

Quite the contrary is true. In a film of strict denotation, images and sounds are quite easily and directly understood. But very few films are strictly denotative; they can't help but be connotative, "for to speak [film] is partly to invent it." The observer who adamantly resists, of course, can choose to ignore the connotative power of film, but the observer who has learned to read film has available a multitude of connotations.

Alfred Hitchcock, for example, made a number of very popular films in a career that spanned more than half a century. We could ascribe his critical and popular success to the subjects of his films—certainly the thriller strikes a deep responsive chord in audiences—but then how do we account for the failed thrillers of his imitators? In truth, the drama of film, its attraction, lies not so much in what is shot (that's the drama of the subject), but in how it is shot and how it is presented. And as thousands of commentators have attested, Hitchcock was the master par excellence of these two critical tasks. The drama of filmmaking in large part lies in the brainwork of these closely associated sets of decisions. Highly "literate" filmgoers appreciate Hitchcock's superb cinematic intelligence on a conscious level, less literate filmgoers on an unconscious level, but the intelligence has its effect, nevertheless.

One more element remains to be added to the lexicon of film semiotics: the trope. In literary theory, a trope is a "turn of phrase" or a "change of sense"; in other words, a logical twist that gives the elements of a sign—the signifier and the signified—a new relationship to each other. The trope is therefore the connecting element between denotation and connotation. When a rose is a rose is a rose it isn't anything else, and its meaning as a sign is strictly denotative. But when a rose is something else, a "turning" has been made and the sign is opened up to new meanings. The map of film semiotics we have described so far has been static. The concept of the trope allows us to view it dynamically, as actions rather than facts.

As we have noted in earlier chapters, one of the great sources of power in film is that it can reproduce the tropes of most of the other arts. There is also a set of tropes that it has made its own. We have described the way they operate in general in the first part of this chapter. Given an image of a rose, we at first have only its iconic or symbolic denotative meaning, which is static. But when we begin to expand the possibilities through tropes of comparison, the image comes alive: as a connotative index, in terms of the paradigm of possible shots, in the syntagmatic context of its associations in the film, as it is used metaphorically as a metonymy or a synecdoche.

Figure 3-17. TROPE.

An ant-covered hand from Dali and Buñuel's surrealist classic *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). Another very complex image, not easily analyzed. Iconic, Indexical, and Symbolic values are all present: the image is striking for its own sake; it is a measure of the infestation of the soul of the owner of the hand; it is certainly symbolic of a more general malaise, as well. It is metonymic, because the ants are an "associated detail"; it is also synecdochic, because the hand is a part that stands for the whole. Finally, the source of the image seems to be a trope: a verbal pun on the French idiom, "avoir des fourmis dans les mains," "to have ants in the hand," an expression equivalent to the English "my hand is asleep." By illustrating the turn of phrase literally, Dali and Buñuel extended the trope so that a common experience is turned into a striking sign of decay. (I am indebted to David Bombyk for this analysis.) (MOMA/FSA.)



There are undoubtedly other categories of film semiotics yet to be discovered, analyzed, propagated. In no sense is the system shown in the chart below meant to be either exhaustive or immutable. Semiotics is most definitely not a science in the sense that physics or biology is a science. (You can't experiment in semiotics.) But it is a logical, often illuminating system that helps to describe how film does what it does.

Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand. The semiotics of film is easy to explain because it is difficult to understand. Somewhere between lies the genius of film.

Syntax

Film has no grammar. There are, however, some vaguely defined rules of usage in cinematic language, and the syntax of film—its systematic arrangement—orders these rules and indicates relationships among them.

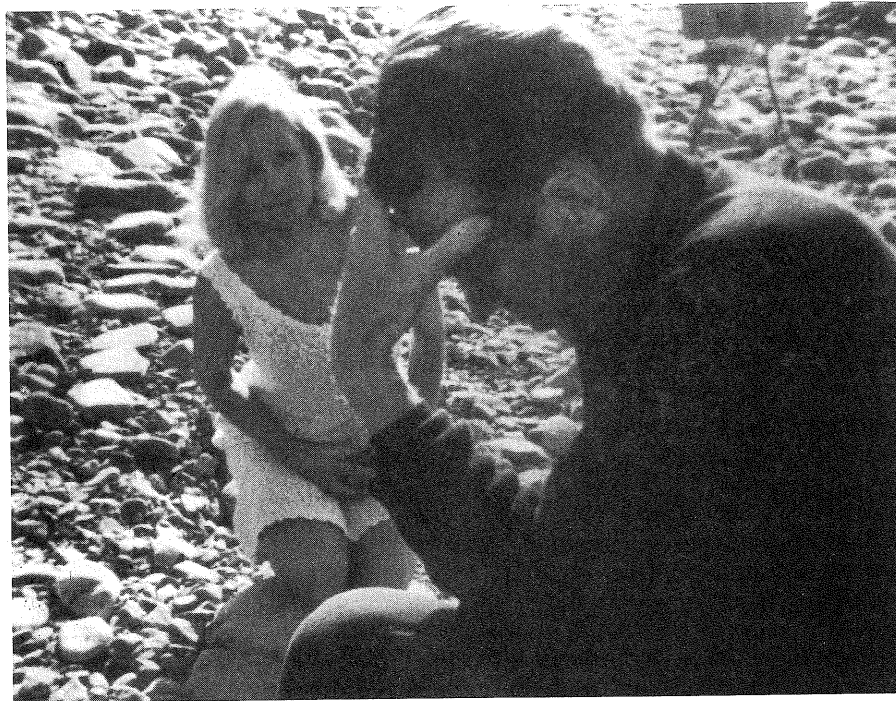


Figure 3-18. METONYMIC GESTURE. Max von Sydow suffers in Ingmar Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* (1967)...

