

Section C

US independent films

Introduction

You can study one of the following five options:

Juno (2007, Reitman), *The Hurt Locker* (2008, Kathryn Bigelow), *Whiplash* (2014, Damien Chazelle), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris) and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015, Alfonso Gomez-Rejon).

Little Miss Sunshine, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, *Juno* and *Whiplash* place younger people and their experiences centre stage, whereas *The Hurt Locker* explores male values and attitudes within the context of a war film. All films reflect aspects of US society in the first two decades of the 21st century; while *The Hurt Locker*, in addition, raises issues about the US involvement in the 2003–2011 Iraq war. As with all film options, the films offered for study are cinematic in contrasting ways and will allow learners to explore how the films are shot and constructed.

Why study American independent film?

The perfect answer to this question is another question: 'Why would you want to miss out?' Cinema is all about story-telling and, as we all know, there are many different kinds of story out there told in many different ways. All too often we miss out on some really great films, or, if we are lucky, catch them online or on DVD. These 'great films' quite often are **independent (or indie) films** that escape our attention as they don't have the massive (and expensive) publicity that comes with a mainstream movie. To quote *Empire* film magazine's '50 Greatest American Independent Movies' article:

As much as blockbusters can thrill us, beyond the well-tended flowerbeds and spacious corner offices of Hollywood there's a world bubbling with creativity, free spirits and up-and-coming talent.

Who would want to miss out on that?

In this section of the book we will be looking at one of the films from the list, *The Hurt Locker*. In the case study we will examine what areas you should study for whichever choice you make. Discussing further what an 'indie' film is, the context/times the film was created in, a look at a sample of how the key elements of film form were used and some specialist writing about the film itself.

1. What do I know already? Chose an indie film. You will probably have seen one or more of the listed films; if not, then a film like them that counts as an 'indie' – check with your teacher.
2. Using your experience of watching both indie and mainstream movies, construct a table that compares what you expect from each type of movie. For example, a low **film production budget** for indie compared to a high one for mainstream.
3. Discuss with a partner or the whole class the points you can use to compare them before you start.

Key term

Hurt locker

The term 'hurt locker', according to the writer-producer Mark Boal, is military slang that means 'a bad and painful place'. The online Urban Dictionary defines it as 'a period of immense, inescapable physical or emotional pain', citing usage examples: 'This recession has been a real hurt locker.' 'She did not foresee her actions as contributing to the hurt locker she would soon be in.' 'That last track meet – Man, what a hurt locker!'

Key terms

Independent film

One that received less than 50% of its funding from one of the 'big six' major film studios; typically, with a relatively small budget, where the filmmaker gets to tell the story they want to tell in the way they want to tell it.

Film production budget

The money allowed to be spent on making the film project.

Task 3.16

Case study: The Hurt Locker

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow

Produced by Kathryn Bigelow, Mark Boal, Nicolas Chartier and Greg Shapiro

Written by Mark Boal

Production company: Voltage Pictures + Grosvenor Park Media, Film Capital Europe

Release date: 4 September 2008 Venice Film Festival

Certificate: 15

Running time: 126 minutes



What do we understand by US indie film?

When discussing what is meant by a US indie (short for independent) film there are two different ways of looking at it we should consider. These cover the two key elements of the process of making an American film: the art and the business. The most straightforward way to define it is financially. Financially, any movie that received less than 50% of its funding from one of the 'big six' major film studios, which are Sony – Columbia (MGM and UA), 20th Century Fox, Walt Disney Pictures, Warner Brothers, Paramount Pictures and Universal Pictures, is considered to be independent of their involvement. This is quite easy to apply but can still raise some issues as 49% can still be a lot of Hollywood money.

We also need to explore what filmmakers want to achieve artistically when producing an independent film and what audiences expect to see when watching one. A non-financial and more difficult to apply definition could be a film made away from the big studio (for whatever reason) that is entred around exploring characters and their development, typically with quite a small budget, where the filmmaker gets to tell the story they want to tell in the way they want to tell it. Quite often the result is that original and challenging films are made, which have an independent 'spirit' that is quite different in feel to more mainstream movies.

Read the following quotation:

So it can be seen that the trouble with the motion picture art was (and is) that it is too much an industry; and the trouble with the motion picture industry is that it is too much an art. It is out of this basic contradiction that most of the ills of the form arise. (Garson Kanin (1912–1999), Hollywood screenwriter director and three times Oscar nominee)

Discuss with a partner:

1. What Garson Kanin meant when he said this.
2. How this situation causes problems, or leads to disappointing ('ills of the form arise') mainstream films.
3. How independent films fit into this idea about the film industry.
4. Produce a poster to illustrate your points.

