In the previous issue of *Screen Education* (no. 56), I wrote the first of two articles on *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954). 'Conscience, Confession and Context in *On the Waterfront'* focused on the range of ideas that underpin the film, and I alluded to the ways in which the film establishes mood, tone and character. In this subsequent analysis I will explore the ways in which the grammar and syntax of the film validate these ideas of conscience and confession.

Throughout the three-act narrative of *On the Waterfront*, the film's protagonist, longshoreman Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando), undertakes a personal journey of self-awareness and redemption in a world of corruption and sin. From the opening sequence, Terry is established, if only by association, as complicit in the shady underworld of the docks. The film's second act sees him gain a certain understanding of the effects of his personal involvement, and articulates his growing ambivalence towards the criminal world in which he dwells. The third part of the film is redemptive, as Terry fights for 'rights', not only for the longshoremen, but also for empowerment against the corruption and immorality of an evil world. This film is rich with imagery, dialogue and design, and steeped in Christian iconography. A careful fusion of cinematic elements plays out to create a narrative of conscience, confession and catharsis in a polarised world of good and evil.

**Establishing immorality**

Throughout *On the Waterfront*, a strong sense of place is evoked and is always infused with meaning. Cinematographer Boris Kaufman distils a cityscape that is most often menacing, insular and claustrophobic. Scenes are typically set in constricted spaces, such as the dark,
Visibility is often limited during the film, a metaphor for the impaired vision and moral uncertainty of its characters.

hood after dark is straight out of a film noir. Light plays on puddles; the coldness of the air is palpable. Oblique lines of clothes and the contours of the protruding grates of external stairs confirm a sense of disquiet in this dark, unwelcoming, urban underbelly. Nothing is what it seems. This is a squalid and cavernous cargo holds; the pigeon cages Terry keeps; seedy bars; and the narrow, dingy alleyways filmed tightly to register a sense of entrapment, alienation and suffocation. Even the diffused light of day is shrouded in a blanket of fog and mist. Visibility is often limited during the film, a metaphor for the impaired vision and moral uncertainty of its characters. The neighbour-sordid world in which those who stand up to the unbri- dled authority of the venal Longshoreman’s Union are punished without pardon. The shadows of this world mask criminality, corruption and amorality.

Friendly (Lee J. Cobb), devise their schemes and scams to extort every cent they can from browbeaten, disenfran- chised stevedores and unsuspecting cargo owners. Next to their seat of power is a smaller boat with an ominous crucifix that will become an abiding symbol of the film. The faceless men of the union emerge from their office. There is a sense of mob psychology and blind obedience in their closed ranks. A sense of macho brotherhood is established. Their movements, accompa- nied by the discordant percussion from composer Leonard Bernstein’s atmos- pheric and dramatic score, create disquiet.

The lines of conflict are soon established in this opening sequence. The men are the self-serving sycophants of Johnny Friendly, and comply with his orders without question. The self-made Johnny Friendly holds court, his every move being approved by his yes-men, his every wish their desire. His sophistry in justifying his money laundering knows no limit. He brooks no dissent. There is something psychopathic in his persona. The bar that Johnny Friendly owns is infected with a malignant masculinity. Easy money, surreptitious deals and personal protection are the rewards of membership to this exclusively male tribe. Thugs and parasites have sold their souls for what they perceive as eternal life. This same Faustian bargain will become central to Terry’s own narrative as he plumbs his soul in response to the culture of easy murder and cover-up. This opening sequence sees Terry, a self-confessed ‘bum’, set up to unknowingly lure rebellious
co-worker Joey Doyle to his death at the hands of the mob, a punishment for speaking out about Johnny Friendly to the Waterfront Crime Commission. To the frightened longshoremen, Joey went too far. To the union hierarchy, he was a 'canary', a 'cheese-eater'. But to Terry, Joey was 'not a bad kid'. His death is the beginning of a test of character and nerve for Terry in the face of brutality and corruption.

