

BLUE MOON FILMS

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“Movie Making – Educational Topics” Series

“The Road to Babel”



UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF FILM



Media Literacy: Analysis of Media

- **Purpose:**
 - People make media messages to inform, entertain, and/or persuade for political, commercial, educational, artistic, moral and/or other purposes.
- **Values:**
 - Media messages communicate explicit and implicit values.
- **Representations:**
 - Media messages are constructed; they are only representations of real or imaginary worlds.
- **Codes, Conventions and Characteristics:**
 - Each medium has its own set of codes, conventions and characteristics which affect the way messages are transmitted and understood.
- **Production:**
 - People who understand the media are better able to make purposeful media messages.
- **Interpretation:**
 - Audience members bring their knowledge, experience and values to their interpretation of and emotional responses to media messages.
- **Influence of Media on Audience:**
 - Media messages can influence people's attitudes, behavior, and values
- **Influence of Audience on Media:**
 - People can influence media institutions and the messages they produce and transmit.

What is Film Language?

Film language describes the way directors, editors and producers create meaning from the moving images of film, video and television. As with written language, meanings can be “decoded”. Our interpretation is not based solely on “what we see”, but a whole range of pre-existing expectations and knowledge that effect the meaning of “what we see”.

A very important aspect of film language is its highly compelling appearance of reality. Modern technology is increasingly able to make imaginative fiction seem entirely believable and trustworthy. This means that moving images can act not only to entertain, inform and educate, but also to be propaganda to convince and reinforce someone else’s point of view.

The “Grammar” of Film Language

- Signs, Codes and Conventions
- Mise-en-Scene
- Editing
- Shot Types
- Camera Angle
- Camera Movement
- Lighting
- ‘Diegesis’ & Sound
- Visual Effects / SFX
- Narrative
- Genre
- Iconography
- The “Star System”
- Realism

Signs, Codes and Conventions: Semiotics

- What is it:
 - The study of the way meaning is created in the world – especially in mass media
 - Based on the idea of “signs and codes”, “connotation and denotation”
- Signs - Any individual thing that signifies meaning
 - Two ways they create meaning
 - Denotation – literal meaning
 - Connotation – depending on context, signs may suggest other layers of meaning (cultural or societal influence)
 - An image of a girl in white denotes just that, while it may connote innocence or purity

Signs, Codes and Conventions: Semiotics [cont'd]

- Codes
 - A group of signs we recognize as going “naturally together” to signify meaning
 - A rose is a sign, but a boy handing one to a girl could create a “romance code” and suggest love
- Ways Codes and Signs signify meaning:
 - Iconicity – iconic sign or code
 - Suggests more than it should – i.e. image of a cowboy
 - Not reality, but a representation of reality
 - Indexicality – indexical sign
 - Directly suggests meaning because what it shows seems to be the result of something we associate with the thing it represents
 - i.e. smoke suggests fire, sweat suggests exercise, appearance suggests wealth
 - Symbolism – symbolic code or sign
 - Suggests meaning because we have learned it in our culture
 - A symbol, in itself, has no association with the meaning
 - i.e. red heart shape suggest love, letters combine to make words
- Meaning we get from codes are culturally determined

Signs, Codes and Conventions:

Semiotics [cont'd]

- Enigma codes
 - Tempts the audience
 - Used in Trailers
- Conventions
 - A way of doing things we are so used to we don't notice it
 - Can seem 'perfectly natural' or 'realistic' but are not
 - i.e. Women in westerns are either "very good" or "very bad"; punches are very loud; car tires always screech; shooters hit what they shoot at
 - Other conventions:
 - Genre, narrative, editing, use of certain shot types

Mise-en-scene:

“Put in the scene”

- The contents and action in the frame
- Asking the “who, what, where and why” of the contents of a mise-en-scene helps analyze it
- Other things to consider:
 - What effects are created
 - What meaning they have (denotation and connotation)
 - How they have been created
 - Why they were created
 - Which will be the director’s purpose
 - Perhaps to develop a character, mood, storyline, plot or theme

Editing:

“The placing of separate shots together”

- Allows the director to manipulate space and time
- Some Editing Techniques
 - Montage
 - A series of shots edited together to create an “individual unit” of meaning
 - Continuity Edits (i.e. Match Cuts)
 - Called “Hollywood Editing”
 - Creates a sequence that flows naturally from one shot to the next (the edits are “invisible”)
 - Has the effect of creating a realistic and seamless flow of story where one event leads into the next
 - Jump-Cuts
 - Are dramatic edits
 - MTV Edits – rapid sequence of fast jump-cuts first used in music videos
 - Follow Cuts
 - Follows an action to its consequence
 - i.e. eye line matches - a shot of a character looking edits to what he is looking at
 - Cross Cuts
 - Follows different action (i.e two people talking)
 - Sound Bridge – allows sound from one shot to cross into the next to create continuity

Shot Types – Very Basic

- Standard Shot Sequence
 - Establishing Shot
 - Usually opening shot of a sequence
 - “sets the scene” and locates the action
 - Followed by a:
 - Medium Shot
 - Followed by a:
 - Close Up
- Point of View (POV)
 - Subjective
 - at eye level, viewing scene from character’s perspective
 - Objective
 - as an observer secretly looking into a scene