Task 3.17

*The rush of battle is often a potent and
lethal addiction, for war is a drug*

-Chris Hedges

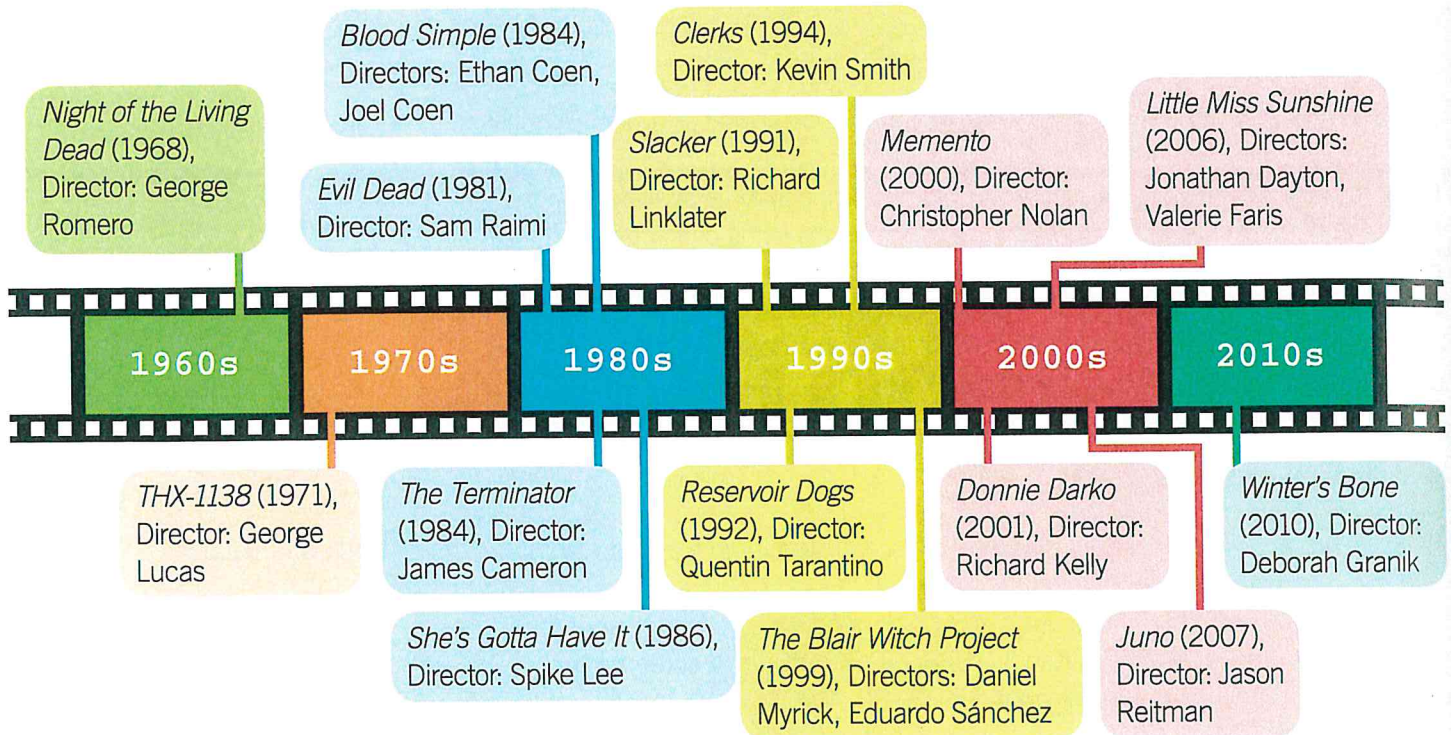
war is a drug

Opening title cards using a selctive fade to introduce the indie take on this war film's central theme (*The Hurt Locker*).

Applying this to *The Hurt Locker*

Financially *The Hurt Locker*, both in terms of its production and distribution, had a relatively small budget and received no support from any of the big studios. Artistically it is very much Kathryn Bigelow's film – her vision being key in its creation. It is very centred on the story of Sergeant First Class William James and was considered by many a challenging depiction of a military figure and how his role impacts his life. So, all in all, *The Hurt Locker* is very much a clear example of an American independent film.

Timeline of American independent films.



Task 3.18

- Look at the above timeline of examples of American independent film and discuss as a class the following questions:
 - What do you notice about the genre of the films listed?
 - Do any appear to be very different from the rest?
 - Which of them have you seen?
 - What do you think of them?
- Look at each film and:
 - Find out what possible important contribution to film each one made?
 - Choose one to prepare a PowerPoint presentation covering:
 - cast and crew
 - financial data
 - narrative
 - who went on to become famous and for what
 - influence on the wider film world and what this was.

Context

Iraq

The Hurt Locker was first screened at the Venice Film Festival in September 2008 and continued what was almost a tour of **film festivals** until its release 'proper' in June of 2009. This means that throughout both its production and release the war, or **insurgency** as it became known, in Iraq continued. So the realities that the film dramatised were still going on as the film audience watched on.

The film's events were inspired by the writing of a freelance journalist (Mark Boal). Boal tracked an American bomb squad in the 2004 Iraq war and later published an account of his (and the 'squaddie's') experiences during that period. Throughout the time he was in Iraq, Boal was in touch with Kathryn Bigelow, they shared ideas and the film began to take shape. In 2005 Bigelow and Boal began to work on the script. Bigelow drafted some early storyboards with the intention of producing as authentic a film as possible, telling Nick Dawson of *The Times* in 2009 that she wanted to 'put the audience into the Humvee – into a boots-on-the-ground experience'; the film was shot during 2007 in Jordan and Kuwait. Throughout this pre-production and production period, the conflict in Iraq continued despite the then president, George W. Bush's 2003 'mission accomplished' declaration on 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. During 2003, events in Iraq transformed from an out and out military conflict to the much more chaotic events of an insurgency.

The term insurgency refers to what has in differing historical conflicts been described as a guerrilla-, partisan- or resistance-based conflict. Where a group, or groups, uses various 'terrorist'-style tactics over a medium- to long-term time period to 'convince' an occupying force their presence is costing more than it is worth. In Iraq there were many groups, and continue to be so, involved, including a changing mix of militias, foreign fighters (such as Al Qaeda, later being replaced by Islamic State in the headlines), some former Iraqi military forces and parts of the former government. They variously used tactics such as the **improvised explosive devices (IEDs)** that feature so strongly in the film, as well as mortar bombing, missiles, suicide attacks, snipers, car bombs, small arms fire (usually with assault rifles) and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), and many other acts of sabotage designed to cause chaos for both the occupiers and the population.