Caught between two worlds

The perverse humour of Johnny Friendly's lackeys in response to the death of Joey Doyle, and their code of silence in the face of murder and violence, provides one of the polarities that will define the ambivalence and vacillation of Terry's internal struggle between right and wrong throughout the film. Terry has been seduced by the false sense of brotherhood and bonhomie of the mob. Indeed, his brother, Charley Malloy (Rod Steiger), is a key player with the mob. Blood is thicker than water, an aphorism that has multiple meanings in the context of the disposal of bodies on the waterfront. But the ambivalence in Terry is palpable. He has been split in two by his unknowing collusion in the death of Joey. Terry is 'not himself'; and in a world of blind loyalty, these hints of unease over the death of Joey Doyle and Terry's claim that he should have been told about the silencing of Joey culminate in noticeable tension in a bar scene, tension that Charley tries to smooth over. Charley reminds Terry about 'who his friends are'. The coercive power of mob psychology is demonstrable as Terry leaves the bar and slides into the foggy night. The fog is consistently synonymous with moral confusion and blurred perception, not only in Terry, but also in the deliberate avoidance of the reality of corruption and its personal and social ramifications for those who work on the waterfront. From the moment Terry slides out the door and into the fog, he is, despite his denials and his obfuscation, a changed man.

The changed Terry is wracked by guilt. For much of the film, he is a prisoner of his own making, incarcerated by his own denials. He is like one of the caged pigeons he keeps, circled by hawks. He is torn by a developing sense of responsibility and is full of restless apprehension. He chews gum expressively, shrugs, lags behind, pulls his collar up and stuffs his hands in his pockets. All of these nervous, almost evasive moments represent a stark contrast to the goons in Johnny Friendly's orbit. Although they are just as inarticulate, the henchmen seek safety in twos and threes; in their film noir triblies and long overcoats, they exude power and use intimidation as a weapon. The henchmen make eye contact, while Terry frequently looks away, afraid to face the truth.

Terry vacillates between the corrupt values of Johnny Friendly and a world of morality and goodness embodied in the characters of Father Barry (Karl Malden) and Edie (Eva Marie Saint), Joey Doyle's sister, whose grief turns to anger and a quest for justice. Their role in Terry Malloy's crisis of conscience and heart is made explicit early. They sense the cracks in Terry and see his inner doubt. Father Barry represents all that is antithetical to Johnny Friendly. Inside the sanctuary of the church, he chides the longshoremen for their conspicuous and corrosive silence. He appeals to their latent sense of justice. Father Barry elicits a commitment from another docker, Kayo Dugan (Pat Henning), after the priest shows that he is prepared to match his own Christian rhetoric with action. Tired of the bullying and the perpetual struggle of the longshoremen's life, Kayo also wants change. But he pays a heavy price, becoming another martyr for the cause.
A call to arms
During the scene of Kayo's funeral, which culminates in Father Barry's oration, there is a strong Christian activist message backed by Christian imagery – in keeping with the opening sequence of the film. Father Barry fulminates against a lack of moral courage on the waterfront and argues that there is a shared responsibility for Kayo's death. The Christian symbol of the cross forms a shadow on the wall as Father Barry gathers his thoughts. Down in the cargo hold the arrangement of characters is poignant. The sacrificial victim, Kayo, lies dead, with his close friends nearby. Terry is in the cargo hold, on the margins. Edie clings to her father. Above are the powerful gangsters and those who have been bought off. Father Barry appropriates the cargo hold as a pulpit. As he speaks with the passion of Christ, his voice penetrates and rises. The camera uses its vertical and horizontal axes to register the power relations of characters. As much as the oration, which uses the analogy of the Crucifixion, is the clear focus of this sequence, the order of camera shots that radiate out from the imposing figure of Father Barry to the funeral congregation is crucial. His impassioned speech touches hearts and draws the longshoremen in. Above, the union thugs are disturbed by the 'heresy' of Father Barry's views and the potential influence of the words on longshoremen.

