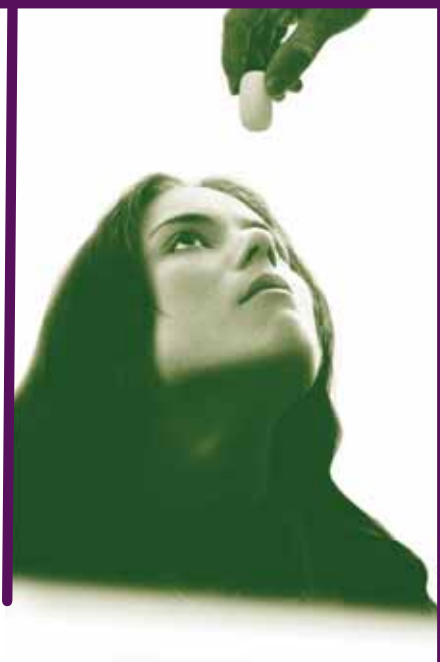




## Wider Visions Study Guide



# Introduction

This study guide has been written to accompany the Transition Year (TY) Moving Image Module, a project of the Arts Council Working Group on Film and Young People (piloted 2005–2008). Focusing on alternative and world cinema, the guide introduces this type of film and follows with a close study of three films.

*Maria Full of Grace* is a South American film which combines documentary and thriller elements to tell the story of a young woman caught up in the drugs trade. *House of Flying Daggers* is a Chinese martial arts action film from an 'auteur' filmmaker and *Touching the Void* belongs to a genre known as the docu-drama. The final chapter introduces the concept of the auteur filmmaker and briefly examines the work of American filmmakers Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino.

Through focus on filmmaking styles, themes and key moments, this guide gives teachers and students opportunities for classroom discussion and activities. We hope that this guide will encourage you to explore alternative film, assist in your teaching of film literacy and offer a wider vision of the world of cinema.




## Baz Al-Rawi

Education Officer  
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## Note to teacher

- This guide works as a step-by-step introduction to alternative cinema.
- Each section of this guide can work on its own or as part of a wider course on alternative cinema.
- Each section of the guide includes a range of student explorations and activities for follow-up work.
- Students may work on these together, on their own or in groups.
- Topics for independent project work are also included at the end of each chapter where you see this icon. 
-   etc. denote DVD classification (**where available**) from the Irish Film Classification Office. See [www.ifco.ie](http://www.ifco.ie) for more information.

# Section 1: Alternative Cinema

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. What do you understand by the following terms: alternative cinema/arthouse/world cinema?
2. Name five films that could be described as alternative? Explain your choices.
3. Where would you expect to see alternative films?
4. List the kind of films you would expect to see in a multiplex cinema.



### Characteristics and Origins

Alternative cinema refers broadly to films that are not mainstream productions. Arthouse or world cinema are terms also used to define a film genre or type that encompasses film from other countries, films in other languages or films that use alternative styles or forms. This study guide takes a close look at three films that can be considered alternative but which also have characteristics that are familiar from mainstream cinema.

Mainstream films are generally commercially produced and are aimed at mass audiences. Their primary goal is to maximise profits. They require the support of large film studios with big budgets to fund costly special effects, celebrity actors, and promotion and distribution to multiplex cinemas throughout the world. These films generally follow traditional narratives with cause and effect storylines. Characters have clearly defined problems or goals, which are usually solved by the end of the picture.

Historically, commercial film production was dominated by the big American studios from the 1920s up until the '50s, when the arrival of TV saw their power wane. Another challenge to this type of filmmaking came from Europe. During the 1950s and '60s European filmmakers such as Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard set out to make films that broke the rules governing these studio films. Unlike the American films, their films contained free-flowing narratives and concerned themselves more with psychological aspects of their protagonists. The motivation of the main character was hard to ascertain and the films often contained no coherent plot or satisfying resolution. Part of this was a motivation to show realism, whether that be realistic characters or realistic settings. With low production costs, these filmmakers couldn't afford the kind of big name actors that would draw large audiences and their films were often confined to festivals or film clubs.

### European Arthouse films in the 1950s and '60s:

- *L'amore in città/Love in the City* – Federico Fellini, 1953
- *The Seventh Seal/Det sjunde inseglet* – Ingmar Bergman, 1957 
- *Hiroshima mon amour/Hiroshima, My Love* – Alain Resnais, 1959
- *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* – François Truffaut, 1959
- *À bout de souffle/Breathless* – Jean-Luc Godard, 1960
- *La dolce vita* – Federico Fellini, 1960 
- *Paris nous appartient/Paris Belongs to Us* – Jacques Rivette, 1961
- *Jules et Jim/Jules and Jim* – François Truffaut, 1962
- *Bande à part/Band of Outsiders* – Jean-Luc Godard, 1964

### Alternative filmmaking today

Since the radical early days of alternative filmmaking, much has changed internationally in film production. Alternative or independent films are now widely regarded as a viable commercial alternative to Hollywood studio films. While broadly speaking the characteristics of this type of cinema are still different, so wide is the influence and crossover that many relatively big budget films with big stars (eg. the multi-layered story *Babel* (2006) starring Brad Pitt) make liberal use of alternative styles. And as mainstream films are taking from arthouse styles, the growing influence of arthouse can also be seen in the increasingly global appeal of films generated by filmmakers outside the USA, like Andrew Lau's Hong Kong crime-thriller *Infernal Affairs* (2002, remade by Martin Scorsese as *The Departed* in 2006), Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001).



© 2002 Copyright Sony Pictures

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

### The Female Protagonist

Along with looser narrative structures and other variations, one of the happy developments in alternative filmmaking is the positive approach to stories from a female perspective. From *The Blair Witch Project* (1998) and *Run Lola Run* (1999) to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Kill Bill* (2003), women take centre stage in the narrative even in the action hero role. Two of the films in this guide, *Maria Full of Grace* and *House of Flying Daggers* have female protagonists.

## Section 1: Alternative Cinema

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Look up the cinema listings for your local cinema and compare the number of mainstream films to alternative films on show.
2. What do you think of alternative cinema? Have you seen any alternative films?

#### How are alternative films distributed?

Film distribution refers to the business of acquiring rights to film titles and getting films into the cinemas. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, the major motion picture studios in America also owned their own cinemas, which meant they had complete control over films distributed to the cinemas. The big studio dominance of distribution ended in 1948 when the studios were forced to sell their cinemas. Nowadays, the “Big Six” majors, Warner Bros, Paramount, Walt Disney, Sony Pictures, NBC Universal and Fox are all owned by larger conglomerates which have separate production and distribution subsidiaries. This means that today’s studio-backed films generally have distribution deals secured before they even go into production.

Many alternative films are made without a secured distribution contract in place. Once completed, they are normally shown at festivals and their critical reception frequently determines their success in achieving a distribution contract. Success at film festivals such as Cannes or Sundance almost guarantees this. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) was a surprise festival hit which then went on to sweep the Oscars in 2009 and was distributed to cinemas around the world. However festival success is not the only way alternative films secure distribution. Following the success of films like *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), alternative or independent (‘indie’) films are now seen as marketable products, and it is now possible for a film to acquire a distribution deal based on the quality of the script or the reputation of the cast or director attached to the project.



Slumdog Millionaire

More recently, titles which achieve success at film festivals such as Sundance, can often find themselves occupying screen space in multiplex cinemas alongside big budget commercial films. Films such as *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Once* (2007) are good examples of independent films which have found big audiences in these venues throughout Ireland. Many of the multiplexes now reserve one screen per week for alternative titles. Outside the large cities, other viewing possibilities exist on the film club network through Access Cinema and the mobile cinemas.

#### Developments in Film Technology and Education

What has dramatically changed the exhibition, viewing and production landscape for all cinema has been the developments in technology. Technology has made a range of film accessible to audiences around the world, but it is also helping facilitate a wider variety of independent film production. Film courses, media studies and promotion of visual literacy in schools are also giving young people the opportunity to have a greater understanding of film culture beyond that of mainstream cinema.

Some of the factors to consider are:

- The development of the home cinema market.
- DVD allows audiences to view films hitherto unavailable in their area theatrically.
- The availability of low cost film production technology has greatly increased the number of independent productions.
- The internet holds great potential for film promotion and distribution.
- Media and film studies courses at second and third level help to promote film culture.

