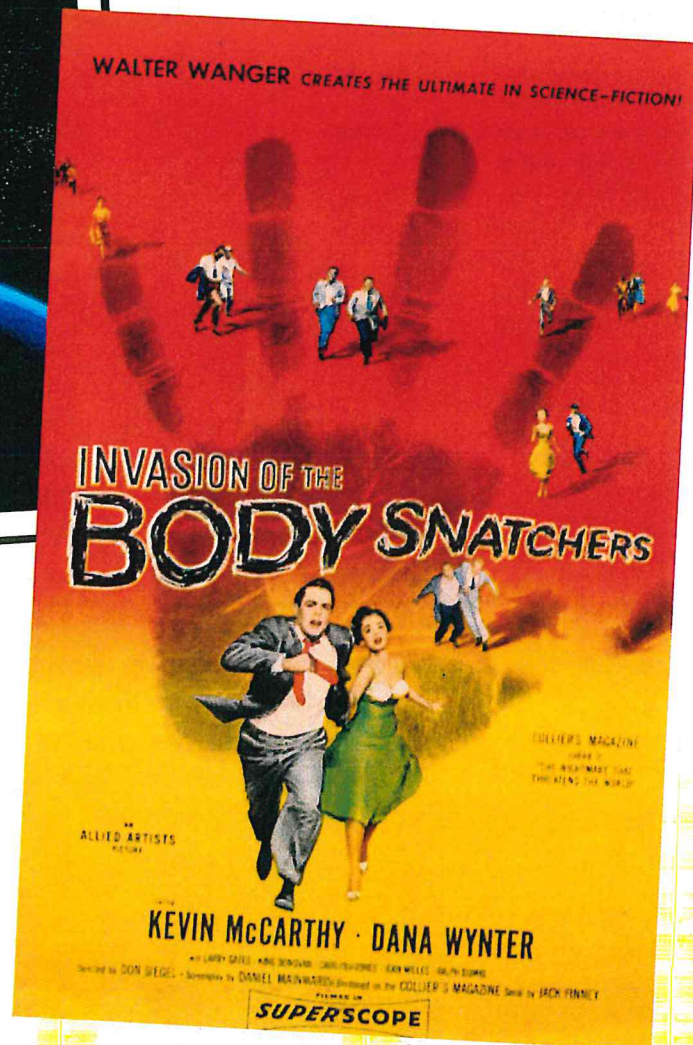
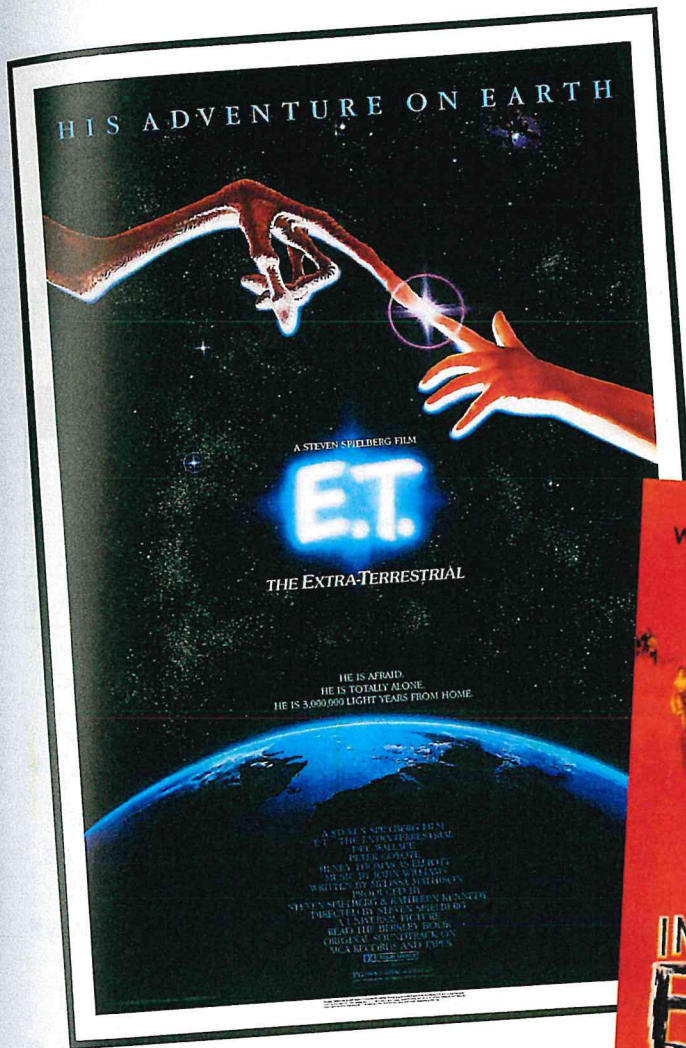


Case study: Invasion of the Body Snatchers and E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

Two different kinds of uninvited guests.



Introduction

This case study focuses upon on pair of mainstream films. The first film is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The second is *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Both are science-fiction films, each offers a different 'take' on this genre and can be seen to reflect social and technological changes in American society in the 1950s and the 1980s. The case study will also consider how film form is used within each film in order to explore similar themes and what these themes might tell us about the time and place in which they were made.

The key elements of film form

In studying the key elements of film form we will explore how the filmmakers have used these creative tools to tell their story and how both emotionally and intellectually impact the audience. To do this we will consider the opening sequences of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*.

Comparisons of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*

Element	<i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i>	<i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i>
Time to engage audience	10 minutes	8 minutes
Days to shoot	23 days	61 days
Budget	\$380,000	\$10.5 million

Both sequences are designed to broadly achieve the same aims: to establish the world where the film will take place and pose the main narrative question that will engage the audience in the overall narrative of each film. In the case of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* this is roughly ten minutes and in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* eight minutes. Even here we have a point of comparison, as it is often observed how the pace of story telling has quickened over the decades as shot duration has shortened. Clearly, both films were made in very different eras of technology and budgets with many similarities and differences; however, both are highly effective in their own way as opening sequences. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* took 23 days to shoot on a budget of \$380,000 with *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* shot in over 61 days at a cost of \$10.5 million.

The opening sequence of each film sets the overall tone, so this will give us a feel for the use of film language throughout each one. Simply put, the intent of both sequences is to establish the world as a version of its contemporary normality but introducing a narrative enigma that will drive the narrative along. Both set up a feeling that this could be 'any town USA' to find empathy in the audience; in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* it is the small Californian town of Santa Mira and in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* it is an un-named north-eastern Californian, suburban neighbourhood. From now on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* will be referred to as *IOTBS* and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* as just *E.T.*

Cinematography in Invasion of the Body Snatchers

IOTBS is a black and white film released in SuperScope – an **anamorphic** widescreen process that altered the original 1.85:1 aspect that the director, Don Siegel, felt compromised both image sharpness and detail. Both then and now, the starkly lit, black and white photography lends it a heightened feel of **verisimilitude**; an almost TV camera documentary feel that helps to lend a factual or 'truthful' feel to Dr Miles Bennell's tale of covert alien invasion.

