



# Advancing English Skills with **Film Studies**

Years  
7-10

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# Introduction

## To the teacher

This book is intended to provide 12- to 16-year-olds, those in years 7 to 10 English classes, with a scaffold that can be used when they watch films. It aims to enhance student enjoyment through a greater understanding of film as a mode of communication and most importantly, to learn how the meanings created by the filmmakers intersect with the world of the viewers. The latter is based on the premise that though intended meaning may be built into the film's construction, it is the viewer that makes the sense for her or himself. There will be many consistencies in the meanings audiences make of the films they share because of the similarities in life experiences, but there will also be differences. This purpose makes the study of film part of the lifelong process of making sense of our world through critical engagement with various media.

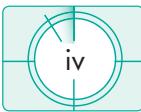
The above approach is consistent with that taken to the study of language in English syllabuses across Australia. Film is seen as having a language that has common characteristics with other text forms and also some distinctive features.

The book provides:

- strategies for film study
- information about particular films
- case studies of many films nominated for study in the New South Wales English Syllabus, stages 4 and 5
- follow-up activities for students.

Most of the activities are applicable to the study of any film, and are graded in terms of their difficulty, \* for the least difficult through to \*\*\* for the most challenging activities. There are also checks on student progress against syllabus objectives at the end of each chapter, and students are asked to document their evidence of progress.

Key concepts such as those associated with film language, film narrative, genre, film adaptations are progressively developed through chapters 1 to 8 of the book. However, it is recognised that neither the time available nor teacher programming practice lend themselves to a linear student approach through chapters 1 to 8. For this reason, treatment of the concepts and references to films are not confined to any one chapter. Teachers will need to select from across chapters to suit their needs. It has been assumed for example that a teacher may wish to enter into film study via Australian film. Such an approach would draw from Chapter 8, the final chapter in this book perhaps with references back to some of the concepts in chapters 1 and 2 on film language and film narrative.



## To the student

This book aims to give you an understanding about one of the great forms of communication – film. In the same way as knowing more about a sport or activity leads to greater appreciation of what is happening, what you learn will help you to enjoy film even more.

Film does more than give you pleasure. As an important means of communication it provides varying perspectives on life, different insights into the way people live and think. Our enjoyment and use of film is therefore one of the processes we use to help make sense of our world. This is equally so whether the film is a documentary or a science fiction feature film. The explanations that are provided in this book and the tasks that you undertake will illustrate the connection between how films are constructed and what those films may mean to you and those around you.

Because it is such an important form of communication, school syllabuses around Australia have included film study, usually as part of English. Therefore in undertaking the very pleasurable task of watching and learning about film, you will also be fulfilling some of the school syllabus requirements and will receive recognition for this.

Although any films could be used to develop the understandings in this book, the films that are nominated in the New South Wales English syllabus have been used to illustrate the learning points. The films which receive most attention are identified at the start of each chapter.

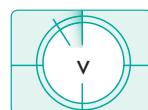
With many books the practice is to start at the beginning and work through page by page until you get to the end. You may want to do this out of interest but it is more likely that your teacher will guide you in selecting the parts for study. There is enough information in the book to last for four years so it does not have to be covered in four weeks!

The teacher will also guide you in the tasks to be completed. It is likely that when you begin, those tasks that are marked \* will be set. As you learn more about film, the tasks with \*\* or \*\*\* may be more appropriate.

## Your major task

As you work through the chapters in this book, your task is to create your own book about film. Use a looseleaf book to include your responses to activities, and other pictures and information that you collect. These will help increase your understanding about how films work as a form of communication and how they interact with our own lives. Your book could also include useful websites or references.

Your cover page should market your book to other potential readers, but be prepared to upgrade this page when you learn more about marketing films. Check other publications to see what else needs to go on subsequent pages before you get to chapter 1 of your book. Don't forget to include an index, a title page and perhaps a dedication. Most of these are done after the rest of the book is completed but in the meantime, you had better put your name somewhere to preserve your copyright.