#### Wider Visions

In the next chapters we will take a closer look at three films that may be classified as alternative cinema. All three had limited cinema releases, are available on DVD and offer a wider vision of the world of cinema.

#### Project Topics

- a My Favourite Alternative Film
- b My Local Cinema (see page 22 for hints and tips)



Little Miss Sunshine



Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Films Ltd. © Twentieth Century Fox Films Ltd

Given all these changes, one would imagine that alternative cinema would be pretty accessible to the viewing public. However, in Ireland, with most cinemas belonging to multiplex chains, we have a large number of screens but in reality, less choice of film. Just a handful of the same titles can be found in most of the country’s cinemas at any given time. So how does one get to see alternative film? Opportunities exist in the bigger cities which have at least one arthouse cinema each and at film festivals around the country.



## Section 2: Maria Full of Grace

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. From the DVD cover, what do you think this film is about?
2. What impression does this image give you of the character?



### Introduction

*Maria Full of Grace* is a Spanish language film, the debut feature of young American writer/director Joshua Marston. It tells the story of Maria Alvarez, a Colombian woman who becomes a drug runner. It is a unique film for a number of reasons:

- The role of Maria is played by first time actress Catalina Sandino Moreno, and her performance won her the Best Actress award at the Berlin Film Festival in 2004.
- In 2005 she became the first actress ever to be nominated for Best Actress at the Oscars for a role spoken entirely in Spanish.<sup>1</sup>

The film won the audience award at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival and two awards at the Berlin International Film Festival.

### Synopsis

A bright, spirited 17-year old, Maria Alvarez, lives with three generations of her family in a cramped house in rural Colombia and works stripping thorns from flowers in a rose plantation. Things begin to fall apart when the offer of a lucrative job as a 'drug mule' changes the course of her life. Although the job is presented to Maria as straightforward and uncomplicated, involving a plane flight and delivery of the drugs, Maria is rapidly transported into the ruthless world of international drug trafficking, encountering law enforcement and dangerous criminals. This journey takes her from her quiet village to bustling Bogota, the capital of Colombia, and finally to the borough of Queens in New York. Her mission becomes one of determination and survival, and she finally emerges with the grace that will carry her forward into a new life.



### BEFORE WATCHING

1. In groups make a list of all the films you know set in Colombia or New York.
2. Look at your list of films set in Colombia – what impression do these give you of life in Colombia?
3. How would you expect a 'drug mule' to be portrayed on film?

### Joshua Marston

The film's writer/director Joshua Marston is the grandson of immigrants to the United States. His interest in the different cultures of his New York neighbourhood of Brooklyn and the wider immigrant experience in the USA led him to Colombia. He followed the turbulent events surrounding Colombia's civil conflict, (1964 – present), which involves left wing guerrillas and right wing military forces, both of which rely on income from drug-running to finance their conflict.

Learning about the country helped Marston create a story around the life of a young woman living in Colombia and the social issues affecting people there. Marston believes his role as filmmaker is to reach "outward and find compelling people, places and stories, and then, to listen. That sort of anthropological approach is how I came to filmmaking and why I want to tell stories." His desire to tell human stories can be seen at the heart of *Maria Full of Grace*.

### Background

#### The 'Drug Mule'

Before embarking on the story of Maria who becomes a drug mule, Joshua Marston conducted research into the process of drug trafficking and watched people being interrogated at Kennedy Airport. He discovered how 'mules' store pellets of drugs internally and spoke to doctors who described the procedures necessary to remove the pellets. However the most significant element of his preparation was to gain an understanding of a real life character similar to Maria, who is not just a vehicle for transporting drugs – she is a young woman, and at the centre of his story. He got this understanding through an encounter with a Colombian woman who had swallowed heroin capsules and was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. Her story was one of the original inspirations for the film because Marston wanted "to look at what it is to be a drug mule and try to imagine it from that person's perspective. To begin to understand what would propel somebody to do this."

As a non-Colombian, Marston researched Colombian life, family structure and social activities, and the hard work involved on flower plantations. He had travelled in Ecuador and visited similar plantations so he was also able to draw on his own memories of South America. Deciding to focus on the human story rather than on the drugs story, he drew inspiration from British director Ken Loach (*Looking for Eric*, 2009) who is also concerned with telling human stories within a context of real social issues.

<sup>1</sup> Penelope Cruz became the first Spanish actress to win an Oscar. She won Best Supporting Actress in 2009 for her role in Woody Allen's *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona*, a role spoken in Spanish and English.

## Section 2: Maria Full of Grace



One issue for *Maria Full of Grace* was how to contrast the sympathetic character of Maria with the negative side of the drug mule story. This is conveyed through Lucy, who dies when a bag bursts in her stomach. It is the third time she has undertaken the journey and she provides an example for Maria and the viewer of the inherent dangers of the drug world.

### South American Cinema

Our perception of South America through cinema is widely informed by numerous Hollywood and American films, especially those which tackle the subject of the drug trade. Films such as *Scarface* (1983), *Traffic* (2001) and *Blow* (2001) touch on the drug problem in South America and its connection with crime, poverty and civil injustice.

In the past, films from South America were rarely distributed outside the country or continent of origin. However in recent years, there have been several successful South American films which have found audiences internationally. Films such as *Central Station* (Brazil, 1998), *City of God* (Brazil, 2002) and *Amores Perros* (Mexico, 2002) provide viewers with a contemporary cinematic representation of this region from a South American point of view.

The success and subsequent distribution of *Maria Full of Grace* in Europe, South America, Asia and America, has brought a Colombian story to a wider international audience. The drug problem and the effects of poverty are central to the narrative of *Maria Full of Grace*, which uses elements of the thriller genre to tell a story inspired by real events and characters. Despite its unfamiliar setting and language, these thriller elements and recognisable themes are already familiar to us, making it very accessible.

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Can you think of any other South American stories that you think would make good films?
2. Why do you think South American stories involving drugs and civil injustice are popular?

#### Some other films from South America:

- *Y tu mamá también/And Your Mother Too* – Alfonso Cuarón, 2001 18
- *Carandiru* – Hector Babenco, Brazil, 2003 18
- *Diarios de motocicleta/The Motorcycle Diaries* – Walter Salles, 2004 15
- *Tropa de Elite/Elite Squad* – José Padilha, 2008 18
- *Linha de Passe* – Walter Salles & Daniela Thomas, 2008 15
- *Sin Nombre* – Cary Fukunaga, 2009

### Themes: Drugs, Growing Up, Biblical Allegory

Joshua Marston says:

“I think there are probably certain universals of a 17-year-old's life that cut across culture and economics. That was one of the aspects that made the film personal for me, because it is about someone trying to figure out who she is and her place in the world. It's about Maria not being satisfied with where she is; she's looking and yearning for something else, even if she can't define or articulate it. So we developed a script that was less and less about a drug mule and more about a young woman trying to break out and kick against a world that seemed to be pressing in on her, in order to achieve something more.”

#### Growing Up

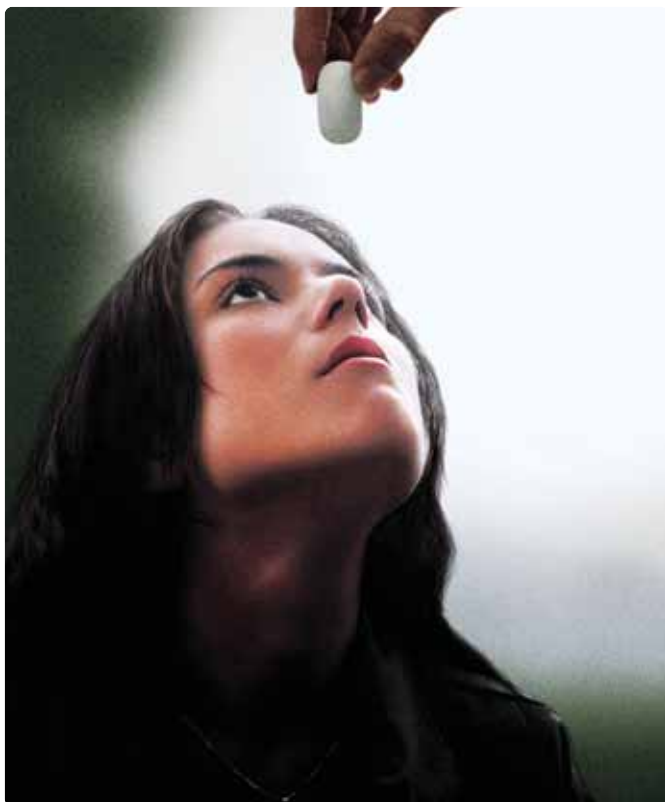
Maria makes her transition from adolescence to adulthood through the circumstances she finds herself in and the important decisions she is forced to make. She is a young girl with all the usual teenage concerns who is pressured into supporting a family unsympathetic to her needs. Her sister expects Maria to provide for her baby, an obligation that Maria feels aggrieved about. She longs to be independent, but her low paying job and family responsibilities keep her trapped until she decides to leave the village. Her relationship with her boyfriend Juan threatens to further complicate her situation, but her strong character helps her decide to move on independently. The unplanned pregnancy and dangerous association with the drug gang force her to re-evaluate her direction in life.