The unsettling nature of the threat is established from the very start of the title sequence.

- We see The passage of clouds across the sky, rendered unnatural and unsettling as they are sped up with a **time lapse photography** effect. This transports the audience towards the films' actual opening and perhaps reminds them of the quoted 1950s sci-fi warning to 'watch the skies'.
- As the titles reach their end they forebodingly darken with a hint of the **film noir**, which will be picked up in the first scene of onscreen action.

The film then starts:

- First, with an establishing shot of a back street, city hospital (added after the first test screening). This panning long shot of a police car racing through the moody, night-time shadows sets up a feeling of film noir that informs most of the night scenes in the film.
- An urgent tracking shot moves us inside the building where we find the main protagonist, Dr Miles Bennell, framed mid-shot in a doorway: enclosing him as a reflection of his paranoia perhaps? Most striking is his direct address to the camera, which heightens the air of hysteria that surrounds his current demeanor.
- As Bennell loudly protests his sanity and begins to tell his story, we see a shot-reverse-shot sequence of close-ups that conventionally construct their conversation, although the tightness of the close-ups here does subtly intensify the feeling of mania that accompanies the dishevelled Bennell.
- The framing device comes to a close and we presumably see the director's original opening shot, an establishing shot of Santa Mira's rural railway station hemmed in by surrounding hills: a familiar scene of an idealised, sleepy, small town America.
- We maintain our initial distance as Bennell's greetings are presented in a matter-of-fact series of long shots.
- The urgency increases slightly as a tracking shot picks up the pace as Bennell's nurse, Sally Withers, reveals the potential emergency that awaits his return.



Santa Mira (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*).

Key terms

Anamorphic

The creation of a distorted image that appears normal when viewed with an appropriate lens. Typically used when shooting a widescreen picture on standard 35mm film with its non-widescreen aspect ratio.

Verisimilitude

Establishing the truth and reality of a fictional world, believability, successfully suspending an audience's disbelief.

Time lapse photography

A way of filming that makes slow action, e.g. a flower opening appear to happen quickly (often used in wildlife programmes).

Film noir

A term originally used to describe films produced in the 1940s, which is now used to describe films with some of the lighting and narrative conventions of the period, e.g. low key lighting creating shadows, dark, urban cityscapes and dark, shadowy characters.

Quick Question
3.8

Annotate the aspects of mise-en-scène in the still on the left that help establish the world of the film.

*Key term***Back projected**

Sometimes called rear projection. Way of projecting images onto a translucent screen so that they are viewed from the opposite side. Used to create the illusion that the characters in the foreground are moving. It was widely used for many years in driving scenes, e.g. *Psycho* (1960, Alfred Hitchcock) or to show other forms of distant background motion, e.g. *King Solomon's Mines*.

- Inside the car we watch a standard **back projected** two-shot close-up conversation as Sally Withers brings the doctor up to speed with the situation and recent town gossip: Becky Driscoll's (an employee at the San Francisco Health Department) name being a pointed reference.
- This is interrupted by a long shot as Jimmy Grimaldi darts into the road and the audience experiences the jolt of a near collision.
- So far the conventional framing has not drawn attention to itself; it is the exposition in the conversation and the action in the road that has held our attention.
- As the depiction of the journey draws to a close we share in long shot the scene of Grimaldi's abandoned vegetable stall, which foreshadows the rising threat to Santa Mira.
- The next scene is in Dr Bennell's office; the first shot is a close-up of Bennell framed to include the reflection of main street to the left-hand side, further reinforcing the apparent normality of Santa Mira.
- Into the office arrives the aforementioned Becky Driscoll, she is clearly top lit to emphasise her attractive features and this helps to reveal Bennell's feelings for her.
- They catch up and Becky begins her story of how her Aunt Wilma is insisting that her Uncle Ira is not him. This shot-reverse-shot conversation is shot from two different angles: Bennell from a low angle and Becky from a high angle. This not only reflects their relative position on-screen but perhaps also the 1950s respective gender roles of power and authority.
- As the characters move to leave the office the camera movement continues its steady fluid motion, helping to establish the sequence's immersive immediacy.
- The two protagonists descend the office staircase and they are prophetically silhouetted against the harsh exterior light as a potentially ideal couple.
- On main street, natural Californian sunshine lights the scene as the camera tracks them across this typical small town American scene: a clear contrast to the dark city where we first met Bennell at the end of both his tether and narrative trajectory.
- The opening sequence comes to a close with a second visit to the doctor's office. It starts with a close-up of the exterior to show the passage of time as the clock now stands at 4.45pm. The working day is nearly done and the lower light level begins to cast the shadows of oncoming evening ... and Bennell's first real encounter with the hysteria. He has finally caught up with Jimmy Grimaldi who of his mother exclaims, 'Don't let her get me'.

Throughout this opening sequence the conventional and unobtrusive framing and movement has smoothly established the world of Santa Mira. It has drawn us into, alongside Dr Bennell, the mysterious goings on both discussed and finally witnessed; the scene is set.

Cinematography in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*

E.T. is a colour film shot in **35mm** using **Panavision** cameras with an **aspect ratio** of 1.85:1. Both then and now the variously lit colour photography lends it a feel of verisimilitude, with a combination of both childhood innocence and an adult nostalgia for such. This fantasy-tinged reality helps to immerse us in a world seen through both Elliott's and E.T.'s eyes.

- In the opening sequence both aspects of the cinematography, lighting and camera set-up, establish a pattern that is used throughout the rest of the film. This evokes a sense of wonder and innocence that has an almost nostalgic fairy-tale feel.
- Spielberg's use of the camera is tailored to a child's eye or, in this case, aliens-eye view of the world. The film is predominantly shot from lower camera angles, mimicking a child's point-of-view. This creates an effect where younger viewers can identify with the characters; adults appear overwhelming and intimidating as we see them from the waist or knees down. It also means that adult viewers are reminded of how the world looked when they were younger and to some extent they spend a short time reliving their own childhood.
- Specific examples of this framing can be seen in two introductions: one of the spaceship and another of the men. We first get close to the ship in a mid-point-of-view shot of the boarding ramp; it is shot looking through the trees at a low level that suggests we are seeing it through somebody's or something's eyes. This is quickly confirmed as the camera does a low angle track around the ship from E.T.'s POV; the POV being confirmed with a close up of his long, bony fingers touching the tree branches.
- When the men arrive to shatter what has been a wonder-filled exploration of the woods by E.T., the low angle of the camera is further cemented.
- Spielberg starts with a brief whip pan from E.T. to a low angle shot of a rapidly arriving truck, which dominates the screen. This is made even more intimidating by an extreme close-up of the truck's radiator grill and headlights, a long shot then reveals the relentless arrival of even more trucks.
- Additional low angle close-ups of an exhaust pipe polluting the forest, a man revealed as a pair of legs and an emphatic boot splashing through a puddle further illustrate E.T.'s point-of-view.
- The audience now shares his feelings of dread at what this arrival means. This brief interlude of tranquil exploration has been broken by this intimidating adult transgression.

