

# *Billy Elliot*

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Film Metalanguage

**Juxtapositioning** – the organisation of scenes so that their differences made comment – eg. gloomy interior of the Elliot kitchen and the light and grace of the Ballet School auditorium

**Motif** – the repetition of an image (or piece of music) throughout a text contribute meaning to the work eg doors in *Billy Elliot*

**Segue** – the imperceptible movement from one scene to another

**Mise-en-scene** – French term – putting into the scene – the composition of a scene or shot eg the Elliot's kitchen details, lighting tell a lot about the family life

**Establishing sequence** – the opening moments of a film – introduces themes, characters, setting mood

**Reaction shot** – generally a close-up of a character reacting to someone or something

**Proxemic range:**

- **Intimate distance (extreme close shots):** ranges from skin contact to about eighteen inches away. This is the distance of physical movement – of love, comfort, and tenderness between individuals.  
**Personal distance (medium close shot):** Ranges roughly from eighteen inches to about four feet away. This distance tends to be reversed for friends and acquaintances rather than lovers or members of a family.  
**Social distance (medium and full shot):** Ranges from four feet to about twelve feet. These are the distances usually reserved for impersonal business and casual social gatherings.  
**Public distance (extreme long shot):** Extend from twelve feet to twenty five feet and more. This range tends to be formal and rather detached. Displays of emotion are considered bad form at these distances. The **more distance** between the camera and the subject **the less emotionally attached**

**Framing** – defines the scope of the shot – can emphasize relationships by shooting 2 people within the same frame

**Social drama** – a film dealing with social relationships and conflicts between characters

## Techniques in *Billy Elliot*

### Technique 1

**Mise-en-scene.** French for “to put in a scene” – this is the composition of elements that make up a scene and creates an overall impression

We need to contrast 2 scenes in detail to understand the vast contrast between the world that Billy leaves, and the world he moves into.

#### Mise-en-scene 1

The kitchen – argument between Mrs Wilkinson and Tony

##### Set details

Strongly patterned wallpaper, pots on the cooker, dishes cluttered on the bench, paintwork chopped and worn, open cupboard shows mismatched bowls, utilitarian utensils, clothes hanging – clutter, garishness, mismatched colours and patterns, disarray

Lighting – naturalistic, dim, filtering through the kitchen window

Sound – silence in the kitchen until Billy is thrust onto the table, then the Boogie music starts as if generated by the anger between Mrs Wilkinson and Tony.

Language – Tony is his usual brutish, explosive use of obscenity. Mrs Wilkinson begins with restraint but descends to Tony's usage as the argument builds- ‘sanctimonious little shit’ and ‘piss your wages up the wall’

Camera work – midrange shot places Jackie sitting with Tony dominant, grandma, as ever, is peripheral to the shot. The midrange puts the characters in context. Close-ups of Tony and Mrs Wilkinson as they argue, back and forth adds to the sense of energy and confusion the argument generates, and allows the reader to observe their reactions as they battle over Billy.

Placement of characters – Tony stands in front of the window, blocking some of the light, he is dominant; Jackie sits silently, he seems to have lost, not only his job, but control of the family; Grandma sits at the edges, part of the family but with no significance; Mrs Wilkinson stands at the edges of this family near the kitchen door; Billy is behind the door, only his head peering around at the action – he is central to this scene but has no voice, when he does make a comment Tony commands him to ‘Shut up’.<sup>1</sup>

What does this scene tell us? – The mess of all the bits and pieces and the number of bodies in a small place gives the sense of oppression, overcrowding, of obstacles. As the anger builds something has to repute – and it is Billy, who bursts out of the house.

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<sup>1</sup>Contrast this family setting with the Wilkinson neighbourhood and home – trim gardens and lawns, separate homes, flowers – inside we see uncluttered polished surfaces, pictures on the wall, subdued colours, plants, flowers, a decorative fan of the wall, other decorative items, a sideboard with drinks etc. tablemats, table napkins

## Techniques cont – Billy Elliot

Juxtaposition – technique lined with theme of growing up, increasing sexual awareness.

Our rubric states that students “will explore a variety of texts that deal with aspects of growing up and transitions into new phases.”

A growing awareness of the self as a sexual being is a part of growing up and in 3 juxtaposed scenes we see Billy contemplating this aspect of life: Debbie’s bedroom, Mrs Wilkinson and Billy in the car and Michael’s parents’ bedroom.

