

## FIL 2000 - Film Appreciation

### UNIT ONE:

#### Basic Approaches to Analyzing Film Meaning

##### *Denotative/Connotative Meaning*

Denotative Meaning - The first reading of a film's images (and sounds).

Connotative Meaning - The associated meanings that can be ascribed to a particular shot(s), sequence(s), film narrative structure, etc. (Think "symbolic meaning" of a film image - in conjunction with the "denotative" level of meaning).

##### *Semiology (Semiotics)*

The study of signs - Language systems - How we interpret meaning from these signs.

Important to note that film does not always follow the rules of linguistic analysis (shot not a word, scene not a paragraph, sequence not a chapter, etc.)

Signs consist of two parts: Signifier and Signified.

A signifier refers to the arbitrary sound or formation of letters that conjures up a specific image in our mind.

What it represents (the image that is conjured up in our mind) is the signified.

Three Types of Cinematic Signs (based on Semiological principals) -

Icon - A sign based on the likeness or physical similarity; the sign looks like what it stands for.

Symbol - A sign that is arbitrary and coded by cultural convention. The word "train" is a symbol for the object train. Verbal language is based symbolic signs.

Index - A sign based on inherent or existential bond between the sign and the object it represents.

Semiology works well for verbal language (spoken narrative).

Filmmakers may play with the signifier/signified to manipulate viewers (e.g., This is Spinal Tap - "Stonehenge").

### *Codes*

Codes that film shares with other arts forms (theater in particular).

Codes that are unique to audio/visual productions (film, television, video) - forms of editing, particularly montage.

Codes are the medium through which the "message" of a film or scene within a film is transmitted.

Because a visual image can give the viewer a close approximation of reality, it can communicate a precise knowledge that written or spoken language seldom can (e.g., the name Alex - male or female? - "Alex felt that they would get married soon.").

Remember: A filmed object is primarily a representation of a real object.

Culturally defined codes - Those that exist outside of film, and that filmmakers reproduce (NOTE: Sometimes, something is so singular in a media presentation, it is "downloaded" into society and then, "uploaded" back into various movies replicating that particular "code" that is now so entrenched in "society," for better or worse ;-))

## *Gestalt Theory*

The Gestalt school of psychology (originated in Germany) provided evidence about how we organize and group visual elements so that they are perceived as wholes.

What we experience when we look at a visual entity is quite different from what we would experience were we to look at each item in the visual entity separately.

Two General Principles of Gestalt Theory -

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The parts of a visual entity may be considered as distinct components.

Elements of Gestalt -

Figure/Ground - The figure (positive space) exhibits certain spatial and graphic characteristics, the most important of which is that the figure seems to lie in front of the ground.

Ground (negative space) is the surrounding fields, backgrounds, or white space to the figure.

Psychological Closure - The act of taking a minimum of clues and filling in mentally non-existing information, to arrive at an easily manageable pattern.

Isomorphic Correspondence - The relationship between structural characteristics of visual forms and similar characteristics in human behavior or experience.

An image that evokes a strong emotional reaction from a viewer.

- spiders, pointed needles, snakes (note: Must look at who audience is)

Equilibrium - We tend to want to balance or order visual information. We want to organize what we are seeing to a point where it feels stable or comfortable (Manipulation of filmmakers).

Continuation - Visual information tends to lead along a straight line or path.

Proximity - Groupings are favored according to nearness of parts. Visually, we tend to unite objects that are nearest together.

Similarity - Elements that visually resemble one another either in size, color, or direction are perceived as being together.

### *Lighting*

Basic purpose of lighting - To help us, or make us, see and feel in a specific way. Lighting can clarify and intensify the film-viewing experience.

Three-Point Lighting - Three basic sources, or points, of illumination.

Key Light - The crucial light source that defines the most important details of a scene.

Fill Light - Employed to bring out details in shadow areas, or in general, to soften the contrast between light and shadow.

Back Light - Gives dimension to a subject. It sets the subject off from the background.

Lighting Functions -

Environment:

Space - Lighting orients us in space (what an object looks like - round/flat, rough surfaces, hard edges, etc).

Effective lighting should give us as much information about the form and dimensions of an object and its relation to its environment as possible.

Interplay Between Light and Shadow - It is not just the light that reveals the shape of the object, but the shadows. Lighting for shadows is an important space-orientation factor.

Texture - Closely related to lighting for spatial orientation. The difference is that lighting for space is done primarily to orient us better visually. Lighting for texture is suppose to appeal to the sense of touch.

Time- Control of light and shadows helps the viewer to become oriented in time (day/night, hour of day, and seasons).

Lighting must be consistent with other time indicators (dusk sun weaker than mid-day sun).  
Halloween (evergreen trees).

Emotion:

Establish Mood and Atmosphere - Can reflect whether a scene is happy or sad, mysterious, etc.

