. But maybe we should think a little more deeply about *what* is being manipulated and just *who* is doing the manipulating. In film after film, from the earliest narrative cinema, through the Golden Age and the New Hollywood, and arguably into the modern era, the Madonna-Whore Complex has shaped how cinema, and by implication we the audience, see women. For the men in that audience (and behind the camera), that has meant decades of objectifying of women as either virginal or villainous. For the women, it has meant decades of *internalizing* that same paradox.

WOMEN IN THE GOLDEN AGE

The Madonna-Whore Complex was clearly alive and well throughout the early years of cinema. But remember that cinema and society exist in a kind of ongoing feedback loop, where cinema both *reflects* the values of society and also *influences* those same values. Typically this process results in a net re-enforcement of the status quo, where cinema, controlled by a narrow slice of society (again, mostly men and mostly white), remains inherently conservative. But change happens. And as the industry and the technology has evolved over time, we can trace the shifts in that cultural feedback loop, observing where cinema reflects political, economic and cultural change, and where it influences society to potentially resist those same changes.

Let's look at a couple of examples.

The Golden Age of cinema covers the period in Hollywood production from around the adoption of synchronized sound in 1927 to the anti-trust case that dismantled studio monopolies in 1948 and the rise of television in the 1950s. During that period, the world was plunged into a second great war right on the heels of a global depression. When the United States entered the war in the 1940s, there was a massive mobilization of resources, including a seismic shift in how women fit into the nation's economy. With thousands of men off fighting in the war, someone had to keep the factories going. Women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, doing manual labor and other jobs historically reserved for men. Desperate times called for desperate measures… like giving a woman a wrench, apparently.

Jane Greer as the Femme Fatale in Out of the Past (1947).

Around this same period, one of the most popular genres produced by Hollywood was the hardboiled detective story, gritty, urban and full of morally ambiguous characters. Eventually, this trend in cinema would come to be known as **Film Noir**. Every studio got in on it, though Warner Bros. was the most prolific. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946), there were dozens of them every year. And each one invariably featured two main characters, the righteous if fatally flawed detective, and the beautiful if emotionally damaged temptress, the **Femme Fatale**. The Femme Fatale typically set the story in motion, stepping into the (male) protagonist's life with a tale of woe, desperate for his help, but usually hiding a secret that could get them both killed. Sometimes the Femme Fatale would wind up behind bars or dead, and sometimes they could be redeemed and live happily ever after. But that was the point. You never quite knew if you could trust them, they were mysterious, morally ambiguous, and most importantly, didn't seem to know their place.

Sound familiar?

At a time when thousands of women were forced to cross an invisible but sacrosanct line and engage in public, manual "men's" work, Hollywood was filling movie houses with images of unpredictable, dangerous women pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior, *reflecting* society's anxiety over the moral ambiguity of women leaving the home for the factory. But more than merely reflecting a contemporary reality, these films also seemed to have strong opinions about these women, and thus exerted a certain *influence* over movie-goers. Echoing that tried and true Madonna-Whore Complex, these films (and their male filmmakers) suggest that these women would eventually need to be redeemed by a good man or end up in jail (or worse).

In the years that followed, especially after the war, the United States experienced an incredible economic expansion, known as the post-war boom. Not only did the men return to take their places in the factories, white-collar work became more available and higher paying. New housing developments, the "suburbs", developed to cater to the higher salaries and growing families. Women were not only sent back to their homes; those homes were bigger and more luxurious than ever before.

But the genie was already out of the bottle. Thousands of women had experienced the psychological and economic freedom of work outside the home, and many were reluctant to fall back into pre-war patterns. This would eventually grow into a social and political movement for gender equality in the 1960s and 70s, but in the short term, during the 1950s and the tail end Hollywood's Golden Age, there was a collective restlessness in U.S. society.

Marilyn Monroe in Niagra (1953).

And what was the response from Hollywood? With the 1950s came the end of Film Noir (though it would survive in various forms and at various periods throughout the century), and the rise of the domestic comedy and the **Blonde Bombshell**, portrayed most famously and consistently by Marilyn Monroe. Films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956) and *Tunnel of Love* (1958) all featured women, mostly blonde, often portrayed as naïve innocents (and sometimes willfully unintelligent) who were either blissfully happy housewives or desperately wanted to be. The unifying theme of all of these films was that a woman's place was in the home, preferably with a wealthy, successful husband. Cinema in that historical moment reflected a kind of nostalgia for the gender dynamics of pre-war America, but it also presented that image as an ideal for women to internalize and ultimately pursue.

What is crucial to understand about the dynamic described above is that it is bound up in a much larger hegemonic process. This is not the malevolent scheme of a few powerful actors bent on controlling society. I am fairly confident there was never a room full of men from all the major Hollywood studios working out how to make films that would convince women to stay subservient to men (I mean… *fairly* confident). And that's because there doesn't have to be. That's the power of hegemonic patriarchy, everyone – men and women – are bound up in the same system, internalizing and re-producing the meaning and values that support inequality… without ever recognizing it as un-equal.

SECOND WAVE FEMINISM AND THE MALE GAZE

By the time we get to the 1960s, enough women had had enough of the status quo, and they didn't care what Hollywood had to say about it. Women like Betty Friedan, who founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, were tired of the limitations placed on women in the post-war period. Not just in terms of where and how they could work, but how they dressed, what they thought, and who they loved. Inspired by women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony who, a half century earlier, fought and won the right for women to vote, Friedan and women like her wanted to build on that political revolution with a more wide-spread *cultural* revolution. To them, the women's suffrage movement was the "first wave" of feminism, the beginning of real change. They wanted to usher in the Second Wave of feminism that would fundamentally alter the way women engaged with politics, the economy and society in general.