In terms of lighting, Spielberg evokes much of the magic and mist of nostalgia by the manipulation of this aspect of film form. In the opening sequence light sources are carefully placed to evoke many emotional responses from the audience. The diffuse light, often back lit, that surrounds the ship and the forest glade it sits in creates a magical grotto effect (both inside and out). Our first view of the alien ship makes it look like a Christmas tree bauble placed incongruously in the woods with the harsh glow of the suburban backdrop in the far distance.

Key terms

35mm

The film gauge or width most commonly used for motion pictures and chemical still photography. It is significantly more expensive than 16mm film but is seen as the cost-effective option for mainstream films producing a good trade-off between price and quality of image.

Panavision

Company that produced a camera with a type of widescreen lens, the word is formed from elements of panorama and vision.

Aspect ratio

The ratio of the width to the height of an image or screen.



Describe the ways in which a camera can be used in order to give a child's-eye's view of a film world.

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial – a scene is set.

Quick Question 3.10

Annotate the aspects of mise-en-scène in the still on the right that help to establish the world of the film.



There are many clear examples in this opening sequence of how Spielberg uses light.

- In the establishing shot of the forest glade, the light pall of the suburb encroaches on the scene and serves to give softness to the illumination.
- In the glade the ship is the main light source, its eerie glow acting as a backlight to give us our first glimpse of E.T.'s silhouette.
- Inside the ship are low level diffused light sources. As the camera tracks around the interior, lending it a 'grotto' feel as we see its strange glowing cargo of alien wonders, the low key lighting creates shadows that give the effect of face-like features on some of the plants.
- Later, more harshly, headlights act as searchlights and, as more trucks arrive, **lense flare** emphasises their 'rude interruption' and transgression of the scene.
- During the chase the light of the ship's glow intensifies to signal the imminence of its departure.
- The chase itself heads for the ship's single spotlight presence in the trees, in mid-shot its interior acts as backlight and silhouettes dramatically E.T.'s companion, who is waiting for his return.
- Finally, after the ship leaves E.T. behind, he descends towards the light of the suburb as the camera tilts up to fully reveal his destination.
- Throughout this opening sequence the unconventional framing and movement and subtly intimate lighting has clearly established a point-of-view on events that is literally alien in its vision. Drawing us into this perspective and what is now E.T.'s very daunting predicament.

Key term

Lense flare

The effect created when light is scattered or flared in a lens system, often in response to a bright light. It usually produces an undesirable effect on the image but has increasingly been used by filmmakers to create an aesthetic effect, e.g. Oliver Tate's '2 Weeks of Lovemaking' video in *Submarine*.

Task 3.6

Having read the two sections on cinematography and re-watched the opening sequences of both *JOTBS* and *E.T.*, compare the similarities and differences in approach of the two films.

Mise-en-scène in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

The opening sequence of *IOTBS* has a basic matter-of-fact mise-en-scène that is significant in underpinning its realistic feel. Several locations are used:

- a clouded sky,
- an urban back street hospital,
- a rural train station hemmed in by hills,
- a country road with its abandoned stall,
- a modest doctor's office and
- a small town main street.

These unremarkable settings not only establish the film's reality but serve to suggest that the invasion could be happening where you are right now.

The costumes, such as suits and ties, suggest a comfortable prosperity. Although Becky on her first appearance, in what could be a prom dress complete with formal looking gloves, appears over-dressed for a day at the hardware store, perhaps she had other motives in mind when dressing that morning?

The props, x-rays and other medical trappings – serve much like the locations do in grounding the opening in a familiar reality. We are immersed in the 1950s perfect white picket fence world familiar to the audience, either first hand or through TV. Suggesting, perhaps, that this is the greatest treasure that could be threatened or more subversively that this bland community is a symptom of the conformity that eases the way for the invasion itself.



Main street small town America
(*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*).

Quick Question
3.11

Annotate the aspects of mise-en-scène in the still on the left that help establish the world of the film.

Mise-en-scène in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*

Key terms

Imbues

Fills someone or something with a particular feeling or idea.

Ambiguity

Something that is unclear or confusing, or can be understood in more than one way.

Strange cargo (*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*).



Annotate the still on the right to highlight the use of light inside the space ship.

The opening sequence of *E.T.* employs a mise-en-scène that **imbues** the film with a sense of wonder, innocence and magic. It is focused on one main setting: that of an isolated forest glade. Within this we experience an alien spaceship both inside and out. We also never lose the feeling of how close the brightly lit suburb is where the main story will take place. It is not just the alien ship that helps create the magical air to the film but the way Spielberg films the more prosaic forest and suburb that starts the film with an almost fairy-tale feel.

The costumes, such as they are, do not give a clear indication of who E.T.'s pursuers are. They carry a clearly masculine threat but do not establish their later identities as scientists in the employ of an impersonal government agency. They are an indication of how the costumes throughout the rest of the film will reflect both character and a 1980s reality; their initial **ambiguity** is perhaps a reflection of how ultimately at least one of these government 'agents' will side with Elliott in his mission to get E.T. home.



We have two sets of props to consider: the alien's and the humans'. The alien props firmly underpin the science-fiction element to the film. Yet they do this with a non-threatening air of magic and curiosity. The ship is a friendly bauble twinkling in the forest night. Its contents, being strange and alluring, are glowing conical space fungi and stunted tree-like plants that may or may not have faces. The human props seem more out of place in the forest than the alien ones. The trucks speak of threat and trespass and the men with their probing torches and custodial belt-hung keys are intimidating to both alien and audience alike. Should we consider E.T. himself as a prop? At this early stage the puppet is viewed with curiosity and a growing feeling of empathy that will mature along with his relationship with Elliott. Nevertheless, E.T. is a puppet and works well in evoking innocence and vulnerability, particularly in long shot, but in some of the closer shots, like when we see his attempting to 'bounce' back to his ship, is something the audience is still becoming accustomed to.

Ultimately, the use of mise-en-scène is successful in establishing two worlds of wonder for the audience: E.T.'s world for us and our world for him.

Having read the two sections on mise-en-scène and re-watched the opening sequences:

1. Find and annotate film stills that illustrate the uses of mise-en-scène in both films.
2. Compare the similarities and differences in approach of the two films.