# About the authors

Barrie McMahon's career in education spans classroom teaching, curriculum development and implementation of media education courses. Together with Robyn Quin he is the author of several student media education texts and resources for educators about media education, theory and practice. In connection with this ongoing research he has delivered several international keynote speeches at media education conferences in Europe, America and Asia. He is currently an adjunct senior lecturer at Edith Cowan University.

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# Acknowledgements

Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12 and 1.17: from *Yolngu Boy* courtesy of the Australian Children's Television Foundation. Photographs by Heidren Lhor, Penny Tweedie and Gordon Glenn. 1.3: from *Noah and Saskia* courtesy of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, photographer Suzy Wood. 2.5: from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* courtesy of Austral International. 3.6: from *Gallipoli* courtesy of Associated R&R Films Pty Ltd. 3.10: from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* courtesy of James McElroy. 3.13: photographs courtesy of the Australian War Memorial. 3.16: from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* courtesy of James McElroy. 3.17: from *Kundun* courtesy of Austral International. 4.14: from *Apollo 13* courtesy of Austral International. 4.15: from *A League of Their Own* courtesy of Austral International. 5.8: from *Lousy Little Sixpence* courtesy of Alec Morgan. 6.11: from *Careful, He Might Hear You* courtesy of New South Wales Film and Television Office. 6.12: from *Noah and Saskia* courtesy of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, photographer Suzy Wood. 6.14: from *Much Ado About Nothing* courtesy of Austral International. 7.2: from *Edward Scissorhands* courtesy of Austral International. 7.3: from *The Importance of Being Earnest* courtesy of Austral International. 7.5: from *Edward Scissorhands* courtesy of Austral International. 7.6: from *The Great Escape* courtesy of Austral International. 7.7: from *Chicken Run* courtesy of Austral International. 7.8: from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* courtesy of Austral International. 7.10: from *Il Postino* courtesy of Austral International. 8.2: from *Sunday Too Far Away* courtesy of the South Australian Film Corporation. 8.3: from *My Brilliant Career* courtesy of the New South Wales Film Corporation. 8.4: from *Shine* courtesy of Ronin Films. 8.5: poster for *Jedda* courtesy of the Estate of Charles Chauvel. 8.6: from *Yolngu Boy* courtesy of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, photographs by Heidren Lhor, Penny Tweedie and Gordon Glenn.



# Film Language

## Objectives

This chapter will help you:

- become familiar with the basics of film language
- learn the different codes and conventions of film
- develop a vocabulary enabling you to talk knowledgeably about film
- apply your knowledge of film language to selected film extracts.

Films referred to in this chapter:

*Chariots of Fire*

*The Dark Crystal*

*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*

*Chicken Run*

*Breaker Morant*

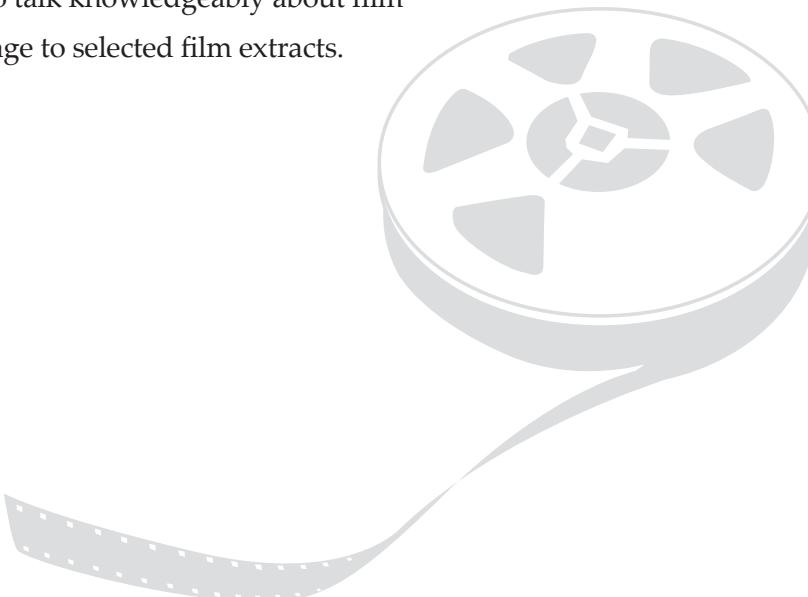
*Shine*

*Shrek*

*Picnic at Hanging Rock*

*E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*

*Yolngu Boy*



## What is film language?

In order to understand how you make meaning from film images you need some simple tools for analysing films. Film language consists of a variety of codes and conventions which help tell the stories. The codes can be categorised as those of construction called the presentational or technical codes, and those associated with the visual content of the images which are called the representational or symbolic codes. Film language also has its own vocabulary. It is useful to learn the correct terms for the various film codes and conventions so that you can clearly express your understanding of films.



# Presentational or technical codes of film

## Shot and point of view

The basic unit of film is the shot. A movie is made up of thousands and thousands of shots joined together (that is, edited) into sequences. A shot is a continuously exposed piece of film which, while it may move up or down, backwards or forwards it does not change or break or cut to another viewpoint.

All shots have a point of view – a position from which a person, an object or an event is seen. Of course this position is the position of the camera but the viewer sees only what the camera sees so it becomes our point of view on the action too.

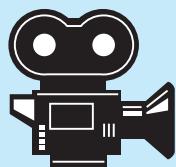
There are two possible points of view or positions which the camera can take up. A subjective point of view re-creates the perspective of a character in the film and the effect is that we, the audience are looking through the character's eyes. A second possibility is an objective point of view which is any position that does not pretend to be the perspective of a character. As a viewer what you see on the screen depends very much on the point of view of the shot.



**Figure 1.1** Subjective point of view in which the audience is looking through the character's eyes.  
From *Yolngu Boy*.



**Figure 1.2** An objective point of view which is not looking through the eyes of any character.  
From *Yolngu Boy*.



## Activity 1.1: Point of view

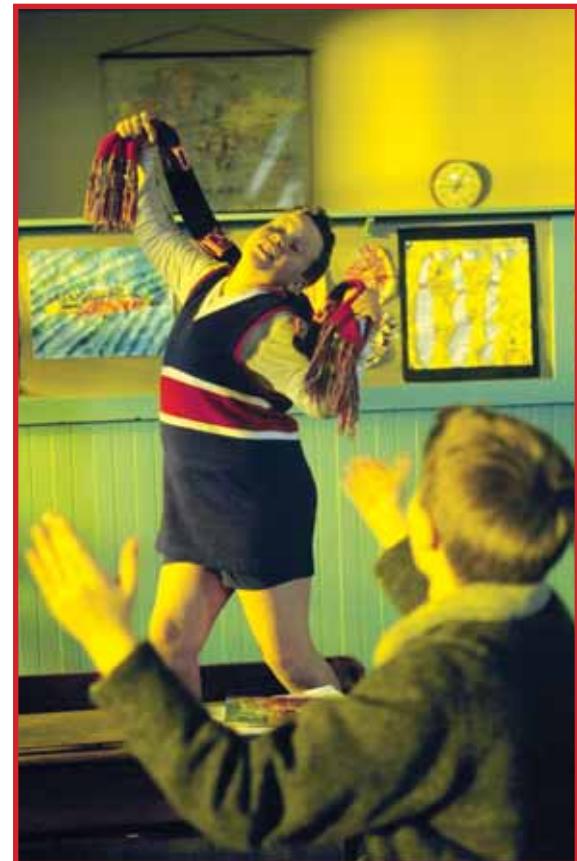
In chapter 1 of your film book, respond to the following.