The period of 2008–2009 did mark a significant period of change in policy towards the conflict in Iraq. In November 2008 George W. Bush was succeeded by Barack Obama, when he won the election to become America's first black president on a platform taglined with the slogan of 'yes we can' in regard to change. Obama's election emphasised how much people had taken to heart his overall message of 'hope' for the future. The emphasis in American military strategy was about to experience some of this 'change'. In January 2009 Obama announced the proposed closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility in Cuba, and the withdrawal of most of the American forces in Iraq by August 2010. The remaining 35,000–50,000 troops were to leave by the previous government's deadline of December 2011. So the endgame in terms of large-scale American occupation of Iraq had begun; indeed, between January and June of 2009, 150 military bases shut down or handed over control to the new Iraqi authorities.

Key terms

Film festivals

Organised, extended presentations of films in one or more cinemas or screening venues, usually in a single city or region.

Insurgency

A movement within a country dedicated to overthrowing the government. An insurgency is a rebellion.

Key term

Improvised explosive device (IED)

A homemade or makeshift bomb.

*Key term***Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

A mental health condition that is a result of a terrifying event – either experienced or witnessed. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety.

It is against this backdrop of changing circumstances for the conflict that the audience members would view the film. As the film ends, William James returns for another year's tour of duty in Iraq to 'escape' his **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** damaged home life – the supply of his 'war drug' in Iraq is in reality coming to a close. Indeed, *The Hurt Locker* can be seen as a culmination of the sub-genre of Iraq war films. Its critical and awards success had largely eluded its predecessor films on the subject. It received nine nominations and six wins at the 2010 Academy Awards. In Martin Barker's book, *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* (2007) he comments:

In several senses, Kathryn Bigelow's The Hurt Locker closes my cycle of films. I believed this before the film won its six Oscars at the 2010 Academy awards. That merely became another dimension to the closure, which is mainly the result of how it differs from the others.

A difference we will also consider when we look at key and structural elements of film form.

What else was going on?

As is the case with any film, the world into which it comes is also the world in which it was created and, perhaps more importantly, viewed. So a brief rundown of some other events happening in 2008–2009 would be useful. Some of these events are highlighted by the *Guardian* newspaper at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/17/decade-timeline-what-happened-when>

Task 3.19

1. Look at the *Guardian* website (see above link). Pick out between six–ten key events for 2008 and 2009.
2. Some of these events may mean very little to many of you; ask your teacher and other adults to talk about those that they remember. Their memories are important to think about because most of them may have affected our lives as well the life of the film to a greater or lesser extent.
3. Produce your own timeline of the UK and world events that you think are important to the film and your life now.

Film in 2009

In one way, within the world of film production and distribution, *The Hurt Locker* found itself as one of absolute contrast because one of its main competitors at the 82nd Academy Awards was James Cameron's *Avatar*, matching *The Hurt Locker's* number of nominations with nine, but only managing half the number of wins with three. If *The Hurt Locker* is a good example of an independent film, *Avatar* is the very definition of a mainstream blockbuster.

Like most industries, Hollywood was trying to tackle the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in the form of a global recession and falling demand.

Rank	Title	Distributor	Worldwide gross
1.	<i>Avatar</i>	Fox	\$2,749,064,328
2.	<i>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</i>	Warner Bros	\$934,416,487
3.	<i>Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs</i>	Fox	\$886,686,817
4.	<i>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</i>	Paramount	\$836,303,693
5.	<i>2012</i>	Columbia	\$769,679,473
6.	<i>Up</i>	Disney	\$735,099,082
7.	<i>The Twilight Saga: New Moon</i>	Summit	\$709,711,008
8.	<i>Sherlock Holmes</i>	Warner Bros	\$524,028,679
9.	<i>Angels & Demons</i>	Columbia	\$485,930,816
10.	<i>The Hangover</i>	Warner Bros	\$467,483,912

Highest-grossing films of 2009

(Source: '2009 in Film', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_in_film)

1. What do you notice about the top ten films of 2009? Think about:

- genre
- studio
- box-office
- stars.

2. How does *The Hurt Locker* compare?

Task 3.20

When we look at what was successful in 2009 we see that Hollywood continued to rely on the tried and tested to tempt an audience that had less spending power to the cinema. Half of the ten highest-grossing films are sequels and franchises, of the other half we have:

- two big budget spectacles, *Avatar* (James Cameron) and *2012* (Roland Emmerich)
- *Up* (Pete Docter and Bob Peterson) a family-friendly Disney film
- *Sherlock Holmes* (Guy Ritchie) a star vehicle for the increasingly popular (again) star Robert Downey Junior
- the perennial Hollywood staple of a franchise beginning comedy in the form of *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips).

So it is into a very 'safe' and 'conservative' market that the ultra real, edgy and potentially controversial Iraq war film was launched. This kind of competition, partnered with its limited release, goes some way to explain that despite its six Oscar wins *The Hurt Locker* only just managed to scrape into the top 100 worldwide grossing films at number 96 (source: Boxoffice mojo.com). Compare this to the previous year's semi-independent winner (eight wins, ten nominations) *Slumdog Millionaire* with an identical \$15 million budget and a global box office of \$377.9 million (16th highest overall) and we can see how hard it is to sell Iraq war films to the cinema-going audience – 'a toxic genre' indeed.



Kathryn Bigelow receiving her Oscar for Best Achievement in Directing, for *The Hurt Locker*.

Studying the key elements of film form

Key terms

Meaning

What the director intends you to think and feel while watching the film.

Documentary

Non-fictional film intended to document some aspect of reality, for the purpose of maintaining a historical record. To be real.

Aestheticised

Depict as being pleasing or artistically beautiful; represent in an idealised or refined manner.

Cinematic

Does it feel like we are watching film? Having qualities characteristic of films – big screen, big sound, big drama, a feeling of created or designed intensity. Adding additional layers of meaning, making the viewer involved and the ability to create a copy in a viewer's mind.

Authenticity

Real or genuine: not copied or false, true and accurate, made to look or look just like an original.