Camera Angle

Camera Movement

- Camera angle can signify meaning
 - A subjective POV high angle shot can create a superior feel
- Camera Movement can create meaning
 - Zoom into a close up of a face can create emotion
 - Pan across a war scene and suggest violence
 - POV Tracking & POV Handheld
 - Can create tension and involvement by making one feel they are part of the action

Lighting

- Can create atmosphere and mood as well as signifying meaning
- Basic Lighting Scheme
 - Key Light
 - Simulates the natural light
 - High Key - harsh
 - Soft Key – can create a romantic atmosphere
 - Fill Light
 - Fills in, or softens, the shadows created by the key light
 - Back Light
 - Placed behind and above the subject
 - Helps to outline the subject and separate it from the background
- Additional lights
 - Eyelight
 - Focused to reflect in the subjects eye, giving them a reflective sparkle
 - Background
 - To illuminate the background
 - Kicker
 - Similar to Back Light
 - Placed behind and below the subject
 - It helps to separate the subject from the background

“Diegesis” and Sound

- Diegesis signifies “the world of film”
 - a Greek word meaning “recounted story”
 - If something seems a part of “the world of film”, it is said to be diegetic
- Diegetic Sound
 - Sound whose source is visible on the screen or whose source is implied to be present by the action of the film:
 - voices of characters
 - sounds made by objects in the story
 - music represented as coming from instruments in the story space (= source music)
 - Can be either **on screen** or **off screen** depending on whatever its source is within the frame or outside the frame.
- Non-Diegetic Sound
 - Sound whose source is neither visible on the screen nor has been implied to be present in the action:
 - narrator's commentary
 - sound effects which is added for the dramatic effect
 - mood music
 - Coming from the a source outside story space.
- The distinction between diegetic or non-diegetic sound depends on our understanding of the conventions of film viewing and listening.

Visual Effects / SFX

- Types of Special Effects :
 - Front / back projection
 - Compositing
 - Cel animation
 - Computer animation
 - Rotoscoping
 - Stop-motion & go-motion animation
 - Puppetry
 - Pyrotechnics
 - Miniature / model making
 - Matte paintings
 - Makeup effects
 - Stunt effects
 - Sound effects
- Techniques help to create compelling realism and meaning

Narrative

- Narrative structure is a major convention in cinema and TV
- In life, we are taught to understand complex world events as interesting stories
 - This way of describing real events oversimplifies reality, while appearing realistic and believable
 - Real events are rarely connected by simple “cause and effect” relationships as in stories
 - Narratives cast people as “good” or “evil”
- Media producers know we hear and tell of world events as narratives
 - They use this to create media texts that rely on narrative forms to be absorbing, compelling and convincingly realistic
- Filmed narratives can easily trick us into thinking we are viewing a real “window to the world”

Genre

- Means the kind of narrative being told (detective, sci-fi, horror, etc)
- It defines a text by its similarity to other texts
- Audiences of a genre film brings many pre-existing expectations
 - Types of characters, setting and events they want to see
 - Prediction is a major aspect of film enjoyment, genre exploits this
- Genre Conventions
 - An important way for directors to create believable “versions of reality”
 - Audiences fail to see it is not reality because they have become accustomed to seeing certain conventions in certain kinds of film
 - In the crime/gangster genre, we see a casino owner as a ‘villain’ so we don’t mind him being horribly killed
- Film companies use genre to make and sell films
 - Popularity of a genre increase chance for commercial success
 - Can be cost effective

Iconography

The “Star System”

- Iconography
 - An important aspect of genre
 - We come to expect to see certain objects within the mise-en-scene of a particular genre
 - Genre indicators are called the Iconography of the genre
 - Westerns – dusty roads, cowboy hats, saloons, horses, jails, etc
 - Horror – lonely girls, ‘normal’ objects, use of light & dark
- The “Star System”
 - Important part of iconography of cinema and TV
 - Different stars can be important signifiers of meaning
 - Can create:
 - Expectation of character and action
 - Help identify genre
 - Create powerful iconic representations – i.e. masculinity & femininity

Realism

- Cinema & TV can offer high levels of “realism”
 - Bright screen, darkened room, Dolby sound
 - Compelling & persuasive
- This “appearance of reality” is called verisimilitude
- It is a convention – nothing real about images on a flat screen
- Type of Verisimilitude
 - Generic
 - The “realism” that convinces us because of the genre
 - i.e. In the horror genre, it’s highly realistic for a vampire to bite its victim and drink blood
 - Cultural
 - The “realism” that convinces us because it looks like the way things are, or should, be in our society
 - Different for different cultural experiences

Analyzing a Film

- Three Key Aspects
 - The METHOD of creation (How)
 - The EFFECT of this on the audience (What)
 - The PURPOSE or INTENTION of the director (Why)
- Moving images create compelling viewing for the audience
 - The realism, excitement, anticipation, prediction, tension, emotion ...
 - Examine mise-en-scenes and montage sequences that significantly contribute to the meaning
 - Be aware of ideological effects
 - i.e. reinforcement of societal values
 - Try to identify which groups in society these values favor
 - Within any particular mise-en-scene or montage,
 - Look for the signs that create particular codes of meaning
 - Look for connotations created by aspects like shot type, camera angle, lighting, sound, etc
 - Consider how iconography suggests a particular genre and how genre conventions create interest and realism
 - Consider the use of stars, the use of stereotypes and other aspects of representation
 - How are character, tension, mood, etc created and why