

When we go to see a film, we never just turn up at a cinema and watch a film about which we know nothing. We have made a choice to see one particular film. There are lots of reasons why we might choose to see a particular film. We could have been told to see it by a friend. Or we could have seen an advertisement for the film and decided that the film looked interesting.

Film posters are a very effective method of advertising a film. Consequently a great deal of thought goes into their creation. Not only must the poster attract the attention of would-be filmgoers – it must interest, intrigue and suggest. No one likes to go to a film with no information about what it is they are going to spend money on, and also devote some time and attention to. Look at the poster for 'Empire of the Sun'. At first glance it may mean one thing but closer study may introduce various ideas that you might not have thought of.

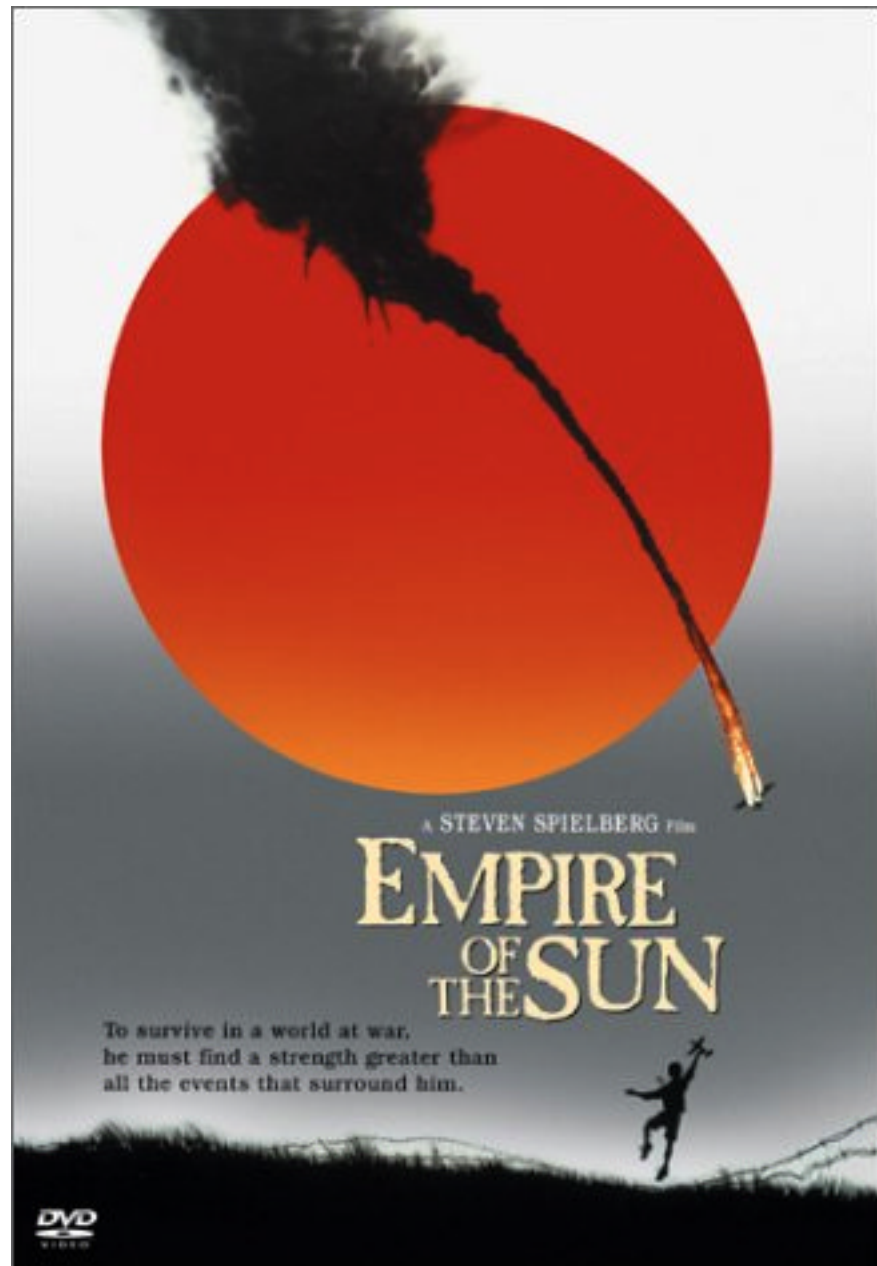
Look first at the poster.

What are your first impressions of it ?

Does it intrigue you, interest you ?

Does it suggest anything to you ?

Just by looking at it do you think you have some idea of what the film is about ?



Now look at the poster again more closely and then answer the following questions about it:

1. What does the orange sun remind you of ?
2. What is it that crosses the sun ? Does the pattern suggest anything else other than exactly what you can see
3. What is the boy in silhouette doing ? And why do you think he is in silhouette ?
4. What else can you see in the bottom quarter of the poster ? What does it remind you of ?
5. What does the title of the film suggest to you ?
6. What does the expression 'A Steven Spielberg Film' mean to you ?

