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Introduction

When we talk about reading a film what we actually mean is looking at the film in great detail to see how it is put together. There are many different elements to consider when undertaking such an activity and it is usual to read an extract from a film rather than the whole film.

Reading a film is just like reading a book, except that instead of looking at a written page we are looking at the cinema screen. We can look at text, books or film for a variety of purposes; we can either read a book or watch a film purely for enjoyment, or, we may want to look at it in more depth to see why it actually is that we enjoy it so much.

As with any other creative text each person will have an individual response to a film. Whilst you may enjoy say, the unusual camera angles in a film, someone else might find them annoying because they distract from the narrative. A friend may think that a certain facial expression reveals something important about a character; you may see it as meaning something completely different. When we read a film we are interpreting the text as we see it; we are saying why we think the filmmaker made certain choices and what the film means to us.

If you read a written text and it has a certain effect on you, for instance it makes you scared, we can look closely at the way the text has been constructed to see how the writer has used the tools at their disposal to create the fear.

Reading a film works in exactly the same way except that the tools that are used

to create meaning are different. We call these tools **film language**.

The opening sequence - getting involved in a film

From the moment we first start watching the film we begin to get involved. The first few images of a film (the opening sequence) are very important to us as they give us lots of clues as to what the film will be about. We look at the opening shots of place and time, and put them into context. We look at the actors we are presented with and make assumptions about their characters and roles in the film and their relationship to each other. We look at the title of the film – the way it is worded and the style of the lettering and we try to guess what genre (type) of film it will be. We listen to the sound, which is often predominantly music at this stage, and the tone and beat of this again give us further clues as to how the film will develop. We do all this automatically – at this time we are extremely receptive and actively involved.

Without realising it, we have entered into the world of the film and begun to read the signals that have been set up for us; we have begun to **decode the film language**.

Film codes & signals

In the spoken or written language that we use, words often have hidden meaning, or a 'signal' behind the literal meaning of the word. For instance, the sun is literally a yellowish ball in the sky, but the word 'signals' to us meanings such as warmth, cheerfulness, life, etc. A teddy bear is a stuffed, brown plaything but it 'signals' comfort and childhood innocence to us. These are known as the **denotative** (literal) meaning and the **connotative** (hidden signals and implications) meaning of the word.

Films use the same signals or coding systems. For instance if we see a picture of a wooden thing with branches on screen, our mind thinks 'tree'. If the tree is a gnarled, large, spiky and leafless image, shot in black and white, we read the signal of disaster, threat, maybe horror. If the tree is drawn in bright crayon colours and is rounded and 'lollipop-like', it signals 'children', 'happy birdies nesting', etc. to us.

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!' An extreme close-up shot of a person's face signals 'this character's reaction is very important'. The study of these systems of signs is called **semiology**.

Most film audiences are able to recognise these film codes; even young children are aware of the basics. As students of film you will learn how to analyse this film language in more detail. Your level of interaction will be greater and you will be able to be more specific about what it is that makes a film 'good' or 'bad'.

Let's look at some of the elements which make up a film and through which the signals are sent to us. These are the basic criteria through which we can make judgements about a film.

Use of the camera

1) **Different types of shots** are used in a combination to give you information about where and when something is happening, the role of a character and his/her reaction, to draw attention to someone or something, or to create an impression or feeling. Look at the [storyboard](#):

There are many variations and combinations of these shots.

2) **Different camera movements** can be used to create a specific effect, for example:

A character walks into a room and the camera slowly **pans** across (moves from side to side). We feel as if we are the character looking around. By stopping something, our attention can be focused on this;

a feeling of unsteadiness or unease can be created by moving the camera diagonally (**rolling**). Our brains register that all is not well within this screen world;

the camera pulling backwards from a scene (**tracking**) indicates to the audience that the action that concerns us has now finished. In suspense films the action may start suddenly again at this point, thus surprising or shocking our expectations.

3) **Mise-en-Scène**. This is a French term meaning 'what is put into the scene' or frame. It is the director's job to decide this 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.