There was just one problem. They were still living in a hegemonic patriarchy. Second wave feminists wanted to change the fundamental values of society, but they had little or no access to the mechanisms that controlled and manipulated meaning. Namely, mass media and, more specifically, cinema. Their strategies involved mass protests, marches, support groups, lectures, and other more traditional forms of political activism. None of which could effectively compete with the hegemonic machine of cultural production churning out a counter-narrative in cineplexes (and on televisions) around the country. Not to mention the fact that their main source of resistance wasn't from men who wanted to hold onto their social position, it was from other *women* who had internalized the patriarchal idea that their place was in the home, that it was the "natural order of things."

The result was wave after wave of cinematic responses to the Women's Movement that echoed the earlier responses from Film Noir to the Blonde Bombshell. First up was the late 60s trend toward **sexploitation films**. These films, like *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964) and *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* (1965) (not to mention the lower-budget, grindhouse films that were more akin to pornography), embraced one small part of the movement, the *sexual* liberation of women. These films managed to both undermine the movement by using sexual freedom as an excuse to further objectify women's bodies, *and* conveniently ignore every other issue important to second wave feminists. By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, this tactic shifted into ignoring women altogether in favor of **male buddy comedies** like *The Odd Couple* (1968) and *The Sting* (1973), films that seemed to suggest that men could get along quite well without any women at all.

It was around this time, 1975 to be exact, that film theorist Laura Mulvey wrote "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," a pivotal essay that helped clarify how hegemonic patriarchy worked, specifically in cinema. It was like pulling back the curtain to see how meaning was manipulated and by whom. And she did it by giving it a name: **The Male Gaze**.

Mulvey's premise is pretty simple. First, she suggests we're all inherently narcissistic. That is, we tend to think of ourselves as the center of the universe. So, when we see the (male) hero in a film, all of us, male and female, tend to identify with that hero. Second, she suggests we are also all inherently voyeuristic. That is, we like to watch others but remain unobserved ourselves. Which is, essentially, what cinema offers. As I've written several times in the preceding chapters, the camera is our only way

into the cinematic world. We watch events unfold through the frame, which can suggest the frame of a painting in terms of composition, but also a window frame in terms of our fascination with watching the private lives of others. Put those two together, and you get two mutually re-enforcing phenomena: We identify with a male hero in his objectification of female characters (as Madonnas or whores), *and* we identify with the camera as it mirrors that objectification. Put more simply, the Male Gaze suggests the camera is never a neutral observer, but rather it forces all viewers to assume a heterosexual male point of view.

And since you can never have too much irony in your life, here's a guy mansplaining the Male Gaze that I just mansplained for you:

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Or we could just hear Mulvey talk about it herself:

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The Male Gaze explains a lot about the cinematic examples I outline above. And it makes sense when you think about how rare an Alice Guy-Blaché or Ida Lupino was throughout most of 20th century Hollywood. The fact was men were overwhelmingly the ones making the films, from the studio executives right down to the production assistants. But even if there were more women involved, the hegemonic patriarchy was so firmly in place we may well have seen them reproducing the same images, adopting that Male Gaze and thinking it was neutral.

By the 1980s, it was as if Hollywood, and society in general, knew that the game was up. Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze had exposed cinema as a tool of hegemonic patriarchy (at least for those who had bothered to read her work). But instead of opening up the process to more voices, allowing the machine of meaning production to evolve with changing times, the industry doubled down on resisting the revolution of second wave feminism. Whether it was role reversal comedies like *Mr. Mom* (1983) and *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) that affirmed a woman's place in the home by showing us the comedic anarchy of men trying to change a diaper or do the shopping, or the trend toward blockbuster action movies like *Commando* (1985), *Rambo* (1985), and *Die Hard* (1988) starring hypermasculine men – Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Willis – capable of saving the world without a woman in sight, Hollywood did its best to reproduce images of a woman's place (or complete absence) in line with traditional patriarchal ideals.

But the most interesting and enduring of these trends was the 80s slasher movie. The horror sub-genre arguably got its start in the late 70s with John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) (or even earlier for horror purists who point to *Black Christmas* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, both from 1974), but really hit its stride in the 80s with *Prom Night* (1980) *Friday the 13th* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and a host of sequels and knockoffs that continue to this day. In each, a familiar pattern develops. A group of young men and women gathers at a cabin, a lake house, a suburban neighborhood, and test the boundaries of moral purity through drinking, drugs, and most often, sex. One by one they are brutally killed by a faceless killer, as if being punished for their transgressions. Until the last victim. Almost always a woman. And almost always the one character who remained pure, who didn't drink or engage in sex. And it's that character that either escapes with her life or overcomes the faceless killer. Madonna-Whore Complex anyone? The trope became so common we gave the character a name: **The**

Final Girl:

WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Obviously, the Male Gaze is alive and well in contemporary cinema. As is its corollary, the Madonna-Whore Complex. Women continue to be objectified and marginalized in mass media entertainment, and cinema, whether in the multiplex or streaming across the internet, continues to be a powerful tool in perpetuating hegemonic patriarchy. But, fortunately, there has been more resistance and critique in the years since Mulvey's essay.