Task 3.7

Editing in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

- IOTBS is constructed in the classic conventional Hollywood style of **continuity editing**. It is put together at a mostly even pace (perhaps slow by today's standards) that never draws attention to itself. Nor does it at any point threaten to break the audience's immersion in this representation of a familiar 1950s America. The audience, even city dwellers, would recognise and understand this world, even if it was from the experience of other movies and increasing amounts of television drama and situation comedies.
- The style largely employs the straight cut, except for major shifts in time and space. Here it employs the standard dissolves as we are transported into the flashback, from car journey to office x-rays, a daytime hardware store exterior, to the evening and an office exterior and the final office shot to cousin Wilma's home.
- When we first encounter Dr Miles Bennell, a series of even paced straight cuts in a shot-reverse-shot conversation construct the initial conversation with the police doctor. The even pace during Bennell's increasingly hysterical outburst give the scene a dispassionate feel, where we seem to be invited to judge his sanity for ourselves. This scene ends with a typical 'watery ripple' dissolve for the start of the extended flashback that would tell us his full story.
- The opening sequence continues as a long series of unobtrusive straight cuts that are even paced until Jimmy Grimaldi runs out in front of Bennell's car, then the driver's shock is emphasised with a slight increase in editing pace.
- Overall, the editing feels slow by modern standards, an almost dogged pace in its mission to establish this world and the enigma at its heart. The use of this seamless style of continuity editing is perfectly suited to effectively and quickly immerse the audience in the mundane normality of this world. A world, however, that has something going on just below the surface and the audience, such as Miles Bennell, wants to find out more.

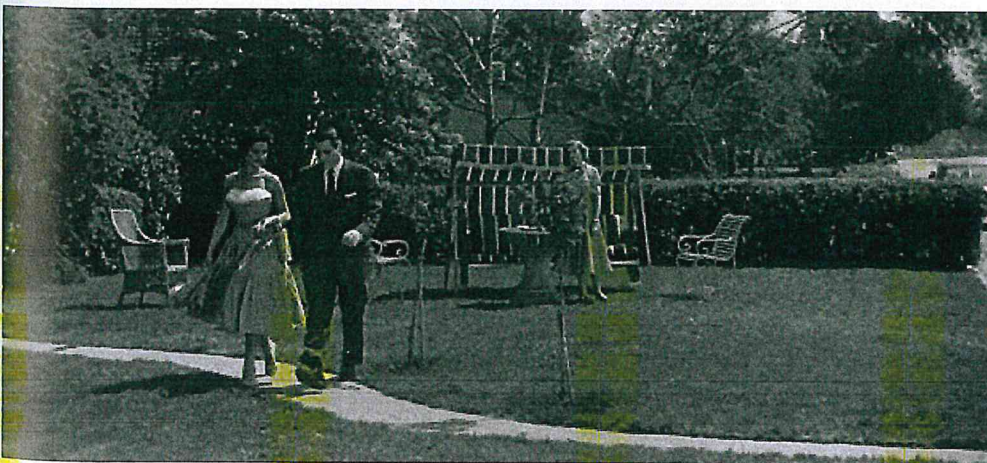
Key term

Continuity editing

A style of editing that gives the viewer the impression that the action unfolds consistently in space and time. In most films, logical coherence is achieved by cutting to continuity, which emphasises the smooth transition of time and space.

Top tip

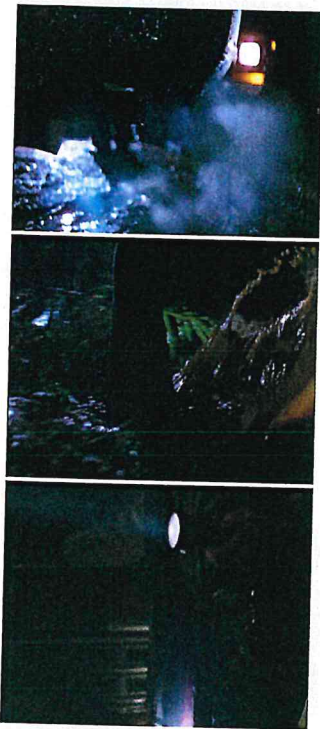
Always make sure you use the correct terminology when analysing the speed or types of edit used in a sequence.



A white picket fence world
(*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*).

Quick Question 3.13

What kinds of editing are used in the opening sequence? What effect do these have on the audience?



Cut to ... (E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial).

Task 3.8

Having read the two sections on editing and re-watched the opening sequences, analyse the closing sequences of each film comparing the similarities and differences in approach to editing of the two films.

Quick Question 3.14

The still on the right is from the framing device at the start of *IOTBS*. Look at the framing device at the end of the film and answer the following:

1. Do you think the framing device was necessary in *IOTBS*?
2. Explain your answer.



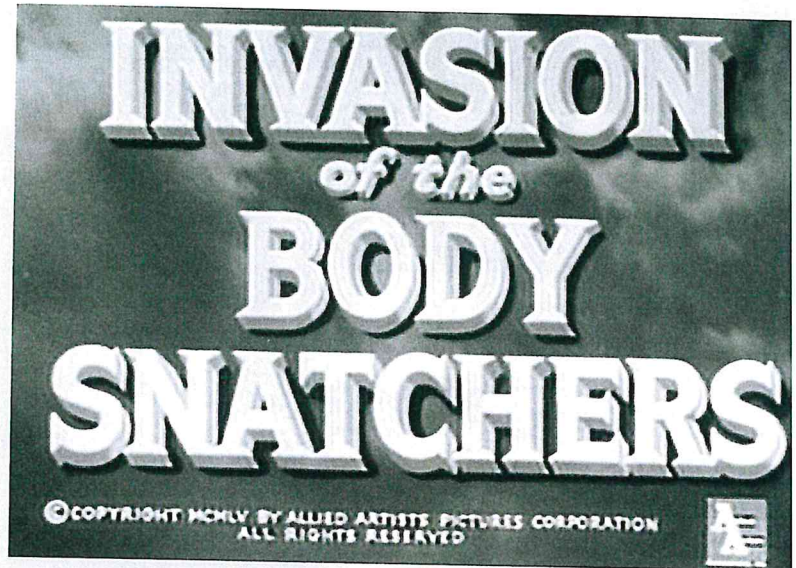
'They're here already!' (Invasion of the Body Snatchers).

Sound in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

The mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sound is fairly standard in *IOTBS*, with the bulk of the opening sequence being orchestrally scored. The score has a strong emotional impact, it helps to plant the seeds of doubt and mystery in the audience, the diegetic sound has an equally important role to play. The diegetic sound we hear from the matter-of-fact delivery of natural sounding dialogue, to the sounds of everyday life is essential to establishing the verisimilitude of the on-screen Santa Mira.