As Father Barry pontificates on shared guilt, the camera cuts to a chastened Terry who looks away, knowing that he is the target of the barb.

And anybody who sits around and lets it happen, keeps silent about something he knows has happened, shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of Our Lord to see if He was dead.

The eulogy quickly becomes a metaphorical call to arms. It is a blend of the religious and the political. Terry is stirred to the point that he confronts Tulio (Tami Mauriello), the only member of the Friendly clique in the cargo hold. This action alone is a statement of Terry's intention. Edie knows that the seeds of resistance have been sown as she approaches Terry at the end of the sequence. But Terry again walks away, the festering torment too much to confront. He is still caught between a rock and a hard place.

The biblical Ascension is recalled in the hauling of the sling with Kayo's dead body from the cargo hold. The camera tilts on its axis as it follows Father Barry, who stands proudly and with dignity. There is a strong feeling that Father Barry's impassioned oration has made its mark. Despite the threatening looks on the faces of the union brokers, the rank and file have been humbled, if not galvanised, by his appeal to their sense of justice and culpability in allowing the corruption and violence on the wharves to flourish.

The beginning of ambivalence
The film's 'shape-up' sequence (a hiring process determining the distribution of jobs to the dockers for the day) depicts a ritual tantamount to grovelling, revealing the dehumanisation, the loss of dignity and the daily futility for many of the longshoremen. There are the favoured and the out-of-favour whose daily lives are at the whim of the union bosses and their flunkeys. Hopelessness is registered in the longshoremen's cap-in-hand pleas for work. Based on the divide-and-conquer ethos, the charade only serves to demoralise the workers further. Throughout the 'shape-up' ritual, waterfront hiring boss Big Mac (James Westerfield) plays with the livelihoods of workers with a sinister pleasure. Filmed from behind, he obscures the workers, who are an amor-
phous ragtag of exploited and worn-down men. During the scramble for the tags that will guarantee them work, the camera captures the desperation on their faces. Father Barry and Edie are horrified by the primal frenzy of their actions. But, in a bid to secure work for her ageing father, Edie takes part in the ‘shake-up’. She and Terry struggle for possession of a tag. While brute force wins initially, when Terry learns that Edie is Joey’s sister, he surrenders the tag to her. Their position in the foreground of the shot intimates their future alliance, an alliance of good in a world of immorality.

This alliance through a shared worldview is reinforced in the following scene. A secret meeting at the church is organised by some of the aggrieved longshoremen who didn’t get work that day. Terry has been sent against his will by the mob to monitor the meeting, where Edie and Father Barry are vainly trying to gain information about Joey’s death. Violence erupts when the union thugs arrive. In order to escape, the pair is forced together past the neo-Gothic Church, through a public park where mist and smoke swirl. As Terry sits almost incongruously on the child’s swing, he gently places a delicate white glove made to Father Barry outside the Church, which is adjacent to the Hudson River and its traffic. Like the fog of the film’s previous sequences, smoke from the fires in the graters wafts over this encounter, as though truth has been rendered opaque until this moment of confession.

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Edie has dropped on his gnarled boxer’s hand. This moment is instructive, as Terry has let down his guard. Terry feints and dodges Edie’s compassionate view of the world but he is drawn to her irrevocably in this moment, despite his bravado and his posturing. The scene’s openness, set to a background of the Empire State Building, is in direct contrast to the enclosed and claustrophobic spaces of the ‘dog-eat-dog’ world of wharves and bars, revealing an alternative to Johnny Friendly’s underworld. There is a nascent resistance as Terry starts to shed his old self and embrace a more selfless world of moral conviction and obligation.

Confession and redemption

Confession is integral to Terry’s atonement. There are two linked confession sequences that are the tipping points for Terry. The first of Terry’s confessions is made to Edie, where he admits his inadvertent role in

Importantly, the choice of setting sees both the church and Father Barry now irredeemably politicised, while the waterfront is exposed as a contaminated life-blood that must be cleansed.