As with written and spoken languages, it is important to remember that the syntax of film is a result of its usage, not a determinant of it. There is nothing preordained about film syntax. Rather, it evolved naturally as certain devices were found in practice to be both workable and useful. Like the syntax of written and spoken language, the syntax of film is an organic development, descriptive rather than prescriptive, and it has changed considerably over the years. The "Hollywood Grammar" described below may sound laughable now, but during the thirties, forties, and early fifties it was an accurate model of the way Hollywood films were constructed.

In written/spoken language systems, syntax deals only with what we might call the linear aspect of construction: that is, the ways in which words are put together in a chain to form phrases and sentences, what in film we call the syntagmatic category. In film, however, syntax can also include spatial composition, for which there is no parallel in language systems like English and French—we can't say or write several things at the same time.

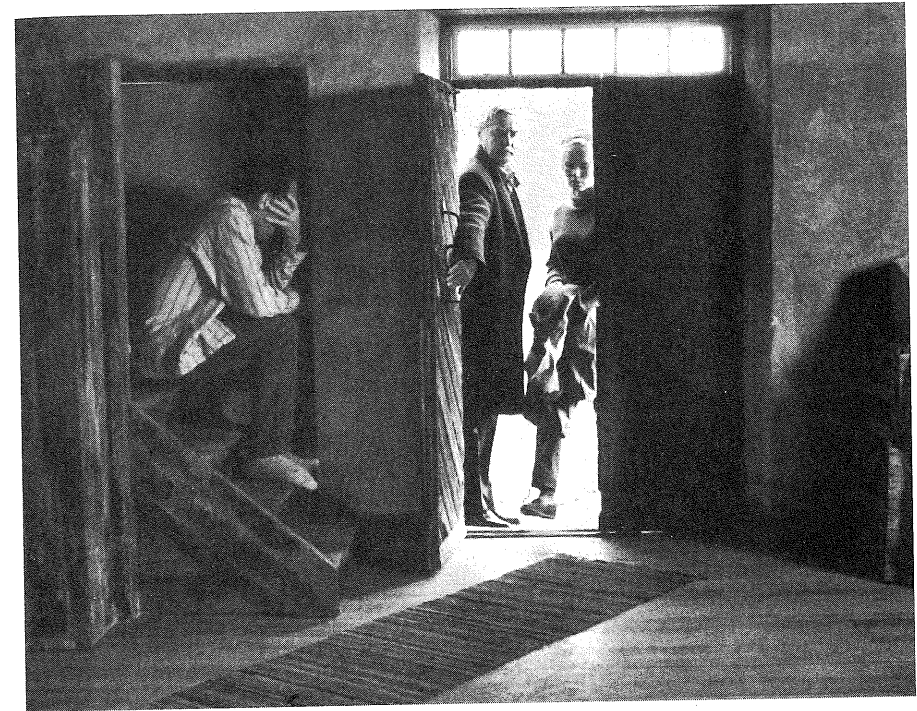


Figure 3-19. ... and in the same director's *Shame* (1968). Gesture is one of the most communicative facets of film signification. "Kinesics," or "body language," is basically an Indexical, metonymic system of meaning. Here, von Sydow's pose conveys the same basic meaning in each film: the hand covers the face, shields it from the outside world; the knees are pulled up close almost in the fetal position, to protect the body; the ego has shrunk into a protective shell, a sense further emphasized in the shot from *Shame* by the framed box of the wooden stairway von Sydow is sitting on. Texture supports gesture in both shots: both backgrounds—one exterior, one interior—are rough, barren, uninviting. The differences between the shots are equally as meaningful as the similarities. In *Hour of the Wolf*, von Sydow's character is relatively more open, relaxed: so is the pose. In *Shame* the character (at this point in the narrative) is mortified, a feeling emphasized by both the tighter pose and the more distanced composition of the shot.

So film syntax must include both development in time and development in space. In film criticism, generally, the modification of space is referred to as "mise-en-scène." This French phrase literally means "putting in the scene." The modification of time is called "montage" (from the French for "putting together"). As we shall see in Chapter 4, the tension between these twin concepts of mise-en-scène and montage has been the engine of film esthetics ever since the Lumières and Méliès first explored the practical possibilities of each at the turn of the twentieth century.