### 1) Debbie’s bedroom – heterosexual

A scene filled with sexual overtones, yet oddly innocent, and certainly tender. Daldry places these 2 children on Debbie’s bed, feminine wallpaper as backdrop, florals, teddies and dolls – a child’s bed. The two are in school uniform, a blackbird sings outside the window; all this adds up to something very chaste. But as Debbie plays with her music box they speak of adult things – her father’s infidelity, her mother’s sexual unfulfillment. The innocent romp with the pillows quickly turns into something else – there is still an innocence and tenderness but the audience understands these two are on the edge of sexual awakening. This scene is a prelude to the later one where Debbie offers Billy a look at her fanny.

2) This scene, interrupted by Mrs Wilkinson calling out to them, lead to a lovely, amusing one where Mrs Wilkinson reveals her idea of applying for an audition to the Royal Ballet School – Billy – mistaking adult concern and affection for something else, asks Mrs Wilkinson whether she mightn’t fancy him. Daldry uses humour to overcome what could have been a moment of awkwardness and allows Billy that learning experience of differentiating between genuine caring that an adult might have for a student and something less innocent. Billy learns there can be a level of allowable intimacy which is affirming and benign and which does not include sex – something that is reinforced in a later scene where Mrs Wilkinson share a moment of intimacy over Billy’s mum’s letter.

3) The third scene offers Billy another view of human sexuality. Against a mundane background of the peeling paint, rickety steps and washing that is normal life Billy learns of Michael’s aberrance, and despite initial concerns, as shown by body language and facial expressions, Billy accepts Michael’s sexual inclinations, wondering instead whether it is better to be a ballet dancer or a miner. By offering us Michael’s unusual pathway, we understand that the destinies of these two boys are parallel – both are heading down paths that are different from the acceptable norms of their society and both needing to be hidden at this stage.

These 3 scenes allow the audience to see that this little 11yr old is coping with the normal pressures of childhood as well as extraordinary ones deriving from; the loss of his mother, the increasing senility of his gran (his last link to his mother), the repercussions of unemployment and a driving ambition to break with tradition and enter a world contrary to that of his brother and father, from a world of grinding, dark, grimy work to a world, of work just as hard, but full of light and beauty and grace.

Having discussed such ideas fully in your essay, identifying juxtaposition of scenes as a technique, move through into how Daldry contrasts the worlds, in the use of the *mise-en-scenes* (as discussed previously) and that little scene which symbolises contrast – the *ugly utilitarian* steelwork of the vehicular transported and the *fantasy* of the story of Swan Lake, the *beauty* of Tchaikovsky’s music and the *grace* of the transporter as it moves across the river.

## **Comments on scenes *Billy Elliot***

### **Establishing sequence**

The tenderness and delicacy of his touch as he puts on the record

Note how Billy blends into the wallpaper

Leaping in time to *The Cosmic Dancer*

Note that the screen lengthens as his exhilaration builds as his whole body comes into view

His familiarity with his caring routines – all done to a rhythm

Grandmother seen has being not quite with this world

The police – in the background

We meet Tony – while sharing the intimacy of a bedroom they are different – Billy *responds* to music, Tony listens passively, we see Tony's impatience and aggression

Downstairs we see the different worlds – Tony and his poster (the strike), Jacky worrying about coal, Grandma in her own world which is always off centre, (listening to her humming), Billy trying to pick out a tune

The photo and the piano – mother, family unity, better times, music

Jacky's expressed through physical action – sharp aggressive words and slamming of the piano lid – we see this reaction again – these men cannot express themselves but through violent words and gestures

We see that despite his father's anger and impatience Billy persists with his music

### **Boxing of Ballet sequence?**

The strikers – loud raw cacophony (contrast with Billy's striving for music)

The Miner's Social Club Hall – Michael is outside – he recognized he is not one of the boys

The door is both a barrier and an opening – an opportunity – doors are a motif in the film – used as barriers and opportunities

Note Billy is pushed – not one of the boys

Jacky sits behind a grill – not part of Billy's world – alone

Mrs Wilkinson hardly fits the stereotype of a ballet teacher

Hear the music, feel it, Billy finds his rhythm

Billy must enter this other world – note the shot of the feet, pink satin shoes/boxing boots (can't get much further apart as human activities) as yet he is a joke in this ballet world