One important source of that contemporary critique originated from an unexpected source: a 1985 LGBTQ comic strip in *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel (Though perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that a critique of marginalization would need to start at the margins of mass media). In one ten-panel comic strip, Bechdel shows two women contemplating a trip to the theater. One of them explains that she has a rule about going to the movies. Basically, it has to satisfy three requirements: 1) It has to have at least two women in it; 2) Those two women have to actually talk to each other; and 3) They have to talk about something besides a man.

That's it. Pretty simple, right? Now think about the last few movies or even tv series you've watched. How many of them could pass that test? In fact, by the early 2000s, that's exactly what this became, a test. **The Bechdel Test**, to be more precise. A kind of basic test to see if a piece of filmed entertainment could muster even the absolute bare minimum of equal representation. Here's a quick video essay about it (that is mercifully *not* narrated by a man):

It is astonishing how little of even contemporary cinema can pass this test. Don't believe me? Check out this relatively depressing running tally: https://bechdeltest.com/

As the feminist critique of cinema gained steam through the 2000s, even film and tv advertising came under scrutiny. For example, Marcia Belsky started a social media campaign to highlight a bizarre but largely unexamined trend in Hollywood advertising: they like to chop women's heads off. Her Tumblr *The Headless Women of Hollywood* is an endless scroll of headless women in film and tv series advertisements. This kind of visual dismemberment, not uncommon in the films themselves, is the height of objectification. A woman's body, or even just one body part, is isolated as an object of visual pleasure (see The Male Gaze above).

These calls for greater awareness of the representation of women on screen are useful and productive. But much of the discussion above regarding the Madonna-Whore Complex and the Male Gaze in 20th and 21st century cinema hinges on the reality that the entertainment industry, like many other industries

throughout that period, has historically been owned and operated almost entirely by men. Unless and until there are more women *behind the camera* actually telling the stories, cinema will remain steeped in that patriarchal point of view.

Fortunately, there's some light there too.

Despite the early successes of female filmmakers in the silent era, women were rarely "allowed" behind the camera throughout much of the 20th century. Unless they took control themselves. That's what Hollywood movie star turned filmmaker Ida Lupino did. As an up and coming actor in the 1940s, she was offered the usual stereotyped roles that actors on contract were required to perform during the Golden Age. Fed up, she started her own independent film company and made several films that foregrounded controversial (for the time) subjects like out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexual assault. Still, she remained on the margins of the industry as a director and producer, a rare exception that seemed to prove the rule of male dominance.

Others would follow in Lupino's path, especially in the era of low-budget indie filmmaking. Shirley Clarke, for example, made a series of underground, independent films starring non-actors in the 1950s and 60s, most famously with *The Connection* (1961). Julie Dash was another trailblazer for women filmmakers, picking up where Clarke left off in the 1980s and early 90s.

By the 21st century, the work of those pioneers began to finally pay off as more and more women stepped behind the camera to take control of the cinematic narrative. It helped that more and more women were also rising in the ranks at the major Hollywood studios, able to greenlight film and television that supported that narrative (or at the very least, passed the Bechdel Test). Writers like Diablo Cody (*Juno*, *Young Adult*), Amanda Silver (*Jurassic World*, *Mulan*) and Andrea Berloff (*Straight Outta Compton*) and directors like Katherine Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*), Ava DuVernay (*Selma, When They See Us*) and Greta Gerwig (*Lady Bird*, *Little Women*) have generated cinema that, even if it doesn't directly dismantle patriarchy (What's with the high heels in *Jurassic World*? Oh, right, a man directed that), poses a direct challenge to the iron grip men have had on the medium from the beginning.

Still, we are a long way off from true gender equality when it comes to who controls the medium. A recent study showed that out of 1,335 entertainment professionals surveyed, only 14.4% of the writers were women, 21.1% of the producers were women, and most startling, only 4.5% of the directors were women. And even when a woman finds herself in a position of power or influence in the entertainment industry, they are often paid much less than men in the same position. This wage discrimination has been highly publicized when it affects well-known movie stars, like when Mark Wahlberg was paid eight times more than Michelle Williams for the film (ironically titled) *All the Money in the World* (2017), but it affects women at every level of the industry. Add to this humiliation the rampant sexual misconduct, harassment and outright assault suffered by women throughout that same industry, as exposed by the #metoo and Times Up movements, it may seem like an absolute miracle that there are still women willing and able to work within the system to tell their stories.

But it isn't a miracle.

It's the result of more than 100 years of struggle, from Guy-Blaché to Greta Gerwig. And yes, as I made clear earlier in the chapter, simply having a woman behind the camera does not necessarily translate into a uniquely feminist cinema. Hegemonic patriarchy implicates everyone, and women are just as capable of reproducing the tropes of inequality. But the more voices we have telling our cinematic stories, the

more likely those stories will reflect the diversity of our collective experience.

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10

African Americans in Cinema

Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence.

Absence means symbolic annihilation.

Think about those two lines for a moment. They were written by George Gerbner, a professor of communication, in 1976, around the same time Laura Mulvey was writing about the Male Gaze. Nearly 50 years later, we still hear a lot about "representation" in the media, especially film and television. But what does that really mean? And why are we still talking about it?

At the most basic level, it's a call for greater ethnic and gender diversity in the characters we see in

cinema. Seems reasonable. But does it *really* matter who we see up on the screen?

If you've read this far, then you know that last bit is a trick question. Of course it matters. But let's discuss *why* it matters. And it starts with Gerbner's assertion that "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence." That's a bold claim. It also happens to be true. And for many of you, that truth has been verified over and over since you first laid eyes on moving pictures.

