

The Cinematic Toolbox: Basic Terms in Film Analysis S. Camargo (Spring 2021)

The following terms and definitions constitute the basic vocabulary for analytical discussions of film.

NARRATIVE AND NARRATION

Since movies tell stories, you have to know the key terms used by literary critics to analyze **narrative**—story (*fabula*) versus plot (*synopsis*); chronological (linear) or achronological plots (those including flashbacks and/or flashforwards); dual plotlines and subplots; motivation, exposition, conflict, climax, resolution, closure; protagonist, antagonist, helper, prize, and other character functions; period and setting. Analytical approaches to **narration** (how the story is told) include focalization, restricted or unrestricted narration, subjective or omniscient narration, narration that is reliable or unreliable, explicit or implicit, diegetic or nondiegetic.

These terms are used to analyze all forms of literary storytelling. They will become part of our discourse in this course, so ask me if you are not sure about what they mean.

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES: The Filmmaker's Toolbox

Storytelling structures are embodied in and inflected by the cinematic techniques of **mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound**. Decisions made about the selection and use of these techniques constitute a film's **audiovisual design**. Every cinematic technique needs to be understood subtextually, as having symbolic or connotative associations important to the process of **representation**. These connotations are derived from our real-life experiences as well as from our knowledge of general film style, generic traditions, the specific narrative context, and the interactions among the various techniques.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE: Everything that you can see within the frame, including set design and decor, actor gestures and movement, costume and makeup, and lighting.

Composition: While each object within the frame is meaningful, the film analyst must also consider **composition**: the arrangement of the objects in relation to each other, to the frame, and to the viewer. Each shot will have a **dominant**, some area or object that the director wants us to notice first and pay the most attention to. While some dominants are **intrinsic** to the particular film, in that the plot makes a particular object important and interesting to us no matter where it is in the frame, other dominants are constructed through the object's position in the frame, through movement, through lighting, and/or through color.

A composition with a single person is called a **one-shot**; a composition with two people within the frame is a **two-shot**. A two-shot is decoded as representing a bond between the characters.

Lighting: Light is an important technique for directing our attention toward a particular object or area of the frame as well as for shaping our responses toward the actions being represented. For example, lighting a person from above can make them look spiritual, while lighting them from below can make them look frightening, even if they are performing identical actions.

Lighting is achieved by the balancing of three light sources. The **key light** is the major and strongest light source. To avoid the harsh shadows that would occur if only a key light were used, a smaller **fill light** is positioned on the other side of the object. Finally, to

define the object from its background, a *back light* is used. Four basic types of lighting designs can be achieved by varying the numbers and intensities of these three lighting positions.

High-key lighting: The key, fill, and back lights are positioned to create a natural and normal image, evenly lighted, with few shadows. High-key lighting is the typical lighting design for musicals, comedies, and films shot in the **realistic style**.

Low-key lighting: In this design the key light and the back light are brought way down and one or both of them may be eliminated. The result is a dim image in which the details of the object and its background will be hard to make out. Low-key lighting is often used in crime films like film noirs and horror films.

High-contrast lighting: In this very dramatic type of lighting design, the fill light will be absent or very dim, resulting in an image with sharply defined contours and very strong shadows. Another name for this style, which is taken from Italian Mannerist paintings of the seventeenth century such as those by Caravaggio, is **chiaroscuro**.

Backlighting: In this dramatic and unusual lighting design, the key and fill lights are absent. The result of backlighting is a silhouette against a bright background.

CINEMATOGRAPHY: The use of the camera to create an image. An image is analyzed according to **camera distance, camera angle, framing, focal length, and movement**. In analyzing the cinematography of a shot, it is important to consider whether a camera position is **motivated**, that is, whether its position is meant to be understood as that of a character (called a **point-of-view shot**).

Camera distances: The human figure is used as the yardstick for defining camera distances, though the same definitions also apply to objects. The range of distance possibilities is **extreme long shot (ELS)**, in which a human figure is very small; **long shot (LS)**, in which the full human figure occupies most of the frame's vertical dimension; **medium shot (MS)**, in which the figure is seen from the thighs or hips up (also called a "plan Américain"); **medium close-up (MCU)**, in which the figure is seen from the mid-chest up; the **close-up (CU)**, in which the bulk of the frame is taken up by the face; and **extreme close-up (ECU)**, in which a part of the face fills the frame. Note that these six distances are not precise; in practice it may be difficult to draw the line between an MCU and a CU, for example.

Also note the distinction between **shot** and **take**: *shot* refers to the apparent *distance* between the camera and the object; *take* refers to *time*. Thus, a **long take** is a shot that lasts a long time, regardless of the camera's distance from the object.

Camera angles: Basically, these are **high, low, and normal**. An extreme high-angle shot is called a *bird's-eye shot*; an extreme low-angle shot is called a *frog's-eye shot*. Any deviation from a normal camera angle needs to be considered as important, even if it is **motivated**.