16mm film

Frequently used, economical use of film. 16mm refers to the width of the film. It is not generally used for mainstream films unless the filmmaker wants to create a gritty or grainy look for the film.

Introduction

As with all the films you are studying on this course, an important, if not the most important, aspects of this study is the key elements of film form: cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing and sound. We need to understand how these are used to create **meaning** in the film overall; we can especially gain much from considering how they are used in the opening sequence, as this sets the tone for much of the rest of the film. Although we will discuss them separately, we must never lose sight of the fact that they are all working together to achieve the filmmaker's overall objective. Kathryn Bigelow is known for her ability to direct action well, which is a very strong feature of *The Hurt Locker*, together with a desire for a **documentary** feel of authenticity. In an interview with Nick Dawson for *Filmmaker* magazine she explained:

Okay, you want to make it as real and as authentic as possible, to put the audience into the Humvee, into a boots-on-the-ground experience. How do you do that? You do it by finding a look, a feel and a texture that is very immediate, raw and vital, and yet also is not aestheticized. I wanted, as a filmmaker, to sort of step aside and let just the rawness and integrity of the subject be as pronounced as possible and not have it feel sort of 'cinematic'.

So as we consider how the key elements of film form are used throughout the film, this explanation is a very important guide for our analysis; we should ask ourselves the question 'does it feel authentic, does it feel like we are "there"?'

Cinematography and lighting

*She wanted to use four cameras running simultaneously. We chose to shoot on Super 16mm, which might seem unusual for a Kathryn Bigelow film, but she was very happy to go with that choice. It offered financial freedom and liberated the cameras a bit. So we showed up with Aaton cameras and a crew from all over the world, and we wound up shooting quite a lot of Fuji film – over a million feet. (Scott Macaulay, 'Cinematographer Barry Ackroyd talks *The Hurt Locker*', *Filmmaker*)*

We got camera's everywhere, we call them ninja cameras ... (Jeremy Renner interviewed during 'The Making of', DVD extra)

Literally no place you could turn where you wouldn't see a camera. (Kathryn Bigelow, interviewed during 'The Making of' DVD extra)

The quotations above underline Bigelow's overall goal of **authenticity**. It was a major influence on how the filming took place: the multiple cameras give great flexibility of choice when it comes to editing and the use of **16mm film** rather than the standard 35mm film helped with the documentary feel. This documentary approach was

her enhanced by unconventional framing camera shaking, loose and at times
ing focus, snap or crash zooms, and an overall hand-held camera style that
ked filmmaking 'on the run', at times almost creating a found footage aesthetic.
vertheless, there was some use of the camera vocabulary of action/war films
elow is so well versed in, for example overhead shots of many of the dramatic
pieces, which would be less common if the footage was solely news crew type
ing where the camera is embedded with the soldiers and follows them at a more
sistently ground level.

ch of this is clearly in evidence during the opening sequence where we see a
nb disposal team dealing with an IED for the first time in the film.



A robot's eye view
(*The Hurt Locker*).

opening shot from the bomb disposal robot's camera is ultra-authentic as its
V style picture breaks up on its journey to the IED. We then cut to an extreme
e-up tracking shot of the robot that barely allows us to take in what we are seeing,
first instance of using the camera to instil a feeling of 'immediate, raw and vital'
os in the situation.

then cut to a series of four shots of the local people being evacuated that takes
way from the close-up danger of the IED into the wider feeling of disruption and
ic of the scene.

Key term

CCTV

Closed-circuit television is a TV system in which signals are not publicly distributed but are monitored, primarily for surveillance and security purposes.

Baghdad: panic in the streets
(*The Hurt Locker*).



Key term

80-degree rule

A general rule used in cinematography and editing that aims to ensure that the camera is kept on one side of the action and the audience does not feel disorientated. For example, when two characters are having an on-screen conversation and we only see one character as he/she speaks, this rule ensures that the on-screen character keeps looking towards where the other (off-screen) character is standing or sitting.

Notice how the location is established in a very matter of fact, almost casual way, with the simple single word caption 'Baghdad' again utilising the simple typewriter Courier-style font. The relaxed approach to camera framing that the hand-held zooming effect creates heightens the feeling of disorder; as does the gently breaking of the **180-degree rule** between the third and fourth shots.

This is quickly followed by an example of a snap or crash zoom, where the camera acts to speed up the action and increases the drama by moving from an extreme high angle long shot of the scene, without pause for focusing, into a lower angled more familiar style long shot of the robot's progress to the IED.



A crash zoom into the action (*The Hurt Locker*).

Notice again how the two out of focus elements in the crash zoom use the 'rawness' referred to by Kathryn Bigelow to draw the audience further into the tension of the scene.

Next, we see a clear example of the four-camera set-up as the soldiers disembark from their Humvee, note how the editor is able to cut to at least four different angles of the event all happening at the same time.

Four cameras – one arrival (*The Hurt Locker*).



Notice also the **Dutch angle** effect in the shots as well as the seemingly non-conventional framing that adds to the immediacy of the documentary feel.

A vital component in establishing the real feel to the action in *The Hurt Locker* is the use of crash zooms to an almost dizzying extent and the very free use of hand-held cameras in the filming to create a very real sense of motion. Kathryn Bigelow explains this in terms of trying to get a feel more like the actual experience of 'seeing':

That's how we experience reality, by looking at the microcosm and the macrocosm simultaneously. The eye sees differently than the lens, but with multiple focal lengths and a muscular editorial style, the lens can give you that microcosm/macrocosm perspective, and that contributes to the feeling of total immersion. (Patricia Thomson, (July 2009), 'Risk and Valor: *The Hurt Locker*', *American Cinematographer*, 90(7): 44–50)

Our final example for the camera is another example of an unconventional use of framing as we are introduced to two of the three main characters of this opening scene.