The idea here is that when you see yourself in cinema, that is, when you see characters in film and television that look like you, talk like you, live like you, it affirms your place in the world. It assures you that you do, in fact, exist and have a role to play in society. And that starts at a *very* young age, often before you've formed clear ideas about the world outside your own home and family. Seeing yourself represented in the fictional world of cinema points to (signifies) your social existence long before you have the opportunity to put that knowledge into practice. Once you do, it will continue to shape that knowledge and that practice (see the previous chapter on how hegemony works).

Now imagine you never see anyone on screen in film or television that looks like you, talks like you or lives like you. Or if you do, those characters are relegated to minor, negatively stereotyped roles. For some of you, that won't be hard to imagine. Maybe you're a woman (again, see previous chapter), or maybe you're a person of color, or maybe both. For the rest of you, maybe this will help. Remember *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* (1982)? It was a big hit in the 80s. Here's a version that's been edited down to show every single word spoken by a person of color in the film:

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Whew. That didn't take long.

How about *JAWS (*1975*)*:

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Okay, so that wasn't fair, there *were* no people of color in *JAWS*.

How about something a little more modern? Here's a version of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002) also edited down to just the words spoken by a person of color:

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At least they did better than *E.T.* I could do this all day long. (But I won't, because Dylan Marron already has). The point is, if you're not white (and not male) you likely spent those same formative years with very little evidence on screen that you exist at all. It can begin to feel as though you've been erased. That you have no place in society. Annihilated. Symbolically, at least. Which is why Gerbner also argues that "absence means symbolic annihilation."

So. Yeah. Representation matters.

And not just for any given individual who might benefit from seeing themselves on screen. If we learned

anything from the previous chapter, it's that cinema is a powerful tool of hegemony. From the early days of moving pictures to the modern entertainment ecosystem of streaming content, film and television, mass media has colluded in a hegemonic, patriarchal manipulation of meaning such that one half the population came to see their own subjugation by the other half as the "natural order of things." And if it was powerful enough to establish and maintain generations of *gender* inequality, what do you think it did for racial and ethnic inequality?

THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF RACE IN AMERICA

Before we get into the representation of people of color in cinema, more specifically, African Americans in American cinema, we need to take a slight detour through the cultural history of race in America. Anyone who has taken middle school biology and/or social science in the last decade should know that "race" is not a biological category. There is no *biological* distinction that correlates with our collective understanding of racial difference. There are phenotypical differences across the global human population, eye color, height, hair texture, skin color, etc. But those are physical expressions of allelic differences in our shared, identical DNA. The concept of race is a product of history, culturally constructed and institutionally affirmed as part of a much larger hegemonic system. A hegemonic system that mirrored hegemonic patriarchy, only in this system it wasn't men manipulating meaning and values to subjugate and control women, it was Anglo-European whites manipulating meaning to subjugate and control people of color, and Black people in particular (but not exclusively), to further their own economic and political goals.

Now, all of that goes way back and is well documented, if somewhat variable, around the world. In fact, it's the variability of how race as a concept is defined and implemented across space and through time that is one of the hallmarks of race as a *cultural* construct. People "do" race differently in different cultural contexts. In Brazil, for example, race is tied to social status. Your phenotype doesn't change, but the terminology used to describe your racial category *can* change depending on your economic, social or political success (or failure).

In the United States, in contrast to Brazil, race is ascribed at birth and does not change, based on a complex pseudo-biological rubric known colloquially as the "one drop rule." According to this so-called rule, one distant ancestor with ties to Africa can "disqualify" an individual from whiteness. In that way, race in America is not even really tied to phenotype, but to a hegemonic idea of "purity." Hegemonic in that it is presented as the "natural order of things," and an idea in that it is not rooted in any biological reality. There's no such thing as racial purity. We, collectively, made it up. And then hung onto it for dear life. Which is why Barack Obama was our first Black president, despite his many white ancestors.

The result is a society in which "whiteness" is **normative**, that is, it is the default category against which every other identity is judged. It is the standard, culturally and even aesthetically. Just look at so-called standards of beauty in advertising over the years which lean heavily toward lighter skin (though in some places that is, thankfully, changing). Or note how often African Americans, for example, are referred to

as "non-white," but those we identify as white are almost never referred to as "non-Black."

But here's the thing. Whiteness? That, too, is culturally constructed. It's also just an idea. A fabrication, wrought by history, that must be continually shored up and maintained. And we know this because it has changed over time. For example, in the aftermath of widespread famine in Ireland in the mid 19th century, hundreds of thousands of Irish men and women immigrated to the United States where they were met with suspicion, prejudice and discrimination… *racial* discrimination. They were considered "Other" from native born whites, including pseudo-scientific claims about evolutionary inferiority. In other words, those first few generations of Irish immigrants were not white. It took time for the *concept* of whiteness to incorporate this new immigrant group. And that went double for Italians and European Jews who would follow at the turn of the century. Each wave of newcomers forced the concept of whiteness to flex and conform to new demographic realities without losing its normative status, its hegemonic power.

And this, finally, is where cinema comes in.

EARLY CINEMA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACKNESS

It's a curious thing. We can't really talk about the history of cinema in America *without* talking about the history of race and the representation of African Americans. They are deeply intertwined, co-expressive in a way. And that's because race as an American concept is the product of a hegemonic system, and as we learned from the last chapter, cinema is an incredibly powerful tool of hegemony.