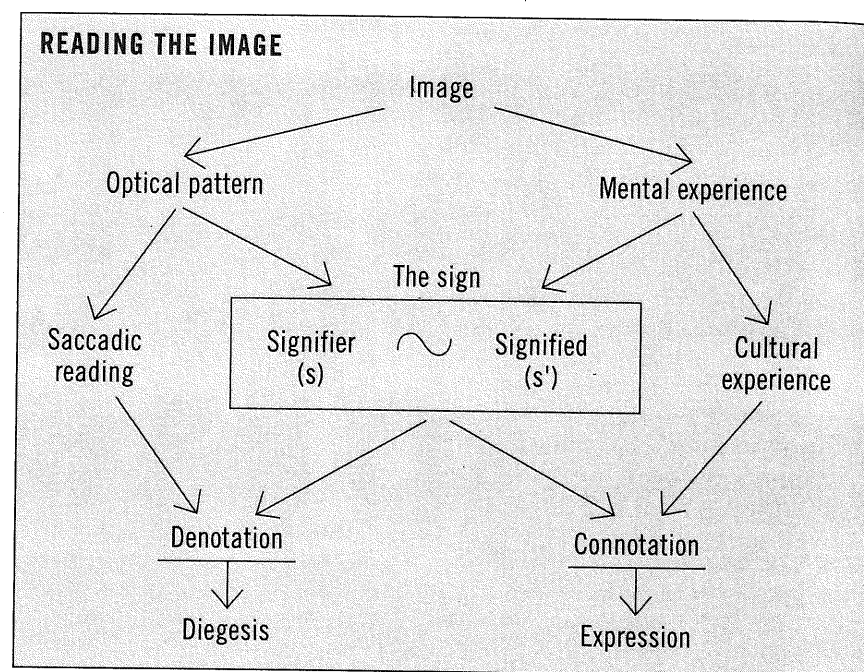


DIAGRAM H. READING THE IMAGE: The image is experienced as both an optical and a mental phenomenon. The optical pattern is read saccadically; the mental experience is the result of the sum of cultural determinants, and is formed by it. Both optical and mental intellection combine in the concept of the sign, where signifier (s) is related to signified (s'). The signifier is more optical than mental; the signified, more mental than optical. All three levels of reading—saccadic, semiotic, and cultural—then combine with each other in various ways to produce meaning, either essentially denotative or essentially connotative.

Over the years, theories of *mise-en-scène* have tended to be closely associated with film realism, while montage has been seen as essentially expressionistic, yet these pairings are deceptive. Certainly it would seem that *mise-en-scène* would indicate a high regard for the subject in front of the camera, while montage would give the filmmaker more control over the manipulation of the subject, but despite these natural tendencies, there are many occasions when montage can be the more realistic of the two alternatives, and *mise-en-scène* the more expressionistic.

Take, for example, the problem of choosing between a pan from one subject to another and a cut. Most people would say that the cut is more manipulative, that it interrupts and remodels reality, and that therefore the pan is the more realistic of the two alternatives, since it preserves the integrity of the space. Yet, in fact, the reverse is true if we judge panning

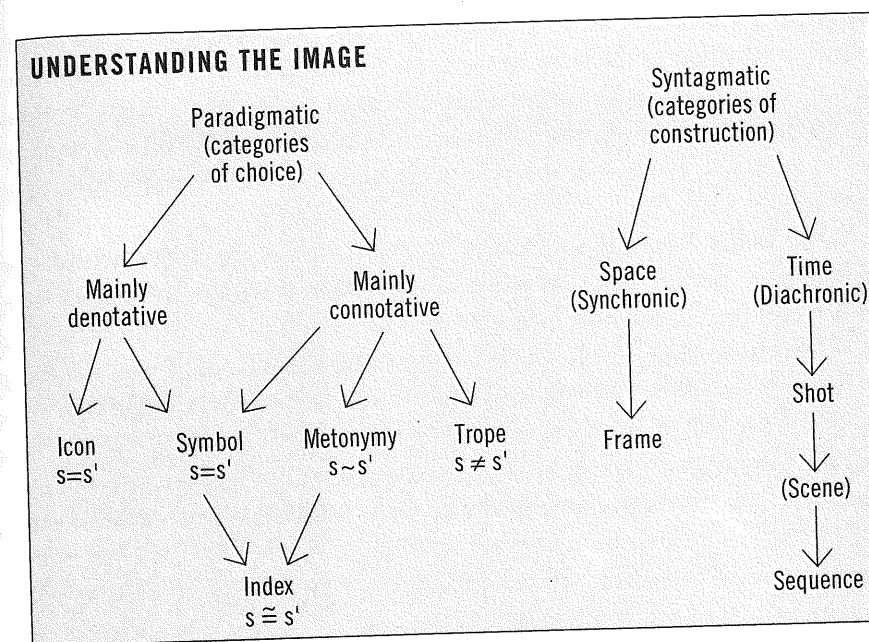


DIAGRAM I. UNDERSTANDING THE IMAGE: We understand an image not only for itself, but in context: in relation to categories of choice (paradigmatic) and in relation to categories of construction (syntagmatic). The categories of choice are variously denotative or connotative, and each variety, none of whose boundaries are sharply defined, is characterized by the relationship between signifier and signified. In the iconic image, signifier is identical with signified. In symbols the signifier is equal to the signified, but not identical. In metonymies and synecdoches, signifier is similar in some way to signified, while in tropes, the signifier is not equal to (distinctly different from) the signified. Here the relationship is considerably more tenuous. In indexes, signifier and signified are congruent.

Syntagmatic relationship (categories of construction) operate either in space or in time: synchronic phenomena happen at the same time, or without regard to time, while diachronic phenomena happen across time, or within it. (Here, the words "synchronic" and "diachronic" carry their simplest meanings. They are also used with more specific definitions generally in semiotics and linguistics, in which case synchronic linguistics is descriptive, while diachronic linguistics is historical.)

Finally, we must note that many of the concepts expressed in this chart are true for sounds as well as images, although usually to a considerably lesser extent. While it is true that we do not read sounds saccadically, we nevertheless focus psychologically on particular sounds within the total auditory experience, just as we "block out" unwanted or useless noise. While sound seems far more denotative and iconic than image, it is nevertheless possible to apply the concepts of symbol, index, metonymy, synecdoche, and trope, if the necessary changes are made.

and cutting from the point of view of the observer. When we redirect our attention from one subject to another we seldom actually pan. Psychologically, the cut is the truer approximation of our natural perception. First one subject has our attention, then the other; we are seldom interested in the intervening space, yet the cinematic pan draws our attention to just that.*

It was André Bazin, the influential French critic of the 1950s, who more than anyone developed the connections between *mise-en-scène* and realism on the one hand, and montage and expressionism on the other. At about the same time, in the middle fifties, Jean-Luc Godard was working out a synthesis of the twin notions of *mise-en-scène* and montage that was considerably more sophisticated than Bazin's binary opposition. For Godard, *mise-en-scène* and montage were divested of ethical and esthetic connotations: montage simply did in time what *mise-en-scène* did in space. Both are principles of organization, and to say that *mise-en-scène* (space) is more "realistic" than montage (time) is illogical, according to Godard. In his essay "Montage, mon beau souci" (1956) Godard redefined montage as an integral part of *mise-en-scène*.

