

Reading Film = Decoding the Codes

In film, meaning is created through

1. narrative elements: plot (organization of episodes), character, setting (time and place)
2. visual/ technical elements:
 - colour, lighting (symbolic colours, colour schemes, shadows and highlights)
 - framing (what is included in the picture, what is excluded)
 - camera angle, distance, movement (closeups, establishing shots, tracking, etc)
 - sound (background music, ambient sound, silence)

Film analysis is analogous to literary analysis:

same narrative elements

technical elements equivalent to style, diction, imagery, symbols, point of view

Codes communicate meanings without using words or by using words in unusual ways. Media texts use a combination of technical codes and symbolic codes. **Technical codes** are meanings created by the use of technology: the camera, the sound, and the lighting. **Symbolic codes** are those that draw on the ordinary symbol systems we use in day-to-day life.

In everyday life, we know and use codes constantly. Body language is a code. A raised fist may signal aggression; a person sitting tensely with arms crossed across the body sends a message of insecurity. Colours can be codes: a traffic light communicates messages using colours. Red means stop, green means go.

Film also shares symbol systems or coding systems with literature. In film as in literature, stormy weather often signals stormy relationships. If we see a picture of a wooden thing with branches on screen, our mind thinks 'tree'. If an author describes a tree as a gnarled, large, spiky and leafless wooden thing, we read the signal of disaster, threat, maybe horror (*symbolic code*). If the director chooses to shoot the tree in black and white (*technical code*), we associate the technique with events happening in the past. If the tree is drawn in bright crayon colours and is rounded and 'lollipop-like' (*symbolic code*), it signals 'children', 'happy birdies nesting', etc. to us. If the image of the tree is created with a low camera angle (*technical code*), we adopt the perspective of the children playing beneath it. If the lighting of the scene is arranged so as to cast a shadow (*technical code*) over one of the children, we think of that child as different, perhaps in emotional pain or personal danger.

Film: the Basic Units of Meaning

shot :: word
scene :: sentence
sequence :: chapter

- Shot:** the image taken in one continuous exposure of the film. A shot can last from less than a second in a still photograph to, in some cases, an entire movie.
- Scene:** a series of shots placed together to form a unit, usually taking place in a single location and in a single time span.
- Sequence:** A series of scenes related by theme, plot, or location, edited together to form a unit.
- Montage:** A series of shots that are unrelated as narrative but are related by theme. Montage is a standard element in music video.

A shot is what is recorded on film in one uninterrupted action. For still photos, a shot captures a single moment. In moving pictures, a shot may run for several minutes (a take) or, in some cases, an entire film. The basic analysis of a shot begins with identifying the subject, the background, and the foreground. The background and foreground create context for the subject, acting as elements that code the subject with meaning.

Shots develop meaning in various ways, but always remember that meaning is created by many elements in a shot working together. When we look at the way meaning is coded in a traffic light, it is not just the colour that communicates, but the position of the lights: the light on the top means go; the light on the bottom means stop. Similarly, in film the director organizes the various visual elements so that they work together to create meaning.

Mise-en-Scène: codes working together in a system of meaning

This is a French term meaning ‘what is put into the scene’ or frame, the organization of setting, costuming, lighting, and actor movement. It is the director’s job to make these decisions, and what is put in or left out can make a big difference to the signals we receive and the way we decode them.

If a director wants to show that the story takes place in Victorian times, he or she will signal this by the use of period clothes and props. The specific inclusion of a bed and rocking horse will signify a nursery. He may take this one step further and include a window with a storm outside, thus creating atmosphere. He may sit a child on a low stool in the middle of the floor, her toys lined up formally against the walls, thus signalling that she is isolated and repressed by this room and the society she lives in. So the selection of specific objects and images carry broader ideas.

Like the words chosen to make up a poem, each item in a frame may be carefully chosen and positioned. The director can draw our attention to an object, a gun, say, by placing it in the foreground, near the camera lens. We then decode that the gun will be important in this scene.

The choice of an outdoor setting (exterior scene) instead of an indoor setting (interior

scene) can also affect the viewer's reading of the characters and the situation.

Camera distance creates meaning:

Camera distance: the distance of the camera from the subject (still and motion photography)

- extreme close-up (XLS)
- close-up (CU)
- medium shot (MS)
- long shot (LS)
- extreme long shot (XLS)

A long shot makes the subject look small, and may give the impression that the subject is lost in the landscape. On the other hand, a long shot long shot may give a large subject the impression of power because it dominates the landscape even though it is far away. For example, a long shot featuring a giraffe standing next to an equally tall tree gives the impression of the giraffe's dominance of its environment.

