HOW FILMS COMMUNICATE: An introduction.

The opening of a film is generally the most important part of it. It usually introduces the main characters and sets up a puzzle to be solved (a problem or a situation that in some ways needs resolving). The opening has to grasp an audience's attention, making them want to find out more about these people or what is going to happen next. A film director therefore has to use all the technical tools they can to capture an audience's attention. So one of the first elements we need to focus on is how filmmakers use technical filmmaking methods. This film language can be separated in two categories:

a. Micro elements

- Cinematography and use of the camera.

- Mise-en-scène and the positioning of objects and characters in a shot.

- Lightning and colour (the direction of light and the colour palette used, often used significantly in scenes to connote various emotions and moods).

- Sound including speech, sound effects, music and silence.

- Editing and the process of creating rhythm after filming.
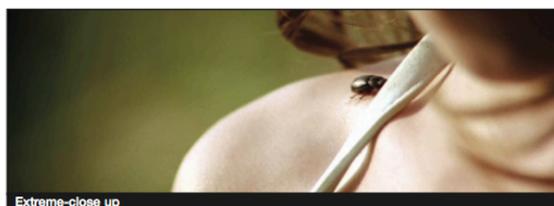
B. Macro elements

- Representation: the way characters and social groups and issues are presented in a film including costumes, body language and actions.

- Narrative: the plot, viewpoint, the story and the way it is told.

- Genre and the features that fit a film into certain conventions and codes.

1. CINEMATOGRAPHY

A film is structured like a language composed of hundreds of fundamental units called **shots** and joined upon edits to create larger strings of **sequences** (a series of shots united in time and space) just as words become sentences. When studying cinematography, it is important to look at the choice of shot and camera movement. The movement, framing and **shot duration** (how long each shot lasts on screen) can tell a lot about the characters and their actions. It also determines whose point of view we seen events from. When we talk about camera framing we are looking at what we can see within the frame of the cinema screen. **Camera framing** can draw our attention to emotions while particular camera angles may create particular impressions.

a. Camera Shots (source: British Film Institute, *Teaching Film* by James Baker and Patrick Toland.)

This is an *aide memoire* for camera shots, angles and movements. These camera techniques are used to create a meaningful sequence. When you watch a film, think about why the filmmaker has chosen to shoot a sequence in a particular way, and why he or she chose the particular shots.

Long shot

Medium shot

Close-up

(all stills from *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*)

Extreme-close up

b. Camera movements and framing

Cameras can be placed on tracks (**a tracking shot**: un travelling), on cranes (**a crane shot**: un plans de grue). Drone shots and helicopters shots are used for **bird's eye view shots** (des points de vues Olympiens).

Steadycam shot: smooth camera movement where the camera is mounted on a harness attached to a cameraman

Hand-held camera: the camera shots move in a disjointed way, this makes the audience feel that the action is somehow more real partly because this is associated with the documentary genre.

Canted angle (le décadrage, also called Dutch angle) is when the camera is tilted and the image you see is on an angle. This is used to put the audience off balance and show that something is not quite right.

High angle

Low angle
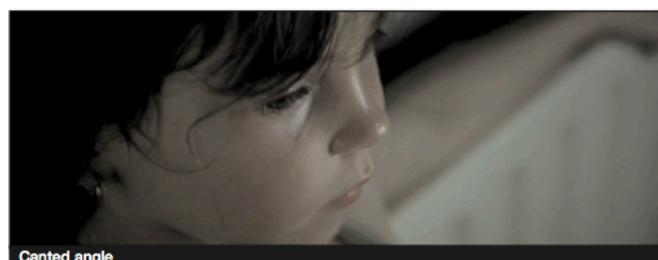
(all stills from *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*)   Canted angle

Framing refers to the edges of the picture. This is a fundamental element because it determines what is contained within the space on screen. The central question for any director is « What should deliberately be placed in the frame? What should be excluded from the frame? ».

Depth of field and focus of the camera. If the setting, colours or landscape are important and the director wants every detail to be sharp and intense, deep focus is used to give all elements in the frame equal focus. The opposite effect is named shallow focus and is commonly used for close-ups so our attention is focused on only one element of the scene. What we see of the objects or characters in a given shot depends upon the manipulation of light and focus and also upon the camera's lens. Lenses come with different focal lengths selected for their ability to alter perceptions of depth and scale.

Deep Focus in *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles (1941).

Shallow focus in *Marie Antoinette*, Sofia Coppola (2006).

2. MISE-EN-SCENE

a. Lighting and Colour.

The use of light probably impacts the most on other elements of mise-en-scène. Whether we are aware of it or not, colours have a tremendous impact on our emotions and understanding of a scene as they **establish mood and direct attention to detail**. Colours are often used symbolically and imply additional meaning or cultural significance. Lighting helps to convey mood and atmosphere. If a film is shot in a studio, lighting usually comes from three different kinds of light known as **a backlight, a filler light and a key light**. This effect of « naturalistic lighting » developed during the studio era in Hollywood takes an enormous amount of work and still largely dominant today.

High key lighting: refers to a scene where lots of artificial lights are added to create a colourful and bright environment. Filler lights are here to « fill » any gaps in the lighting so as to avoid shadows.

