Cinematography Across Cultures: Why Films Look Different

Name Date Class

Reading

1 You settle in for a Hollywood thriller. Two characters argue across a kitchen table, and the camera cuts between their faces so smoothly that you never think about it. A week later you watch a Japanese family drama from the 1950s. The camera sits barely a meter above the floor and hardly moves at all. Both films show you where to look and how to feel, yet they speak in different visual accents. Cinematography, the craft of choosing where the camera goes, how it moves, and how light falls, works like a language, and languages have regional habits.

2 Start with the accent most of us know best. Early in cinema's history, American studios settled on a way of framing and cutting scenes that aims to be **seamless**. Shots are matched so that you always know who is where, and the camera stays on one side of an imaginary line between the characters. Rarely does a viewer notice any of this, which is exactly the point. The pace has quickened, too: one study of popular English-language films found that the average shot shrank from about ten seconds in the 1930s to under four seconds after 2000. Some critics call the system **formulaic**, others admire its clarity, and opinions differ on whether its polish is a strength or a trap.

3 Much of European cinema has defined itself against that polish, though Europe holds many traditions. When Raoul Coutard, a former war photographer, shot *Breathless* (1960) for Jean-Luc Godard, he used a light camera held in his hands and mostly natural light, partly because the budget was tiny. The result looked rough and restless, and it helped make **gritty** realism a style that others copied. In 1995, two Danish directors went further. Their **manifesto**, Dogme 95, demanded filming on location, a handheld camera, and no special lighting. Not only did the founders write the rules; they also admitted, in their first Dogme films, to breaking a few of them.

4 India is usually counted as the world's largest producer of feature films, in dozens of languages, and Hindi-language Bollywood is only one part, so it is risky to speak of a single Indian look. Two traditions stand out. One is the quiet realism of Satyajit Ray, whose first film, *Pather Panchali* (1955), was shot by Subrata Mitra, a stills photographer who had never operated a movie camera. Mitra is widely credited with the **pioneering** use of bounce lighting, in which lamps are aimed at a white cloth so that the light spreads softly, like daylight. The **diffused** look suited Ray's love of naturalistic light. The other tradition is the song sequence of popular Hindi cinema, where realism gives way to a deliberately **stylized** world. In “Chaiyya Chaiyya”, from the 1998 film *Dil Se*, dancers perform **choreographed** steps on top of a moving train, and the cinematographer Santosh Sivan says that what you see is exactly what was filmed. Some writers argue that such numbers are not filler at all, because the **spectacle** carries emotion and story in its own way.

5 Korean directors such as Bong Joon-ho and Park Chan-wook are known for precise, carefully designed images. Bong, who made *Parasite*, drew a storyboard for every shot, a sign of his **meticulous** planning. The film's two houses were built from scratch, and staircases return again and again as a **motif** for the gap between rich and poor. Park's *Oldboy* (2003) contains a famous action **set piece**: a hallway fight of about three minutes that appears to be one unbroken shot. At no point does the camera seem to cut away, and it glides sideways along the corridor like the view in a side-scrolling video game.

6 Yet these accents are tendencies, not borders, and filmmakers keep crossing them. Yasujiro Ozu's **austere** style in *Tokyo Story* (1953) is often called distinctly Japanese: a camera placed at the eye level of someone sitting on a tatami mat. Hardly ever does it move, and Ozu often broke the Hollywood rule about staying on one side of the action. But the film itself was inspired by an American movie. The Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, famous for long takes and natural light, won three Oscars in a row in the mid-2010s for films from Hollywood studios. Film cultures are **porous**, and the scholar David Bordwell argues that mass-audience films worldwide still follow the principles of Hollywood's continuity system. That shared **baseline** may be why deliberate rule-breaking stands out.

7 Try a small experiment. Count the seconds before the first cut in a conversation scene from a film you know well, and notice where the camera sits and whether the light looks natural or arranged. Then repeat it with a film from somewhere else. Whether the differences come from culture, budget, technology, or one director's taste is open to debate.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**seamless**	_____	**A**	following a fixed pattern with little originality
2	**formulaic**	_____	**B**	plain and strict, with no decoration or luxury
3	**gritty**	_____	**C**	open, so that ideas pass through easily
4	**manifesto**	_____	**D**	an impressive, eye-catching display or show
5	**pioneering**	_____	**E**	planned in careful detail, like dance steps
6	**diffused**	_____	**F**	a starting point used for comparison
7	**stylized**	_____	**G**	being among the first to use a new method
8	**choreographed**	_____	**H**	realistic in a rough, unpolished way
9	**spectacle**	_____	**I**	shaped by artistic style rather than realism
10	**meticulous**	_____	**J**	an idea or image repeated through a work
11	**motif**	_____	**K**	a large, carefully staged scene meant to impress
12	**set piece**	_____	**L**	a public statement of a group's aims and beliefs
13	**austere**	_____	**M**	spread out softly instead of being sharp
14	**porous**	_____	**N**	smooth, with no visible breaks or joins
15	**baseline**	_____	**O**	showing great care about every small detail