A close up can help the audience identify with the subject, because so many details are visible, which may be codes themselves. If the subject is human, and the close up is of the face, the audience seeing the drops of perspiration, the tension in the face, and beard stubble can know without being told that the subject is in crisis.

Camera angles create meaning:

Camera angle: The position of the camera in relation to the subject

- high angle shot: the camera is above the subject
- eye-level or flat shot: the camera is on the same plane as the subject
- low angle: camera is below the subject.

A high angle shot looks down on the subject, and may make the subject look insignificant, weak, or helpless. A low angle shot looks up at the subject, and may make the subject seem important, powerful, or dominant,

Sound creates meaning

The codes films use do not only have to be visual. The use of sudden loud music signals 'something dramatic is about to happen – pay attention!'

Diegetic sound is sound which is part of the film world we are watching. This can be dialogue, ambient sound (the background noises of the world such as passing cars, birds singing in trees, the sound of feet crunching on gravel), music or sound effects which come from a source within the film world. The music in this instance will be from a source in the film which we acknowledge could actually be producing music, for example, a CD player or jukebox.

Diegetic sound can occur either on screen or off screen; in other words we can either see the person or object that is making the sound (on screen) or we don't (off screen).

Nondiegetic sound is sound which we do not recognise as part of the film world such as a voice-over or background music. **Voiceover** is a seemingly simple technique that has complex effects: at the same time that it creates a close relationship between character and viewer, it distances the character and the action. With voiceover, action that is already mediated once (through being represented on film) is doubly mediated by adding the narrator as a second filter.

From a Collection of Still Pictures to the Illusion of a Continuous Narrative

The images in a motion picture do not actually move. If you examine a strip of film, you will notice that each action is represented by a sequence of still pictures. The brain, through the **phi effect**, assumes relationships between each image and the image that follows it and interprets the succession of changes as continuous motion. Although it seems common-sense that this mental process is a reassembling of the original movement recorded on film, beware of common sense interpretations of media effects. The Phi effect works equally well with the artificial arrangement of unrelated images; otherwise special effects sequences would be impossible.

Camera Movement: the movement relative to the subject

- Pan: camera moves across the scene from a fixed point
Follow : camera moves with the subject across the scene
Tilt: camera tilts up/ down while staying in the same place
Zoom In /Out: lens changes to increase or decrease the camera distance. The camera itself does not move
Dolly/ Track: the camera is positioned on a cart and moves along a track alongside, towards, around, or away from the action

The Art of Editing

The art of film editing reinforces the phi effect by combining long shots, medium shots, and close-ups to create a seemingly seamless and continuous narrative.

Several special shots are used in moving pictures

1. Establishing shot
 - usually a long shot (or wide angle shot), the establishing shot occurs at the beginning of a sequence (including the opening of the movie). It tells viewers where they are and when they are.
2. Shot-Reverse shot
 - an editing technique that alternates shots, particularly in conversation scenes, between two characters, showing their reactions to each others' words
3. Insert Shot
 - cut to a closeup of something significant within the basic scene. The use of an

insert shot is simply a way of directing attention to a significant element within the scene. The insert shot forces the audience to look at a significant aspect of the overall scene, while highlighting details that may not have been apparent.

4. Cutaway Shot

- cutting away from the central scene to bring in related material. For example, while covering a parade a director might cut away to a shot of a baby sleeping peacefully in a stroller. Or a sequence showing buyers in a busy marketplace in the Philippines might cut away to a shot of a child watching it all.

5. Subjective Shot/ POV shot

- can be used to involve the audience and help them see the action from a particular character's point of view

6. Dutch tilts (camera tilted so that the frame is diagonal)

- can create a feeling of unease in the audience, or can suggest that a character is ill or drunk

Special Effects

1. freeze frame

- the action is momentarily stopped to give the effect of frozen time.

2. whip pan

- an extremely rapid pan that causes blurring and may create the sensation of chaos

3. pulling focus

- shifting the focus from foreground to background or vice versa. The effect is an intensification of emphasis on the main subject which is the only focused image on screen. Pulling focus is also used to momentarily draw the viewer's attention to action or characters that may be working in the background of the character's world. In this case, the technique works like dramatic irony in literature: as viewers we now know something about the action that the main character does not know.

Transitions: smoothing the change from shot to shot or from scene to scene

Shots are connected in a variety of ways:

1. cut: the second shot is placed right after the first shot
2. matched cut: a common element (colour, image) creates unity across the cut
3. dissolve: the first image gradually fades away as the second image gradually grows brighter
4. wipe: one image appears to wipe over another
5. fade-in: a shot gradually increases in intensity from an originally underexposed image
6. fade out: a shot gradually decreases in intensity from an originally properly exposed image
7. superimposition: one image sits over top another, an effect similar to a double exposure.