

# Attack the Block

(2011, Joe Cornish)

## Component 2: Global Film: Narrative, Representation and Film Style

### Focus Area

### Contemporary UK film - Film Style (Aesthetics)

#### PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

##### Sequence 1

[://youtu.be/wnLVesoen4g](https://youtu.be/wnLVesoen4g) The Opening

##### Sequence 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Smvg7nOOHwU>  
“Attack on the police van”

##### Sequence 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZMbY6SEK64> The Ending

#### PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

##### Cinematography (including Lighting)

- The opening is generally dark but Sam is brightly lit and the colours on her are bright. The gang of teenagers are in darkness, underlit and with very dark clothes. This sets up a clear distinction of character and establishes their stereotypes as ‘victim’ and ‘criminals’.
- Initially the teenage gang are shown in extreme long shot (ELS), essentially from Sam’s POV to make clear that they are distant; in the dark; a menace; something to fear. This establishes a trope for the film later on. We cut to a medium close up (MCU) and it’s clear that we are now looking in reverse, at her direction. We then see an over-the-shoulder (OTS) shot from their perspective creating an almost Western-style stand-off that suggests confrontation.
- During key sequence 1 when Moses runs into the shed to fight the alien, the lighting is very ‘Amblin’ in style; the scene is very dark

with sparse use of a key light to highlight the area of conflict. There is also use of smoke to emphasise where the fight is.

- The establishing shot of Wyndham Tower sees it lit in an odd way; in parts the light is very bright and the use of prominent spot lights on the roof shining downwards help to not only reinforce the brutalist nature of the building but also help to create a grey/teal palette that dominates throughout the film. As well as this, it creates a visual style for the building that is other-worldly, with cold greys and blues reminiscent of classic sci-fi imagery of spaceships and base stations on other planets.
- This aesthetic is enhanced when the gang first begin to walk around the tower at 00:10:35 onwards—we see that the design of the building is ‘brutalist’ with a ‘retro’ futuristic style that is highly reminiscent of a 1970s view of the future. Lighting now has a green and light blue hue to it, again typically reflective of a sci-fi film. The composition too, is often done to emphasise the linear, corridor nature of the building, much like the corridor on a space ship for example the Nostromo in *Alien*.
- Later in the film, from 00:21:53 onwards, the Director again uses an ELS to establish that there is a danger in the distance. As with the first sequence, there is dark lighting and there is a significant distance between the characters and the ‘enemy’. This time however it’s the gang spotting the danger of an alien, an interesting reversal of situation and characters from the earlier set-up in the first key sequence.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- Costumes help to reflect age and culture; hoodies dominate, scarves are used to hide identity and the costume overall references British iconography of ‘youth’ and ‘hooligans’.
- Props also establish age and culture with BMX bikes, all of the teenagers having a mobile phone, as well as the variety of ‘weapons’ reflecting ‘status’; the youngest characters

are seen with a large water pistol, the teenage gang have fireworks and blunt instruments with Hi-Hatz, the villain, using a pistol.

- The use of the BMX bike is especially important as it is very emblematic of Amblin films of the 80s as well 'revival pieces' such as *Super 8* (2011) and more recently the Netflix TV show, *Stranger Things* (2016).
- Each floor of the 'block' is designated by a floor number that is painted on the walls in a style that resembles a stencilling effect, the kind of aesthetic used in sci-fi films especially on large space ships, to quickly and easily establish locations for the audience.
- The inside of Moses' apartment is only revealed 1:12:00 in; we see how chaotic his home life is, how messy and deprived it is and how he's been forced to grow up quickly and fend for himself. The dark colour palette, the use of the props to create a mess directly contrast with the cosy, clean and inviting apartment that Sam has created.
- As a result, his apartment is key in establishing a connection with Moses: the audience appreciate how and why he has to resort to crime. As a result, this allows us to sympathise with his plight and therefore forgive his indiscretions in time for the audience to root for him in the finale of the film.

### Editing

- The opening scenes feature an interesting use of jump cut, with the main credits being intercut and breaking up Sam's journey home. As the titles appear on screen the sound as well as the images 'stop' and it creates a somewhat jarring and disorientant 'flow'.
- Fights with the alien in sequence one are edited in a rapid manner, cutting at a very fast speed to show the nature of the frenzied attack. It also helps to ensure that the audience never get a clear view of the alien to help create a somewhat ambiguous understanding of what is happening, much in the same way as the characters feel at that time.
- The second time we see the alien it is shown with use of the 'bangers' to light it, again causing it to be seen very briefly, almost in flashes via editing that is rapid and not lingering on any shot. This again helps to create mystery but reveal just enough visual information to help entice the audience.
- Whilst the editing throughout the film is

largely motivated, some moments of tension are created partly through the editing by slowing down and holding on a key angle or movement to restrict the audience's viewpoint. During the sequence from 1:00:15, the editing flicks between differing MCUs to help create confusion but also prevent the audience from fully seeing the corridor to create tension.

