



Dial S for Suspense

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## Studying suspense

Many of these films are rated MA15+ and contain scenes that may be inappropriate for your school or classroom. That said, there are some terrific individual scenes in these films that can be analysed in isolation by your senior classes. Always make sure you check the classification before screening material for your class.

### Film

### Scene

<i>28 Days Later</i> (2002, Danny Boyle)	00:41:51 - 00:45:13
<i>Duel</i> (Steven Spielberg, 1971)	00:09:11 - 00:09:59
<i>Disturbia</i> (DJ Caruson, 2007)	00:59:34 - 01:04:49
<i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> (David Fincher, 2011)	01:45:35 - 01:49:35
<i>The Hurt Locker</i> (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008)	00:20:52 - 00:25:12
<i>The Lovely Bones</i> (Peter Jackson, 2009)	01:35:01 - 01:41:42
<i>Misery</i> (Rob Reiner, 1990)	00:44:38 - 00:53:02
<i>Munich</i> (Steven Spielberg, 2005)	00:48:13 - 00:50:53
<i>Mystery, Alaska</i> (Jay Roach, 1999)	01:41:10 - 01:41:46
<i>No Country for Old Men</i> (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007)	00:56:36 - 01:00:57
<i>Psycho</i> (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)	00:10:37 - 00:13:17
<i>Rear Window</i> (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)	01:40:25 - 01:45:12
<i>Scream</i> (Wes Craven, 1996)	00:00:00 - 00:03:53 00:21:03 - 00:23:42 00:43:45 - 00:46:27
<i>Signs</i> (M Night Shyamalan, 2002)	01:12:01 - 01:19:03
<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> (Jonathan Demme, 1991)	01:33:57 - 01:35:57
<i>The Sixth Sense</i> (M Night Shyamalan, 1999)	00:19:03 - 00:19:25 01:17:30 - 01:18:33
<i>The Strangers</i> (Bryan Bertino, 2008)	00:17:31 - 00:20:19
<i>The Thing</i> (John Carpenter, 1982)	01:15:39 - 01:19:33
<i>Unbreakable</i> (M Night Shyamalan, 2000)	00:40:07 - 00:41:30
<i>Valkyrie</i> (Bryan Singer, 2008)	01:23:16 - 01:25:18
<i>The Village</i> (M Night Shyamalan, 2004)	00:31:19 - 00:32:48
<i>Zodiac</i> (David Fincher, 2007)	02:05:53 - 02:11:07

# Dial S for Suspense

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Watch a suspenseful scene from a film carefully. As you're watching, jot down notes about how camera techniques, acting, mise en scène, editing, lighting and sound are used to make the audience feel a sense of anxiety or concern about the outcome of a scene.



Directors use a number of techniques to create suspense, including:

- camera (handheld camera movement, framing, extreme close ups, close ups, point of view shots, canting, camera angle)
- acting (mannerisms, gestures, tone of voice, facial expression)
- mise en scène (colour, props, costume, make up)
- editing (parallel editing, pace of editing, cutaways, slow motion)
- lighting (low key lighting, back lighting, chiaroscuro lighting)
- sound (diegetic sound effects, music, silence, non-diegetic sound effects)

# Studying suspense

In class, we are going to examine a number of scenes from famous films and write about how the director has used various cinematic techniques to engage the audience. We are doing this because we want to become better at discussing film but also to improve our own filmmaking. Describing how professional directors create suspense is the first step towards using these techniques ourselves.

## Writing about suspense

- Watch the scene several times and take detailed notes on how the following techniques are used to create suspense:
  - **Camera techniques.** Handheld camera movement, framing, extreme close ups, close ups, point of view shots, canting, camera angles.
  - **Acting.** Mannerism, gestures, tone of voice, facial expression.
  - **Mise en scene.** Colour, props, costume, make up.
  - **Editing.** Parallel editing, pace of editing, cut aways, slow motion.
  - **Lighting.** Low key lighting, back lighting.
  - **Sound.** Diegetic sound effects, music, silence, non-diegetic sound effects.
- Always start off with a **topic sentence**, e.g. "In *The Lovely Bones*, director Peter Jackson uses a combination of camera techniques, acting, editing and sound to engage the audience."
- Give **specific** and **detailed** examples of these in your response, e.g. "The suspense in this scene is largely achieved through the use of parallel editing. After Paul discovers that the telephone doesn't work, Reiner cuts to a shot of Annie as she is leaving the store in town. The pace of editing increases as the scene progresses. By showing the parallel action, Reiner plays on the audience's anxiety that Paul is going to be caught out of his room by Annie, increasing the suspense and audience engagement. In the kitchen, James Caan winces in pain as he climbs out of the wheel chair. Reiner cuts to a shot of Annie driving home. He cuts back to a shot of James Caan as he claws his way across the kitchen floor."
- Always organise these examples into paragraphs.
- Always explain how these techniques help to engage the audience, e.g. "This close up emphasises the pained expression on Susie's face, encouraging the audience to identify with her and share her terror."
- Always conclude with a brief sentence at the end, e.g. "Throughout this sequence, director Rob Reiner uses a number of techniques - including camera techniques, acting and sound - to engage the audience."
- Always spell the name of the film and director correctly.
- Always refer to the director by surname.