Key term

Dutch angle

A tilted camera angle that causes the horizon in the shot to be diagonal to the bottom of the frame. It can be used to express a character's drunken state (as in *Rebel Without a Cause*), mental state, disorientation and anxiety.



Extreme concentration and close-up (*The Hurt Locker*).



We see each soldier for the first time in extreme close-up, with barely a glimpse at who they are, but it does heighten both the intimacy and claustrophobic feeling of this high-pressure situation. It is interesting to note that the third of the three protagonists (Eldridge) is framed differently at this point:



Eldridge framed as an outsider (*The Hurt Locker*).

Almost 30 seconds later we see him stand up and look into the action from its edge, which sets up an aspect of his character for later in the film, as he is in some ways the outsider on the periphery of the relationship between the main characters.

1. Examine the two shots below from *The Hurt Locker* and answer the following questions:



Task 3.21

- How would you describe these shots?
 - What is this type of framing called?
 - What does the framing and composition suggest to the audience?
 - What meaning is the director trying to create by framing these shots in this way?
2. Examine the next two shots from *The Hurt Locker* and then answer the following questions:



- How would you describe these shots?
- What type of framing is being used?
- How are they different from the previous two shots?
- What does the framing and composition suggest to the audience?

Slow motion

The sequences' climactic uses of super slow motion shots utilises cameras that can shoot up to 50,000 frames per second – 1,000 images per second. This allows for shots of much longer duration to hold the spectator in the moment of the explosive action taking in the extent of its power and destruction.



Detonation sequence
(*The Hurt Locker*).

This final section of the opening sequence is constructed once again using multiple angles and distances. It is the use of slow motion that impacts the audience the most, especially given its contrast to the fast paced and frenetic editing immediately prior to it as the soldiers try to stop the man with the mobile phone from detonating the IED.

What would be an incident that would be over in a fraction of a second is given a full 35 seconds to unfold. When the scene cuts from slow motion to real-time action this acts in a similar way to the crash zooms earlier in the sequence, as it gives us a jolt, further increasing the impact of the explosion. The way that the explosion is filmed leaves the audience with a very clear and visceral impression of what the bomb disposal technicians will be up against throughout the rest of the film.

In pairs:

Task 3.22

1. Think of and list three examples of uses of slow motion from any other film.
2. What are the similarities and differences in the meaning created in each example?
3. Share your findings with the class – see if, as a group, you can compile a list of the typical meanings created by the use of slow motion in film.

Lighting

The Hurt Locker is a good example of a film shot with lighting designed to create a feeling of no formal lighting or with the use of natural light. This effect is key to underpinning the documentary feel Kathryn Bigelow was trying to achieve. Given its setting, the audience experiences high or even harsh levels of lighting that evoke reality within the desert setting.



Cinematography
(*The Hurt Locker*).

In the still above left, we see the use of the sun as the principal light source, the overall picture being clear and bright with clearly defined shadows created by the surrounding buildings. Again, in the still above right the audience is exposed (as far as is possible) to the harshness of the sun. The audience shares the experience with Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson of having to squint through his helmet's visor under the sun's harsh glare, when a passing helicopter attracts his attention.

Paired with this naturalistic approach to the use of daylight is the use of night shots of contrasting levels of low light, to suggest on-screen light sources, and the use of night vision effects of US military equipment. This provides the very foundations of Kathryn Bigelow's aim to produce 'a look, a feel and a texture that is very immediate, raw and vital'. This is explained in further detail by the cinematographer Barry Ackroyd:

On daylight scenes I avoided lighting if I could. When it came to night, I would try and use a practical light as a source. I tried to avoid bringing too much technical equipment into a room. I used Chinese lanterns and Kino Flo tubes inserted into drainpipes. I cut out the central section and then you can diffuse the tube itself and stand them in corners. I like to disguise lights in that way. I'm always thinking about how to bring light into a scene without having to see it or have it interfere with the acting. [My approach] is about simplifying, not thinking too big and trusting the stock will carry. (Scott Macaulay, 'Cinematographer Barry Ackroyd Talks *The Hurt Locker*', 14 November 2011, *Filmmaker*)

Key terms

Chinese lanterns

A great low-budget method for creating soft, diffused light in a number of directions.

Kino Flo tube

An LED and fluorescent lighting system.

1. Watch the night sequence set in the aftermath of the tanker explosion (1:33:35–1:38:48), analysing the use of the lighting to create meaning. Consider:
 - (a) What kind of lighting scheme is being used.
 - (b) What is the overall effect created by the atmosphere of the sequence?
 - (c) On-screen light sources and their effect.
 - (d) Off-screen light sources and their effect.
 - (e) What feeling does the silhouette effect create?
 - (f) How far do you think we are watching action lit by natural light sources?
 - (g) How is this important in the context of the director's overall aim for the film?
2. Experiment by filming at night with different levels of light to see for yourself how much film lighting may have been used in this sequence. Clue – torches usually give off beams of light; why don't they seem to have them here?

Task 3.23

Mise-en-scène

Setting

Of the elements of mise-en-scène, perhaps key to realising Kathryn Bigelow's vision for an authentic feel is the setting. The film is shot in Jordan relatively close to the film setting of Iraq, which does not just afford the film the 'look' it needs to emulate Baghdad but also 'helps' the performance of the actors in reaching for the required realism, as Jeremy Renner (Sergeant William James) commented in the 'Making of' documentary – *'that sweat's real sweat!'*



The long walk (*The Hurt Locker*).



The Souk (*The Hurt Locker*).

We view the typical backdrop for the action in the above stills from the opening sequence. The civilian areas are either fully ruined or partially destroyed to reflect the aftermath of US's 'mission accomplished'. In the first image we see a typically basic and ramshackle open air Middle Eastern marketplace or Souk. In the second we get a wider view of what appears to be post-conflict temporary dwellings and burnt-out cars that help establish the combat-worn post-'mission accomplished' Baghdad.