- Key examples of the non-diegetic musical score occur at frequent intervals throughout the opening sequence. From the very start of the title sequence, dramatic strident brass and rising strings invoke a sense of impending melodrama – that something big is behind that sky – the titles climaxing in a foreboding fanfare.
- The orchestral score continues its work by emphasising the strength of feeling behind Miles' initial outburst, as a thriller- or horror-style tension builds. At this point the second non-diegetic sound element is introduced in the form of the voice-over, guiding us towards and into the central narrative; the haggard Bennell dramatically intones: 'Something evil had taken over the town.' The score is applied in a variety of ways throughout the opening sequence, from slightly mournful strings to underscore the forebodingly abandoned Grimaldi's vegetable stall; through the romantic flourish of strings to herald Becky Driscoll's 'love interest' entrance; to the final scenes and the pensive notes under the 4.45pm clock – nothing's happened, no patients have come and we begin to realise that's the point.
- The first diegetic sound does not let up on the drama, as a police siren splits the night to introduce the framing device and perhaps sound a warning alarm for the audience that echoes Bennell's final warning shouted directly into camera at the film's end: 'They're here already! You're next! You're next, You're next ...!' As we move through the opening sequence, the diegetic sound is that of the everyday noise of small town America; from a solitary tolling railroad bell through to the hustle and bustle of the emblematic main street. The only truly strident diegetic sound is that of the sharp shock of the loud car horn warning Jimmy Grimaldi and temporarily startling the already absorbed audience.

So, as we can see in this special-effects free, science-fiction opening, the combination of the dramatic music and realistic sounds of normality are vital to establishing both the believability of the world and the unseen menace that will come to increasingly threaten our main protagonists, Santa Mira, America and the whole world. The fact and feeling that something is wrong in this idyllic community is almost exclusively evoked by Carmen Dragon's poundingly ominous score.



Duumm derrr! Carmen Dragon's soundtrack introduces the film with unmistakable drama.

Top tip

When describing sounds make sure you have a 'bank' of words that can be used to describe the soundtrack and the effects created (see opposite).

Sound in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*

The mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sound is both effective and at times subtle in the opening sequence of *E.T.*

- The non-diegetic score is a mix of typically science-fiction sounding themes combined with light orchestral sounds to evoke wonder, only changing to a more traditionally dramatic feel when the humans appear on the scene. The diegetic sound uses elements typical of science fiction to underscore the spaceship and its occupants; it also provides a contrast between evoking a feeling of nature's gentle wonder to the shattering of this by man's sudden incursion into this innocent scene.

John William's score rises to a crescendo then descends to a few pensive notes as E.T. is left behind (*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*).



- Non-diegetic sound is deployed immediately over the opening titles to establish *E.T.* as a science-fiction film. Creepy, otherworldly Theremin-style, electronic moaning sounds evoke both previous science-fiction films and the ominous depths of space that set the tone for the rest of the film. The remaining non-diegetic score is largely conventional in approach. John Williams employs piping flutes as we enter the scene proper. The music has a gentle sense of playful mystery lending the atmosphere a kind of daybreak expectancy. There are typically strange fiction-style strings, with a xylophone ripple, to evoke the alien feel for the ship's interior. Williams moves to lower register notes of the music to signal the ominous arrival of men and their trucks, this increases in tempo with an urgent foreboding. As the scene crashes into action the pace of the music mirrors the chase in tempo using loud pulsing horns and racing strings. We move towards the sequence's climax with a fanfare heralding the spaceships' take-off. Finally, the music dies down with E.T.'s worried gulp to more gentle horns, strings and piping flute to re-emphasise our empathy with the stranded creature's predicament.

- Diegetically the sound is used as we would expect. There is a range of slightly strange non-threatening sci-fi sounds like the gentle ringing of the alarmed E.T.s, their gulping and grunting speech and the whirring of the ship itself as it powers up to leave. The earthly sounds are set in contrast to one another. Nature is evoked with crickets chirping and owls hooting; these gentle, calming night noises are brutally disturbed by the harsh sound of the men and their machines, rumbling exhausts, loud splashing and the sparse dialogue cries of 'This way!' and 'I think I see him!' The sequence ends with the sounds of a different kind of night as a police siren and distant dog bark signify the potential hazards of the suburbs and humanity E.T. must now face.
- One of the more successful elements is how the non-diegetic and diegetic sounds are subtly mixed on frequent occasions to enhance the mood of the sequence. As we review the landing site, a mix of strings, chirping crickets, mysterious sounding chords, hooting owls, the gently barking aliens and sci-fi beeping sounds all blend together to build the drama, and to underscore a feeling of discovery, exploration and intrigue that are central to the sequence.

So, as we can see, or more correctly hear, just as in *IOTBS*, the soundtrack is integral to establishing both genre and mood at the start of the film. The clever and subtle mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds create a feeling of innocent wonder.

Having read the two sections on sound and re-watched the closing sequences, analyse the use of sound in each film and answer the following questions:

1. What are the key elements of sound in both sequences?
2. What effect do you think these key elements were designed to achieve?
3. What are the main similarities and differences between the approaches of each film?

Task 3.9



An adventure begins
(*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*).

Concluding aesthetics

Key term

Chiaroscuro

An Italian term originally used in art to refer to the high contrast light and darkness in Renaissance paintings. Later used in cinema to describe the use of high and low key lighting in, for example, film noir films.

In defining film aesthetics, for our purposes we have to consider how all aspects of film form are combined artistically to create a distinctive 'look' or style; where the 'spectacle' of a film engages spectators more than a film's narrative. This idea about the collective impact of the use of film form certainly applies to both films. The idea of aesthetics can be hard to pin down at first. If we step back from the detailed analysis for a moment we should remember that it is not just individual films that may or may not have an overall guiding aesthetic. It is not uncommon to associate a particular look, style or feel to genres, directors, studios and film movements. This is not true of all examples in each of those categories; in some an aesthetic is more fundamental to its artistry than others. For example, in the case of the German expressionist film movement the use of **chiaroscuro** lighting, highly expressive acting and highly subjective sets and camera angles are essential in their attempts to convey meaning and create their art.

IOTBS and *E.T.* are generally considered to be science-fiction films and this genre is often associated with a cold, antiseptic, bright and shiny future aesthetic style. Neither of our films employs much of this kind of look or style, although clear examples of science-fiction style can be found in both films. In *IOTBS* the alien pods, and in *E.T.* the creature itself, are clear visual references to the science-fiction genre. In the case of our comparative study we are considering an aesthetic determined by the individual filmmakers rather than wholesale use of genre iconography and style.

When we consider the combined use of film language in both opening sequences of the films, they are both engaged in building a version of a normal world.

Don Siegel
(1912–1991).



Siegel intends the aesthetic of *IOTBS* to reflect an unremarkable and ordinary version of 1950s small town America, much as Spielberg's guiding aesthetic is that of an unremarkable and ordinary version of 1980s suburban America. It is the use of film form to infuse these similar worlds with a different nuance that brings their respective aesthetics into focus.