## Things to avoid

- Do not praise the film or director, this is not a review, e.g. “The sound in this film was *amazing*.”
- Do not retell the story.
- Do not use the words ‘us’ or ‘we’ when referring to the audience, e.g. “This makes us feel for the character.” It is much better to use the word ‘audience’, e.g. “This encourages the audience to feel for the character.”
- Do not use filmmaking abbreviations such as POV, CU or ECU. Write the full phrase.

# Studying Suspense: *Valkyrie* (Bryan Singer, 2008)

At the beginning of *Valkyrie* (Bryan Singer, 2008), the audience is kept in suspense as Major-General Henning von Tresckow (Kenneth Branagh) attempts to recover a bomb that failed to detonate and kill Adolf Hitler. Singer uses dramatic music and low key lighting to create unbearable tension as von Tresckow apprehensively attempts to retrieve the explosives.

When writing about the scene, it is useful to know the names of the characters. In this scene, the following characters play an important role:

- Major-General Henning von Tresckow (Kenneth Branagh)
- General Friedrich Olbricht (Bill Nighy)
- Colonel Heinz Brandt (Tom Hollander)

**Class activity:** Watch this scene several times. Each time you view it, think about how cinematic techniques are used to create suspense. Share your ideas with the class.

**Writing your analysis:** Once you've got some ideas down, start to write your analysis.

- Remember to start off with a topic sentence, e.g. In *Valkyrie*, director Bryan Singer uses a number of production elements - including camera techniques, acting, editing and sound - to create suspense and engage the audience.
- In each paragraph, describe an aspect of the sequence and explain how these techniques have been used to create suspense, e.g. Towards the beginning of the film, there is a sequence where Tresckow (Kenneth Branagh) and a coconspirator hastily assemble a bomb inside a bottle of cointreau. In this part of the scene, music and dialogue contribute significantly to the suspense. "Hitler's leaving...NOW!" he rasps with a note of urgency in his voice. The sound of a plane starting up is accompanied by a rise in the score by John Ottman. This sudden peak in the music helps the audience to feel a sense of anxiety. Singer cuts to a close up of Tresckow, a look of concern crossing his face. As he hands the bottle to Colonel Brandt (Tom Hollander), the music becomes much louder and more percussive. This sequence ends with a close up of Tresckow, turning back to his coconspirator, with a look of grim determination and concern on his face. Throughout this part of the sequence, a combination of camera techniques, music and dialogue all contribute to the overwhelming sense of anxiety that the audience feels over their assassination attempt.

**Class activity:** When you have finished writing, share your responses with the class.

## Studying Suspense: *The Lovely Bones* (Peter Jackson, 2009)

In *The Lovely Bones* (2009), director Peter Jackson uses a range of cinematic techniques to nail-biting effect when as Lindsey (Rose Mclver) searches for evidence in the house of murder George Harvey (Stanley Tucci).

When writing about the scene, it is useful to know the names of the characters. In this scene, the following characters play an important role:

- Lindsey Salmon (Rose Mclver)
- George Harvey (Stanley Tucci)

**Class activity:** Watch this scene several times. Each time you view it, think about how cinematic techniques are used to create suspense. Share your ideas with the class.

**Writing your analysis:** Once you've got some ideas down, start to write your analysis.

- Remember to start off with a topic sentence, e.g. In *The Lovely Bones*, director Peter Jackson uses a number of production elements - including camera techniques, acting, editing and sound - to create suspense and engage the audience.
- In each paragraph, describe an aspect of the sequence and explain how these techniques have been used to create suspense, e.g. Jackson lingers on a shot of George standing backlit on the basement steps, listening. He cuts back and forth between George and Lindsey, using silence to create unbearable tension.

**Class activity:** When you have finished writing, share your responses with the class.

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## Ideas

There's a suspicious noise downstairs. Trees scratch against the window ominously and thunder rumbles in the distance. Low key lighting, eerie music and point of view shots will help to make this scene suspenseful. Don't forget to establish your character as likeable so that your audience cares about their fate!

Attempting to steal files from a computer is a classic suspense scenario that provides an excellent opportunity for rising tension. Use parallel editing to cut from the progress bar, the anxiety on your protagonist's face and the footsteps as someone returns to the room.