Setting up a scene is as much an organizing of time as of space. The aim of this is to discover in film a psychological reality that transcends physical, plastic reality. There are two corollaries to Godard's synthesis: first, *mise-en-scène* can therefore be every bit as expressionistic as montage when a filmmaker uses it to distort reality; second, psychological reality (as opposed to verisimilitude) may be better served by a strategy that allows montage to play a central role. (See Chapter 5.)

In addition to the psychological complexities that enter into a comparison of montage and *mise-en-scène*, there is a perceptual factor that complicates matters. We have already noted that montage can be mimicked within the shot. Likewise, montage can mimic *mise-en-scène*. Hitchcock's notorious shower murder sequence in *Psycho* is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. Seventy separate shots in less than a minute of screen time are fused together psychologically into a continuous experi-

* It has been suggested that the zip pan, in which the camera moves so quickly that the image in between the original subject and its successor is blurred, would be the most verisimilitudinous handling of the problem. But even this alternative draws attention to itself, which is precisely what does not happen in normal perception. Perhaps the perfect analog with reality would be the direct cut in which the two shots were separated by a single black frame (or better yet, a neutral gray frame), which would duplicate the time (approximately 1/20 of a second) each saccadic movement of the eye takes!

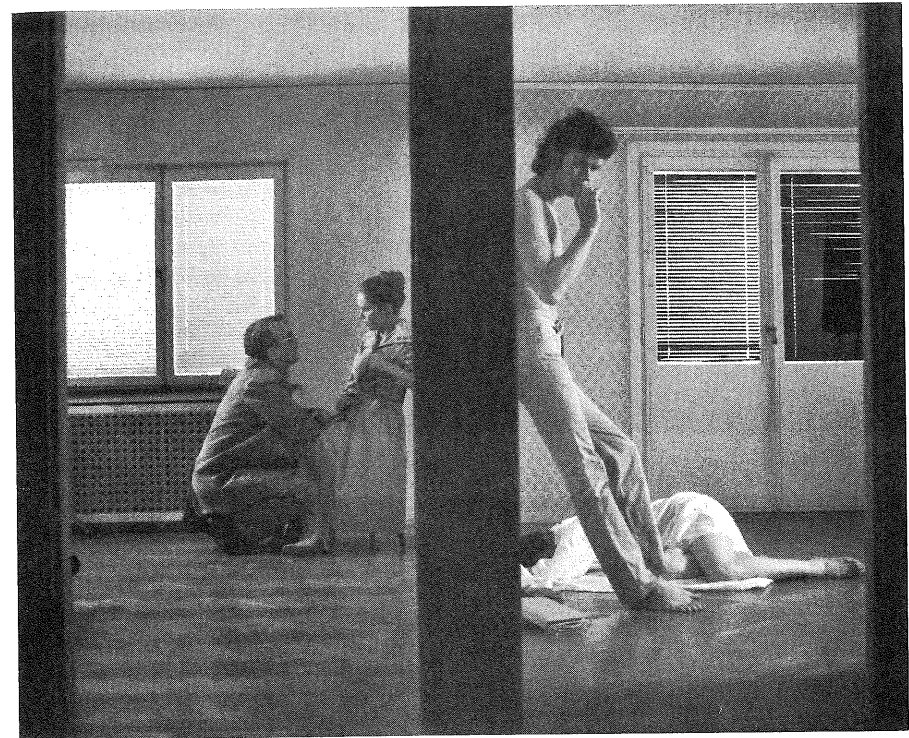


Figure 3-20. *Mise-en-scène* or montage? A crucial scene in Bergman's *Face to Face*, this was shot from a hallway giving a "split screen" view of two rooms. Instead of cutting from the action in one to the action in the other, Bergman presented both simultaneously while keeping the action in each separate. The cross-cutting dialectic of montage is thus made an integral element of *mise-en-scène*. (Frame enlargement.)

ence: a frightening and graphic knife attack. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts (see Figure 3-21).

Codes

The structure of cinema is defined by the codes in which it operates and the codes that operate within it. Codes are critical constructions—systems of logical relationship—derived after the fact of film. They are not preexisting laws that the filmmaker consciously observes. A great variety of codes combine to form the medium in which film expresses meaning. There are culturally derived codes—those that exist outside film and that filmmakers simply reproduce (the way people eat, for example). There are a number of codes that cinema shares with the other arts (for instance, gesture, which is a code of theater as well as film). And there are those codes that are unique to cinema. (Montage is the prime example.)



THE BATHTUB/SHOWER CODE

Figure 3-21. Hitchcock's spellbinding shower murder in *Psycho* (1959) has become notorious over the years for its vertiginous editing, yet the bathroom murder was not a new idea. (Frame enlargement.)



Figure 3-22. Several years earlier Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Diabolique* (1955) had shocked audiences with an altogether quieter but no less eerie murder scene. (Paul Meurisse is the victim.) (Walter Daran. Time/Life Picture Agency. © Time Inc. Frame enlargement.)