Predictive Lighting - Helps to predict (foreshadow) a future happening. Light that changes from high-key to low-key (happy to mysterious).

Moving light sources used as predictive lighting (e.g., car headlights, a flashlight beam).

As with any element of film design, predictive lighting rarely operates alone, but in conjunction with appropriate sounds, suspense music, and the like.

Low and High Key Lighting -

Low-Key Lighting - Depends on contrasts between light and shadow. Few bright areas.

Aims to articulate space - to clarify and intensify the three-dimensional property of things and the space that surrounds them.

Often expressionistic - the filmmaker uses sharp shadows and pools of light to create a heavily emotional atmosphere.

Film Noir - Term coined by French film critics for a particular type of film that appeared in America after WWII. "Black film" evokes a mood of cynicism and despair.

Stylistic mark - Dark settings: City worlds of deep shadows and unseen threats. These movies combined harshly realistic subject matter with precisely controlled craftsmanship (femme fatale, anti-hero, psychotic killers)

Their narrative content tended to reflect a concern with psychosis and a sense of impending doom.

Low-key lighting varies from moderate to high contrast between light and shadows (e.g., Night of the Hunter - moderate, Raging Bull - high contrast).

Types of Low-Key Lighting -

Rembrandt - highly selective lighting. Illuminate specific areas while leaving other areas in semi-or complete darkness. Often strong contrast between light and dark areas of screen space (high contrast).

Cameo - Concentrates the viewer's attention on the performers (can be simply a spot-light - no set).

Cameo lighting can reveal a performer's inner emotions, rather than outer actions.

Silhouette - Emphasizes contour rather than volume (e.g., where the identity of someone should remain unknown).

High-Key Lighting - Uses predominately bright key and fill light to avoid deep shadows and reduce contrasts (sometimes called flat lighting - musicals, comedies, etc.).

May have no aesthetic function except for visibility - (low-contrast between light and shadow).

Does not carry the same emotional impact that low-key lighting (in its various forms) can elicit.

High-Key/Flat Lighting Characteristics -

The light comes from no particular direction.

It is non-selective; all areas lit equally.

Lighting is low contrast.

Three-point lighting is used with generous amounts of fill light. Shadow areas are minimal.

Symbolic Implications (in regards to characters) -

Above/Front - Lighting in most movies is from above and in front (feels normal to viewers).

NOTE: Simply lighting from the front is rarely used since it tends to flatten the contours of facial features.

Addition of backlighting can produce an image that is softer. It can produce a feminine, romantic effect (often used in the 1930s to highlight an actress' hair).

Above - Lighting from directly above can suggest a character's spirituality.

Below - Lighting from below generally makes the subject appear sinister (even if the actor/actress assumes a totally neutral expression).

Blocking Light Source - When the subject blocks the source of light, viewers may feel insecure and trapped, for we tend to associate light with safety.

On the other hand, in some contexts, especially in exterior shots, a silhouette effect can be soft and romantic, perhaps because the open space acts as a counter to the sense of entrapment suggested by a confined interior.

Existing Light -

Filmmakers may often use it as a deliberate realistic device (see Kubrick). Using plain daylight, indoor scenes under ordinary house lights, etc.

Light Source (Lighting Instruments)

Light source itself as a highly effective dramatic agent. Showing light source - the sun or a turned on lighting instrument. Can heighten the emotional impact of a scene (flashlight shining in someone's eyes, motel neon sign, etc.).

Post-Production Lighting Effects -

Lighting effects produced through optical processes (including computer-generated effects). Lighting effects are artificially created - lighting not found in the real world (e.g., reverse polarity).

*Color*

Involved in movie experience from the very beginning. (paint, dyes, various tinting/toning processes).

1935 - Technicolor (dye process)

1950 - Eastman Kodak (chemical process)

Black and white film prevailed for many years. The balance only shifted gradually until today where color is the predominant mode of visual production (NOTE: Type of film generally associated with black and white now? - Documentaries).

Color Perception - Emotional responses to particular colors probably depends to a great extent on association. Thus, red is felt to be warm and blue cold because of associations with fire and blood/water and ice.

Color Attributes -

Hue

Saturation

Brightness

Hue - The color itself (red, green, blue, etc.)

Saturation - Color that has a varying degree of white mixed in. The more white, the less saturated the color. A color's strength depends upon how much white light is mixed in.

Brightness - How much light a color or "color object" reflects back to us.

All three attributes are important to filmmakers - Each has to be considered in order to produce an effective color visual presentation.

The utilization of color can work for (or against) a filmmaker in the following broad areas:

Informational Function - Brings out detail. Can help viewers distinguish between objects/characters.

However, if filmmaker lets colors get out of hand, the accumulation of detail may lead not to clarity, but to confusion.

Fakery of any kind is more obvious.