For example, film scholars point to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) as one of the first full-length feature films ever made, an epic drama lasting more than three hours. It was and is a landmark achievement in cinema, employing formal techniques that were years ahead of their time, and playing across the country to sold out, enraptured crowds. In fact, it was the first film ever screened at the White House for then president Woodrow Wilson.

We simply cannot recount the history of cinema in the United States without some mention of *Birth of a Nation*.

There's just one, glaring problem…

It is racist AF.

The film is set during and after the Civil War and, essentially, depicts the "horrific" results of giving freed slaves and African Americans the right to vote and hold political office. Black men, played by white actors in blackface, are portrayed as power-hungry rapists and murderers, unfit for freedom. And when it seems all hope is lost for the white Southerners suffering under the "savagery" of reconstruction, who rides to the rescue? That's right: The Ku Klux Klan. They are the hooded heroes who save the day, protecting whites from the menace of African Americans who have the audacity to want to… vote. The

original title of the film? *The Clansman*. Sheesh.

But almost worse than the film itself, is the fact that it was so *hugely* popular. There were some critics, thankfully, but most theatergoers, that is, most *white* theatergoers, at the time ate it up. They loved it. Because it reaffirmed the contemporary, hegemonic idea of race in America. It presented the subjugation of Black people to white people as the "natural order of things" by showing audiences the danger of upending that order. And by fabricating a narrative of the KKK as the (white) saviors of democracy in the south, it wrapped a lie in the persuasive power of mass media. It made it *feel* true. And that was good enough. President Wilson himself reportedly said of the film, "It's like writing history with lightning!"

This is where I would normally include a clip from Griffith's film. But I'm not going to do that (because, frankly, f%@k that guy). But I will show you this:

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Birth of a Nation remains an important film in the history of American cinema because, in a way, Woodrow Wilson was right, just not in the way he intended. The film *is* like writing history with lightning, the *cultural* history of race in America and the role of cinema in perpetuating the hegemonic idea of racial inequality.

Want another example? Me neither. But I'll give you one anyway. The next big milestone in cinema history was the introduction of synchronized sound in 1927. You remember. That landmark film, *The Jazz Singer*, that set the world on fire, proved Sam Warner right, and revolutionized how movies were made. Here's a clip:

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Oh, no.

Is he?

Yes… he's singing in blackface. That's Al Jolson playing the son of Jewish immigrants performing in blackface in front of a sold-out crowd of white people. In fact, he spends a solid 1/3 of the film in blackface. White performers wearing blackface was a common form of popular entertainment at the time, a caricature of African Americans satirizing African American culture. A not-so-subtle way to remind everyone, white and Black, who had the power to mock and satirize and who didn't (which is why whiteface never really became a thing). The fact that Jolson's use of blackface is *never once mentioned in the movie* is evidence enough that the politics of racial inequality were so deeply rooted in the culture that no one (at least no white person) thought twice about it.

Interestingly, by the 1930s, blackface began to fall out of favor, partly because enough African Americans protested its use in popular entertainment. And partly because even reasonable white people began to see it as offensive and racist. But the damage was done. Synchronized sound, the most revolutionary technological advance in cinema history after the camera itself, is forever linked to the image of Al Jolson in blackface singing "Mammy."

So, we can't talk about American cinema history without talking about race in America. Alright then,

let's go there. Aside from these two glaring examples, how else did early cinema represent African Americans? If cinema, as a tool of hegemonic patriarchy, represented women as either Madonnas or whores, did it also employ specific stereotypes of African Americans that shaped the way audiences perceived racial difference?

Okay, that's another trick question. *Of course it did*.

In fact, film scholars have identified five broad categories of Black stereotypes in early American cinema (even if these characters were not always played by Black actors). One of the most prevalent of these stereotypes was of the Black man colluding with white hegemony. And the corollary role for Black women. Colloquially known as the Uncle Tom and Mammy roles, respectively. These were characters who upheld and even celebrated the idea of white superiority, the slave who seemed to actually enjoy life on the plantation. Actor Hattie McDaniel played the most famous version of the Mammy character. She played Scarlet O'Hara's loyal slave in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), for which she won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. The first African American to win an Oscar (It was well-deserved as she did a tremendous job as an actor, but It would also appear that the Academy was eager to celebrate the portrayal of an enduring stereotype). The most *in*famous example of the Uncle Tom stereotype would have to be James Baskett's performance as Uncle Remus in Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). A film so blatantly offensive in its portrayal of happy and devoted slaves that the studio locked it away in a vault and tried to forget it was ever made. Which is why you'll never see it on Disney+:

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Another common stereotype was the ineffectual and lazy simpleton. Slow-witted and easily fooled, this role was often used as comic relief, a foil for white protagonists to ridicule. Lincoln Perry played the most famous version of this stereotype as the recurring character, Stepin Fetchit. A dim-witted fool who was often billed as "The Laziest Man in the World," Stepin Fetchit appeared as comic relief in dozens of films. His popularity would earn Perry the distinction of being the first African American actor to earn a million dollars. But Perry would eventually step away from acting, frustrated that he could not get equal billing and pay as his white co-stars. Some have argued that the Stepin Fetchit character was actually a crafty trickster figure, subtly subverting white power in his films. But it's a hard argument to sustain when you place it in the larger context how that stereotype framed *all* African Americans as lazy and unintelligent.