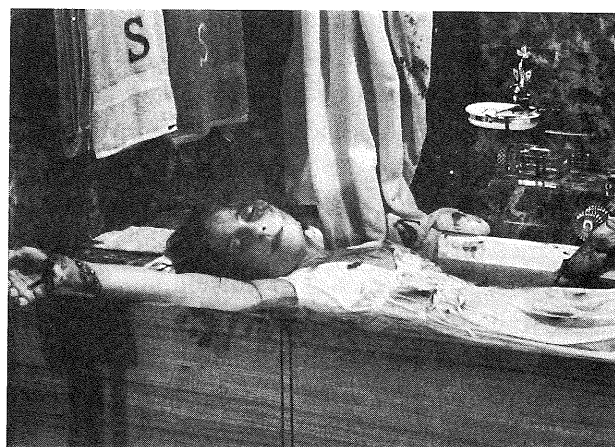


Figure 3-23. *Psycho*'s star, Anthony Perkins, cowrote the script for Herbert Ross's *The Last of Sheila* (1973). Joan Hackett attempted suicide in an elegant shipboard bath.

THE BATHTUB/SHOWER CODE

Figure 3-24. *Psycho* spawned numerous homages. Here, Angie Dickinson in Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980). (Frame enlargement.) Compare the hands here and in Figure 3-35.



Figure 3-25. Murder isn't the only activity that takes place in tubs. It's good for contemplation, as well. In Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965), Jean-Paul Belmondo relaxed in a tub as he shared some thoughts on the painter Velázquez with his daughter. (Frame enlargement.)

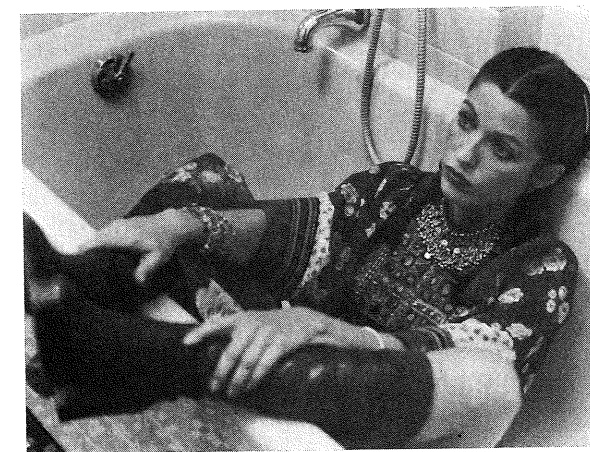
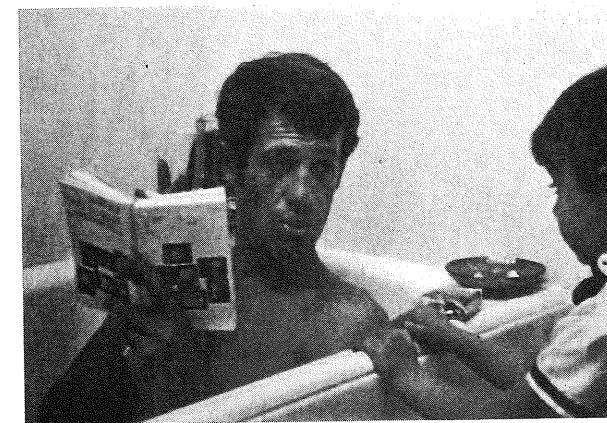


Figure 3-26. In Jean-Charles Tacchella's *Cousin, cousine* (1975), Marie-France Pisier settled into an empty tub deep in thought.



THE BATHTUB/SHOWER
CODE

Figure 3-27. Tom Hanks, distracted by real-world news, ignoring his bathmate in *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007, Mike Nichols).

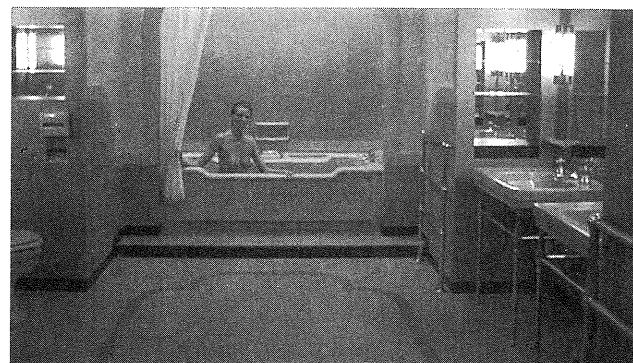


Figure 3-28. A classic Kubrick deep-focus composition from *The Shining* (1980). The gleaming fixtures and empty foreground emphasize vulnerability and fear.



Figure 3-29. In a variant, Kevin Kline as president showers in Ivan Reitman's *Dave* (1993). Sigourney Weaver is surprised. (Frame enlargement.)

THE BATHTUB/SHOWER
CODE

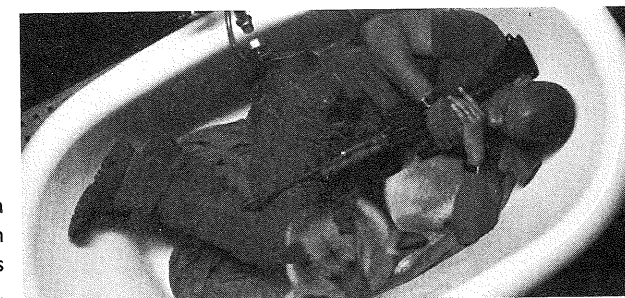


Figure 3-30. Will Smith finds a refuge in the tub in *I Am Legend* (2007, Francis Lawrence).



Figure 3-31. Angelina Jolie and Antonio Banderas take a soak in *Original Sin* (2001, Michael Kristofer). Sex plays less of a part in Hollywood bathtubs than you might expect. (Photo: Lourdes Grobet © 2001 Metro Goldwyn Mayer.)