#### Drugs

In Maria's village employment opportunities are limited and her job in the flower factory is laborious with paltry reward. Furthermore, the obligation to provide for her family keeps Maria locked within her status quo. Once she is unemployed however, the monetary attraction of becoming a mule is too much for her to resist and the drug gang in the film preys on this. The film highlights how smuggling drugs can be an attractive prospect to those who are trapped in a world of poverty and it tries to help us understand this decision from their point of view.

#### Biblical Allegory

The title (taken from the Christian prayer, 'Hail Mary') evokes the image of the Blessed Virgin who carries the Christ child in her womb. She is replaced in this film by a young girl who conceals drugs in her



abdomen along with her pregnancy – thus making a potential mockery out of the Christian myth since she is giving to the outside world not the possibility of a religious allegory come to life, but cocaine-induced oblivion. When Maria subsequently arrives in New York she ‘gives birth’ to the drugs and then chooses to bring up her child alone.

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Consider how Maria's character develops through the film.
2. Can you think of any other films that deal with the transition to adulthood?
3. Do you agree with Joshua Marston when he says: “there are probably certain universals of a 17-year-old's life that cut across culture and economics”?
4. Do you think *Maria Full of Grace* is an appropriate title for this film? Can you think of any others?

## Film Genre: The Drug Film

The drug-running story has had many versions in cinema, from the ‘warning’ films produced by Hollywood in the 1930s (e.g. *Reefer Madness*, 1936), to their conventional deployment in thrillers and gangster films, e.g. *The French Connection* (1971). Sometimes the drug lord is portrayed in sympathetic fashion, as in *Blow* (2001). *Traffic* (2001) attempts to follow the trail of the drugs route from its source in Mexico to street corners in the United States.

Similar to some of the films mentioned above, *Maria Full of Grace* also contains many elements of the thriller genre: a protagonist who is involved in a potentially dangerous situation, criminal activities and a plot which creates tension and suspense. The action moves quickly between locations, involving major cities (Bogotá and New York) and international drug gangs (whilst always maintaining a Colombian perspective). *Maria Full of Grace* takes an unusual point of view by not including end users of the drug in the narrative and by portraying the drug mule as another victim of the drug trade.

## Style & Setting

### Style

Joshua Marston's desire to tell a realistic and compelling story is evident in the filmmaking style of *Maria Full of Grace*. The film incorporates a lot of handheld camerawork to encourage the viewer to believe in the realism of the story and Maria's character. This technique is a common feature in documentaries as well as fiction films which want to convey a sense of reality, and we can see this particularly during the sequence where the pellets are prepared for Maria to ingest.



In *Maria Full of Grace*, the camera never strays far from Maria, achieving a sense of closeness between her and the viewer. In certain scenes, the shakiness of the camerawork combined with the rhythm and pacing of the editing create a feeling of uncertainty, tension and suspense, as found in a thriller.

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Watch Chapter 9 and in groups discuss all the elements you think contribute to the documentary style of this scene. Consider camerawork, dialogue, lighting and editing.
2. Watch Chapter 10 and 11 and in groups discuss how camerawork, sound and editing create suspense.

## Section 2: Maria Full of Grace

### Setting: Country Vs. City

The rural village in Colombia where Maria works and lives with her family appears as an impoverished monocultural society with limited employment opportunities and a slow pace of life. The streets are never crowded and the village is set against a backdrop of green hills and forests. Bogota, on the other hand, is a bustling metropolitan area, full of people and traffic, and filled with vibrant colours and characters.

New York City and particularly the borough of Queens where the Colombian immigrant community is concentrated is portrayed visually in blues and greys, emphasising its urban qualities as opposed to the earthy and natural tones of Maria's rural home town. Its vibrancy is conveyed in the food sellers on street corners and the boy selling roses.

However, there is an irony in the distant cityscape of Manhattan, which we see when Maria and Blanca travel across the city (the traditional newcomer's view of the city), that ensures we also feel the immigrant's sense of alienation from their host culture. Later, among the Columbian community of Jackson Heights, the immigrants are no closer to their idea of the real New York than they were in rural South America and find themselves amongst people who are longing for home.

### New York: How is it shown?

Maria's first impression of the USA is at JFK airport where she is treated kindly by Customs officers who correctly suspect her of drug trafficking yet don't X-ray her abdomen because of her pregnancy, an act of consideration in direct contrast to her life in South America (in particular her treatment by her boss at the flower factory).

Maria's first impression of the country outside the airport is in a New Jersey motel room where Lucy is killed. The first people she talks to properly are a Filipino petrol pump attendant and a Haitian taxi driver who speaks Creole. We get the impression of an integrated, multicultural environment.

When she first arrives in New York it is busy and lively, yet everyone appears to be relaxed and happy, in total contrast to the materially impoverished and depressed characters populating Maria's hometown.

### Immigration

The eastern coastal cities of America have a long history of immigrant arrival, from the gold rush era of European immigrants and the famine ships from Ireland, to the 20th century arrivals from South America and Cuba. Maria's journey to New York however is not motivated initially by a desire to emigrate but by the lure

of the money she can earn as a mule. She intends to return to Colombia. Once in New York however, her experiences with those working in the world of drugs, her pregnancy and the opportunities offered by the city lead her to realise that life there may be better for her and her unborn child. Her decision to stay gives us an insight into the motivations of those who emigrate for economic reasons.

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Compare Maria's rural village and the borough of Queens.
2. What do you think was the main reason for Maria choosing to stay in New York?
3. What kinds of circumstances lead people to emigrate?
4. What does this film say about the relationship between Colombia and the USA?

### Key Sequence: 'Home Truths'

**Chapter: 7** Watch the sequence from when Maria enters her house to when she is in Lucy's house sitting on the sofa talking to Lucy.

**Time:** (29:16 – 38:14)

**Context:** Maria is pressurised into supporting her family including her sister's child. She is treated unfairly in the workplace but her sister and mother don't view the inequality as a problem and urge her to apologise to her boss and return. Preparing to become a drug mule, Maria then visits Lucy, who has been on two previous trips to New York.

This sequence opens with a handheld midshot which follows Maria through the house as her sister insists that Maria should be supporting her. During the conversation, the film cuts between midshots of each of them and then moves into close-ups. As the tension increases between them, Maria storms out of the kitchen. The scene ends with Maria in her bedroom. The colour in this scene also contributes to our understanding of the story. The scene is dominated by neutral colour tones except for Maria's red top, which stands out prominently.

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Look at the camerawork in this scene. In groups, list all the observations you make and discuss what you think it tells us about the story.
2. Compare how we see Maria at the beginning and end of this scene.
3. What do you think is the significance of the use of colours in this scene?

We then see Maria walking uphill towards Lucy's apartment. The camera is handheld, and tracks her as she walks to the front door. Lucy's apartment is sparse but clean and relatively modern compared to some of the other homes we see. Maria looks curious and



uncomfortable in this environment. Lucy demonstrates her experience of being a mule by showing Maria how to swallow the pellets by practicing with grapes.

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. We see Maria behind a gate at the start of this scene. What does it tell us about her?
2. Compare the condition of Maria's apartment with that of Lucy's.
3. How does this scene contribute to the development of their relationship?