The base (*The Hurt Locker*).



Removing the shutters (*The Hurt Locker*).

Another key setting, which doesn't feature in the opening sequence, is the US base, which is sparse and functionally military, with a vaguely temporary and faceless feel. This is illustrated in the stills above; on the left we see the base with its mix of concrete and basic steel shuttering and portacabin-style buildings that hold clean lines in stark contrast to the battle-worn Baghdad surroundings we have seen already. On the right still we see Sergeant J.T. Sanborn helping Sergeant First Class

William James removing the safety boards from the windows of his already sparse accommodation. Sandborn advises against it, to no avail, which clearly foreshadows James' attitude towards risk.

Consider the following still (1:12:42); Sergeant James is 'enjoying some downtime':



Isolation (*The Hurt Locker*).

1. Identify and explain the key elements of the setting.
2. How are these key elements being used to reflect Sergeant James' state of mind?

Performance

Much of the central characters' performances are **internalised** for a greater part of the film. We see a depiction of men in combat struggling to find their own ways of dealing with their situation. This builds up to emotional outbursts or 'explosions' that parallel the detonation of the IEDs.

The central performance is that of Jeremy Renner in the role of Sergeant First Class William James, who was nominated for the Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role Oscar. Renner's portrayal is very much that of a man dealing with inner turmoil and a struggle to reconcile what he is feeling and experiencing with the expectations of military men in combat situations. We see on the next page a typical moment of **introspection** from later on in the film.

Task 3.24

Key terms

Internalised/inner turmoil

If you internalise your emotions or feelings, you do not allow them to show although you think about them while experiencing a state of confusion, disturbance and agitation.

Introspection

Observation or examination of one's own mental and emotional state, mental processes; the act of looking within oneself.

Heavy metal processing (*The Hurt Locker*).



This performance as the 'brooding outsider' is one that Renner excels at, even to the extent of importing elements of it into his performance as Clint Barton in the mainstream blockbuster Marvel movies.

Other important elements within the performances are the relaxed relationships between the central characters for much of the time. Dialogue is 'banter' in style with suitably male posturing body language. There are at least two examples of this in the opening scene: the 'dick' exchange whilst manipulating the robot and the reference to the American version of *Steptoe and Son* – *Sanford & Son* in the vaguely racist conversation regarding the idea for a grass business.

Task 3.25

Complete the tasks below, considering the three main characters, Sergeant James, Sergeant Sanborn and Specialist Owen Eldridge:

1. Write a brief character description for each character.
2. Find a sequence that includes a performance element that demonstrates each one's character.
3. Explain why you think this is so.

Key terms

Blocked or blocking

Originally a theatre term referring to the positioning and movement of the actors on the stage. In cinema, blocking a scene entails working out the details of an actor's moves in relation to the camera and lighting.

Staged or staging

The process of selecting, designing, adapting to, or modifying the performance space for a film.

Positioning of characters and objects

Despite the, on occasion, unconventional approach to camera framing and movement, much of the chaos of authenticity is achieved through the ways in which the shots showing the relationship between James, Sanborn and Eldridge are edited together. There is a feeling of things happening spontaneously in front of the cameras, created, rather than being **blocked** and **staged**, in the style of a more conventional movie. If we look at the following still we see activity at various distances in the frame.



'He's not gonna make it'
(The Hurt Locker).

From the minaret in the far distance we have the Iraqi police moving into the focus of the scene with the partially framed officer and his men, with, finally, the barrel of another soldier's gun encroaching on the frame immediately in front of the camera. This multi-layered **composition** feels 'untidy' and once again helps towards fulfilling Kathryn Bigelow's overall ambition for rawness and authenticity.

Key term

Composition

How the elements of a shot are arranged, including sets, props, actors, costumes and lighting.

Costume, hair and make-up

Much as we would expect, the most significant elements are the Americans on the one hand and the Iraqi population on the other. The still below, again from later on in the film, serves to illustrate this.



'It's not too safe here –
I think we should move'
(The Hurt Locker).

The American is seen in his clean and efficient-feeling desert camouflage uniform, which makes an officious contrast with the Iraqi's mix of time-worn old and new native garb. These are very much the costume images we have come to expect from news coverage of the ongoing conflict.

One key costume is the bomb suit: how its appearance seems to change the man inside into some kind of lumbering robot. This superficial appearance of power, however, is revealed as illusory in the opening scene as we see how little true protection it affords Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson once the IED explodes.

Thompson's death
(*The Hurt Locker*).



We also see the use of make-up that indicates swiftly to the audience that he is badly injured or dead. Indeed, after this opening sequence, whenever the bomb suit comes out it is a signifier that something is about to happen or Sergeant First Class William James is about to venture once again into the very heart of the 'hurt locker'.

Key term

Jeopardy

Hazard or risk of or exposure to loss, harm, death or injury; peril or danger.

Props

The most significant props are the bomb disposal equipment, particularly the suit, the weapons and the IEDs. We also see the importance of the mobile phone as the means of detonation, the cutaway (below) of one from the opening sequence underlines early on this important tool of the insurgency and indicator of possible **jeopardy** in the film's narrative.

'Put it down!' (*The Hurt Locker*).



Overall, the props become increasingly unobtrusive after a while, as the audience is immersed in this military environment and the authenticity of look and feel that gradually increases our acceptance of these accoutrements as part and parcel of the every day.

Study the following still taken from the sequence where Sergeant James is confronted with dealing with a reluctant human bomb (1:48:24):



'Put his hands behind his head or I will happily shoot him' (*The Hurt Locker*).