In *IOTBS* normality is coloured with a flavour of film noir and paranoid threat; in *E.T.* a similar normality is instead imbued with a sense of innocence and nostalgia. These 'styles' or 'looks' are not just limited to the opening sequences but run throughout the films. One only has to consider the first home we visit in *IOTBS*, as a perfect lawn is mowed by a unnervingly happy drone-like Uncle Ira or the consumerist clutter that colonises Elliott's 1980s bedroom to realise that these aesthetic flavours of meaning run throughout both films.



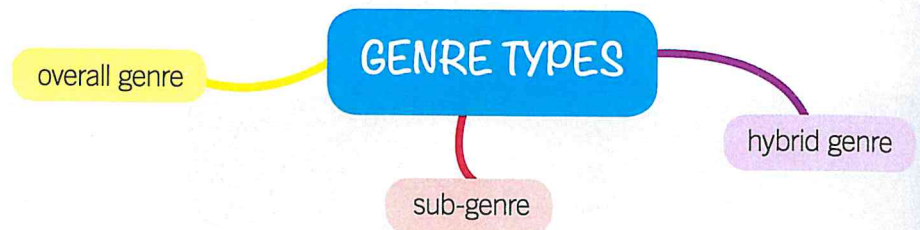
Steven Spielberg
(1946–).

1. Research a short biography of each director, you might include:
 - their background
 - their films
 - any other interesting things you find out about them.
2. Write a short paragraph about any similarities you find, anything they have in common.
3. Write a short paragraph about any differences you find; how different are they as directors?

Task 3.10

The structural elements of film form

Genre and science fiction



Key terms

Genre

A type or category. The characteristics that distinguish, for example, a science fiction from a romance.

Sub-genre

A sub-category within a particular genre: they are identifiable sub-categories of the larger category of main film genres, with their own distinctive subject matter, style, formulas and iconography.

Hybrid genre

A film that combines two or more distinct genre types. It cannot be easily categorised by a single genre or sub-genre type.

In deciding what the **genre** of a film is we must look to three possible categories: overall genre, **sub-genre** and **hybrid genre**. Genre itself can be defined as categories of film based on frequently recurring patterns of form, style and, particularly, subject matter. So, as we consider science fiction as the genre for our two comparative films, we start to think about what kind of things allow us to recognise a science-fiction film? What are the frequently recurring patterns of form and style? A typical list begins to emerge in which are things such as spaceships, the future, robots, time travel and so on. The more we think, the longer this list will become. With just a brief glance at this list it is enough to show us that these kinds of things do not really describe our films. So we need a much more focused definition to help us. One definition of science fiction was coined by author Theodore Sturgeon:

A good science-fiction story is a story about human beings, with a human problem, and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its science content. (Quoted in William Atheling Jr, *More Issues at Hand*, page 12)

This gets us closer to a sci-fi definition as invasion and threat is a human problem and the alien can perhaps be considered as the 'science content', if only speculatively so. The important element within this initial definition is the human. If we look at nearly all science-fiction films what engages us in them is how the humans, who we can identify with, react to the challenges they face. Perhaps we all ask ourselves, 'What would I do if faced with an alien invader?' Perhaps a tighter definition for science-fiction films may read:

A film that uses speculative or fictional science or technology as the basis for a story of how people might deal with its discovery.

This should provide a solid basis on which to judge whether our choices are science-fiction films or not. Visitation by aliens, friendly or not, is certainly speculative science, and in both of these cases the films are very much about how the people involved deal with this. A potential sub-text that involves a clever choice of fictional science or technology can also make possible that other important aspect of science fiction – film as mirror or metaphor. In the best science fiction the themes and issues of the film are about us and now. The fictional context allows the filmmaker to deal with themes in an interesting and engaging way. In *IOTBS* we perhaps get to think about the dangers of conformity and paranoia, while in *E.T.* the value(s) of home and family are considered.



'Someone's not happy with my definition of science fiction ...'
(*Terminator 2*, 1991, James Cameron).

As a class:

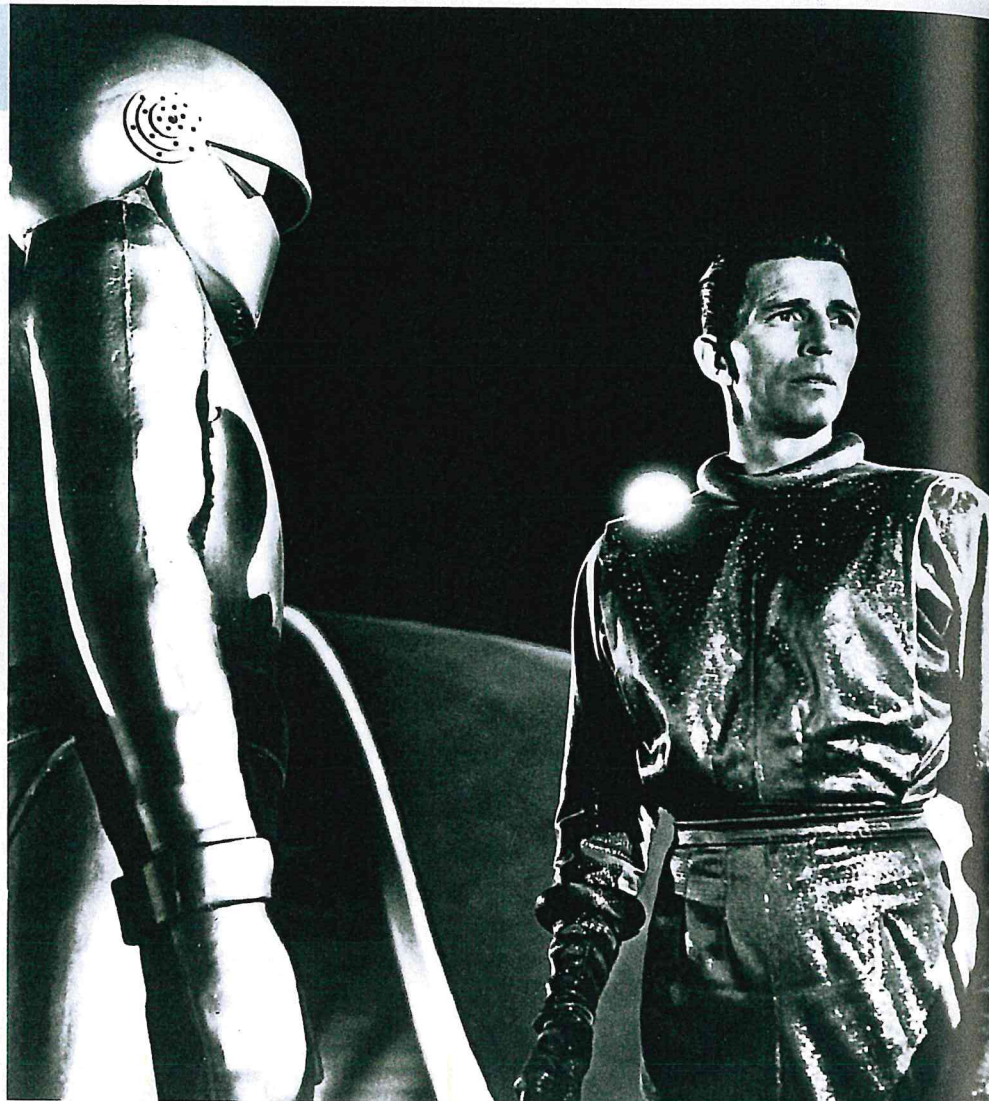
- Each think of at least one film that you consider to be science fiction.
- Compile all the films into a list.
- Test whether they fit the definition.
- How could we change the definition?