## DISCUSSION

1. Do you think *Maria Full of Grace* is successful in justifying Maria's decision to be a drug mule?
2. Do you sympathise with Maria? Give reasons for your answer.
3. In groups, compare the experiences below taken from news reports with Maria's. Do you think her story is realistic?
  - "Hospitalised drug mule had €56,000 stash in stomach" – Irish Independent, Feb 28th, 2009.
  - "X-ray missed 'drug mule' cocaine" – BBC News, Dec 10th, 2007
  - "'Drugs mule' has her sentence increased" – Irish Independent, Feb 14th, 2006
4. Is *Maria Full of Grace* an anti-drugs film? Why/not?
5. Who do you think is the ultimate victim of the drug trade? Give reasons for your answer.



## Credits

*Maria Full of Grace*, directed by Joshua Marston  
USA/Colombia, 2004, Running Time: 101 mins.

For complete cast and crew details please see [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

## Project Topics

- a A South American Film Director or Star
- b Three Films with Female Protagonists
- c An Alien in New York: Films about Immigrants in the USA



## Section 3: House of Flying Daggers

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. *House of Flying Daggers* is an example of a martial arts action film. Can you think of any other films which belong to this genre?
2. What are your expectations of a martial arts film?
3. In groups, make a list of all the martial arts actors/actresses you know.

### Introduction

*House of Flying Daggers* is an Asian martial arts film made in 2004. It belongs to a genre known as wuxia (martial arts chivalry). Starring the famous Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi, it is directed by Zhang Yimou, one of the supreme visual stylists of world cinema. Described by the director as “a love story wrapped inside of an action film”, *House of Flying Daggers* contains stunningly choreographed martial arts sequences and intriguing plot twists.

Following Ang Lee’s Oscar-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *House of Flying Daggers* is another Asian martial arts film to achieve international success<sup>2</sup>. The success of martial arts films outside of Asia owes much to the cult status of Chinese-American martial arts film star Bruce Lee. His influential films *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) and *Enter the Dragon* (1973) were pivotal in generating interest in martial arts films around the world.



### Awards & Nominations for *House of Flying Daggers*

**Academy Awards** (2005): Nomination for Zhao Xiaoding for Best Cinematography

**Golden Globes** (2005): Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film

**BAFTA** (2005): 9 nominations including Zhang Ziyi for Best Actress and Best Film not in the English Language.



### Synopsis

It is 859 AD. During the reign of the Tang dynasty in China, a secret organisation called ‘The House of the Flying Daggers’ rises and opposes the government. A police officer called Leo sends officer Jin to the Peony Pavilion to investigate a young blind dancer named Mei, claiming that she has ties to the ‘Flying Daggers,’ an all-female rebel army that steals from the rich and gives to the poor, to the consternation of the government. Leo arrests Mei, only to have Jin release her in a plot to gain her trust and lead the police to the new leader of the secret organisation. But things are far more complicated than they seem: Mei is not blind. She is in fact a member of the ‘House of Flying Daggers’, and while she apparently flees from Leo she is leading him to Jin, who is himself in love with her. At the film’s conclusion, everyone is unmasked and reveals their true allegiance, but Mei’s love for Leo means certain death for somebody...

### BEFORE WATCHING

1. Can you think of any other stories about people who steal from the rich and give to the poor?
2. Having read the synopsis and from the title, what are your expectations of this film?

### Background

#### The Director: Zhang Yimou

“Many directors have told similar stories, but my concern is how people fall in love and what we are willing to sacrifice for the sake of that love. At the end of the day love is a triumph of the human spirit.” – Zhang Yimou, on his experience of making *House of Flying Daggers*.

Zhang Yimou is a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, China’s state-run film training centre which has trained the foremost filmmaking talent in China since its establishment in 1950. The academy suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)<sup>3</sup> but re-opened to students in 1978. Zhang Yimou belongs to what is known as China’s

<sup>2</sup> Other Asian martial arts films that have achieved international success are: *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, China, 2002), *Ong Bak* (Prachya Pinkaew, Thailand, 2003) *Fearless* (Ronny Yu, China, 2006) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Zhang Yimou, China, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> A ten year long social and political campaign carried out by The Red Guard and led by Mao Tse Tung (leader of the People’s Republic of China), which aimed to reignite revolutionary fervour and remove “bourgeois” influences in society. It led to millions of people being forced into manual labour, thousands of executions and civil unrest.






Fifth Generation of filmmakers, the first group of Chinese filmmakers to graduate from the Academy following the Cultural Revolution, and whose careers went on the rise during the 1980s.

Zhang Yimou made his directing debut with *Red Sorghum* (1988) and consequently formed a distinctive professional relationship with leading female actress, Gong Li, which resulted in a fascinating female-centric trilogy of films including *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992). These films all had a Chinese focus and they not only brought the director acclaim from Chinese audiences but also saw him make a great impression on the European Arthouse scene, winning a Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1988 for *Red Sorghum* and a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1992 for *The Story of Qiu Ju*.

In 2002 he made *Hero*, a conscious decision by the director to embark on a Hollywood-style blockbuster which would have appeal outside China (in particular the USA) but would retain the identical elements of his filmmaking style. As a former cinematographer<sup>4</sup>, this style consists of beautifully photographed visual spectacles rich in colour, extreme forms of violence, choreographed fighting and the use of magical incidents and objects. He followed *Hero* with *House of Flying Daggers* and in 2006 he released the epic period drama *The Curse of the Golden Flower*, which saw him reunite with Gong Li for the eighth time. In 2008 he directed the visual spectacles which opened and closed the Beijing Olympics.

Although his current political viewpoint would appear to be sympathetic to the Chinese government, his films continue to display a thematic preoccupation with gender roles, in which the female's desire threatens the (usually tyrannical) system which seeks to control her. Zhang Yimou is also concerned with the male's predicament, which typically involves a problematic father/son relationship.

#### Selected Filmography

- *Curse of the Golden Flower/Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*, 2006 
- *House of Flying Daggers/Shi mian mai fu*, 2004 
- *Hero/Ying xiong*, 2002 
- *The Road Home/Wo de fu jin mu qin*, 1999 
- *The Story of Qiu Ju/Qiu Ju da guansi*, 1992
- *Raise the Red Lantern/Da hong deng long gao gao gua*, 1991
- *Red Sorghum/Hong gao liang*, 1987 

See [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) for complete filmography

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. How do you think Zhang Yimou's training as a cinematographer has influenced his style of filmmaking?
2. What do you expect from Hollywood-style blockbusters? Why do you think Zhang Yimou wanted to make a Hollywood-style blockbuster?
3. Do you know any other directors whose films have a rich visual style?



### The Star: Zhang Ziyi

Zhang Ziyi is a trained dancer who also studied drama at the China Central Drama Academy. Her on-screen debut was *Wo de fu jin mu qin* (1999) (aka *The Road Home*, but literally *My Father and My Mother*), a film by Zhang Yimou. After the film was completed, the media quickly forced upon her the dubious nickname of 'Little Gong Li', since a number of Zhang Yimou films featured the 'Big' Gong Li. In 2001 she made her first appearance in an American movie, starring alongside Jackie Chan in *Rush Hour 2*. With no knowledge of English at the time, Chan mentored her by translating everything the director said.

Zhang Ziyi went on to star in the hugely successful *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and reunited with Zhang Yimou on the Oscar-nominated film *Hero*. 2004 was a big year for Zhang Ziyi, playing the lead role in *House of Flying Daggers* and Wong Kar-Wai's *2046*, where she co-starred with Gong Li.

Zhang Ziyi has now starred in some of the biggest Chinese films to have achieved international success in recent times and has worked with some of the greatest Asian directors – Ang Lee, Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-Wai. Even though she has been in many kung fu movies, she is not actually a trained martial artist, so she uses many dance moves in her fight sequences. She has been listed in Time magazine's World's 100 Most Influential People. They called her 'China's Gift to Hollywood.' She is immensely popular in the Far East and endorses numerous commercial products.

<sup>4</sup> A cinematographer (also known as the Director of Photography) is the person in charge of the photography of a film. They are responsible for managing the camera and lighting crew, and for making technical and creative decisions which affect the overall look of a film.



## Section 3: House of Flying Daggers

### Asian Action & Hollywood

Asian action films have taken the film world by storm by virtue of their natural elegance, poetic use of symbolism, ornate visual riches, painterly qualities and the romantic elements they integrate in their storylines. They also have female action stars playing key roles in the narrative. The effect on Hollywood has been twofold: it has purchased screen stories and remade them eg. *Infernal Affairs*, and it has hired stars and directors to make films in the United States such as John Woo (Director), Yuen Woo Ping (Choreographer), Chow Yun Fat (Actor), Zhang Ziyi and Michelle Yeoh (Actresses).