Viewers have a heightened awareness of not only details, but of colorfulness in general (Watch out for distraction).

Realism - Color can provide realism, establish a time-frame, and can be representative of the essential qualities of an environment, event, or object.

Mood (Atmosphere) - Colors influence our perceptions of an environment and/or the environment for a character(s) - e.g., warm colors can emphasize romance, eroticism, nostalgia - cool colors, depression, gloom, death, melancholy - garish colors, disorientation, psychosis, uneasiness, etc.

Color Symbolism - White (pure), black (evil). Filmmakers often reverse and manipulate color symbolism (contradictory symbolism). Effective only if audience realizes that the color is supposed to mean something (often hard to pull off).

Leitmotifs in Color - Directors may associate colors with a given character(s). A trade-mark effect.

Psychological (warm/cool colors) - Color also affects perceptions of temperature and weight. We perceive warm colors as hot and heavy; cold colors as cool and light.

Three-Dimensionality (advancing/receding properties) - Some colors seem to advance toward the foreground (red, orange, yellow, lavender - advancing colors).

Objects in these colors appear larger and closer to the camera than they are. Some colors recede into the background (beige, green, pale blue - receding colors).

Taking advantage of the advancing and receding characteristics of color fosters the illusion that the image on the screen is three-dimensional.

Color helps focus attention to specific objects within screen space (or deemphasize).

Colors can create harmony or discord within a visual sequence.

Color composition can be a highly effective means in which to focus audience attention to that which the film director feels is important visually.

NOTE: Color may draw attention to the outer rather than inner reality of an event/character. Sometimes best to deemphasize rather than focus on outward appearance.

If color prevents the viewer from perceiving an event in all its depth and subtleties, then it shouldn't be used. If it can clarify and intensify an event, then it should be used.

Color can also simply be a gimmick (e.g., The Tingler).

### *Screen Composition*

In visual media such as film, the screen is our principal frame of reference.

Visual Composition techniques that help clarify and intensify events within the frame (spatial field):

- Main Direction
- Screen Position
- Camera Angles
- Motion

Main Direction - Horizontal/vertical - By emphasizing one or the other, a film producer can suggest the following:

- Horizontal (calmness, normalcy)
- Vertical (power, formality, strength)
- The Canted Shot (tension, disorienting effect)

Horizon Line and Meaning - - lower third (emphasize sky) - upper third (earth)

## Screen Position:

Rule of Thirds - Cinematographers try to avoid perfectly symmetrical images where an object of interest is centered and everything else is evenly positioned around it (e.g., don't want characters always placed in the center of the screen - non-dramatic composition).

Traditionally, cinematographers place objects of interest along one of the imaginary lines that divide the image into thirds laterally and horizontally. Director should also give characters not only head room, but lead (or nose) room.

Toland's Rule - The strongest point of screen composition appears to be along a diagonal line from the lower left to the upper right corner of screen space (with focus on the upper right corner).

Often, relevant information is presented on the right side of screen. Seems normal and balanced for viewers (Westerner's reading). Right side of screen is often perceived as "heavier" than left side.

Filmmakers will balance screen areas by placing more objects on left side to provide equilibrium and stabilize right side of screen space (unless, of course, they want to create tension within audience by going against this compositional factor). Reversing this expectation (utilizing a reversal of Toland's rule) often creates tension (see Leone films).

Often we see a diagonal line from bottom left to top right as going uphill; top left to bottom right as downhill (movement affected by slant - fast or slow).

Framing devices - Placing a frame device (doorway, window, etc.) around area of interest (frame within a frame).

Frame Cramming - Push all objects (characters) close together in framed area (tight shot).

The Packed Screen - To achieve a live screen effect, each shot can be composed so that the visual frame is loaded with cinematic information and large blank areas (dead screen) are

avoided - unless of course there is a dramatic reason. The most obvious way to keep the screen alive is to pack almost every square inch of its surface with visual information (see Braveheart).

Motion:

Motion in general is one of the strongest elements used in screen composition. Film directors must continuously consider how motion is going to be used to convey specific meaning to viewers - translate content into action.

Background in Motion - A film director attempts to incorporate some kind of motion into almost every shot and often uses natural background movement to keep the screen alive. This type of background motion, a very subordinate type, does not divert our attention from the primary subject.

Camera Angles:

Eye-level - Most common camera angle. Feels natural and unobtrusive.

Low-angle - Increases the height of figures in the foreground (implications - character's dignity, dominance or power).

High-angle - Decreases the apparent height of a character (implications - character is weak, less significant than other characters).

Practical function: These type of camera angles may simply be used to accentuate our depth perception, or reveal objects that would otherwise be blocked from our view. Also, character point of view shots.

Point of View - Character's perspective (or "subjective" camera - i.e., drunk character)

NOTE: Camera angles must be analyzed in relation to their context - how are they being used in relation to the narrative of the media presentation?