When you have answered those questions you should begin to have some notion of the film makers', and in particular the film distributors', overall concept of the film. The poster is telling you what to expect from the film before you even get into the cinema. It is preparing you for a narrative, a little bit like a book cover might do. (Though as we shall see later, there are many differences between books and films). Think about the poster again and then answer these questions, making sure that you can give reasons for your answers:

1. What does the poster tell you about the setting of the film ?
2. What does it suggest will happen in the film ?
3. What does it tell you about the central character, if there is one
4. What kind of audience do you think the poster is aiming for ?

So you pay your money and enter the cinema. Perhaps you have already read the book 'Empire of the Sun' by J.G. Ballard, or maybe dimly remember that there was a book that was much talked about when it came out.

But what is it about the book that made Spielberg want to turn it into a film ?

What are the ingredients that make a successful film ?

What are the ingredients that make a successful book ?

Are the two the same ?

To answer these questions it is a good idea to first of all consider the two experiences. Below you will find a chart. Under each of the two headings write down everything that you can think of about first, the experience of reading a book and then, second, watching a film.

BOOK	FILM

Obviously the two experiences are very different. When we read a book, for instance, we usually do it alone, in a quiet place and at our own pace. We can put a book down when we have had enough. And the experience of reading is often a fairly lengthy one in comparison to the experience of watching a film.

Most films, for economic reasons are rarely longer than 2 hours. ('Empire of the Sun' is an exception). So how is one medium transferred to another ? How does a text written in words become a text which is primarily communicating to us in pictures?

The most obvious difference is simply in the way we are told the story. Thus a book has a 'storyteller', be it a character in the novel or a narrator (the author ?) who not only tells us of what is going on but who can also tell us why certain things happen. The reader very quickly adapts to and understands the way the story is told, and soon gets involved with the story and the characters within it. This process is an acceptable part of the nature of reading –we settle into a book. The first few chapters are frequently just setting the scene. We re-read sections we do not quite understand at first. We might even discuss the opening with someone who has already read the book.

Naturally we cannot do these things in the cinema —if we attempted to the audience would soon call for the manager ! Thus the opening section of a film takes on considerable significance:

- it must stimulate our curiosity
- it must present us with characters we are interested in
- it must start off a recognisable narrative.

Think again about the opening minutes of the film.

What happens ? Who do we meet ? What do we find out about them ? Who are we likely to identify with and follow through the rest of the film ?

Now look at the pictures below





Both are taken from the opening section of the film when Jim is separated from his parents after the Japanese army has arrived

1. What events have occurred in the film that have made you want to carry on watching ?
2. What characters have you met so far that have interested or intrigued you ?
3. What has happened that has made you realise that the major character in the film is going to be Jim ?
4. What sort of character is Jim ? How is he presented to us visually ? What can you tell about him simply by looking at the two pictures here ? In what ways do you think he is likely to change as the film tells its story ?

The preliminary chapters of the book have been transposed to the screen. But the voice of the story teller hardly exists. Instead we are given a panoramic view of events, and we as an audience have to work quite hard to get a grip upon events and characters. When we meet a character in a book we meet them when and how the author sees fit. S/he gives us information about the character and can spend an entire chapter telling us about them. The convention of cinema demands otherwise. The audience likes to get settled much more quickly and consequently the introduction of a character is handled in a different way.

What were your first impressions of Jim ?

How was he presented/represented ?

Whom did he interact with ? How did he behave ?

Did you find him a sympathetic character at the start of the movie ? Why ?

How are we told about Jim in the book ? Is our impression that immediate or do we approach his character rather with less attention to begin with ?

When you read a book you usually have the author there to guide you through its pages making comments about people, advising you even about whom you are going to spend a long time with. In a film things are not so simple. On a very simple level, if you don't necessarily recognise an actor then it can be difficult to establish whom is a central character to start with. After V_2 hour, once things have settled down maybe ...because their place in the narrative will have been established.

Why did Spielberg not employ famous stars in the film ? To make life more difficult for the audience or is there another reason ?

Look now at the other characters in the film as well as Jim. How are they presented ? What are the visual and other impressions we are given of them ? Fill the information into the following chart:

JIM
BASIE
MRS VICTOR
DR RAWLINS
FRANK
SGT NAGATA
KAMIKAZE BOY PILOT

Showing character in a film is not only achieved through actions but also by mode of dress, speech and position in a film. Relationships with people and things are portrayed by relative positions to each other and a camera.