### Asian Action Director: John Woo

The balletic action style of Hong Kong director John Woo has been a major influence on Hollywood action filmmaking over the last decade. His films *The Killer* (1989), *Bullet in the Head* (1990) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) have proven key artistic influences on a generation of directors such as Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs* – 1992, *Pulp Fiction* – 1994), Robert Rodriguez (*Desperado*, 1995) and the Wachowski brothers (*The Matrix Trilogy*, 1999-2003). Woo made his debut in the USA directing Belgian action star Jean-Claude Van Damme in *Hard Target* (1993) and followed this with *Broken Arrow* (1996). He graduated to directing his breakthrough film in the USA, *Face/Off* (1997), and then *MI:2*, for one of Hollywood's biggest producers/stars, Tom Cruise, in 1999. In 2009 he directed an action war drama called *Red Cliff* (2009), which tells the story of an epic battle in Chinese history.

### Film Genre: Wuxia

#### Introduction



Martial arts films either feature martial arts combat as a central theme or are action films which contain martial arts combat as a significant element. This could include Chinese swordplay films and Japanese Samurai films, as well as the kung fu action films popularised by Bruce Lee.

Wuxia (pronounced "woo-she-yah") is a Mandarin Chinese term which means martial arts chivalry or martial arts heroes. It is a distinct genre in Chinese literature and cinema, and features prominently

in all areas of Chinese culture. Wuxia is peculiar to that culture because of its centuries' long history of 'wushu' (martial arts). Japanese Samurai traditions have some aspects of wuxia in common because of their history of martial arts.

Wuxia films feature strong magical and fantasy elements, and typically have a historical setting (commonly set against a background of political crisis in Imperial China), impossible love affairs, action scenes centred on swordplay and a narrative style based on melodrama. Typical themes are those of friendship, loyalty and betrayal. Locations include mountain-top monasteries and bamboo forests with casts of spiritual masters, master swordsmen, acrobatic warriors, flying daggers and martial artists.

#### Other Wuxia films:

- *A Touch of Zen/Xia nu* – King Hu, 1971 
- *Ashes of Time/Dung che sai duk* – Wong Kar Wai, 1994 
- *Curse of the Golden Flower/Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia* – Zhang Yimo 2006 
- *The Banquet/Ye yan* – Xiaogang Feng, 2006 
- *The Forbidden Kingdom* – Rob Minkoff, 2008 

### Style and Setting

#### Element of Style: Flying Fighters

The dazzling martial arts sequences in *House of Flying Daggers*, involving fighters literally flying through the air, are a conventional element of wuxia films. This effect is a fictitious exaggeration based on the real martial arts practice of Qing Gong, which gives the martial artist the ability to scale walls and move swiftly and lightly. The use of wirework special effects to make fighters appear to effortlessly fly through the air is a technique that has been used in wuxia filmmaking for many years, and has developed from being rather crude and amateurish to an advanced and stunning effect. Some of the best examples of this technique can be seen in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. It is sometimes referred to as 'Wire-Fu'.

In film, the person responsible for choreographing these action sequences is the Action Director or Action Choreographer. Zhang Yimou has worked with the same acclaimed Action Choreographer (Tony Ching Siu-Tung) on *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* and *Curse of the Golden Flower*. Perhaps the most famous martial arts Action Choreographer is Yuen Woo Ping who choreographed the kung fu fight sequences in the *Matrix* trilogy, *Kill Bill Vol 1 & 2* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

#### Element of Style: Colour

Zhang Yimou's visual style is characterised by a strong use of colour, giving his stories another layer of depth and emotion. He likes to use symbolic visuals in his films, codifying gender by colour: this could be termed expressionist and in his case is related to a particular Chinese





painting style. His previous film *Hero* is divided into different coloured sequences, beginning with red, then blue, and so forth, giving each sequence a distinctive look and a thematic meaning. From his first major film *Red Sorghum* to *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* and *The Curse of the Golden Flower*, he has included sequences with distinct colour palettes.



Colour plays a significant role in *House of Flying Daggers*. One notable example is the final scene, during which a snowstorm coats the entire landscape in white. In Asia, white is a colour that is typically associated with mourning and death, and therefore is very appropriate for the scene of death and tragedy which follows. This winter setting has another symbolic meaning, that of underlining the finality of the story.

### Setting: The Bamboo Grove

Another aspect of the wuxia genre is the use of the bamboo grove as a site of combat. In *House of Flying Daggers*, Mei and Jin fight a battalion of government troops in a lush green bamboo grove, this setting symbolising the true heart of the Chinese martial arts action film. Zhang Yimou approaches this scene by having the battle taking place on top of the bamboo and on the ground simultaneously. We see the action from Mei and Jin's perspective on the ground and on top of the bamboo, from the villain's perspective. This lends the narrative strength and creates dramatic tension as we see the action from point of view of all the main players. This fight is also a reference to the famous bamboo grove battle in the modern classic wuxia film *A Touch of Zen* (1971), which is also referenced in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.



### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Why do you think the abilities of martial artists are exaggerated in wuxia films? What effect do you think this exaggeration has on the audience?
2. Look at the colour of Mei's different costumes throughout *House of Flying Daggers* and consider how they change during the story.
3. Compare the fight sequences from the bamboo grove in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Which one do you think is more impressive?
4. Watch Chapter 11, Bamboo Fight, and in groups discuss how camerawork, sound and choreography contribute to creating dramatic tension.

### Theme: Blindness

The central theme in *House of Flying Daggers* is blindness. Mei plays at being blind and the government is blind to the fact that she is a spy. Jin is a government mole – an animal analogy which symbolises blindness and Mei is actually blind to Jin's love for her. The action storyline takes centre stage, however it is the love story which is at the heart of the action, and the film's breathtaking structural trick is to keep the audience guessing about the dramatic outcome of these interwoven narratives until the final frame.

Furthermore, Mei's feigned blindness is not merely to demonstrate the importance of vision and understanding, but also because blindness is a customary physical defect for warriors in martial arts films, particularly in the old *Zatoichi*<sup>5</sup> series (recently updated by Takeshi Kitano in *Zatoichi*, 2003.)

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. How does the revelation that Mei is only pretending to be blind affect your response to her character?
2. Can you think of any other films that have blindness as a central theme?

<sup>5</sup> Zatoichi is a fictional Japanese character created by novelist Kan Shimozawa. A blind masseur and swordmaster, this character was the basis of a total of 26 films and 112 TV episodes in Japan between 1962 and 1989.

## Section 3: House of Flying Daggers

### Key Sequence: Echo Game

**Chapter: 3** Watch the sequence from when the drummers arrive to when Mei attacks Leo.

**Time:** (10:49 – 15:25)

**Context:** After Mei is assaulted by the intoxicated Jin while dancing for him, Leo arrives and challenges her to the 'Echo Game' and Mei reveals herself as an assassin.



This scene opens with people running up stairs with drums and a montage of different people arriving into the room hurriedly preparing their instruments. When everything has settled down we cut to a close-up of a bowl of nuts as the room descends into a mood of quiet anticipation. We see the Head Mistress of the Peony Pavilion hide behind a curtain.

Cut to a close-up of Mei who is in deep concentration. Leo flicks a nut which hits a drum and Mei reacts by striking the drum with the sleeve of her costume in one balletic movement. This dramatic feat is underscored with a drum roll and burst of appreciation from the crowd.

This sequence is repeated three times, each more challenging for Mei than the last, before Leo flings the entire bowl of nuts at the drums and we see them fly past a motionless Mei. Mei grins, the drummers erupt and she leaps into action.

While this scene is a perfect example of Zhang Yimou's stylish combination of colour, sound and enthralling action, it serves also to mark the first pivotal plot point in *House of Flying Daggers* and is central to how narrative progression is achieved in his approach to wuxia. By dazzling the viewer with this elaborate action sequence it serves to create dramatic tension for the moment when she grabs the sword and swipes at Leo, and reveals herself to be a member of the Flying Daggers, as Leo suspects her to be. In this case, the narrative is progressed through the use of a highly stylised and exaggerated action sequence which draws the viewer into the

magical and fantastical style of the film. Furthermore it propels Mei from her role as a vulnerable female character who entertains men into that of the brave and cunning protagonist of the story.