1. Discuss as a group how the elements of costume, hair and make-up, and props contribute towards this scene.
2. Write a paragraph on how they add to the jeopardy of the situation we see here.
3. What other elements of film language contribute to what the audience is feeling?
4. Which narrative device common to mainstream action movies is used here?

Editing

Due to the nature of the sequence, we have partly discussed editing throughout the previous elements of film form. The guiding idea behind the editing choices again falls very squarely in line with Kathryn Bigelow's policy of 'raw, immediate and visceral'. The editor, Chris Innis, reflects this when he stated that they '*really wanted the film to retain that newsreel documentary quality ...*' This results in multiple uses of straight cuts that feel random in places, which tend to break traditional rules of the typical Hollywood **continuity editing** style. The editing plays fast and loose with the 180° rule and matching on motion and framing to evoke a feeling of documenting the chaos of a real panic. Slightly more conventional is the cross-cutting between the main protagonists to heighten the emotional drama and fear, particularly in the IED disposal situations.

Task 3.26

Key terms

Newsreel

A short film of news and current affairs, formerly made for showing as part of the programme in a cinema.

Parallel editing

An editing technique of alternating two or more scenes that happen simultaneously but in different locations. If the scenes are simultaneous, they occasionally culminate in a single place, where the relevant parties confront each other.

Similarly conventional is the **parallel editing** between the main protagonists and the unseen insurgents POV to build tension as Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson approaches the IED's disposal. As important as the style of cutting is the variation in shot length and pace to create drama and tension. The best example of this being how the length of shot shrinks to increase the pace of the action significantly, as the sequence builds up to the traditional action movie moment of will or won't Sergeant Matt Thompson escape the blast. Unlike a more clichéd Hollywood outcome, he does not survive.

Task 3.27

1. Watch the sequences 'How long you guys out here?' (51:51) and 'We need ammo!' (56:29) and then:
 - (a) Explain the transition(s) used, why do you think this choice was made?
 - (b) Discuss the impact the pace of editing has on the audience.
 - (c) What impact does the use of cross-cutting have?
2. Time some of the shots to see how long they actually last; this may be useful if you have to edit your own film.

Key terms

Soundscape

A sound or combination of sounds that forms or arises from an immersive environment.

Film score

Original music written specifically to accompany a film.

Sound

Last, but far from the least, we must consider the use of sound; or perhaps a more accurate description would be the construction of the film's **soundscape**. There is an unmistakable emphasis on the use of diegetic sound, as we would expect in its role in supporting Kathryn Bigelow's overall goal of authenticity.

Despite this, the film is subtly scored, subtle to the extent that the first sound we hear is music, but only of a sort, it is an electronic tone that could almost be a sound being heard inside a stressed participant in the sequence. This tone acts as a sound bridge between the black of the opening caption as it morphs into the panicked Arabic shouting, which parallels the feel of the opening sequence. The **film score** is also used more conventionally, where often regional flavoured music is used to evoke an authentic Middle Eastern feel.

As the sequence progresses, multiple on-screen and off-screen sounds are layered, and collide to evoke what is now familiar in this depiction of a distrusted military occupation facing an immediate crisis. The disembodied loudspeaker Arabic voice, often the call to prayer but in this instance the IED warning, the insistent whirring of the bomb disposal robot, crowd noise, and the sound of jets and helicopters overhead are all a constant reminder of the intrusion of US military. They might all combine to immerse the audience in the 'immediate, raw and vital' experience of the situation.

This build-up of intensity enhanced by the use of sound in the sequence culminates in the dramatic 'release' of the explosion. This large diegetic sound contrasts dramatically with the more intimate sound of Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson's increasingly laboured breathing as he tries to escape the explosion. The sequence ends in a silence that allows the audience to breathe once again and to take in and absorb what they have just seen and felt.

Watch the sequence 'Ishmil' (1:23:17–1:25:09) a surprise attack. Now, complete the following tasks:

1. Identify the different sound elements used.
2. Which are diegetic and non-diegetic?
3. Which are on-screen and which are off-screen?
4. How are these individual elements used to support meaning and create atmosphere?
5. How do they work collectively to create meaning and atmosphere?
6. What meaning(s) does the sound bridge and the end possibly convey to the audience?

Task 3.28

Consider the following still from the closing shot of the film (2:00:48).

Task 3.29



The final shot (*The Hurt Locker*).

Discuss:

- (a) The thoughts and feelings of the audience created by this image?
- (b) Watch the actual sequence and comment on the contribution of the sound and editing elements.
- (c) What message are you left with?

*Key term***Academic study**

Usually used to describe work carried out in schools, colleges, and universities, especially work that involves studying and reasoning skills rather than practical skills.

Talking and writing about films

Here we will consider how other people have thought and written about *The Hurt Locker*. It is useful to deepen our understanding of the film by considering a range of responses. We will look at two reviews from publications aimed at different audiences and an extract from a more **academic study** of the film.

Reviews

Let's consider the final 150–200 words of two reviews of the film when it was first released.

Mainstream media: *Empire* – Ian Nathan

The Hurt Locker, such a bruising, brilliant experience, can be viewed as the culmination, to date, of Bigelow's heightened MO. Amongst her snorting satire of macho posturing that was Point Break crops up a pumped and tattoo-splattered surf-warrior derisively dubbed War Child. Now, heartbreakingly, she has found a true war child, a soul that can only function in country. Without the breast-beating of the Sarandon-Robbins crew, without much Bush-bashing at all, it's a tragic picture of men defined by conflict.

If it lacks the grand breadth of the great war movies, the mythical elevation of an Apocalypse Now, say, Bigelow has envisioned a stunning microcosm of hell that asks the most nakedly important question of all: will they make it?