Look at the image above and answer the following questions about it:

- What is happening in the photograph?
- What do you notice about the relationship each person has within the picture as a whole?
- Which character is your eye drawn to almost automatically?
- Who are the most important people in the photograph? How do you know?
- Who are people you are never likely to see again?
- How has the director set up the shot to engage your attention on what he wants you to look at?

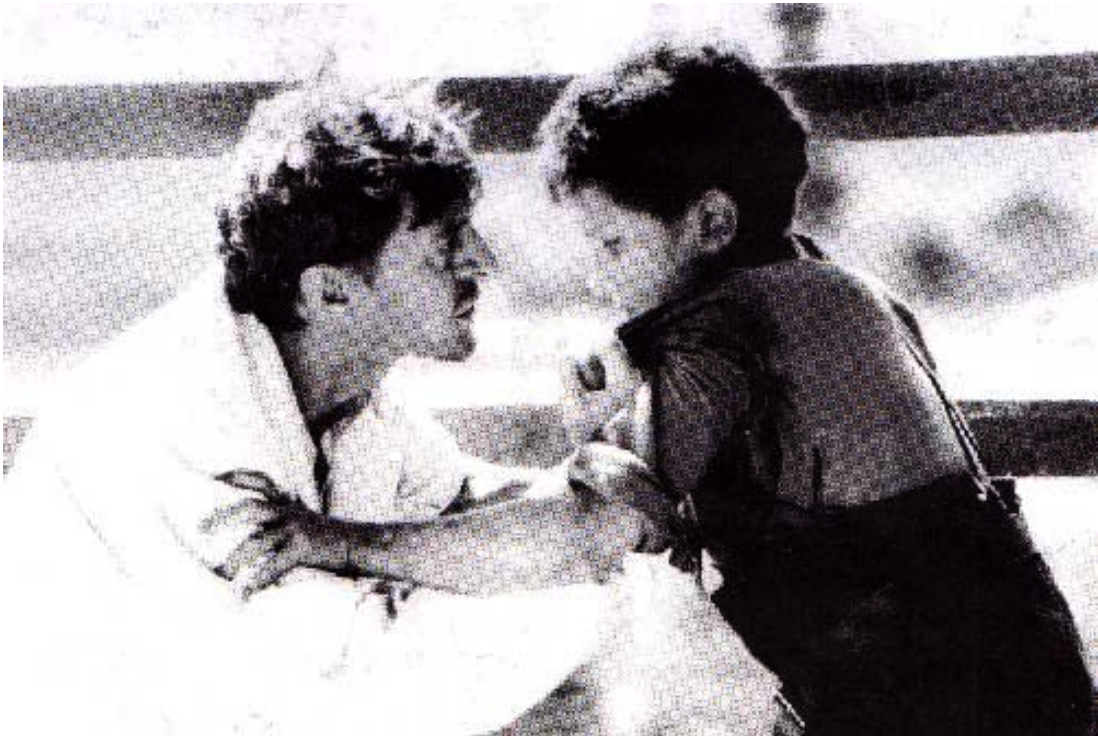
It goes without saying that the narrative of many books and films involves the gradual reworking of character. And as we watch this unfold so too our original perceptions of characters change. Fill in the following chart about the characters in the film:

	First reaction at start	Sympathetic or not by end of film	Altered?	How?
JIM				
BASIE				
MRS VICTOR				
DR RAWLINS				
FRANK				
SGT NAG ATA				
BOY PILOT				

What should be looked at is not only what changes about characters and your reaction to them but how the filmmaker, without the techniques available to an author, manages to work out and show these changes.

Is it simply what people do that provokes us to like or dislike them ? Perhaps also what they say ? Or is there more ? Does the filmmaker have other ways of revealing character to the audience as the film unfolds ?

Look carefully at the following three pictures. They tell us a great deal about Jim, but equally important, they tell us a lot about other characters in the film.





How has Jim changed as the film has progressed ?

What kind of person is he now

Is he 'better' or 'worse' than he was or what ?

How are we as an audience meant to react to him ? Do we feel sorry for him, or do we simply hope that he will survive in an unpleasant adult world ?

What can we tell about Jim's relationship with the other characters ?

What do we think of the other characters ? How are they presented to us ?

If characters are treated in a different way in the cinema, so too there are different ways of dealing with narrative. The book in question is fairly long. The film has only 152 minutes in which to tell the story. If there are short cuts in the delineation of character, so too a filmmaker has to rework the story. Not every incident can be included. Fill out the following chart:

SEQUENCE IN BOOK BUT NOT IN FILM	SEQUENCE IN FILM BUT NOT BOOK

1. Was the absence of any event particularly noticeable in the film ?
2. Was the narrative any less interesting in the film ?
3. What reasons do you think would have been given for any alterations ?
4. Has the "message of the book been changed in any way ? If so, how ?
5. Would you say that the film version of the book has done it justice ?
6. Which version of the story has had the most impact on you and why ?