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. What is the purpose of the opening montage in this sequence?
2. How do the camera angles and sound effects convey Mei's blindness?
3. Compare the use of camera angles, camera movement and sound in each of the three sequences of Leo throwing nuts.
4. What does this sequence tell us about Mei and Leo?

### DISCUSSION

1. Were you satisfied with the ending? Working with a partner, can you think of any other outcomes that would work?
2. Who do you think is the hero/heroine in *House of Flying Daggers*? Give reasons for your answer.

### Credits

*House of Flying Daggers*, directed by Zhang Yimou  
China, 2005, Running Time: 119 mins.

For complete cast and crew details please see [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

### Project Topics

- a The Legacy of Bruce Lee
- b My Favourite Martial Arts Film
- c Martial Arts Special Effects
- d An Asian Film Director or Star



## Section 4: Touching the Void

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. *Touching the Void* is a film which is based on a true story. Can you think of any other films based on true stories?
2. Have you seen any films that are set on a mountain? What type of film (genre) are they?

### Introduction

*Touching the Void* is the story of an expedition in 1985 by two young British climbers, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, to climb the Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. The film, directed by Kevin Macdonald in 2003, is based on the book of the same name written by Joe Simpson in 1988. *Touching the Void* combines dramatic reconstructions of events on the mountain with real interviews with the protagonists. This combination of drama and documentary styles is known as the docu-drama.

### Synopsis/Credits

In June 1985, Joe Simpson and his climbing partner Simon Yates set out to conquer the west face of the 21,000 foot Siula Grande in a remote part of the Peruvian Andes. After reaching the peak's summit, Simpson fell. Yates was left with an agonising and fateful decision – to continue holding Simpson, in which case he would most likely also fall and die on the mountainside, or to cut the rope. He chose to do the latter and returned to base camp after a few days to relate his horrific experience and to inform everyone that Joe was dead. However four nights later during a snowstorm, Simpson returned suffering from delirium and frostbite.

### BEFORE WATCHING

1. How would you approach this story as a filmmaker?
2. In pairs, can you think of any other stories where characters are faced with a difficult dilemma?

### Director: Kevin Macdonald

*Touching the Void* was directed by Scottish filmmaker Kevin Macdonald who also directed the Oscar-winning documentary, *One Day in September* (1999) and later the multi-award winning *The Last King of Scotland* (2006). His most recent film is the American political thriller *State of Play* (2009). Macdonald is the grandson of the late screenwriter Emeric Pressburger, who, along with Michael Powell, made some of the greatest films produced in the United Kingdom.

### Background

In 1989, four years after his miraculous survival, climber Joe Simpson's novel *Touching the Void* won the NCR Book Award (U.K.'s major non-fiction award, now the Samuel Johnson Prize) and the tale of his remarkable survival and Simon Yates' crucial decision to cut the rope are now part of mountaineering folklore.

Upon their return to the U.K. following the events on Siula Grande, Simon Yates was criticised by many in the climbing community for cutting the rope. However Simpson has always defended Yates' actions and admits that he ultimately saved both their lives. As well as continuing mountaineering, Yates wrote two autobiographical books about his climbing experiences, *Against the Wall* and *The Flame of Adventure*. Simpson began a new career as a motivational speaker and wrote further books about his climbing experiences, including *The Beckoning Silence* (2003) which was adapted into a TV documentary by Channel 4 in 2007.

## The Documentary and the Docu-Drama

### Introduction

The documentary is a distinct genre in film, encompassing films which attempt to document or observe real life, real people and real issues. The definition of documentary is broad and it can include biographies, investigative reports, historical accounts and educational material.

### The Documentary: Popular Reality

Kevin Macdonald states in his introduction to the book, *Imagining Reality*, that the documentary form is about "life caught as it really is." Part of the appeal of documentary is its ability to offer us authentic and unexpected stories. The audience's voyeuristic desire to see people's inner lives exposed is fed by the documentary form. The form depends on a subtle combination of the participant's





## Section 4: Touching the Void



trust in the filmmaker and the filmmaker's luck or cunning in exposing the participant's true character or the truth underlying events or situations. A variety of techniques – testimony, photographs, newsreels, home movie footage, interviews and voiceovers - combine to satisfy the audience's hunger for truth and the filmmaker's desire to reveal truth. Although documentaries may appear to offer an unmediated reality, from the very earliest documentary films, "life caught as it really is" has been staged, organised and edited into a form that would fit the filmmaker's intentions and their versions of reality.

The last ten years has seen a significant rise in the number of documentaries and reality-based programmes being produced. From gameshow-style programmes such as *Big Brother* to nature-based shows like *Planet Earth*, reality programming makes up a huge percentage of television entertainment today. Where cinema is concerned, documentary films now regularly make it into theatres and the commercial success of films such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *March of the Penguins* (2005) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) highlights the public's demand for factual stories.

### The Documentary Filmmaker: Michael Moore

One of the most famous and successful documentary filmmakers of recent times is Michael Moore, director of *Roger & Me* (1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Sicko* (2007). Moore's informal style of reportage and investigation has made his films appealing to mass audiences but he has also drawn criticism from those who argue that his approach is sensationalist

and often inaccurate. Despite the criticisms, Moore has made some of the most financially successful documentaries of all time and won an Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine* as well as the coveted Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2004 for *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the first documentary to do so since *Le Monde du Silence/The Silent World* (Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle) in 1956. Moore's active participation within his films is a style shared with British documentary filmmaker Nick Broomfield (*Biggie & Tupac*, 2002). Other documentary filmmakers who appear in their films include Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*, 2004) and Louis Theroux (*Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends*, 1998-2000).

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. In groups, discuss what you think makes a good documentary?
2. Why do you think stories based on reality are popular with audiences?

### The Docu-Drama

The drama documentary (or 'docu-drama' or 'drama-doc') is a subset of the documentary genre. It supplements a reality-based story with episodes of performance (by professionals or non-professionals, sometimes even the people whose own story forms the centre of the narrative) which are based on a real life incident or story. These kinds of dramatic reconstructions are familiar to viewers of news and factual TV programmes.

In the docu-drama *Touching the Void*, the reconstruction of their expedition is complicated by the fact that while the actors playing Simpson and Yates are physically and vocally unlike their subjects, the real-life Simpson and Yates also supply the film's voiceover narrative and appear on screen. At one point they even retrace their steps on the mountain, doubling for themselves. Thus we have the real Simpson and Yates and the characters 'Simpson' and 'Yates'. To complicate matters still further, some of the long distance shots of Joe and Simon climbing the mountain are played not by the lead actors, but by body doubles, who were Joe Simpson and Simon Yates themselves.

Docu-drama relies on the principal character to deliver the plot's moral or message; thus an observer or victim of the story's event or situation is used to portray the story. In this sense, we can see that, while perhaps confusing, *Touching the Void* essentially conforms to the main rule of storytelling in the docu-drama format by structuring the film around Joe and Simon's narration of their story. It is also a film which overlaps many genres with its content and themes, since it is an adventure film, a documentary, a buddy movie, a horror movie and perhaps in a broad sense, an exploration of faith.



## Style & Setting

### Style

*Touching the Void* tells its story through a combination of interviews with the main characters and a dramatic reconstruction of events. The film interviews Joe, Simon and Richard, who speak to the director just off-camera. They recall their experiences of Siula Grande over reconstructed images of the terrifying expedition. These experiences are re-enacted (and spoken) by actors. The interviews are conducted direct-to-camera, and this style allows the participants to tell their own stories, explaining, pleading and exonerating themselves directly to the viewer. We are constantly reminded that this is a true story and their direct engagement with us heightens our interest in their story.

By interviewing all parties involved in the expedition, the film is successful in maintaining an objective point of view of the events. However the point of view is complicated by the presence of Richard Hawking, who remained at base camp but regularly reminds the viewer that he prefers Simon to Joe. His contribution provides an interesting frame of reference for the audience as it opposes the natural preference for the perceived victim of events, Joe.

The fact that the two protagonists have survived to narrate the film necessarily removes what filmmakers call the need for the 'suspension of disbelief'. In other words, despite this film's generic adventure elements (the mountain, the battle against the odds, the cold, and the imminent threat of avalanche) we already know the outcome (rather like *Titanic*, 1997). In order to sustain our interest, the film needs to focus on the very singular characters at its heart, Joe, Simon and the Siula Grande itself. The spiralling tension and the description of Joe's agonising injuries combine to heighten the audience's anticipation of the known outcome.