- There is a use of a 'Spielbergian' trope; the 'delayed POV shot' throughout. This involves a character looking off-screen, usually towards the audience but to one side. Crucially, the edit does not immediately cut as the character reacts to what they see. Instead, the shot holds on the characters' face and we experience their reaction first, before a delayed POV shot reveals to the audience what the character is seeing.

### Sound

- The opening scene begins with an interesting use of score; it shimmers but at the same time offers some dark tones, recalling the style of soundtrack for *Alien* (1979) and Vangelis' score for *Blade Runner* (1982). Brass instruments are used to create a darkly thematic refrain that suits the tone and atmosphere of the film, but also recalls the scores of John Williams, especially in the 1970s and 80s.
- There are also 'futuristic' beeps and sound effects and the soundtrack also features heavy bass, reminiscent of bassline, grime, garage and hip-hop. These elements combine to help instruct of where we are, what genre we're watching and suggest an overall tone.
- During the opening sequence, fireworks help to establish that explosions and the like will be used throughout as a clever diegetic 'masking' tool to ensure that the population at large are unaware of the explosions of the alien ships hitting the floor.
- During sequence 1, the score almost 'ticks down' to the initial confrontation with Sam only stopping when Moses' dialogue gives her an instruction to give him the phone. Oboes then interrupt the scene to signify that something has arrived. The soundtrack only really stops 00:7:43 into the film after the establishing of the narrative is developed and the second 'scene' begins, creating a hectic and deeply active opening scene.

## PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- Production of the film was handled by Big Talk Pictures, known for films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Hot Fuzz* (2007), and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010). They produced the film alongside Film4, UK Film Council, and Studio Canal.
- The plot was inspired by the Director, Joe Cornish being mugged. Noticing that his assailants were young and visibly scared about what they were doing, Cornish used this as an inspiration for his characters in the film before adding the science fiction element.
- To help develop the script and narrative, Joe Cornish interviewed various people in youth groups in London in order to find out what kind of weapons they would use if a real alien invasion occurred. He also used these interviews to develop the colloquial language for his characters.

### Historical

- The fictional locations and surrounding areas in the film are named after British sci-fi writers: Wyndham Tower (John Wyndham); Moore Court (Alan Moore); Huxley Court (Aldous Huxley); Wells Court (H.G. Wells); Clarke Court (Arthur C. Clarke); Ballard Street (J.G. Ballard); Adams Street (Douglas Adams); Clayton Street and Clayton Estate (Jo Clayton); and Herbert Way (Frank Herbert).
- Members of the gang compare the film's aliens to various fantastical creatures, all British in origin such as Dobby the house-elf from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novel and Gollum from novels by J.R.R. Tolkien.

## PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Film Style (Aesthetics)

- The interior shots of apartments wildly differs from the outside shots; lighting is much brighter and more even, props show a clear sense of domesticity and relevant normality. Props and overall mise-en-scène is recognisably domestic. From outside the building and even in the corridors, it carries a style that appears to be 'other-worldly' but inside the apartments is recognisably domestic.
- Sam's home is much brighter and cleaner than Ron's; hers is well-looked after and comfortable and suggests a stable and respectable home

life. Ron's is much more put-together and ramshackle, suggesting a lack of care and attention – the 'weed room' however is much more tidy and clean. The lighting here is bright and the composition is very 'staged' and rigid, indicating that Ron cares about this room and looks after this much more than his home.

- Tia's apartment is similar in so much that it is brighter and with bright props and colours. This too reflecting life and love, care and attention. During the initial moments in this apartment we see the bright colours reflect a happiness and security.
- When stuck in the bin, we see Dennis only by the light of his mobile phone. He is essentially in a small, metal 'coffin'. This visual metaphor is used in many action and science fiction films, often with people in air conditioning vents and in ceilings/walls of spaceships and buildings.
- The inside of the lift, whilst typical, reflects this point also-it is metal and small. It provides some protection and the tight framing reinforce that everyone is closely packed in and that any alien who was to get in the lift would have their fill of victims who could not escape.
- There is an interesting use of lighting to create a visual metaphor; from 56 mins in, Brewis walks down the corridor and activates the lights in the ceiling; Hi-Hatz walks down the corridor and the lights turn *off* as he walks down. It suggests that he brings darkness; death.
- The scene at 1hr in uses smoke to restrict what the characters and therefore the audience can see; this resembles dry ice or mist-another classic sci-fi visual trope-this moment even includes the immortal line "follow me".
- During key sequence 3, we see another loose *Die Hard* reference at 1:15:30. Our protagonist is no longer wearing shoes, is holding on from outside of a building with an explosion coming from inside. A nice touch is Moses holding a Union Jack flag, representing the country of production.
- The aesthetic is also influenced by a broadly grounded sense of dystopia, or "retro-futurism" that can be seen in the architecture of mass-housing. The cinematography of *A Clockwork Orange* for example, set in a very similar location, also utilises the architecture and location as a backdrop and style that evokes something off-kilter, anachronistic or perhaps 'alien'.