

# Rocks

## (Gavron, UK, 2019)

### Component: 2

**Core study areas:** Film form and contexts

**Additional study areas:** Aesthetics/style

**Rationale for study:** *Rocks* is a modern, vital and vibrant British film, featuring an ensemble cast of unknown and amateur actors. The predominately female cast worked closely together to create an authentically British story of BAME teenagers, made on a relatively small budget. Written by Theresa Ikoko and Claire Wilson, but with dialogue and scenes that are the result of hours of collaborative workshops and scene building, the affecting narrative is presented in a loose, almost documentary style. This allows audiences to feel a part of a world which for some, might be uncomfortably relatable, and for others, a window into a world that is rarely shown on screen.

### STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

“Opening scene” 00:00:00 – 00:03:00

“School starting” 00:05:35 – 00:09:35

“Dance scene” 00:18:00 – 00:20:00

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key Elements of film form (micro features)

#### Cinematography

- The cinematography is loose – almost documentary style.
- It is punctuated by footage in vertical format, shot directly from phone cameras and at some points incorporates filters to overlay imagery on characters, suggesting that Snapchat is being

used by characters to help film the movie.

- This loose style and use of phone footage combine to create an informal style that reflects the nature of the characters – informal, friendly, contemporary and not beholden to rules or traditional standards.
- Characters who are conversing with friends or are generally together tend to be filmed in a two or three-shot, often in a medium close-up, so they appear together in the frame. This contrasts with characters in conflict, with just one person in the shot, and often in close-up to allow the audience to appreciate how isolated the characters feel.
- Where characters are together and happy, the lighting is bright, and the film is evenly lit using ambient light. The opening scene of *Rocks* returning to school after the summer has a slight yellow tint, creating nostalgia by evoking memories of summer – bright, warm and fun.
- The light and colour dim as things begin to fall apart for *Rocks*, e.g. the cutting off of the electricity in the flat evokes her loss of happiness.
- At one of her lowest points, when *Rocks* cries on screen, the weather reflects this with rainfall. The muted colour palette really helps to emphasise the sombre nature of the scene and *Rocks*'s predicament.

## Mise-en-scène



Image by BFA / Alamy Stock Photo

- The opening scene is evocative, using the ‘golden hour’ lighting and colour.
- The large number of people in the frame solidifies the idea of the characters being friends – they are comfortable and informal, giving the film authenticity.
- The costumes are varied and bright, reflecting the range of cultures, personalities and situations, creating realism. This is best typified in the dance studio scene, where there is a riot of colour and at times, synchronicity to visually connect the characters despite their different appearances and personalities.
- The settings are recognisable, authentic and representative of places where teenagers might hang out, such as houses, flats and schools. The exception is the roof top where Rocks and the girls hang out in a couple of scenes, allowing them to be hidden from the stresses of London and the world.
- There is careful attention to detail in the production design to create an authentic, varied world – note how Funke’s letter to Rocks is screwed up and messy, how Agnes’s bedroom has a range of ‘impractical’ yet aesthetically pleasing lights, how the rubber of destiny looks like the rubbers we’ve all seen in schools.

## Editing

- The pace of the film is fast – individual shots only last a few seconds, and the heavy use of

straight cuts, match-on action and montage often mean that scenes and long periods of time in general, move quickly. This reflects these young girls’ frantic pace of life and in the scenes where they are having fun, that time is moving too quickly.

- Many scenes begin with static shots of details, such as photographs, that help to establish the location or situation.
- This quick pace combines with the loose cinematography, as the camera often doesn’t stay still in one place or narrative for long, nor do individual shots. These could reflect the busy and almost manic nature of Rocks’s life. Montage editing cuts from one perspective to another, such as when Roshe and Sumaya fight, the second scene on the rooftop, when Rocks is on the bus and suddenly having to avoid Roshe, or in the final scene in Hastings on the beach.

## Sound

- Before we see any visual images, we hear the diegetic sounds of joy, laughter and chatter, establishing tone and overall mood. We then see the girls, and then spontaneous singing from the group, as they slowly at first and then confidently join in with a recital of Proud Mary. This is typical of the film overall, as dialogue is quick, joyful and often overlapping, showing how comfortable and excitable the group are and that there is no hierarchy – everyone is equal and keen to talk, listen and share.
- There is a very light touch in terms of the score – it is generally quiet in volume, unassuming in the mix and can be easily missed. It doesn’t feature dramatic or sweeping refrains, and instead is almost ambient in its nature, with very few notes or changes in pitch. It is often used to underscore a few key moments. The score become prominent later in the film as emotions are heightened; however, the filmmakers prefer to let the diegetic sound (or absence of it) drive our understanding and empathy.
- Music is a key aspect of the characters’ lives and almost all the music in the film is diegetic, making us feel a part of this group and showing how united the group is, for example, in the dancing scene.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

### Social

- Set in modern-day London, the film provides a grounded, authentic view of the city and the world that is informed by the girls and their day to day lives including their ‘limited horizons’. There are references to other towns and cities, but often these are followed up with the question of “where’s...[name of city?]”. Even in the beginning of the film we see some of the characters show some confusion over the names of modern London landmarks. However, characters have a much better appreciation and understanding of the heritage of their families and as a result we come to recognise how important family and social and cultural ties are to these characters. When Rocks abandons her home and seeks solace, she seeks out her friends, and attempts to find a home for her and Emmanuel where comfort can be found. It’s no coincidence that despite not knowing where Hastings is, all the girls manage to get there and find Emmanuel – his presence being the thing that drives their need to expand their horizons and find the place that he will now call home.