### Setting

Set in the Peruvian Andes, the film occupies two distinct territories: the physical conflict implied in the mountaineering adventure and the protagonist's state of mind. The film's lack of domestic context ensures that the audience focuses entirely on the dilemma at hand. The image of isolated human figures battling the elements in a hostile landscape is enhanced by the knowledge that this incident actually happened.

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Why do you think the 'climbers' aren't seen away from the mountain?
2. How do the present-day interviews add to your understanding of the protagonists' dilemma?

## Themes: Survival & Bravery

The predominant theme in *Touching the Void* is man's determination and instinct for survival following a disastrous event. This theme is familiar to us from true stories such as *Titanic* and *World Trade Centre* (2006) as well as Hollywood disaster movies such as *Twister* (1996), *Armageddon* (1998) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). All of these films involve protagonists who must battle against seemingly insurmountable odds to survive, generally through extreme acts of bravery. Unlike the fictional characters in some of the aforementioned films, Joe's incredible bravery in surviving the accident is all the more gripping as we are aware that it is a true story.

## Key Sequence: Day 4 – Disaster Strikes

<b>Chapter: 5</b>	Watch the sequence from when we see snow blowing off the top of the mountain until Simon is assisting the injured Joe.
<b>Time:</b>	(20:44 – 26:16)
<b>Context:</b>	Joe and Simon are making their descent along a ridge when Joe falls and badly breaks his leg. Both he and Simon realise the seriousness of this accident and the potentially grave consequences it may have for both of them.

The scene opens with wisps of snow blowing off the top of the Siula Grande and feet trudging through thick snow as Joe and Simon make their way along a ridge on their descent of the Siula Grande, confident of reaching base camp by the end of the day. Joe approaches a vertical ridge and uses his ice pick to try and lower himself down. Footage of them on the mountain is intercut with straight-to-camera interview footage of Joe and Simon candidly recounting the moments before and after the fall. This sequence is a pivotal moment in the film and an examination of it highlights the techniques Macdonald uses throughout the film to tell this story so dramatically.

One of the techniques he uses is an effective combination of shot size and sound effects. At the beginning of this scene, the close-up shots of Joe's feet crunching cautiously through the snow, and the way this sound effect is accentuated, heightens the drama as our attention is focused on Joe's legs and we get the feeling that disaster could happen at any moment. This image is then contrasted with the voiceover narrative, which at this point has Simon speaking of their confidence of descending by the end of the day. Joe's candid explanation of his attempt to descend the ridge is at odds with the predicament we see in the reconstruction. This evokes belief in the viewer as we have previously seen them overcome other difficult obstacles. However, once Joe begins describing the sound his ice pick made in the snow, ominous music can be heard in the

## Section 4: Touching the Void

background, which increases in volume until he falls. The silence as he falls through the air is broken by the sound of his leg breaking, and the dramatic music returns, heightening the drama and sense of doom. At this point in the film, we get the feeling that the real adventure is only beginning.

During this sequence, the voice-over serves to root us in the present and makes us aware that despite the visual pain and crisis the actors in the reconstruction are going through, they somehow manage to overcome it. By cutting between the reconstruction and the interviews, moments which may have only taken a few seconds to happen in reality seem longer and more dramatic. Macdonald also relies heavily on sound to achieve this drama, skilfully manipulating the music, sound effects and voice-over to direct the tension, control the mood and influence our emotional response to the film.

### STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. Comment on the use of sound effects and music during this scene.
2. How effective is the use of camerawork in conveying the drama of this scene?
3. Why do you think the director chooses to use the dialogue from the interviews to narrate this scene as opposed to allowing the actors in the reconstruction to speak the lines? Do you think this is effective? Why/not?
4. If you were to direct this scene, how would you approach it?

### DISCUSSION

1. How does your foreknowledge of the film's conclusion affect the way you view the characters? Do you think the film is successful in sustaining our interest despite knowing the outcome?
2. Who do you think was the braver character? Which character emerges as more sympathetic?
3. If you were in a similar position to Simon, what would you have done?
4. What other survival/disaster films do you know of?

### Credits

*Touching the Void*, directed by Kevin Macdonald  
U.K., 2003, Running Time: 106 mins.

For complete cast and crew details please see [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

### Project Topics

- a True Stories on Film
- b Adaptations: Films which began as Books.
- c My Three Favourite Documentaries
- d Make your own Documentary (see page 22 for hints and tips)



## Section 5: Auteur Cinema

### Introduction

#### What is an 'auteur'?

An 'auteur' is a filmmaker who is deemed to have a significant level of control over the films they make or an identifiable filmmaking style or set of values evident across a number of their films. Current filmmakers who have a signature style and may be deemed auteurs include Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar Wai, Martin Scorsese, Jane Campion and Quentin Tarantino.

#### The Origins of the 'Auteur'

The term 'auteur' was coined by French film critics in the 1950s who wished to establish a cinema industry in France led by writer-directors. Until that time the most significant person in film taking both creative and financial risks was usually considered to be the producer. Through the influential film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, these critics elevated the reputation of many films and film directors, and established a standard which was upheld for years as the epitome of filmmaking excellence. The auteur school of critics revered certain directors (such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks) who left their personality on the films they directed. This was apparent in their style of camerawork, consistent use of symbols and recurring themes. Some of the most notable auteur filmmakers were associated with the French New Wave and they include Jean-Luc Godard (*À bout de souffle/Breathless*, 1960), François Truffaut (*Jules et Jim*, 1962) and Alan Resnais (*Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959).

#### Some films by auteur filmmakers:

- *Chungking Express* – Wong Kar Wai, 2004 
- *Curse of the Golden Flower* – Zhang Yimou, 2006 
- *Pulp Fiction* – Quentin Tarantino, 1994 
- *The Departed* – Martin Scorsese, 1990 
- *The Piano* – Jane Campion, 1993 



Chungking Express

### Contemporary Auteurs

Two contemporary American filmmakers who could be regarded as having trademark styles are Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino.

#### Martin Scorsese

##### Background

Martin Scorsese is one of the most revered contemporary American filmmakers. His signature filmmaking style is apparent over a large body of work. His films have combined traditional genres (the gangster film, the musical) with elements of his own background as an Italian-American growing up on the streets of New York City. His long association with the actor Robert De Niro [*Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Casino* (1996)] has been mutually beneficial and their collaborations are considered among the best work that either has achieved. Scorsese has shot remakes



Martin Scorsese on location

North by Northwest



The term auteur can also be interpreted as a kind of trademark. In other words, a filmmaker's name is a promise or guarantee of value or entertainment based on the filmmaker's previous activities and credits. On this basis, an auteur's work can be recognised by recurring themes, characters, setting and imagery. For example, the name 'Alfred Hitchcock' (*North by Northwest*, 1959) signifies a particular genre of cinema: an entertaining thriller, usually featuring an innocent man who is placed in danger and a blonde heroine; whereas the name 'Martin Scorsese' generally indicates a film centered on the activities of Italian-American gangsters.



The Departed



(*Cape Fear*, 1991) and adapted classic novels (*The Age of Innocence*, 1993) as well as attempted epics such as *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Aviator* (2004) – both with Leonardo Di Caprio. His most popular success, *Goodfellas* (1990), suggests that his greatest creative and emotional commitment lies with the violent gangsters who became legends on the streets of Little Italy, as well as dealing with issues of guilt and redemption particularly associated with Roman Catholicism. Despite being tipped for success on numerous occasions, the Oscar for Best Director eluded him until 2007, when he won for *The Departed* (2006), his adaptation of the cult Hong Kong action-thriller *Infernal Affairs*.

The Departed



### Filmmaking Style

Scorsese's style of directing could be described as exciting and energetic, with stylised camera movements, jump cuts, tracking shots and voiceovers heightening the tensions, doubts and anxieties of the often loner characters who inhabit his best films.

#### Selected Filmography

- *Shine a Light*, 2008
- *The Departed*, 2006
- *The Aviator*, 2004
- *Gangs of New York*, 2002
- *Casino*, 1995
- *Goodfellas*, 1990
- *Raging Bull*, 1980
- *Taxi Driver*, 1976
- *Mean Streets*, 1973
- *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, 1967

See [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) for complete filmography

With interesting and innovative use of film techniques, lush colour textures and excellent production design, his films are characterised by the use of violence and pulsating soundtracks whilst also taking care to document the minutiae of the everyday. He is probably most influenced by Vincente Minnelli (e.g. *Gigi*, 1958) and Nicholas Ray (e.g. *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) but his work also reflects a fascination with the neo-realist school of Italian filmmaking and the naturalistic dramas of American filmmaker, John Cassavetes.