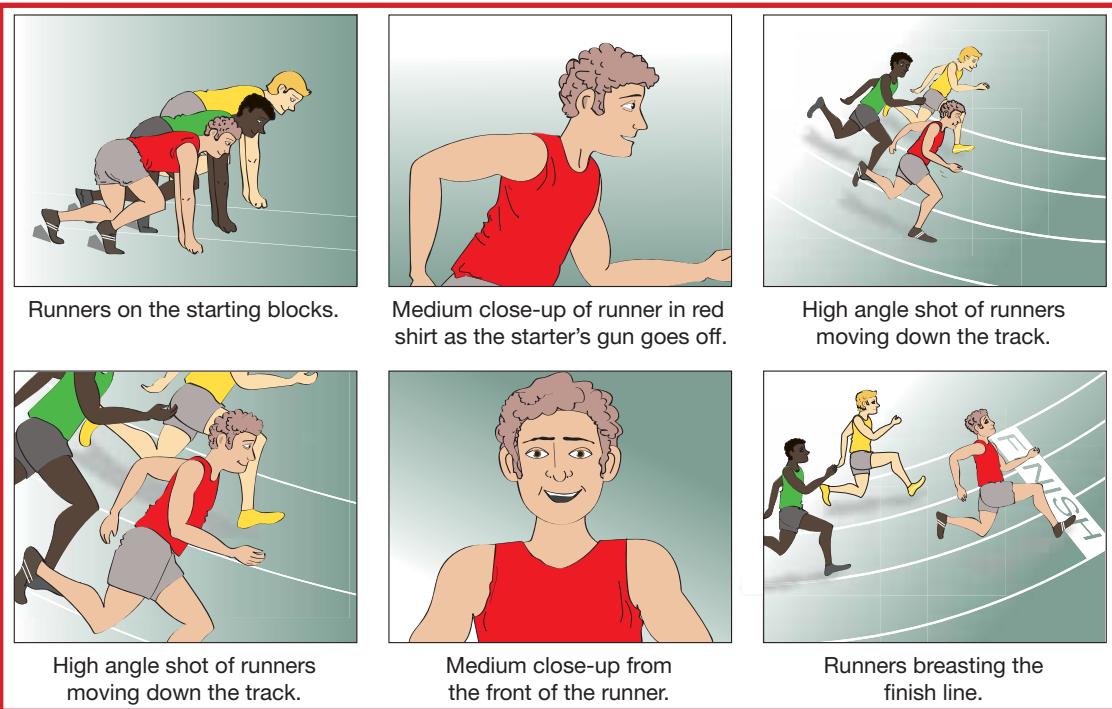
1. Imagine you are watching a game of cricket on the screen.
  - The first shot, an objective point of view is taken from the grandstand. What do you think you would see from this point of view (POV)?
  - The second shot is taken from the point of view of the batsman at the bowler's end of the pitch. What would you see from this POV?
  - Which point of view offers the most information? Who would you definitely not see in the POV shot from the batsman's position?
2. As a class, watch a segment of a film that you have seen this year.
  - Identify and discuss subjective and objective point of view shots.
  - Which characters do you connect with through the subjective point of view shots?

## Shot focus

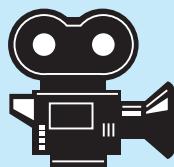
Each shot has a focus, a part of the image the filmmaker considers to be the most important. The focus could be on objects or people or even parts of the setting. Sharp image focus and the positioning within the frame determine the shot focus. Focus and point of view can act together to direct the viewer to look at specific characters, objects or actions.

**Figure 1.3** The viewers' eyes are directed to the most important part of the image. This is the shot focus. What is the shot focus in this image from Noah and Saskia?





**Figure 1.4** In these shots of a footrace the point of view changes but the focus remains on the runner in the red singlet.



## Activity 1.2: Point of view and shot focus

Figure 1.4 represents shots from a footrace. The point of view varies from shot to shot but the focus is consistently on the runner in the red singlet.

1. As a class, watch a short race sequence from a film. There are some good examples of race sequences in *Chariots of Fire*. Watch carefully to see how the point of view changes. Sometimes the camera is above the racers, sometimes alongside them, sometimes in front of them and occasionally behind. Although the point of view changes (the camera shifts), the focus sometimes stays the same. In each shot we are looking at the same racer. By changing the point of view but keeping the focus on the same person the film is saying that, 'This character is important to our story. He is the one we are interested in'.
2. Refer to Figure 1.4.
  - In chapter 1 of your film book draw six shots of the school assembly with each shot from different points of view but with the focus on one character.
  - Under your drawings describe what would be the effect of focusing on this character.