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The fog is consistent in its role as a deliberate filmmaking device used to emphasise the depth of feeling and the maelstrom of emotions incited by the confession. The emphasis here is on the weight of the confession on Edie. Her distress is palpable in a series of close-ups, where she clutches her face and ears as if she is going mad. She then takes flight, leaving Terry alone on a pile of rocks, with the Empire State Building visible in the background through the fog. The combination of vastness and the lifting fog communicates the sense that Terry has, in this moment of confession, crossed over into a new world.

There is also a third confession-like scene, which takes place between the brothers Charley and Terry in the back seat of a cab. Charley is futilely trying to dissuade Terry from giving evidence against the mob to the Waterfront Crime Commission, a decision he has made since his confession to Edie. Unbeknown to Terry, Charley has been threatened by Johnny Friendly to prevent the testimony, or pay the price of his brotherly love.

The visual crafting of this sequence has the tight confines of a confession box. The back seat is indeed a space of transformation, representing the emotional and moral transition of both brothers. The horizontal blinds are drawn, the external world glows intermittently as light penetrates the window, producing an intimacy to the space that matches the intimacy of their conversation. There is a fidgety discomfort in Charley from the start. Johnny Friendly's threat weighs heavily on his usual poise. Charley tries to be persuasive but Terry is not seduced by the promise of wealth and protected security. The fortitude of Terry's power of self-analysis and moral assuredness has been hinted at but not realised on a verbal level until this point: 'There is more to this than I thought, Charley,' he says, as he looks into the eyes of his brother with an almost disarming certainty.

This sequence is in many ways a confession of mutual love. When Charley, in a moment of confused desperation, pulls a gun on his brother, Terry gently pushes the gun away with tenderness. Terry knows that Charley loves him. The
two-shot conversation about their shared past, overlaid with a melodic score, is a nostalgic acknowledgement of what might have been. Terry feels let down by his brother (witness the famous 'I could have been a contender' speech) and Charley begins to see the blinding truth in what Terry intimates, that he has failed his own flesh and blood. Charley’s usual panache is dimmed. He is humbled, knowing that not only that Terry has made important moral choices, but also that he, Charley, has failed the untenable test that will keep him alive. Accepting his fate, Charley is killed off by the mob without remorse. His ultimate sacrifice, for a brother he loves, is his own redemption.

**Return of the saviour**

After testifying against the union, Terry throws down the gauntlet to Johnny Friendly. The stranglehold of the union is threatened by his stand. After suffering a vicious beating, Terry wills himself to walk to the warehouse. Biblical allusions that have dominated the film culminate in this final scene. Carrying a hook instead of a cross, he refuses assistance. Bloodied and beaten, but unbowed, he has usurped the old union order. Terry assumes the status of saviour, climbing to his own Calvary. Initially, he is ostracised by fellow longshoremen, but his courage in asserting his ‘rights’ convinces them that shunning him and remaining subservient will only perpetuate the abuse of power. The longshoremen become the disciples in his flock and watch with a mixture of trepidation and admiration.

The film provides spectatorial identification through a unique privileging of Terry’s blurred vision. He approaches the entrance to the warehouse where the day’s ‘shape-up’ is about to take place, watched by a guard of honour made up of his fellow longshoremen. His confessor, Father Barry and Edie, are close to him in his moment of final redemption. To the crescendo of music there is a transitory, perhaps even a pyrrhic, victory in all of this. The menacing figure of Johnny Friendly is never far away and the vitriol that he pours on those who have broken his ranks might, in fact, be prophetic. In melodramatic tradition, the lone saviour has at least temporarily removed corruption and oppression. Individual heroism, imbued with moral courage, is affirmed in this final act of resistance.

And Terry Malloy is no longer a ‘bum’. He is the ‘contender’ he always wanted to be.

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