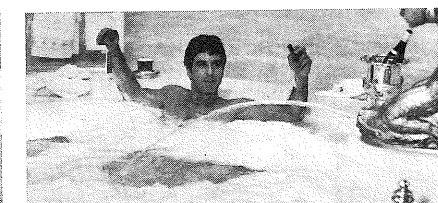
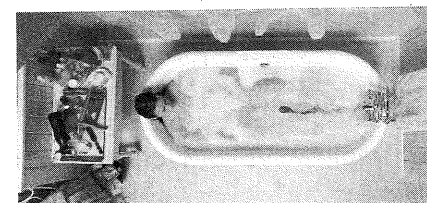


Figure 3-32. BUBBLE BATH SUBCODE. The suggestion of nudity without the truth of it. Claudia Cardinale, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968); Julia Roberts, *Pretty Woman* (1990); Tania Saulnier, *Slither* (2006); and Al Pacino, *Scarface* (1983).

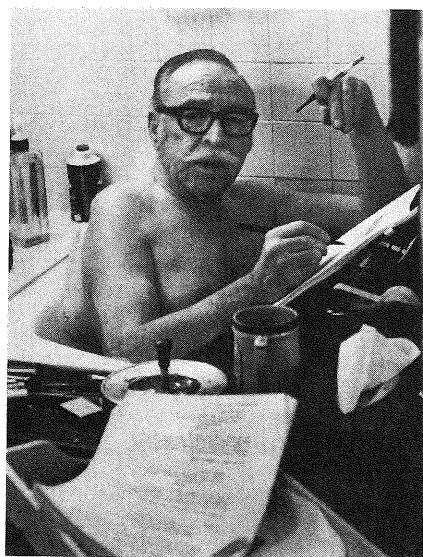
THE BATHTUB/SOWER
CODE

Figure 3-33. You can find the Bathtub code in documentaries, too. Here Dalton Trumbo at work in his tub, cigarettes and coffee at hand. (Mitzi Trumbo, 1968.)

The culturally derived codes and the shared artistic codes are vital to cinema, naturally, but it is the unique codes, those that form the specific syntax of film, that most concern us here. Perhaps "unique" is not a completely accurate adjective. Not even the most specifically cinematic codes, those of montage, are truly unique to cinema. Certainly, cinema emphasizes them and utilizes them more than other arts do, yet something like montage has always existed in the novel. Any storyteller is capable of switching scenes in midstream. "Meanwhile, back at the ranch," is clearly not an invention of cinema. More important, for more than a century film art has had its own strong influence on the older arts. Not only did something like montage exist prior to 1900 in prose narrative, but also since that time, novelists, increasingly influenced by film, have learned gradually to make their narratives ever more like cinema.

The point is, simply, that codes are a critical convenience—nothing more—and it would be wrong to give them so much weight that we were more concerned with the precise definition of the code than with the perception of the film.

Taking the shower scene in *Psycho* once again as an example, let's derive the codes operating there. It is a simple scene (only two characters—one of whom is barely seen—and two actions—taking a shower and murdering) and it is of short duration, yet all three types of codes are evident. The culturally derived codes have to do with taking showers and murdering people. The shower is, in Western culture, an activity that has

THE BATHTUB/SOWER
CODE

Figure 3-34. The Bathtub code extends as far back as Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793), shocking because of its intimate realism. (Oil on canvas. 65" by 50 1/2". Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.)

elements of privacy, sexuality, purgation, relaxation, openness, and regeneration. In other words, Hitchcock could not have chosen a more ironic place to emphasize the elements of violation and sexuality in the assault. Murder, on the other hand, fascinates us because of motives. Yet the dimly perceived murderer of *Psycho* has no discernible motive. The act seems gratuitous, almost absurd—which makes it even more striking. Historically, Jack the Ripper may come to mind, and this redoubles our sense of the sexual foundation of the murder.

Since this particular scene is so highly cinematic and so short, shared codes are relatively minor here. Acting codes hardly play a part, for instance, since the shots are so brief there isn't time to act in them, only to mime a simple expression. The diagonals that are so important in establishing the sense of disorientation and dynamism are shared with the other pictorial arts. The harsh contrasts and backlighting that obscure the murderer are shared with photography. The musical code of Bernard Herrmann's accompaniment also exists outside film, of course.

In addition, we can trace the development of the use of the culturally derived codes in cinema and allied arts: Hitchcock's murder scene might be



Figure 3-35. The Academy aperture two-shot. Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in George Cukor's *Pat and Mike* (1952). More intimate and involving than...

contrasted with the murder of Marat in his bath (in history, in the painting by Jacques-Louis David, and in the play by Peter Weiss), the bathtub murder scene in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955), or that in *The Last of Sheila* (1973), written by Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkins (who played in *Psycho*), or the direct homages to *Psycho* in Mike Hodges's *Terminal Man* (1974) or Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), or even the shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho* by Gus Van Sant (1998).

As we've already noted, the specifically cinematic codes in Hitchcock's one-minute tour de force are exceptionally strong. In fact, it's hard to see how the montage of the sequence could be duplicated in any other art. The rapid cutting of the scene may indeed be a unique cinematic code.

Hitchcock manipulates all these codes to achieve a desired effect. It is because they are codes—because they have meaning for us outside the narrow limits of that particular scene: in film, in the other arts, in the general culture—that they affect us. The codes are the medium through which the “message” of the scene is transmitted. The specifically cinematic codes together with a number of shared codes make up the syntax of film.



Figure 3-36. ... the widescreen two-shot. Jean-Claude Brialy and Anna Karina in Jean-Luc Godard's *A Woman Is a Woman* (1961). The still life on the table is carefully composed, both to fill the middle space of the frame and to connect the characters.

