GLOBAL EDITION

A Short Guide to Writing about Film

NINTH EDITION

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

Figure 3.04 Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) presents characters in a more extreme and disturbing way than in many films. It follows the development of young men who, drafted to become soldiers during the Vietnam War, are transformed into killing machines.

characters—those portrayed by Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*, and Meryl Streep in *August: Osage County* (2013), for example—and try to describe how and why those characters are so different.

You can begin an analysis of characters by asking yourself if those characters seem or are meant to seem realistic. What makes them realistic? Are they defined by their clothes, their conversation, or something else? If they are not realistic, why not, and why are they meant to seem strange or fantastic? Do the characters seem to fit the setting of the story? Does the movie focus mainly on one or two characters, as in *The Big Sleep*, or on many, as in *Gosford Park* (2001), in which there does not seem to be a central character? Do the characters change, and if so, in what ways? What values do the characters seem to represent? What do they say about such matters as independence, sexuality, and political belief?

Normally, we take characters for granted, and these are a sampling of the kinds of questions you can begin to direct at characters to make more sense of them and determine why they are important.

Point of View

Like narrative, *point of view* is a term that film shares with the literary and visual arts. In the broadest sense, it refers to the position from which something is seen and, by implication, the way that point of view determines what you see. In the simplest sense, the point of view is purely physical. My point of view regarding a house across the street will, for example, be different if I am looking from the rooftop of my house or from the basement window. In a more sophisticated sense, point of view can be psychological or cultural. For example, a child's point of view about a dentist's office will probably not be the same as an adult's.

In the same way, we can talk about the point of view that the camera has in relationship to a person or action or even the point of view that a narrative directs at its subject (Figure 3.05). Usually, movies use an objective point of view so that most of what is shown is not confined to any one person's perspective. In *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or *Gandhi* (1982), the audience sees scenes and events (for example, the Battle of Atlanta, epic encounters in India) that are supposedly objective in their

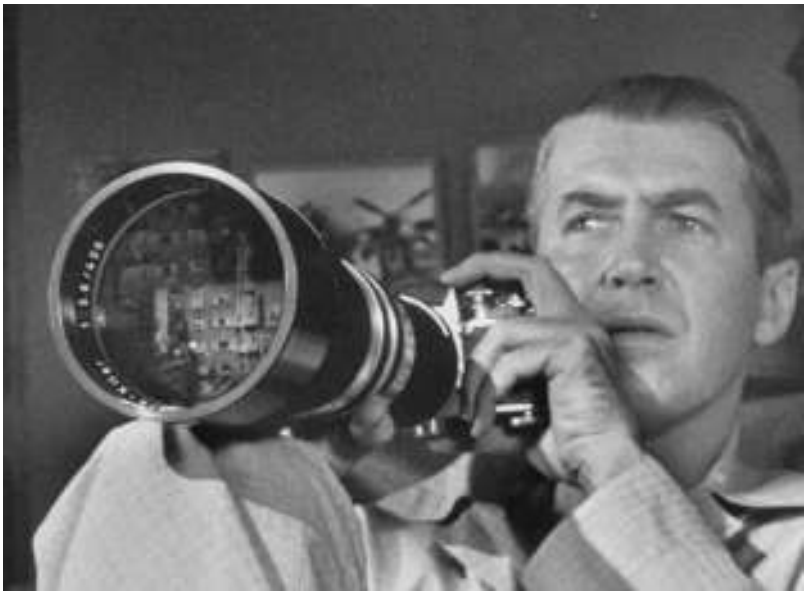

Figure 3.05 Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1945) is a film explicitly organized around the point of view of a photographer confined to a wheelchair. As he and his girlfriend watch the secret lives of his New York neighbors, he discovers both the power and the dangers of a point of view.

scope and accuracy, beyond the knowledge or perspective of any one person. In specific scenes, however, that audience may be aware that they are seeing another character only through Rhett Butler's or Gandhi's eyes, and in these cases, the camera is recreating that individual's more subjective point of view.

Some movies experiment with the possibilities of point of view: In *Apocalypse Now* (1979), we seem to see the whole story from Captain Willard's (Martin Sheen's) point of view; he introduces the story as something that has already happened to him, but despite this indication of historical objectivity, many of the scenes recreate his personal, nightmarish perspective on the war in Vietnam.

Point of view is a central term in writing about films because films are basically about seeing the world in a certain way. Pay attention to point of view by using these two general guidelines:

1. Observe how and when the camera creates the point of view of a character.
2. Notice if the story is told mostly from an objective point of view or from the subjective perspective of one person.

Ask yourself in what ways the point of view is determining what you see. Does it limit or control your vision in any way? What can you tell about the characters whose eyes you see through? Are they aggressive? Suspicious? Clever? In love?