### Cultural

- Director Sarah Gavron didn’t want to “impose an idea [for a story] on these kids. We wanted to build a story with a group of women, where we were like big sisters to them, and we wanted to build a film with them.” This is evident through the cultural and social references to the young actors’ real lives in the film. The use of vertically shot iPhone footage, Snapchat filters, modern R’n’B and hip hop, references to Air Force trainers, constant references to ‘chicken shops’ and the dialogue, all combine to create a fresh, relevant and modern feel to the film. The soundtrack, using artists such as Lil Sims, makes the film feel contemporary and energetic, and the spontaneous singing of Proud Mary in the opening scenes creates a film that reflects the real experiences and cultural touchstones of real young people in Britain today.

### Political

- One interpretation of the film is that it takes

a negative view of state institutions, such as school and social care. These are portrayed as uncaring, cold and unsupportive of Rocks. However, another interpretation is that the audiences’ experience and understanding of these institutions is informed by Rocks’ experience, as aspects of institutionalised racism and misogyny exist in many aspects of British society. While some students are mocked for wanting to be lawyers, others are supported with enjoyable, relatable and contemporary dance lessons and expressive, rich lessons on Picasso, enabling the students to express themselves. Their final collages are shown over the final credits, showing the young women as multifaceted and complex.

- The portrayal of social services is also complex. The “social” as they are referred to in the film, could be seen as negative as they separate Rocks from her brother. However, another reading is that they save Rocks and Emmanuel when they most need saving yet Rocks and Emmanuel are too young to understand this.

### Institutional

- The film cost around £3 million and was financed by the BFI, Film 4 and the Wellcome Trust.
- The production was somewhat ‘unusual’. Theatre writer and first-time film screen-writer Theresa Ikoko had a loose idea for a story but was motivated by her desire to thank her older sister for the support she gave her growing up. She also wanted to thank, and draw attention to, the black and brown girls who, in her words, “have to grow up quicker than their white counterparts”. To create a story, dialogue and film that reflected this, she and Claire Wilson created an overall pitch for the film: a film that represented young black and brown women that felt authentic to their experience and yet evoked the nostalgia of youth from the older cast and crew members. To achieve this, the entire cast and crew worked collaboratively, and after 1300 schoolgirls were involved in the initial casting process, a final 30 were involved in workshopping ideas, themes, experiences and possible stories and dialogue. A final 12 were selected, and some 11 months after the lead

actors were chosen, the final narrative began to fall into place and story beats were shared with the young cast to offer feedback. Over the course of a couple of days, the cast offered advice and ideas to develop dialogue, and specifically, whether it sounded authentic. They also offered advice and ideas on music, interests and reactions of teenage girls to the scenarios in the narrative.

- The crew, which was around 75% female, helped to foster a supportive, nurturing, and caring environment. An example of this is the decision to film chronologically to help the amateur and young actors develop a sense of momentum and development.

## KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: Style/aesthetics

“The start of school”  
00:05:35 – 00:09:35

### Cinematography

- Initial shots of the staircase are shot so that there is no real entrance or exit – it’s just a mass of people climbing a staircase, evoking how claustrophobic and manic school corridors can be.
- Lighting is warm and even, reflecting the time of year (September) and that hazy mix of the end of summer and the burgeoning autumn. It also helps to create the cordial, comfortable feeling these girls have when in each other’s company.
- The lighting is warm and yellow/orange in tone, giving it the feeling of ‘golden hour’ – picturesque and nostalgic.
- Corridor shots are largely medium long, the shots outside medium to medium close and in the classroom, shots of main characters are closer in the classroom so that we can appreciate facial reactions and see how they react to each other.
- Camera movement is loose, contributing to the ‘documentary style’ filmmaking.

### Mise-en-scène

- Scenes are generally busy as people and props fill the screen, reflecting how busy the school is and how little space the students have in their life.
- Jewellery, accessories and trainers are brought to the audience’s attention. These contravene the school uniform policy yet are also markers of the students’ individuality. The removal of them indicates an end of the summer and a move towards more of a disciplined and ‘uniform’ character that school enforces.
- The performances throughout are authentic – it is the warm, engaging and realistic performances from the girls that make the scenes so vibrant. The dialogue is genuine, contemporary and full of enjoyable beats, slang and mannerisms, and the reaction to the rubber of destiny is one that audiences may recall from school.

### Editing

- As with many of the other scenes in the film, it opens *in media res*.
- Dominated by straight cuts, the scenes have no real beginning nor end. The scene jumps from one moment to another, creating a relatively quick pace. This reflects the feeling of being young and in school – as we may not recall how lessons start or how one part of the day ends, instead we recall moments, anecdotes, the odd insult or joke.

### Sound

- As with the rest of the film, dialogue overlaps and there is a generally loose feeling to the scene – dialogue is used for developing characters and their relationships, rather than exposition.
- There is no non-diegetic sound in the scene. The music heard later seems to come from a smartphone. This device is used throughout the film and helps to unite the students as they can all hear the same music as us, creating an implicit connection between characters and the audience. The call-and-response style is impactful and creates energy.