High Key in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Howard hawks (1953).

Low key lighting (also known as chiaroscuro): refers to a scene where only key and backlights are used to create shadows and zones of darkness on the frame. With its high contrasts, low key helps to gesture toward the underworld while high-key style contributes to a worldview that values transparency, clarity and intelligibility.

Low Key in *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles (1941).

b. Setting.

The choice of location is very important to a film as it creates time and space. Setting needn't be constructed, although it often is. Shooting on location (un tournage en décors naturels), that is, using settings found in the world rather than constructed in the studio does not mean that the world of the film thus created is « realistic ». Location shooting relies on deliberate choices to enlist the help of ready-constructed locales in the production of the film's setting.

c. Props, Costume, Hair, Make-up.

These elements are important ways of telling us something about different characters. They often change throughout the film to show us that things are changing for characters within the narrative.

Clothes can tell us what people do for a job and give clues about what kind of person they are (the symbolic use of colour can also be added here). « Props » (short for « properties ») help to amplify a mood, give further definition to setting of call attention to detail within the larger scene (Example: In Hitchcock's « The Birds » stuffed birds peering down upon Marion Crane in the Bates Motel define the creepy motel as well as they give away the secret of the film…).

d. Body Language, expression, movement and position within the frame

e. Sound: as many critics have taught us functions in a variety of different ways. Not mere accompaniment to the image, sound actively shapes how we perceive and interpret the image. It directs our attention within the image, and it cues us

to form expectations. In the language of formal film analysis there are only three types of film sound : speech, music and noise. Speech in not restricted to dialogue although dialogue is one of narrative films' most compelling devices. It often emanates from onscreen characters and is thus diegetic sound. A diegetic sound is a sound whose source belongs to the imaginative world of the film and include sound effects (the person responsible for creating the realistic interaction between picture and sound is the « Foley Artist » (le bruiteur). Examples of non-diegetic sound include voice-over commentary or music (or score) written for a specific sequence that was added in post-production. The distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound helps us to understand how sounds in narrative films are motivated, how the sound design is constructed. Music can be understood to be non-diegetic yet is always important to our understanding of the film's character and their emotional journeys. (Read pages 184-85 from Lumet's chronicle of movie making for an example of how sound and image sometimes don't work together).

3. REPRESENTATION

Representation is a key concept in Film and Media Studies as it refers to « how the world is represented to us in a fictional narrative ». Family, friends and education shape the way we view and understand the world. It is important to remember that the images we watch in a film are carefully selected and organized in order to communicate meaning and create a response from the audience.

The representation of characters refers to categorizing people by ethnicity, abilities, age, gender, nationality, region, religion, sexuality and social class. **Props** (des accessoires de plateau) or significant objects are often used to characterize characters. Characters who are superficial will appear as stereotypical

representations and are sometimes named « stock characters ». A **stereotype** should not be mistaken with an **archetype** that relies on instantly recognizable representations (mythical and legendary heroes or villains).

Several academics have applied theories to narrative structures to create ways of categorising them (Todorov, Campbell, Propp, Barthes...).

Different archetypes/character types according to Jung:

	Motivations	Methodologies	Means of Evaluation	Purposes
Protagonist	Consider	Certainty	Proven	Knowledge
	Pursuit	Proaction	Effect	Actuality
Antagonist	Reconsider	Potentiality	Unproven	Thought
	Avoid	Reaction	Cause	Perception
Emotion	Feeling	Possibility	Hunch	Desire
	Uncontrolled	Protection	Test	Self-Aware
Reason	Logic	Probability	Theory	Ability
	Control	Inaction	Trust	Aware
Skeptic	Disbelief	Induction	Non-Accurate	Chaos
	Oppose	Non-Acceptance	Process	Change
Sidekick	Faith	Deduction	Accurate	Order
	Support	Acceptance	Result	Inertia
Guardian	Conscience	Reduction	Expectation	Equity
	Help	Evaluation	Ending	Projection
Contagonist	Temptation	Production	Determination	Inequity
	Hinder	Re-evaluation	Unending	Speculation

Todorov's narrative theory suggests five different stages in any story:

1.**Equilibrium**: used to establish the setting, the characters and the storyline.

2.**Disruption** of the equilibrium, perhaps by an oppositional character or negative forces.

3.**Recognition** of the disruption.

4.**Attempt(s)** to repair the disruption.

5.**Reinstatement of a new equilibrium.**

The elements of representation are important to understand the ideology of the film. This refers to an individual's or a group's values and beliefs. It is always relevant to consider where the film was made and in which context is was produced. It tells a lot about the values and beliefs of a director, a producing company, an era. (C'est l'analyse externe qui prend en compte le contexte de production et l'utilise comme grille de comprehension du monde représenté).

4. NARRATIVE

Narrative refers to the way the story is told as well as the story itself. Narrative structure refers to the order in which the action takes place. There are essentially three ways in which narrative can be structured: circular (using flashbacks or flash-forwards), episodic (events unfold through episodes) and linear. A linear narrative is the most commonly used narrative structure and refers to a story that is told in the order in which events happen from beginning to end. (If you want to go further, please read « Quatorze façons de raconter au cinéma », Michel Chion in « Ecrire un scénario »).