Writing Cue

Consider the shape of the narrative of a film you watch for class. Write a paragraph about what stands out as most important to it: The construction of the plot? The development of a character? Or the narrative point of view? Support your points with evidence from the film.

Comparative Essays and Adaptations

Because the movies incorporate the traditions of books, plays, and even sculpture and painting, terms such as *narrative*, *character*, and *point of view* are not only useful, but also necessary in analyzing film. Often, these terms provide the basis for a comparative essay that examines a book and its adaptation as a film, or especially in recent years, the adaptation of video games as in films such as *Tron: Legacy* (2010), *Max Payne* (2008), and *Resident Evil* (2002). Other kinds of comparative essays may contrast different versions of the same movie or a group of films by the same director.

When you write a comparative essay of this kind, be sensitive to and careful not only about how these terms connect different art forms, but also about how they highlight differences. Be aware of how the film medium may change the message or meaning of the original book, play, or game. Look, for instance, at how a literary or artistic trope is translated successfully into a movie, as well as at what may be lost; consider how a film adapted from a video game alters or makes use of the way a viewer interacts with the images and sounds. Finally, take into consideration how other social and historical factors may play an important role in the comparison and contrast of different works. The popular Indian adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), for instance, features extraordinary textual changes (including the addition of musical numbers), and a smart comparative analysis would clearly need to examine the South Asian cultural and historical context that influences that adaptation. Less obviously perhaps would be a comparison of Jane Campion's adaptation (1996) of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), in which the gender difference of the female filmmaker and the male author may well be as important as their historical distance in comparing and understanding the two works. Likewise, Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) provides a variety of entryways into a productive comparison with F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel: the lavish contemporary music track, the use of three-dimensional (3D) technology, or the casting of Leonardo DiCaprio as Jay Gatsby could each illuminate both the connections and differences between the two works.

Whatever line of argument a comparative essay takes, detailed formal evidence is critical. To compare *Apocalypse Now* and Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1898), a writer may thus choose to begin with a comparison of the subjective point of view that describes the journey of one Marlow—Captain Willard—through Vietnam and the journey of the other Marlow into Africa. That comparison will be much sharper and more revealing, however, if the writer can show how certain literary techniques (for example, long sentences full of repetitions) create one point of view and how certain film techniques (the use of light and shadow or exaggerated mise-en-scènes, for instance) create the other. These film techniques are the subject of the rest of this chapter.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND REALISM

The mise-en-scène, a French term roughly translated as "what is put into the scene" (put before the camera), refers to all those properties of a cinematic image that exist independently of camera position,

camera movement, and editing (although a viewer will see these different dimensions united in one image). Mise-en-scène includes lighting, costumes, sets, the quality of the acting, and other shapes and characters in the scene. Many writers mistakenly believe that these theatrical features are a somewhat unsophisticated topic for analysis because they appear to be more a part of a dramatic tradition than of a cinematic tradition. Evaluating the performance of an actor may, for some, seem much less important than analyzing the narrative or the camera work. Yet for many other perceptive critics, the tools and terms of mise-en-scène are the keys to some of the most important features of any movie.

Realism

The major reason that we tend to overlook or undervalue mise-en-scène in the movies is the powerful illusion of realism that is at the heart of the film medium. In many movies, we often presume that what is put into the scene is simply what is there; it consequently cannot be analyzed as we would analyze the construction of a plot. We accept the Philadelphia setting of Jonathan Demme's 1993 movie *Philadelphia* as merely the background that was chosen for the battle between a prestigious law firm and a young associate discovered to be HIV-positive. But comparing the affluent setting of that film with, say, the mise-en-scène of Philadelphia in the 1976-movie *Rocky* (set in the ethnic neighborhoods of South Philadelphia) or in the 1995-movie *Twelve Monkeys* (set in a Philadelphia of urban squalor and decay) should make it clear that the realism of a place is malleable. The illusion of realism, in short, is a kind of mise-en-scène that makes us believe that the images are of an everyday world that is simply "there"—one we know and are familiar with. Or as the Italian neorealist screenwriter Cesare Zavattini argued in 1953, the cinema "must tell reality as if it were a story; there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen" (quoted in Williams 29).

You must learn, however, to be suspicious of realism in the movies because it can distract you from the many interesting possibilities that mise-en-scène analysis offers. Watching a documentary from another country or an old movie once considered realistic, you recognize how relative your sense of realism is and how, even when the filmmaker may not acknowledge it, the reality of a movie is constructed for a purpose. Simply putting a camera in front of a scene, as one writer has noted, changes the most realistic situation into a kind of theatrical setting. Asked to look more closely at the realism of *Philadelphia*, one student thus