Here's a cringe-inducing clip from *Judge Priest* (1934) with the aforementioned Hattie McDaniel in a classic Mammy role and Lincoln Perry playing the slow-witted Stepin Fetchit:

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A fourth stereotype of African Americans prevalent in early cinema (and literature) was the "tragic mulatto", that is, a character of mixed-race ancestry who was inevitably doomed. Not quite as prevalent as the others, the tragic mulatto would appear now and again, almost always as a female character. That includes *Birth of a Nation* where Lydia, a mixed-race housekeeper, becomes the object of her white employer's desire. Griffith's even gives us a title card describing her as the "weakness that is to blight the nation." There's an echo of the "whore" side of the Madonna-Whore Complex here in that the mixed-race character represented a direct challenge to the myth of racial purity and therefore must be

destroyed.

But the most enduring of the five stereotypes, the one that seems to have never quite disappeared entirely, is the Black male as hypermasculine and dangerous. You see it throughout *Birth of a Nation*, not surprisingly, but also in just about every film in the classical era depicting Black men as violent, unpredictable and overtly sexualized. It was a thinly veiled projection of white fear, a subconscious awareness of their own vulnerability. An awareness, on some level, that the only thing keeping them in power was the idea of power itself, the hegemony of ideas. Maybe that's why this stereotype has taken the longest to die. White fear seems to be as durable as white hegemony. Freud would have had a field day with this one.

THE RISE (AND FALL) OF EARLY BLACK CINEMA

If Gerbner was right and representation in the fiction world signifies social existence, then the representation of African Americans in early cinema signified a meager existence indeed. The narrative manufactured by white hegemony through mainstream Hollywood cinema framed African Americans as either passive collaborators or dangerous threats to the racial status quo. But unlike the history of women in cinema, where gender inequality ensured women rarely had the opportunity to make their own films and thus counter the dominant narrative, there *was* an important counternarrative produced within the African American community at this time. A few enterprising African American artists (and yes, they were mostly men) understood there were plenty of African American theatergoers who didn't want to pay their hard-earned nickels to see themselves denigrated and mocked in *Birth of a Nation* or *The Jazz Singer*. But they still wanted to go to the movies. And they still had those nickels.

And here's where things get really interesting.

Starting roughly around the same time as the birth of Hollywood cinema, there was an alternate film industry, a Black Cinema produced by African American filmmakers for African American audiences. Known as "race films", they had their own movie stars, their own luminary directors, and their own movie houses scattered throughout the United States. And as more and more African Americans left the south for the industrialized north in the Great Migration, creating centers of Black culture in New York City, Detroit and Chicago, the demand for content that rejected the offensive stereotypes of Hollywood only grew. By the 1940s, there were 100s of theaters in cities from New York to Los Angeles screening films with Black characters portrayed by Black actors (what a concept!) that were nuanced, heroic, tragic, comic and human.

Oscar Micheaux.

One of the most famous and most successful filmmakers in early Black Cinema was Oscar Micheaux. Micheaux would produce more than 40 films over his career, spanning the transition to sound, and challenging the prevailing stereotypes with every one of them. His first film, *The Homesteader* (1918) directly confronts the tragic mulatto stereotype by having the protagonist, an African American, fall in love and marry a woman who "passes" as white but is discovered to be of mixed race. A storyline that actually celebrates rather than denigrates the revelation of African heritage in someone presumed to be white. He formed his own production company in 1919 and produced *Within Our Gates* (1920) as a direct response to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. In that film, a white landowner attempts to rape a Black tenant until he realizes she is his own biological daughter. The revelation actually causes him to repent and turn away from his racist ideas!

Unfortunately, Micheaux was as bound up in the white hegemony as everyone else at the time, internalizing some of the very inequalities he resisted in his work. For example, many of his films depicted lighter-skinned African Americans as more heroic, enlightened and intelligent than darker-skinned characters. Despite that glaring example of the hegemonic power of whiteness as a normative ideal, Micheaux wrote, directed and produced dozens of films that explored issues of inequality, race relations, social justice and contemporary Black life and culture.

Have 80 minutes to kill? You can check out Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* here:

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The success of early Black Cinema made Micheaux and filmmakers like him influential figures in a cinematic counternarrative to Hollywood's grotesque stereotypes. It also made them a lot of money. So much, in fact, that Hollywood eventually took note. And after World War II, when African American involvement in the war effort began to turn public opinion against the enduring racism of the Jim Crow Era, Hollywood studios began incorporating more Black characters played by actual Black actors in an attempt to share in the profits of this untapped market.

Okay, maybe not "share," more like… steal.

MGM produced *Cabin in the Sky* in 1943, the first musical with an all-Black cast by a major studio (still an all-white crew), and other studios followed suit, casting actors such as Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge who were popular with both Black and white audiences. The characters themselves relied less and less on the tired, old stereotypes, but they were replaced by a new narrative that emphasized a passive acceptance of the status quo. Rarely were any of these roles centered around political engagement nor did they touch on the issues that were most important to the African American community. But they sure looked good, and audiences ate them up.

Soon those niche movie-houses showing lower-budget "race films" in African American communities could not compete with the grand studio-owned movie palaces screening big-budget spectacles featuring at least a few true-to-life African American characters. Sure, there were still some of the familiar stereotypes, and maybe the characters were less than inspiring as the country moved toward a full-fledged Civil Rights Movement, but the damage was done to the razor thin profit margin of Black Cinema. Many of the movie-houses closed, and with nowhere to show their films, many of the filmmakers were forced out of the business.

BLAXPLOITATION AND THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

The shift in cultural attitudes toward race that began in the wake of World War II would take another 20 years to come to fruition in the Civil Rights Movement and, eventually, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And even that was only possible because of the direct social and political action of African American leaders like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. African Americans may have lost their own Black Cinema, but at least they gained legal protection against discrimination.