Task 3.11

This still leaves us with a problem, although the definition works it defines the boundaries of the category in a very wide way. How does this help us sort out the massive list of films, many of which seem very different from each other, that fall under its terms? This is where the use of sub-genres will help. Even ignoring our definition of the science-fiction genre, it is a huge genre within which we can list 1,000s of films. When a genre becomes so large, groups of films with more specific typicalities and similarities emerge. The sub-genre our films could be said to belong to might be called alien invasion or alien visitation. Here, the overall defining feature for membership would be an alien or aliens arriving on Earth and people's reaction to this event.

Now we have decided what category our films fit into, we have to go back to what we need to consider in more detail when studying genre. The commonality of genre conventions based on iconography, including mise-en-scène, characters, narratives and themes, is what we use. These aspects will often act to define genre and sub-genre in different ways with a different emphasis depending on the specific category. In the case of alien visitation it is the characters, narratives and themes that are the most important. In both our films we have characters that know and do not know about the aliens, and of course the alien itself. Narratively the stories are about how we cope with the new arrival. Theme is perhaps the key; how do we react to the 'other' or the 'stranger'? What are their motives? Here the films perhaps reflect on how we as both individuals and groups deal with outsiders of a less alien kind.

More 1950s visitors to Earth (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, 1951, Robert Wise).



In other sub-genres of science-fiction films, iconography and mise-en-scène may be more important in defining the category. In the space opera sub-genre it is the futuristic technology, spaceships and space travel that are the characteristics we look for. These are less obvious in our films but we can say that the iconography and mise-en-scène should at the very least draw us a picture of a familiar world we can identify with as it is disrupted by the alien arrival.

Task 3.12

Choose a big genre, for example science fiction or horror, then:

- list as many sub-genres you can think of
- state what the defining characteristics of each are.

Now we may have found a way of grouping films that seems to be able to manage the 1,000s of films in the overall genre; but there will always be films that still seem not to fit. This may be because they have some strong characteristics that are not really science fiction in nature. If a film has two or more genres within it this is known as a hybrid genre. In some discussions *IOTBS* is an example of this. Many commentators refer to it as a horror-science-fiction hybrid. The terror of the pods experienced by

people probably leads them to this conclusion. However, we do know that the pods come from outer space not some dark Earth-bound place of horror and by today's standards the horror would be considered very mild indeed. Much better examples of horror-science-fiction hybrids would be *Alien* (1979, Ridley Scott) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). Interestingly, *The Thing* came out in the same year as *E.T.* as a re-make of a 1951 film *The Thing from Another World* and is more similar in story to *IOTBS*. The alien visitor in this film has no intention of making friends – only in surviving – much to the cost of any creature that crosses its path. It was far less successful than *E.T.* at the box office; perhaps the audience in 1982 felt the need for a friend rather than another enemy? If you would like to read a more detailed discussion of *IOTBS* and *The Thing* check out:

<https://popsmut.wordpress.com/2011/04/19/two-eras-of-terror-comparing-the-invasion-of-the-body-snatchers-and-the-thing/>



E.T. wasn't our only visitor in 1982 (*The Thing*).

We always have to be careful when trying to figure out a film's genre. We need to be flexible and be ready to justify our analysis through argument and evidence. Take the example below; would we be wrong to put this film into the western genre?

Set in the past, on the frontier, with good guys encountering bad, featuring a trade dispute and shoot-outs as an evil organisation attempts to swallow up individual settlers and traders.

Perhaps, but if we consider it more closely, it is in fact a logline for the *Star Wars* films. Now there is an interesting genre discussion – are the *Star Wars* films science fiction or westerns? We can add even further 'confusion' by throwing the hybrid of the science fiction-western into the mix, for example *Cowboys & Aliens* (2011, Jon Favreau). It might be a fun debate to sort out in class!

Science fiction – ever popular with producers and audiences.



One final question we should ask is why is genre so important, particularly in the US film mainstream? In answering this we should remember that genre is significant to both film producers and film audiences. Some of the reasons are set out in the boxes below.

Producers and filmmakers

A simple and effective way of selling their films to a specific target audience.

It can help reduce the risk of financial failure.

It can be a formula for simplifying filmmaking.

The conventions can help, or provide a short cut to, the making of meaning(s).

Subverting the conventions can provide a creative approach to making a film.

Audience

It is an easy way to spot the kinds of film they like or dislike.

It is a way of comparing one film with another.

We enjoy subconsciously responding to the short cuts and clues within its film language.

Genres offer comforting reassurance and a closing down of the complexities of life.

Meeting audience expectations equals pleasure.

Of these various reasons, many, if not all, will apply to individual films. Overall, the producers of mainstream films are usually looking to repeat the success that a genre has already enjoyed, whereas the audience is usually looking for a kind of film they know they will enjoy.

Task 3.13

Using the films chosen for your comparative study, write an essay that discusses why their genre is important to both producers and audiences. Use the reasons in the boxes above as well as any ideas of your own.

Representation

When considering representation in our comparative study, or any film, we need to consider the points-of-view or perspectives that provide a context to help us understand what we are looking at. There are two key perspectives to be aware of: our perspective as a contemporary audience and the perspective of the filmmakers and audience in the era of the film's production.

What do we mean by perspective? Context is the key term in understanding this. At the start of this study we looked at the political, economic and social aspects of each decade that influenced the audience of the time. We have to try and form some feeling or idea of what people's attitudes were back then. This is where it is important to remember our point-of-view and the influences on it, and try to take this into account when drawing conclusions about the representations we see. We need to remember that attitudes and ideas can be very different within just one person's life time. For example, people's attitude towards sexuality has changed a lot in my life time. Before 1967 you could go to prison for being a homosexual; very different from our modern acceptance of this particular human difference.

So, we must take into account the context of the time the film was made to help us interpret the representations we see. That should not be confused with excusing something we now may find offensive, but should be more to help us understand why people were more accepting of it at that time.

Why consider representation in the films we are studying? Just like the key and structural elements of film form we have studied so far, it should help us understand not just the films themselves but the times and people that shaped them, which is central to the appreciation of any film or work of art.