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

austere	**baseline**	**choreographed**	**formulaic**	**gritty**	**manifesto**	**meticulous**	**motif**	**pioneering**
porous	**seamless**	**set piece**	**spectacle**	**stylized**				

1 The editor wanted every cut to be so _____ that viewers would forget the film had been assembled.

2 Critics complained that the sequel was _____, repeating the plot of the first film almost exactly.

3 She loves _____ crime dramas that show city life without any glamour.

4 The young poets wrote a _____ announcing what they believed art should do.

5 The engineer was praised for her _____ work on the first solar-powered ferry.

6 The play uses a _____ style, with exaggerated gestures instead of everyday behavior.

7 The dancers' arrival was carefully _____, with each group entering on a different beat.

8 The fireworks display was a breathtaking _____ that drew thousands of people to the harbor.

9 The accountant is so _____ that she checks every number twice before she signs a report.

10 Water appears again and again as a _____ in the poet's work.

11 The final car chase is the biggest action _____ in the whole movie.

12 His apartment was _____, with bare walls and a single chair.

13 Online, ideas move so easily that national borders feel increasingly _____.

14 Scientists first record a _____ before they test the new drug.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What differences does the writer describe between the two films in the opening scene, and what do they have in common?

2 What does the writer mean by saying that Hollywood's continuity style aims to be "seamless"?

3 How did Raoul Coutard's way of shooting Breathless differ from the Hollywood style described earlier, and what was one reason for it?

4 Which rules did the founders of Dogme 95 set, and what does the reading say happened to those rules?

5 Which two traditions of Indian cinema does the writer describe, and how does each one look?

6 How does bounce lighting work, according to the reading, and why might it suit realistic films?

7 What evidence does the writer give that Bong Joon-ho and Park Chan-wook design their images carefully?

8 The writer says these accents are "tendencies, not borders." Which examples in the reading support that claim?

9 The writer ends with an experiment and says the causes of the differences are "open to debate." Why might the writer have chosen this ending, and what could explain the differences besides culture?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Raoul Coutard used artificial studio lighting throughout Breathless."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that film styles are fixed by national borders."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin with two films that a viewer watches a week apart? Is the purpose to show that Hollywood is better, to make a general idea feel familiar, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** The writer says the two films in the opening scene do very different jobs for the viewer.

2 **T / F** The writer says viewers rarely notice the continuity system.

3 **T / F** The study found that average shots in popular English-language films became longer over time.

4 **T / F** Raoul Coutard shot Breathless mostly in natural light with a camera held in his hands.

5 **T / F** Dogme 95 was announced in 1960.

6 **T / F** The Dogme founders admitted to breaking a few of their own rules.

7 **T / F** Subrata Mitra had never operated a movie camera before working with Satyajit Ray.

8 **T / F** According to the reading, all Indian films share a single look.

9 **T / F** The two houses in Parasite were built from scratch.

10 **T / F** Emmanuel Lubezki won three Oscars in a row for films made by Mexican studios.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1. What was the last film or series you watched from another country? What did you notice about how it looked, compared with what you usually watch?
2. Do you prefer films where you never notice the camera, or films that show off their style? Why?
3. Think of a film you know well. Can you describe one shot, such as a camera position or movement, that you still remember?
4. Do you enjoy musical numbers in films? When do they add to a story, and when do they interrupt it?
5. Why do you think older films often feel slower than recent ones? Is a faster pace always better?
6. Have you ever watched a film with a very still camera or long, quiet shots? How did it affect your patience and your feelings?
7. Does your country have a recognizable look in its films, series, or advertisements? What are its features?
8. Bong Joon-ho drew a storyboard for every shot. How much of a creative project should be planned in advance, and how much left to chance?
9. Film styles sometimes begin as solutions to money problems, such as the handheld look of Breathless. Can limits make art better?
10. Why might Hollywood's continuity style have spread to so many countries? Is it a natural way to tell stories, or a result of business and power?
11. Is it fair to describe a country's films with one word or one style? What do such generalizations help us see, and what do they hide?
12. Subtitles and dubbing change how we experience a film. How much of a film's visual style survives translation?
13. Do you think global streaming will make films from different countries look more alike, or will local styles survive? Why?
14. If a film follows every rule perfectly, can it still be original? What does a filmmaker gain or risk by breaking a rule?

Language Focus: Negative Inversion for Emphasis

After some negative or limiting adverbials, such as rarely, hardly ever, not only, and at no point, English puts the auxiliary verb before the subject, as in a question. The unusual word order adds emphasis and a polished tone.

In the reading:

- "**Rarely does** a viewer notice any of this, which is exactly the point."
- "**Not only did** the founders write the rules; they also admitted, in their first Dogme films, to breaking a few of them."
- "**At no point does** the camera seem to cut away..."

Practice: Rewrite this sentence so that it begins with a negative adverbial and uses inversion: *"Directors seldom allow the camera to cut away during a fight scene like this one."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/cinematography-cultures

Notes