Mise-en-Scène

Three questions confront the filmmaker: What to shoot? How to shoot it? How to present the shot? The domain of the first two questions is mise-en-scène, that of the last, montage. Mise-en-scène is often regarded as static, montage as dynamic. This is not the case. Because we read the shot, we are actively involved with it. The codes of mise-en-scène are the tools with which the filmmaker alters and modifies our reading of the shot. Since the shot is such a large unit of meaning, it may be useful to separate a discussion of its components into two parts.

The Framed Image

All the codes that operate within the frame, without regard to the chronological axis of film, are shared with the other pictorial arts. The number and range of these codes is great, and they have been developed and refined in painting, sculpture, and photography over the course of thousands of years. Basic texts in the visual arts examine the three determinants of color, line, and form, and certainly each of the visual codes of film fits within one of these rubrics. Rudolf Arnheim, in his highly influential study *Art and Visual Perception*, suggested ten areas of concern: Balance, Shape, Form, Growth, Space, Light, Color, Movement, Tension, and Expression. Clearly, a full exposition of the codes operating in the film

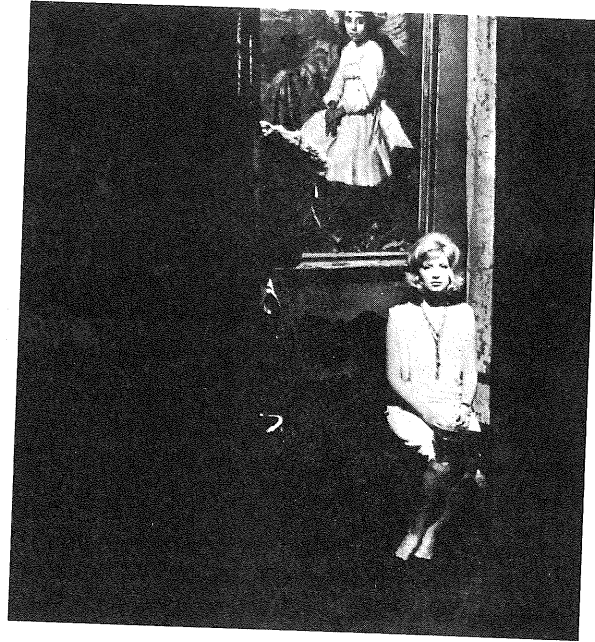


Figure 3-37. Michelangelo Antonioni was well known for his sensitivity to architectural metaphor. This naturally masked shot from *Eclipse* (1962) both isolates Alain Delon and Monica Vitti and calls attention to the comparison to be made between Vitti and the portrait on the wall behind her.

frame would be a lengthy undertaking. We can, however, describe briefly the basic aspects of the syntax of the frame. Two aspects of the framed image are most important: the limitations that the frame imposes, and the composition of the image within the frame (and without necessary regard to it).

Since the frame determines the limit of the image, the choice of an aspect ratio suggests the possibilities of composition. With the self-justification that has been endemic to the elusive subject of film esthetics, early theoreticians waxed eloquent over the value of the Academy aperture, the 1.33 ratio. When widescreen ratios became popular in the 1950s, the classical estheticians bemoaned the destruction of the symmetry they perceived in the Academy aperture, but, as we demonstrated in Chapter 2, there was nothing sacred about the ratio of 4:3.

The question is not which ratio is "proper" but rather which codes yield themselves to exploitation in which ratios? Before the mid-fifties, it seems, interiors and dialogue dominated American and foreign screens. After the introduction of the widescreen formats in the 1950s, exteriors, location shooting, and action sequences grew in importance. This is a crude generalization (Westerns existed before the 1950s), but there is some useful truth to it. It's not important whether there was a cause-and-effect rela-



Figure 3-38. Antonioni was obsessed with widescreen composition. This shot from *Red Desert* demonstrates his architectural formalism. (Frame enlargement.)

tionship between the two historical developments, only that wide screens permitted more efficient exploitation of action and landscape codes.

CinemaScope and Panavision width ratios (2.2 and above) do make it more difficult, as the old Hollywood estheticians had suggested, to photograph intimate conversations. Whereas the classic two-shot of the 1.33 screen size tended to focus attention on speaker and listener, the very wide anamorphic ratios cannot avoid also photographing the space either between them or beside them and therefore calling attention to their relationship to the space surrounding them. This is neither "better" nor "worse"; it simply changes the code of the two-shot.

The filmmaker can also change the dimensions of the frame during the course of the film by masking the image, either artificially or naturally through composition. This has been an important aspect of the syntax of frame shape ever since D. W. Griffith first explored its possibilities.

Just as important as the actual frame size, although less easily perceived, is the filmmaker's attitude toward the limit of the frame. If the image of the frame is self-sufficient, then we can speak of it as a "closed form." Conversely, if the filmmaker has composed the shot in such a way that we are always subliminally aware of the area outside the frame, then the form is considered to be "open."