What do you understand by the term 'perspective'? What are the two key perspectives to consider when analysing representation in your focus films?

Find someone you know, a friend or relative, and chat about what life was like for them in the 1950s and 1980s. This may have to be two different people. Did they go the cinema to see either of the films? If they did what did they think?

Task 3.14

Invasion of the Body Snatchers and E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

It may seem out of step with the rest of this section of the book to discuss both films together for this topic, as so far each has been considered separately topic by topic. This is to emphasise straight-away how similar both films are in a key approach to the representation we see. In discussing representation in *IOTBS* and *E.T.* what is absent from the screen is as important as what is present. What we are presented with in both cases is virtually an all-white middle class world. In *IOTBS* we see no African-American people in this small town, white American world; both of our central figures are prosperous and college-educated white people. The only hint of an ethnic minority is in the working-class Grimaldi family, an echo of a previous generation's immigration, as no trace of an accent can be detected in either Jimmy or his mother. Likewise, the world of *E.T.* is the insular white American suburb. This time we do see an African-American but in the briefest of cameos towards the end of the film, in the form of a police detective who questions Mike about why he's in the van.

This is significant for us to consider because as we have seen race is an important ongoing social issue throughout both decades. Even allowing for how both narratives deliberately narrow their focus for reasons of dramatic **claustrophobia** and/or intimacy, this 'whitewash' of both films illuminates, at least partly, the cultural attitudes of mainstream US film at the time. It is perhaps not racism, but it is certainly a form of 'colour blindness' that illustrates in some way cultural attitudes current at the time.

1950s (left) and 1980s (right)
America – members only?



Key terms

Claustrophobia

A fear of being in closed or small spaces or an unsettling, uncomfortable feeling caused by being in a situation that limits or restricts you.

Key demographic

A term used by government agencies, political parties and manufacturers of consumer goods to describe particular groups in society. Films are often aimed at a 'key demographic', e.g. a particular age group or gender grouping.

As we should consider perspectives on gender, ethnicity, age and different cultures, this leaves us only two areas where there are things to look at. In terms of gender both are typical of their times. In *IOTBS* we see men in all the positions of authority with women taking on a secondary role (even among the aliens). Even Becky, who, for a time at least, seems as determined and as strong as Miles, reverts to being the damsel in distress by the film's end. This 1950s attitude towards women's dependence on men is clearly stated in Becky and Miles' first conversation about their divorces. The word divorce not being mentioned so as to not offend 1950s family values; the reference to Reno (a centre for 'quickie' divorces) would have been understood by the 1950s American audience. In this conversation Miles jokes about legal divorce settlements by saying, 'Except that I'm paying dues while you collect them.' Clearly commenting on how men pay alimony to their dependent ex-wives. Age in *IOTBS* is fairly unremarkable in its representation, except perhaps that even though our protagonists are relatively young their roles in modern **key-demographic**-focused films might be filled with actors closer to teenagers rather than the '30 somethings' we see here.

In *E.T.* things have moved on in terms of attitudes to divorce, as it is a key element of the family's back story. The mother is depicted as capable of raising the family herself. She is a much stronger female character than those in *IOTBS*, apart from calling the police when Elliot is missing, she does not feel the need to be rescued by a man. Nevertheless, despite the presence of a mother and a sister in Elliott's life, the rest of the cast is still largely male dominated. It is the boys that rescue E.T. from the scientists, who are led by men reflecting that in 1980's America equality of gender roles still had some way to go – it still has, both in front of and behind the camera of US mainstream film. Age representation is, by the nature of the narrative, a rich area

of discussion. Through the staging of the film from the alien's or child's point-of-view, adults and their world are cast in a villainous light. The children and the alien are the vulnerable heroes we all root for. Elliot's mother, who is shot openly, and Keys, who is only shot openly when we realise he is an ally, being 'bridges' between the two age groups.

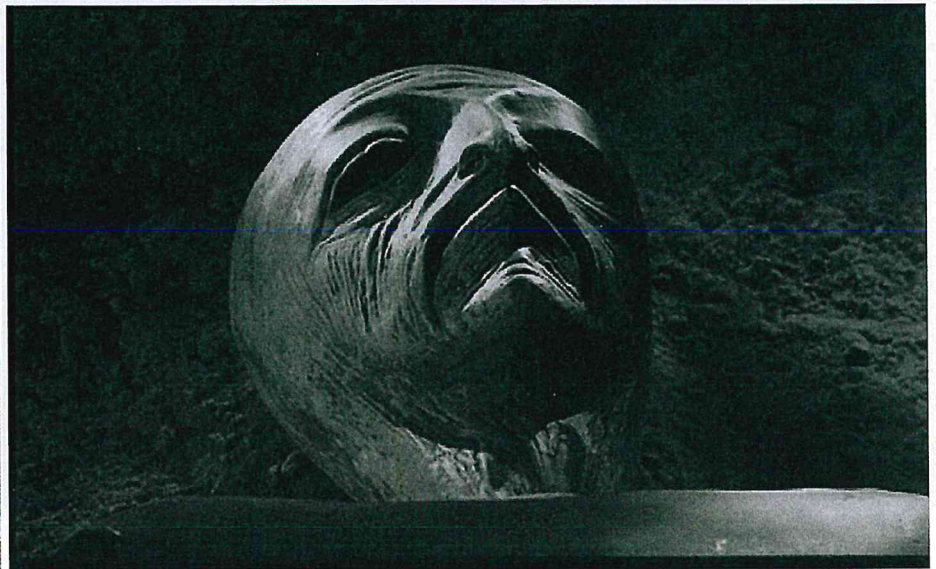
Perhaps in the final analysis, the representation open to most interesting discussion is that of the alien. As an audience we can decide for ourselves who or what the alien represents in each of the films. In *IOTBS* at one end of the spectrum it could be the communists and their desire to subvert the American way of life. Equally, at the other end of the spectrum the pods could be the American way of life itself and how rising materialism and social conformity are turning people into unthinking drones. In *E.T.* he could be a friendly immigrant with much to offer who is pursued as dangerous by a suspicious government. He could also be part of our innocence and wonder that we somehow thoughtlessly 'send away' in our rush to grow up. Whoever, or whatever, you decide the alien is standing in for, it is something interesting to discuss.

Quick Question
3.16

What do you think about how young people are depicted in the film? Write your response in bullet point form. Share with the class to see who agrees or disagrees.



'Who would you like me to be?'
(*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*).



'It's humanoid!' (*Earth vs the Flying Saucers*, 1956, Fred F. Sears).

This has been a brief look at some of the key representation in each film. What is important to remember when we look at any film or character in them, is that we should ask ourselves: What do they say about the people who made the film and the times in which they lived?

1. Discuss how people are represented in your chosen films.
2. Refer to at least one sequence from each film, commenting on the roles that cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing or sound play in their representation.

Task 3.15