It is of course important to consider where the audience is placed in relation to the narrative and whose eyes we see the story through. The director is like a narrator who uses his camera to connect us (or disconnect us) from characters. If a director wants us to feel part of the film's narrative, he may use a restricted narrative viewpoint where the audience only get to know as much as the characters do. This way we are as puzzled as the characters and have to work out what is going to happen as the story goes along.

The other narrative viewpoint is the omniscient narrative when we know more than the characters do. This « god-like perspective » creates suspense rather than mystery.

CODES AND CONVENTIONS

Watching a film is meant to live an experience of somebody else's lives. Our expectations, our knowledge and understanding, our ability to feel empathy creates a genuine emotional experience. Films communicate and therefore create a relationship between the film director, the characters in the narrative and the audience. The development and actions of the characters may illustrate some « high concepts » such as redemption, self-sacrifice[1]…

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[1] « Spectator, audience and response » Patrick Phillips. Chapter 7 in « Introduction to Film Studies » (Routledge).

This is an *aide memoire* for editing transitions. Most filmmakers try to make their edits 'invisible' so they don't get in the way of the story. Sometimes particular transitions are used to denote a change of time or place. When you watch a film sequence, think about why the filmmaker has chosen to edit it in a particular way.

Cut

Match on action

(all stills from *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*)

Eyeline match

(all stills from *The Most Beautiful Man in the World*)

Time and Space.

These two key concepts are directly linked to editing.

Editing is very important to the way a narrative is structured. The editing process is the moment when filmed elements are given birth. Editing also gives rhythm and pace and time is manipulated. As spectators, we accept the gaps in narrative time (an ellipsis in which unimportant events are cut out and often signaled with a dissolve. A **dissolve** (le fondu-enchaîné) is that edit which joins two shots, the first fading while the second gradually appears. Time can also be stretched so the build-up to the drama can last much longer than it would in reality. This increases the excitement and tension in the audience.

Dissolve

(all stills from *Accident*)
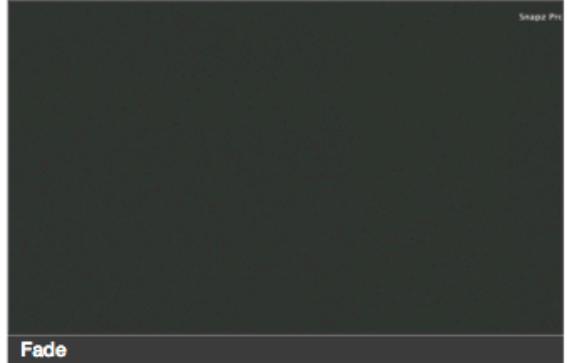
Fade

(all stills from *Accident*)

QUELQUES REMARQUES COMPLEMENTAIRES

Outre les remarques liées à l'esthétique et à la forme du film, lorsque l'on cherche à analyser un film il faut s'intéresser à la façon qu'il a de faire sens c'est à dire de donner à dire et à ressentir. Un film sert à délivrer des sensations et il convient de pouvoir exprimer les émotions des personnages mais également celles du spectateur qui partage un moment de vie avec ces personnages. Si « il n'existe pas de méthode universelle pour analyser les films » (Aumont et Marie p.29), il y a cependant une méthodologie qu'expose Laurent Jullier dans son ouvrage de référence. Que l'analyse s'opère sur une séquence ou à l'échelle de l'œuvre complète, trois questions successives doivent être posées: **Quoi ?** (Que me raconte-t-on ? De quels éléments suis-je témoin ?), **Comment ?** (Comment ces évènements me sont-ils racontés ? Quels sont les moyens d'expression artistiques employés à cet effet ?) **Pourquoi ?** (Quel sens cela a t-il pour moi ? Quel fonctionnement du monde cela cherche t-il à traduire ?).

Si vous souhaitez revisiter l'histoire du cinéma tout en révisant l'appareillage théorique de l'analyse de séquence je ne saurais que vous conseiller vivement l'ouvrage « Lire les images de cinéma » de Laurent Jullier et Michel Maire. Outre un parfait équilibre entre théorie de l'image et iconographie abondante, le livre propose d'innombrables exemples d'analyses.

Enfin, les ouvrages liés à la structure du scénario et proposant des outils de compréhension ou des techniques d'écriture créatives sont forts nombreux mais je vous invite à (re)lire Michel Chion : « L'échiquier et ses pièces », « Qu'est ce qui fait

courir les spectateurs (et marcher les spectateurs) » dans la seconde partie de son ouvrage de référence « Ecrire un scénario ».

Concret et mettant en lumière le fonctionnement interne de classique du cinéma et de la littérature, le livre « L'anatomie du scénario » de John Truby est devenu une référence et un compagnon de route fort solide pour ceux qui souhaitent affiner leurs connaissances de la dramaturgie.

Evidemment, avec le classique de Sidney Lumet au programme il est nécessaire de lire « Making Movies », cette ressource incomparable rédigée par ce maitre du septième art !

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