*The most literally exciting film you will see this year. Forget the off-putting banner of another Iraq movie – go, watch, marvel, endure and book in the palliative of a stiff drink afterwards. ('The Hurt Locker Review', 29 July 2009, *Empire*)*

About Ian Nathan

Ian Nathan, who lives and works in London, is one of the UK's best-known film writers. A former editor and executive editor of the world's biggest film magazine, *Empire*, he remains a contributing editor. Nathan has written several books on film including a filmography of the Coen Brothers, and a *Masters of Cinema* book dedicated to them. He is also author of *Terminator Vault* and *Alien Vault*, the definitive history of James Cameron's *Terminator* movies. He is a contributor to numerous publications including *The Times* and the *Independent*.

Task 3.30

- Look up the whole review online at: <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/hurt-locker/review/> and:
 - Read the review and make notes of any words or phrases you do not understand.
 - Look up their meanings or discuss them with your teacher or class.
 - What new information about the film did the review give you?
 - What did you agree with?
 - What did you disagree with?
 - What was your overall opinion on the review?
- Look up another review from a mainstream source, for example *Total Film*. How does it compare with the *Empire* review?

BFI: Sight & Sound – Guy Westwell

The *Hurt Locker* is a powerful action movie in its own right, but it also offers a different take on the war in Iraq. Avoiding the high moral tone of *Redacted* or the plaintive soul-searching of *In the Valley of Elah* (also co-written by Boal), it confronts the fact that men often take great pleasure in war. While one sensitive character longs to leave the fighting behind and return to America to start a family, the film sides with Renner's character, inveterate risk-taker and adrenaline junkie Staff Sergeant Will James. James confesses to his infant son that he loves just one thing and in the very next shot he's back in Iraq and striding towards an unexploded bomb. In the context of the war in Iraq (where many reservists and stop-lossed veterans are not exactly volunteers) this unapologetic celebration of a testosterone-fuelled lust for war may gall. Yet there is something original and distinctive about the film's willingness to admit that for some men (and many moviegoers) war carries an intrinsic dramatic charge. ('Film Review: *The Hurt Locker*', 2008, *Sight & Sound*)

About Guy Westwell

Guy Westwell is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and Chair of Department of Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London. A graduate of Keele University (BA Hons) and the University of Glasgow (MPhil, PhD), his main areas of research have focused upon the war film and antiwar film, film and politics, film and cultural memory, 9/11 and film, and iconic photographs and film. He occasionally writes film reviews for *Sight & Sound* and *The Conversation*. He was the recipient of the Drapers' Award for excellence in teaching in 2009. Publications include: *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (2014, Wallflower Press) and *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (2006, Wallflower Press).

1. Look up the whole review online at: <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/5082> and:
 - (a) Read the review and make a note of any words or phrases you do not understand.
 - (b) Look up their meanings or discuss them with your teacher or class.
 - (c) What new information about the film did the review give you?
 - (d) What did you agree with?
 - (e) What did you disagree with?
 - (f) How did this review compare with the *Empire* review?
 - (g) What was your overall opinion on the review?
2. Look up another review from a cinephile source, for example *Film Comment*. How does it compare with the *Sight & Sound* review?

Task 3.31

1. Go back to the two original reviews and:
 - (a) Note down the main features of each, for example the use of a star rating or a synopsis.
 - (b) Which review included the most difficult language?
 - (c) Why do you think that is?
 - (d) In your opinion, which was the most effective review?

Task 3.32

Task 3.33

Using what you have learned about writing a review, write one of your own. Once you have finished, include a short explanation of why you have done it in the way that you have.

Academic study

Now let us look at an extract from academic study of the film taken from the *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 'Embodiment in the War Film: *Paradise Now* and *The Hurt Locker*', by Robert Burgoyne.

The Hurt Locker foregrounds the body in an equally explicit manner. Encasing its protagonist in a 100-pound Kevlar 'bomb suit', the film isolates the main character, Sergeant William James, as dramatically as the suicide vest isolates the human bomb in Paradise Now. Opposites or antitheses of each other, the suicide bomber and the leader of the bomb deactivation squad both bring into focus the problem of bodies in war, their destructive potency and their vulnerability. By underscoring the body at risk, The Hurt Locker also presents an implicit critique of the distance – moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry. The reality of war as embodied activity and embodied violence asserts itself here in a visceral way. (2002, Vol. 5, No. 3)

About Robert Burgoyne

Robert Burgoyne is a Professor of Film Studies at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Minnesota and a doctorate at New York University. His work has centred on the historiography of film, with a special emphasis on American cinema, history and national identity, and the counter-narratives of nation that have emerged in many films. His recent publications include *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (2010, University of Minnesota Press) and *The Epic Film in World Culture* (2010, Routledge).

Task 3.34

1. Read the extract from Robert Burgoyne's article above and:
 - (a) Write a short summary about what you think he is saying. Look up or ask about any difficult language or words.
 - (b) Discuss with a partner or your group what you think Robert Burgoyne is saying.
 - (c) Now write a short summary about what you think he is saying.
 - (d) Write a short evaluation once you have finished explaining how and why your understanding changed.
2. You could now try to take on the whole article at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9821980.pdf>

1. Use the internet to find your own examples of specialist writing about *The Hurt Locker*.

A good place to start may be with a specific issue, for example the area of gender, from the *Guardian* newspaper's headline (Matthew Weaver, 8 March 2010):

Task 3.35

KATHRYN BIGELOW MAKES HISTORY AS FIRST WOMAN TO WIN BEST DIRECTOR OSCAR

Once you have found a piece of writing that you find interesting create a critique of it to include:

- (a) A brief summary of the article.
 - (b) The main ideas in the writing you think are most interesting.
 - (c) List where you agree with it.
 - (d) List where you disagree with it.
 - (e) Any other thoughts or information you have as a result of this piece of writing.
2. Present your critique to the rest of your class.