He runs home – he hasn't realised it yet, but he has found his world

### **Other Worlds sequence**

Billy walks through Mrs W's suburb – needs directions (doesn't know this area) – wide street, cars, gradients, not the decoration of the house – harmony, decoration (cf Elliot household of garish colours and jumbled utilitarian objects – bowls, tea towels etc)

Debbie's bedroom – decoration including swan wallpaper – her successes are proudly displayed on the wall, girly, toys – conversation is adult stuff – pillow fight childish fun leads to sexual tension 0 they are on the verge of sexual awareness (another world Billy is negotiating)

Immediately after this there is the confusion about Mrs W's motives

Then Billy visits Michael – note he looks around before going inside this door! A third sexual awakening scene – note proxemic range

### **Private lessons sequence**

The hall is another world – light and cigarette smoke give it a hazy other-world effect

Billy's important objects show his differing sides – tenderness, practical side, love of music, and, like other boys, love of football (reinforcing his heterosexuality)

Billy and Mrs W dance exuberantly to I love to Boogie music – a world they share – but hidden

Billy passes the police on the way home

Tony's aggression and need for action symbolized in the midnight altercation with Jacky – Tony believes Jacky has become useless – and we see Tony taking power in forthcoming scenes. Jacky's response is, again, physical

Billy's anxieties and frustrations are released in much the same way when he shouts at Mrs W – she responds by hitting him, then gentle connection. This release allows Billy to regain focus as he begins to practice again

### **Swan Lake sequence**

For some reason Mrs W takes Billy to Newcastle – they cross a river – he is introduced to Tchaikovsky's music and the highly romantic story of *Swan Lake* – all against a background of police presence and the hard edges angles of the vehicle carrier – Billy's world clashing – yet another vehicle carrier glides across the river in a long shot, gracefully

The story of *Swan Lake* involves a powerless protagonist who finds a way to prevail

Billy is ready for his audition – but he must overcome obstacles, like any fairy quester – Michael doesn't want him to leave and his father doesn't know!

The strikers and police clash violently – Tony runs a wild dance through his community – we see how intrusive the police are, attacking in an ordinary domestic scene – washing – Billy watches on, helpless, his voice hardly heard in this world of mean and violence

### **Mrs W and Tony sequence**

Mrs W unfamiliar with Billy's world

Tony's aggressive reaction "Who the fuck are you?"

Billy behind the door – note the placement of characters – Tony in control, blocking the light

Note the placing of the panel – intimidating, and Billy alone in the middle of the room, note their reactions to his dance – highly individual

Billy responds to gentle boy's commiserations with behaviour typical of his father – this is Everington male behaviour when they can't adequately express themselves

Facing the panel Billy nearly blows it – but a woman asks him about how it feels when he dances and this finally triggers something – he moves from 'Dunno' to using metaphors

### **Resolution sequence**

Billy back home – Billy and Jacky together on the same side of the table, with Gran – as she speaks about what she could have been – they are a look – proxemic range

George asks if he's heard

The family together waiting around the table, the letter – Billy foes behind doors to read the letter – his reactions seems to indicate he missed out

The Miners Hall – strike is over – but the family has other things to think of...

Exterior short high aerial, at the cemetery, - Billy and Jacky together, mine in the background

Billy at the dance hall in now an outsider – as he leaves he looks back to see Mrs W trapped, left behind in the twilight zone, neither one world or another.

Billy leaves – no words can express leaving Gran – she pushes him to the door – as she drags his case up the steps we see the closed door – says goodbye to Michael

At the bus stop the family says goodbye – Jacky, echoing a ballet duet hold, hugs him farewell, even Tony farewell's is heartfelt, albeit in mime – the separation between the two suggests their very different worlds

Tony and Jacky are seen in a cage going back underground – their world

Billy in the bus – note the birds flying – segue through to a train with Jacky and Tony – looking around him

At Covent Garden – this is Billy's world – Jacky, Tony and Michael! "Wouldn't have missed it for the world"

In the wings – a strong, big shouldered man – other people looking to him – this young man is in control

A flying grand jete – the leap that Billy has taken to cross the huge obstacles

He doesn't land and then we cut back to our leaping juvenile Billy.