Framing: Framing is the measure of how much space there is around the person. Framing may be **tight**, in which the person has very little space around them, or **loose**, in which the amount of space around the person is extensive. A particular type of framing, in which the architecture of the space, like a doorway, is used to decrease the space around the person, is called **interior framing**. Framing also relates to how straight the image is. In **canted framing**, the image has been tilted toward one side instead of being straight.

Focal length: Lenses are **wide-angle, normal, and telephoto**. A wide-angle lens has great depth-of-field and gives the illusion that objects are farther apart than they really are. Wide-angle lenses are used for **deep-focus** images, in which all planes of a shot are in focus. A telephoto lens has a shallow depth of field, but can present clear images at great

distances; telephoto lenses also give the illusion that objects are closer together than they are in real life.

Movements: Moving a camera on a wheeled cart is called a **tracking** (or trucking) **shot** or a **dolly shot**. In addition to following the action, the camera may **dolly in** and **dolly out**. (NOTE: A **zoom**, strictly speaking, is not a camera movement, but it can create the effect of dolly-ins and dolly-outs.) A **pan** is achieved by mounting the camera on a stable tripod and slowly moving the camera **horizontally**; a **tilt** is achieved by moving the camera on its tripod **vertically**. A **swish pan** or **swish tilt** occurs when the camera is moved so quickly that the image blurs.

EDITING: The basic unit of cinema, analogous to the word, is the **shot**, defined as an uninterrupted run of the camera. A shot lasting longer than 60 seconds is called a **long take**. A long take that encompasses a series of actions and that is essentially a **scene** is called a **sequence shot**. The joining together of shots to create an individual scene and a series of scenes is called **editing**.

Editing is the essence of film art. Editing shapes the rhythm of a film by varying the length of the shots and this, in itself, can influence our experience of a film, regardless of the images being used and the effects of their juxtaposition.

Editing is divided into three main types: **continuity editing**, **classical cutting**, and **montage**. While each of these forms developed during a particular historical era, all are still used today, and most films use all of them.

Continuity editing: the arrangement of shots to create the illusion of contiguous space and continuous time. This illusion is created through the use of specific techniques such as **establishing shots**, **matching the master shot**, **matches on action**, **eyeline matches**, and the **180-degree rule**. As a result of these techniques, actions can be elided without making the break in time and space obvious, and the spectator can create a coherent mental map of the scene. *Continuity editing is the fundamental technique in realist cinematic style.*

Classical cutting: developed by D. W. Griffith around 1912, classical cutting is used to heighten the emotional or dramatic impact of an action by cutting to its direct result or to someone's reaction to it (called a **reaction shot**), even if continuity rules have to be broken to do it. One particularly important type of classical cutting is **parallel editing** or **cross-cutting**: also developed by Griffith, parallel editing intercuts shots from events in different spaces, creating the assumption that they are occurring simultaneously.

Montage: developed by Russian filmmakers in the early 1920s, montage was designed to create an intellectual or emotional response in the audience by linking images for symbolic rather than narrative purposes, for example, cutting to a strutting peacock after a shot of a government official. In Hollywood films, montage is mainly used for intense action sequences and to compress time and space, as in the **montage sequence** that presents a series of shots that summarizes two characters' growing romantic relationship.

Montage is often confused with the **jump cut**. A jump cut occurs when two shots show the same object from the same angle but at a closer distance. Jump cuts are rarely used, but montage is common.

Transitions from shot to shot: The most common is the **straight cut**. Most commonly used within scenes and made to be inobtrusive when the rules of **continuity editing** are followed. When those rules are broken, the transition is experienced as a **shock cut**. Between scenes, you may find a **fade-out** followed by a **fade-in** (also described as a **fade to black**, followed by a **fade-in**). The next type of transition is the **dissolve**, in which the image gradually disappears in a slower version of the fade to black, before the new image

gradually reappears. If a **superimposition** or **lap dissolve** is used, the second image will gradually appear as the first image gradually dissolves. Fades and dissolves are decoded as representing a significant passage of time.

SOUND: The key points in analyzing sound are the quality of the sound, its relationship to the image, and the way it is used to construct our sense of space. **Sound perspective** means changing the quality of the sound to create a sense of space, distance, depth, and direction. Lacking recorded dialog and ambient sound, silent films often seem to us to be two-dimensional.

Diegetic/nondiegetic: The world of the story is called the **diegesis**, so calling a sound **diegetic** means that it is part of the story world and that the characters could hear it. Only the viewer can hear a **nondiegetic** sound.

Onscreen/offscreen: When we see the source of the sound, the sound is called **onscreen sound**. If we hear a sound, but its diegetic source is not visible to us at that very moment, it is called **offscreen sound**. Offscreen sound is an important technique because it reminds us (and the characters) that there is a world outside of the frame.

Natural/manipulated: If the sound is recorded in a way that makes it sound normal, we call it **natural sound**. **Manipulated sound** might distort the sound quality to achieve a particular effect.

Ambient sound is sound that is equivalent to the visual background of a shot. It fleshes out our sense of the space.

A **sound bridge** is the use of a sound from a previous or subsequent scene as a transition device.

Voiceover narration comments on the action being represented. Voiceover may be diegetic or nondiegetic; simultaneous or retrospective.