## Quentin Tarantino

### Background

Quentin Tarantino's debut film, the violent heist movie *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), became an instant cult hit, launched his career and announced the arrival of a new distinctive voice in American cinema. He enhanced his reputation further in 1994 with his seminal film *Pulp Fiction*. Its cast of iconic characters, non-linear storyline, memorable dialogue and eclectic soundtrack took the world of cinema by storm and it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1994. He followed it with *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Kill Bill Vol 1 & 2* (2003/4), *Death Proof* (2007) and the World War II epic *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). He has also worked as a writer on a number of other films such as *True Romance* (1992) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

#### Selected Filmography

- *Inglourious Basterds*, 2009
- *Death Proof*, 2007
- *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*, 2004
- *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, 2003
- *Jackie Brown*, 1997
- *Pulp Fiction*, 1994
- *Reservoir Dogs*, 1992

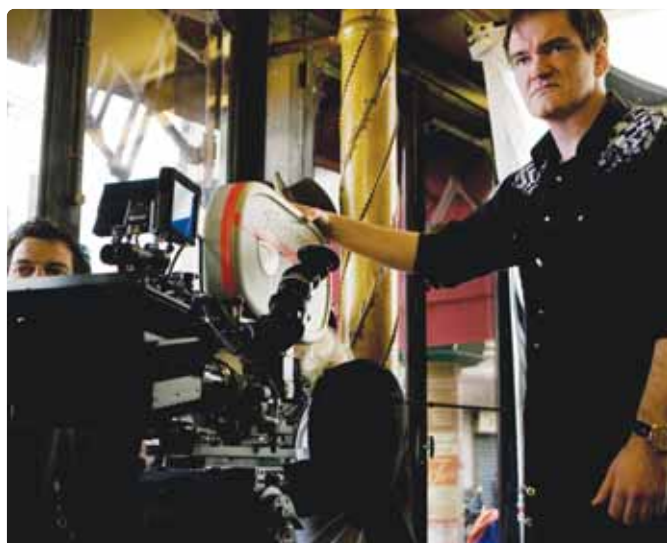
### Filmmaking style

As writer/director, Tarantino's style derives from his combination of humour, violence, masculinity and unique female protagonists and characters. Most of his films feature a distinctive mix of sharp dialogue, multi-story non-linear narratives, ensemble cast and clever use of music. They are also known for their graphic use of violence, black humour and are usually littered with references to pop culture and other filmmakers' work. Tarantino received his film education in a video store by repeatedly watching genre output such as martial arts films and blaxploitation<sup>6</sup> thrillers.

Through characters such as Jules Winnfield (played by Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*) and Odell Watkins (also played by Samuel L. Jackson in *Jackie Brown*), he has located the contemporary significance of the black male as icon and has also cast well-known actors in roles that recall their previous films.

<sup>6</sup> A 1970s American film genre featuring African-American actors in lead roles. These films were often criticised for their stereotypical characterisation of African-Americans and glorification of violence.





Quentin Tarantino on set

For instance, John Travolta [whose legendary roles remain the classic seventies musicals *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978)] dancing as Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction* and Christopher Walken in the same film, cast as an unhinged Vietnam veteran in *The Gold Watch* episode – a nod to his role in Vietnam War classic, *The Deer Hunter* (1978). The casting of Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* contributed to kick-starting his faltering career and this is also true for the career of '70s black action star Pam Grier, cast as the lead in *Jackie Brown*. This referencing of seventies movies and TV shows is especially evident in his epic wuxia homage, *Kill Bill Vols.*

1 and 2. Both films are littered with references to Asian martial arts, gangster and revenge films, as well as recalling famous martial arts TV shows such as *Kung Fu*. The star of that show, David Carradine, plays the role of Bill, and Tarantino also resurrects famous characters from other shows such as the Chinese Kung Fu master Pai Mei in *Kill Bill Volume 2*. The effect on the audience is two-fold: it evokes nostalgia for many but has also drawn criticism from some that Tarantino's films are unoriginal and rely on imitation for their success.

## STUDENT EXPLORATIONS

1. What do you think of Martin Scorsese or Quentin Tarantino as filmmakers?
2. What similarities, if any, can you draw between Scorsese and Tarantino?
3. In groups, can you think of any other film directors today who could be called auteurs?
4. If you were a director, which filmmakers would you be influenced by?
5. Watch a film by an auteur filmmaker and comment on their style.

### Project Topics

- a My Favourite Auteur Filmmaker
- b My Three Favourite Scenes



## Alternative Films for further viewing

- Amélie* – Jean Pierre Jeunet, 2001
- Garage* – Lenny Abrahamson, 2004
- Little Miss Sunshine* – Jonathan Dayton & Valerie Faris, 2006
- Once* – John Carney, 2006
- Pi* – Darren Aronofsky, 1998
- Run, Lola Run* – Tom Tykwer, 1999
- Slumdog Millionaire* – Danny Boyle, 2008

### South American Cinema

- Amores Perros* – Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, 2002
- City of God* – Fernando Meirelles, 2002
- Diarios de motocicleta/The Motorcycle Diaries* – Walter Salles, 2004
- Linha de Passe* – Walter Salles, 2008

### Drug-themed Films

- Scarface* – Brian De Palma, 1983
- The French Connection* – William Friedkin, 1971
- Traffic* – Steven Soderbergh, 2001

### Wuxia & Martial Arts Action Films

- Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* – Ang Lee, 2003
- Hard Boiled* – John Woo, 1992
- Hero* – Zhang Yimou, 2002
- Kill Bill Volumes 1 & 2* – Quentin Tarantino, 2003/4
- The Matrix* – The Wachowski Brothers, 1999

### Documentary

- An Inconvenient Truth* – Davis Guggenheim, 2006
- Bowling for Columbine* – Michael Moore, 2002
- One Day in September* – Kevin McDonald, 1999
- Waltz with Bashir* – Ari Folman, 2008
- Waveriders* – Joel Conroy, 2008
- When We Were Kings* – Leon Gast, 1996

### Auteur Cinema

- À bout de souffle/Breathless* – Jean Luc Godard, 1960
- Chungking Express* – Wong Kar Wai, 1995
- Goodfellas* – Martin Scorsese, 1990
- Infernal Affairs* – Andrea Lau & Alan Mak, 2002
- North by Northwest* – Alfred Hitchcock, 1959
- Paris, Texas* – Wim Wenders, 1984
- Pulp Fiction* – Quentin Tarantino, 1994
- The Piano* – Jane Campion, 1993

# Project hints and tips

- **Begin by keeping a record of all the films you see in your film diary/logbook.**
- **Pick one of the suggested projects or choose one of your own.**
- **Try to watch at least three films related to your project.**
- **Write reviews on the films you see.**
- **Make your project visual: record video reviews or reports using your mobile phone/digital camera/video camera/webcam**
- **Use the internet, your local library, film magazines/journals and your local DVD shop to assist your research.**
- **Decide how you are going to present your project – will it be written, use photographs, video clips etc.?**

## Section 1: Alternative Cinema

### a) My Local Cinema

- What kind of films does your local cinema show?
- Which films are the most popular?
- Can you see alternative films at your local cinema?
- Propose the kind of films you would show at it.
- Go to the cinema and interview people as they come out about the film they have seen/their favourite genre/what they'd like to see at their local cinema. (Tip: use your mobile phone/digital camera or video camera to record it)

## Section 4: Touching the Void

### b) Make your own documentary

- Pick a subject personal to you e.g. a hobby, family member, pet, place you visited etc.
- Choose a style – think about TV programmes and films you've seen.
- Use your mobile phone/digital camera/video camera/webcam to film your documentary.

## Film Diary/Logbook

- Keep a list of all the films you see in your diary/logbook.
- Write down the name of the director, major actors/actresses, genre etc. (Go to [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) to get correct spelling of names)
- Give your film a star rating.
- Have your diary/logbook with you every time you are watching a film. (Get a small one which is easy to carry around with you!)
- Write down any immediate thoughts you have during or after a film.



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