Unfortunately, that's all it was. Legal protection. Not unlike First Wave Feminism which ensured the legal right to vote for women but did nothing to change the culture of gender inequality, the Civil Rights Act did nothing to change the pervasive culture of racial inequality in America. In other words, you can legislate against discrimination, but you can't erase prejudice. That requires deep cultural transformation, a dismantling of hegemony. Or at the very least, a new counternarrative to compete with the manipulation of meaning in the mainstream mass media.

And that's exactly what happened in the 1970s.

By that time, many African Americans were frustrated by the lack of real change in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and by the persistent image of African Americans as passive, often secondary characters in Hollywood cinema. Films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) about an older white couple coming to terms with their daughter's African American boyfriend. Considered ground-breaking at the time, it exposed the tacit racism (and eventual repentance) of "well-meaning" liberal whites. But it was told almost entirely through the white characters' point of view. And the boyfriend, played by Sidney Poitier, was a young, accomplished African American doctor, the *least* threatening version of "Black boyfriend" imaginable.

So, African American filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks started making their own, often independently financed films that reclaimed an image of Black culture, and Black masculinity in particular, as powerful, pro-active, anti-establishment, and yes, even dangerous. It was, in a way, a re-appropriation of the Hollywood stereotype of the aggressive, violent Black man, meant as a provocation to the cultural complacency of the post-Civil Rights era.

It all started with Melvin Van Peebles's 1971 *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (yes, it has all of those S's). The film stars Van Peebles as a successful gigolo in Los Angeles who finds himself on the wrong side of the law after stopping two white police officers from beating a defenseless young activist. On the run, he finds protection and support within the Black community as the (mostly white) authorities terrorize the city looking for him. It was low-budget and rough around the edges, but it depicted a strong Black male lead struggling against the forces of white power. It was, literally and metaphorically, revolutionary:

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Other films in this same spirit would follow, including *Shaft* (1971) directed by Gordon Parks and *Super Fly* (1972) directed by his son, Gordon Parks Jr., along with dozens of others in the first half of the 1970s. They were hugely popular, both inside and outside of African American communities. But not everyone was pleased. In fact, it was the NAACP that coined the term "blaxploitation" as a criticism of the genre. They felt the depiction of African Americans in these films, particularly the hyper-masculine Black men, was simply *reproducing* old Hollywood stereotypes and, in turn, exploiting African American audiences. For the filmmakers, that was missing the point. Their goal was to reclaim that image and turn it loose on white hegemony.

But as the popularity of the films grew, so did their profits, and with those profits, came increasing interest from white producers and Hollywood itself. Sound familiar? By the late 1970s, the films had become a parody of themselves, often backed by white producers and directed by white directors. Suddenly, "blaxploitation" took on a new meaning, with white filmmakers reducing the characters intended to resist hegemony to the same tired, old stereotypes. By the end of the 70s, the short-lived resurrection of Black Cinema in the form of blaxploitation was over.

MODERN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA AND

REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACKNESS

So, the Hollywood entertainment industry co-opted blaxploitation the same way it co-opted early Black Cinema, subsuming it under the dominant cultural hegemony and robbing it of its power as a counternarrative. And as the 70s became the 80s, the same cultural machine that resisted Second Wave Feminism with cinematic images of hypermasculine action heroes, gender role reversal comedies, and slasher movies, produced cinema that resisted real cultural change in terms of racial equality by emphasizing an anti-reactionary, assimilationist narrative. This narrative shows up in buddy comedies like *Silver Streak* (1976) and *Stir Crazy* (1980), action comedies like *48 Hrs* (1982) and the *Lethal Weapon* franchise which began in 1992. In each of those films, two characters, one Black and one white, must overcome their differences and work together. An admirable message, surely. But one that often ignored the deep disparities in power and opportunity between the two characters. Or if they paid any attention to such issues, played them as a joke.

In some ways this is not so different from the image of Blackness presented in early cinema. Those tired, old stereotypes were grotesque, but ultimately, they were intended to promote assimilation (which is really just another way of saying submission). The Uncle Tom and Mammy roles, along the Stepin Fetchit character, were held up as positive images, appropriate behavior for African Americans. The tragic mulatto and dangerous Black male were the cautionary tales. But all of it was part of a narrative of assimilation, of submission to white hegemony. And as we move into the modern era, we can identify a few new stereotypes designed to promote a similar agenda.

One of the most commented upon new stereotypes is the so-called Magical Negro. This is a recurring character, usually male, often with mysterious, supernatural powers whose only role is help the white protagonist achieve their goal and/or avoid some terrible predicament. There's a long list of these characters in popular movies: Michael Clarke Duncan in *The Green Mile* (1999); Will Smith in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000); Djimon Hounsou in *In America* (2002); Morgan Freeman in *Bruce Almighty* (2003); Samuel L. Jackson in *The Unicorn Store* (2019). These characters rarely have any inner life of their own, no motivations aside from helping the white characters. I could go into the psychology behind this trope, discuss how it's a projection of white fear of the mysterious "Other" and an appropriation of their perceived power. But instead, I'll just let Key and Peele demonstrate:

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Another prominent modern stereotype is the "Thug" character, which, of course, is really just an updated version of the old "dangerous Black male" stereotype of early cinema. The Thug stereotype is arguably the most common of the new/old stereotypes, appearing in more films and tv series than is worth mentioning here. And there are others. The Angry Black Woman, defined by her unmotivated aggression and little else, the Domestic, essentially the Mammy role for the modern era, and, of course the Sassy Best Friend:

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And of course, there's also the corollary stereotype for white protagonists thrust into situations where

they alone can save the [insert poor, disadvantaged, wrongly accused, non-white student, domestic laborer, convict, etc. here), known, appropriately enough, as the White Savior. Sandra Bullock in *The Blind Side* (2009) is a prime example. But you can find examples in *The Help* (2011), *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and the list goes on (and on):

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What all of these modern stereotypes have in common is their role in shaping a shared cultural narrative about race in America. A narrative that constantly reaffirms whiteness as normative, and the implied value in any non-white "Other" submitting (or "assimilating") to that norm. And while we have seen an increase in African American representation in mainstream cinema, quantity does not always equal quality if that representation is reduced to a new set of stereotypes.

Which is one reason we've seen an increasingly vocal critique of the Academy Awards and their persistent exclusion of African American actors from nominations and awards. Beginning in 2015, the #OscarsSoWhite campaign called on the Motion Picture Academy to redress this disparity after all 20 acting nominations went to white actors that year (and the year after that). And when African American actors *have* won major awards, it is often for playing the very roles that affirm white hegemony. Denzel Washington was only the second African American to win a Best Actor Oscar in 2002. He did not win it for playing the political activist Malcolm X in *Malcolm X* (1992), or boxing phenomenon Rubin Carter in *Hurricane* (1999), but for playing the corrupt, "Thug" cop in *Training Day* (2001). Halle Berry was the first African American in Oscar history to win Best Actress in that same year. It was for *Monster's Ball* (2001) in which she played the widow of a death row inmate who has a torrid affair with her late husband's white prison guard.

MODERN BLACK CINEMA AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Fortunately, the story of African American representation in cinema does not end there. Just as the "race films" of early Black Cinema offered a counternarrative to the offensive stereotypes of Hollywood's Golden Age, and the blaxploitation movement offered a counternarrative to the passive, assimilationist message of Hollywood in the 60s and 70s, a new counternarrative has emerged in a new modern Black Cinema. Or maybe it's the same Black Cinema that's always been there, fading to the background for a while, then roaring back when we need it most.

This latest iteration begins with the independent film movement of the 1980s, when more and more filmmakers had access to cheaper and cheaper equipment and were able to take control over the creative process outside of the Hollywood system. Filmmakers like Spike Lee, whose first feature film *She's Gotta Have it* (1986) was shot in 12 days for just $175,000. Or Robert Townsend, whose *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) was financed by maxing out his own credit cards. Or Julie Dash, who made *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) with financing from PBS after struggling more than 15 years to get it made.

All of these debut films offered a startling alternative to the stereotypes favored by Hollywood (or in the case of *Hollywood Shuffle* offered a scathing satire of them), but it was Spike Lee in particular who paved the way for other African American filmmakers. His third film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), unapologetically takes on the cultural politics of race and directly comments on the issue of representation, racial inequality, gentrification and police brutality. In fact, the film's challenge to white hegemony was so on point that critics suggested the film might actually inspire race riots, as if simply calling attention to inequality would lead to violence. Police were even dispatched to early screenings.

The riots never happened. But a lot of young African American filmmakers were inspired. John Singleton would make *Boyz n the Hood* in 1991, a raw, nuanced portrait of teenage life in South Central Los Angeles. The Hughes brother would make *Menace II Society* in 1993. F. Gary Gray would make *Friday* in 1995 and *Set if Off* in 1996. Kasi Lemmons would make *Eve's Bayou* in 1997. Spike Lee would make 10 more films in the 1990s alone. And there were others. All of them creating work that echoed the counternarratives of Oscar Micheaux and Melvin Van Peebles, a new Black Cinema that let African American audiences know they too existed. They also let aspiring filmmakers know they could join the conversation. As we learned from the last chapter, representation *behind* the camera is as important as representation in front of the camera.

The result of this fertile decade in Black Cinema was a new generation of African American filmmakers who started outside of the Hollywood system, and then stormed the gates to helm some of most acclaimed films of the past decade and some of the largest studio productions in history. Filmmakers like Barry Jenkins whose first film *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008) was a small, intimate romantic drama. His second film, *Moonlight* (2016), won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Or Ava DuVernay whose 2012 film *Middle of Nowhere* dramatized the toll of unequal incarceration rates among Black men. Two years later, she made *Selma* (2014), a historical drama about the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, for Paramount Pictures. A few years later, she helmed the $200 million Disney film *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018). Or Ryan Coogler whose first film in 2013 was *Fruitvale Station*, a searing portrait of the last day in the life of Oscar Grant, the young, unarmed Black man shot dead by police in Oakland in 2009. His second film was *Creed* (2015) a $40 million re-boot of the *Rocky* franchise, this time with an African American in the lead role. His third film? Yeah. It was *Black Panther* (2018). Part of the Marvel series of films, Coogler oversaw a budget of more than $200 million, and the film grossed $1.3 billion worldwide (It also happened to feature a Black superhero protagonist and push a not-so-subtle critique of white hegemony).

All of these filmmakers, and many more, are not only offering an important counternarrative to modern audiences, they are affecting real change in the dominant narrative as well. And changing the narrative can mean, hopefully, a slow but steady dismantling of hegemony. Or, at the very least, remind audiences that African Americans do, in fact, exist outside of the roles that were written for them.

So. Yeah. Representation matters.

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