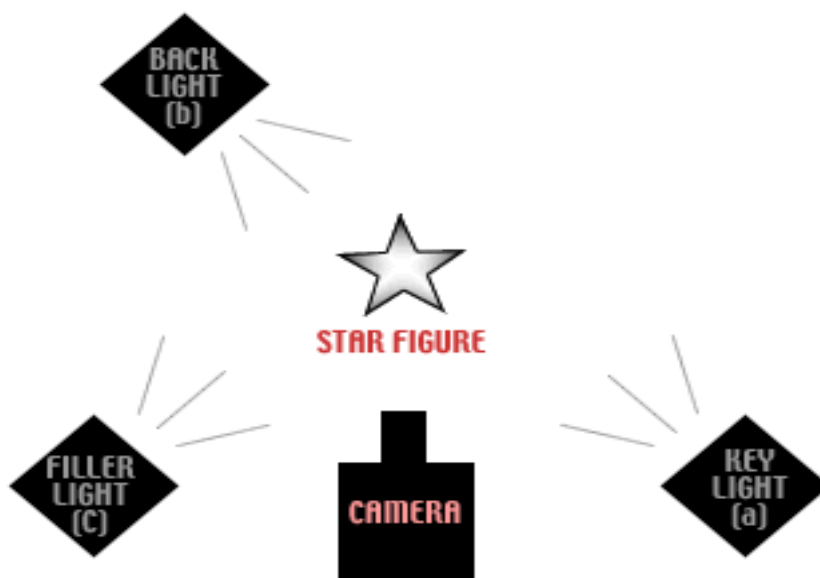
Like the words chosen to make up a poem, each item in a frame may be carefully chosen and positioned. The director can draw our attention to an object, a gun,

say, by placing it in the foreground, near the camera lens. We then decode that the gun will be important in this scene.

One director who emphasised the importance of *mise-en-scène* was André Bazin, who believed that it encouraged audiences to become more involved in a scene since they had to look actively and interpret what was included.

Use of lighting

Lighting is an important signifier as it conveys the mood or atmosphere of the scene which we are observing. In a studio, the lighting is usually from three sources and is set up as follows:



a) The **key light**, as the name suggests, is usually the brightest and most influential.

b) The **back light** helps counteract the effect of the key light, thus making the figure look more 'rounded'.

c) The **filler light** helps to soften the harsh shadows created by the use of the back and key lights. There may be more than one of these.

The director manipulates this basic format to achieve the atmosphere he wishes to signify. For instance, if he uses only the key and back lights, he will produce a sharp contrast of dark and light areas on the screen as shadows are formed. This is known as **low-key lighting**. These shadows can be decoded by the audience to suggest an air of mystery, as used in the 'film noir' (dark films) of the 1940s and 1950s. They can also be decoded to suggest a world where there is depression and decay, as we find in many modern-day films depicting life in the future. Exaggerated use of low-key lighting can be found in horror films, where underlighting (placing a light under a face or an object) gives a dramatic, often

distorting effect. Low-key lighting is often seen as expressive. **High-key lighting** means that filler lights are used. This will appear much more normal and realistic to our eyes but can also be manipulated to give a more glamorous appearance to a star's face, or add a 'twinkle' to their eyes. It is much 'softer' than low-key lighting.

Sound

The extra dimension that sound adds to film has been acknowledged since the early days of cinema, when live music in the form of a piano, organ or even a full orchestra accompanied the images on the silent cinema screen. Although the first demonstration of sound on film is meant to have taken place as early as 1911 in the USA, it was only in 1927 that Warner Bros. released the first feature film with a soundtrack – 'The Jazz Singer' starring Al Jolson. One of the main reasons for the delay in the implementation of sound technology is that the film companies were unwilling to invest large sums of money into sound equipment when they were making huge profits with silent movies. However, the next commercial sound film 'Lights of New York' (1928) was so impressive that it stimulated a rapid and total conversion to sound within the entire film industry.