Your main character is late for school. Another great scenario with the possibility of rising tension - missing the bus, waiting at the traffic lights, dropping school books. Frequent point of view shots of a wristwatch will help increase suspense. Towards the end, the ticking hands of a classroom clock will help to build further suspense.

Your main character is alone, walking home quickly, when they feel an overwhelming sense that they're being followed...Use close ups of the anxiety on your protagonist's face and make them seem closer to the threat. Parallel editing can be used to show the approaching stalker. Use point of view shots to increase anxiety.

## Pre-Production

**Casting and location.** Select age appropriate actors that will be available for shooting and potentially reshoots as well. Select a location that is accessible and safe. Visit the location before shooting and discuss ideas about how best to use it.

**Treatment.** Write a treatment outlining what will happen in your story. As you're developing your story, think of opportunities to encourage the audience to identify with your character. You might connect with the audience using universal emotions such as fear, love, injustice or embarrassment. Make your character familiar, likeable or intriguing to the audience. Encourage the audience to identify with them using techniques like point of view shots. Whatever idea you pick first, remember to use rising tension to make the suspense unbearable. Think about opportunities to create suspense using: handheld camera movement, framing, extreme close ups, close ups, point of view shots, canting, low angles, high angles, parallel editing, pace of editing, cutaways, slow motion, low key lighting, back lighting, diegetic sound, music, silence, non-diegetic sound.

**Screenplay.** Write a screenplay for your film using Celtx.

**Shotlist.** Create a detailed shotlist for your film so you don't miss out on any important shots during principal photography.

**Further information:**  
<http://lessonbucket.com/filmmaking>

## Principal Photography

**Composition.** Always check your use of headroom, look room and the composition of your shot before pressing record.

**Lighting.** Make sure your shots are lit correctly, if necessary close/open blinds, turn on lights and use desk lamps. Always set the white balance of your camera correctly before shooting.

**Sound.** Whether you're using a camera or dedicated audio recorder for sound, always listen to the audio levels through a pair of headphones and eliminate noises like air conditioners and refrigerators that may ruin your audio. When recording dialogue get your audio recorder, or camera, as close to the subject as possible. Record a few minutes of ambient noise while on location.

**Use a slate.** When you press record, hold a slate in front of the camera with the scene and shot number. You don't need a proper film slate, a small whiteboard or piece of paper will do fine!

**Coverage.** Think like an editor. Once you've captured your shotlist, think about other opportunities to film the scene from different angles. Shoot more than you think you'll need. Doing this means you'll have greater scope in the editing suite to manipulate the pace of your scene and, consequently, the audience reaction.

**Cut!** Playback shots to check they worked to avoid reshoots.

## Post Production

**Diegetic sound.** Think about your use of real world sounds and how they can contribute to tension - if necessary rerecord poorly captured sounds or download them from a sound library like [www.freesound.org](http://www.freesound.org).

**Non-diegetic sound.** Equipped with a digital recorder and a microphone, you can create some wonderfully eerie and suspenseful sounds by rubbing a superball across the surface of a timpani or gong, sawing a cello blade down the side of a cymbal and scraping objects across steel stringed guitars and piano strings. For the less adventurous sound designers [www.freesound.org](http://www.freesound.org) is a terrific source of non-diegetic sounds that can help increase the suspense of your short film. Searching for keywords like 'suspense' and 'tension' is a great way to find sounds.

**Music.** Find creative commons or royalty free music for your film at websites like Open Music Archive, Incomptech, Vimeo Music Store, Audio Jungle and Sound Cloud.

**Editing.** Don't overuse effects and transitions, most of the time this takes your audience out of the moment. A simple cut works just fine!

**Colour correction.** When you're making a suspense film, editing programs allow you to tweak the colour of your film to increase audience anxiety. Make it look gritty and dark.

## Release

**DVD.** Author a DVD complete with behind-the-scenes photos, interviews and a director's commentary.

**DVD Cover.** Create a DVD cover for your film by following this tutorial: <http://lessonbucket.com/filmmaking/horror-dvd-cover/>

**Distribution.** Consider putting your masterpiece on video sharing websites like YouTube and Vimeo.

**Festivals.** Entering short film festivals is a great way to draw attention to your work.



## Resources and bibliography

Blain Brown, *Cinematography: Theory and Practice : Imagemaking for Cinematographers, Directors & Videographers*, Focal Press, Amsterdam, 2002.

Sara C. Caldwell, *Splatter Flicks: How to Make Low Budget Horror Films*, Allworth Press, New York, 2006.

David Howard, *How to Build a Great Screenplay*, St. Martin's, New York, 2003.

John Rosenberg, *The Healthy Edit Creative Editing Techniques for Perfecting Your Movie*, Focal Press, Burlington, 2011.

Thomas M. Sipos, *Horror Film Aesthetics: Creating the Visual Language of Fear*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2010.