Sound on film today is of course much more sophisticated with a digital synchronised soundtrack combining the elements of dialogue, music and sound effects (SFX).

Diegetic & nondiegetic sound

The world of the film as we see it on the cinema screen is known as the diegetic world. We can see only a section of this world – the events which the filmmaker has chosen to include in the frame. However, as a modern-day, cinema-going audience we accept that there are things taking place around the edges of what we see on screen. For instance, if a character has gone to make a cup of tea, we accept that they have gone to the kitchen which is part of the 'film' house in which they live. However, they are still part of the film world we are watching although they are out of vision.

Often, the edges of what we can see on the cinema screen are extended by the use of sound. We might hear a doorbell ring and we acknowledge that there is someone being let into the house even though we can't see them. Likewise, we might hear the siren of a fire engine and we know that there is a road outside.

When we watch a film, the sounds that we hear can be diegetic or nondiegetic. Diegetic sound is sound which is part of the film world we are watching. This can be dialogue, 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.

Use of editing

When the filming has been completed, the editing process begins. This is a matter of choosing which shots to include, which to put next to which, and what method to use to join the shots together. So how does the audience interact with the film through the editing?

1) Selecting and ordering the shots

The director can create a mood or atmosphere by choosing certain shots in a certain order, to build a picture in our minds. We automatically link what is happening in one shot with what happens in those either side of it, as this is what happens in real life. Thus, by showing us a window frame and then a shot of a house, we presume the house is what you see out of that window. In this way we are interacting with the film.

Some directors have exploited this idea to extremes. Lev Kuleshov, a Russian filmmaker in the 1920s experimented by showing shots of an actor in between shots of different objects – food, a dead woman and a child. The audience interpreted the actor's expression (although it never changed!) as being hungry, sad and affectionate. This is because our brains try to make continuative sense of what we see. This placing together of images is called **montage**.

Sergei Eisenstein, another Russian filmmaker of the same era, believed that it was more effective if consecutive shots were not obviously linked, as the audience were forced to think and interact more to make the mental jump from shot to shot. Montage can be used effectively in propoganda, where the filmmaker wants the audience to believe in a certain idea or concept and is a common feature in present day advertising and pop videos.

2) Joining the shots

The director has a choice in the way he or she can join the shots together.

Smooth continuity of events and 'normality' for the audience is best achieved by using **simple cuts**. There are many technical rules to be remembered in order that the actors in consecutive shots are not suddenly looking in a different direction

for no apparent reason. The director can also manipulate time and space by, say, having a car leaving one place in one shot and arriving at another in the next. We accept the convention that the 'journey' has taken place – we interact by knowing that the film is not real time.

The director can create suspense by using short shots frequently edited with other shots. For example, the murderer breaks into the house, we cut to the victim in the bedroom, then back to the murderer on the stairs and so on. Shock tactics can be used by **jump cuts** to a sudden close-up of an expression or object. Expectations can be built up by cutting from one shot to another and back again repeatedly, then suddenly replacing one shot with a totally new one.

Fade out shots, where the screen fades to black, or **dissolve shots**, where one image is slowly brought in underneath another one, are used to indicate the end of an event and beginning of a new one. These cause us to interact by giving us time to think about what has happened. A third type of cut is a **wipe cut**, where one part of the screen moves across the other. This is most often done today using computer graphics (swirls, blocks etc.).

The director may also choose to slow the film down at certain moments, thus highlighting say, a romantic moment or creating suspense by delaying the action. We, the audience acknowledge that in film language this is a significant part of the film. He or she may also choose to use black and white film for part or all of the film, which we will automatically read as being events in the past.

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Using film language: camera shots

- Long shots help establish the setting
- close up shots draw attention to certain people, objects or actions that will be important in the narrative
- Extreme close ups can be used to frighten or confuse the audience
- Low angle shots can make objects or people look bigger, more frightening, more powerful
- High angle shots can make someone or something look smaller, weak, vulnerable
- Over the shoulder shots can be used to involve the audience and help them see the action from a particular character's point of view
- 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