Open and closed forms are closely associated with the elements of movement in the frame. If the camera tends to follow the subject faithfully, the form tends to be closed; if, on the other hand, the filmmaker

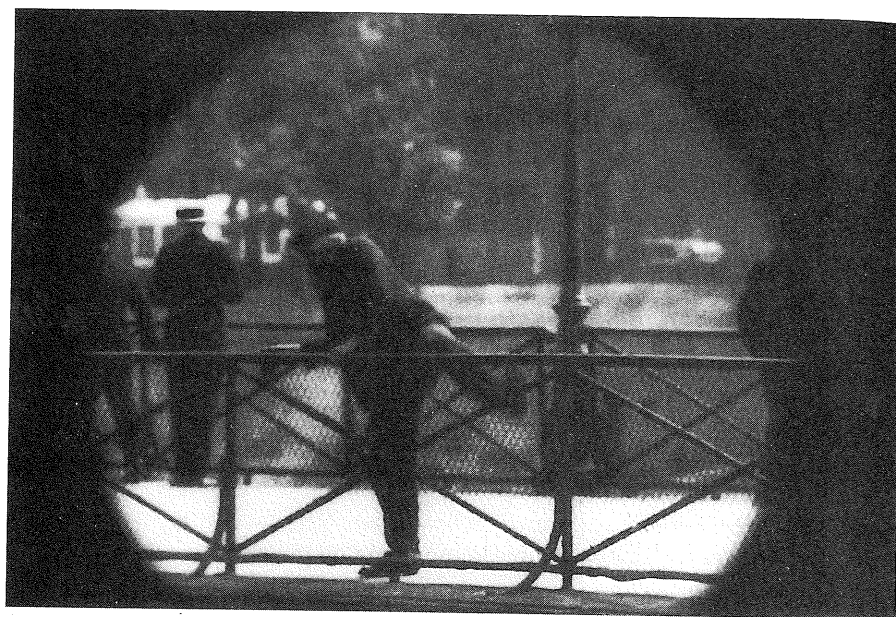


Figure 3-39. This shot from Jean Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932) isolates the forlorn figure of Boudu, about to jump into the Seine, by vignetting the image. The masking has a literal function as well: Boudu (Michel Simon) is seen through a telescope in this shot. (Frame enlargement.)

allows—even encourages—the subject to leave the frame and reenter, the form is obviously open. The relationship between the movement within the frame and the movement of the camera is one of the more sophisticated codes, and specifically cinematic.

Hollywood's classic syntax was identified in part by a relatively tightly closed form. The masters of the Hollywood style of the thirties and forties tried never to allow the subject to leave the frame (it was considered daring even if the subject did not occupy the center of the 1.33 frame). In the sixties and seventies, filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni were equally faithful to the open widescreen form because it emphasizes the spaces between people.

Most elements of compositional syntax do not depend strictly on the frame for their definition. If the image faded at the edges like a vignette (which itself is one of the minor devices of the framing code), such codes as intrinsic interest, proximity, depth perception, angle of approach, and lighting would work just as well as they do in frames with sharply defined limits.

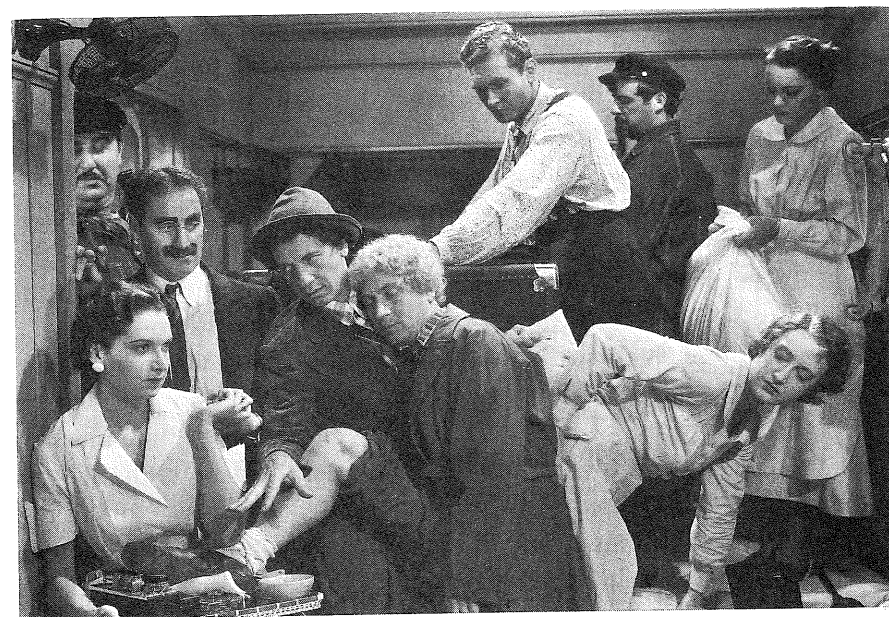


Figure 3-40. CLOSED FORM. The notorious stateroom scene from *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935) must be the zenith of Hollywood-style closed form! The brothers are cramped in the frame, as well as in the stateroom.



Figure 3-41. OPEN FORM. Macha Meril in Godard's *A Married Woman* (1964). The taxi is moving to the left out of the frame, Meril is walking to the right out of the frame and looking back toward the left; the car in the background is moving diagonally up out of the frame. The design elements of the shot conspire to make us aware of the continuous space beyond the limits of the frame. (French Film Office.)

The filmmaker, like most pictorial artists, composes in three dimensions. This doesn't mean necessarily that he is trying to convey three-dimensional (or stereoscopic) information. It means that there are three sets of compositional codes: One concerns the plane of the image (most important, naturally, since the image is, after all, two-dimensional). One deals with the geography of the space photographed (its plane is parallel with the ground and the horizon). The third involves the plane of depth perception, perpendicular to both the frame plane and the geographical plane. Figure 3-42 visualizes these three planes of composition.

Naturally, these planes interlock. No filmmaker analyzes precisely how each single plane influences the composition, but decisions are made that focus attention on pairs of planes. Clearly, the plane of the frame must be dominant, since that is the only plane that actually exists on the screen. Composition for this plane, however, is often influenced by factors in the geographical plane since, unless we are dealing with animation, a photographer or cinematographer must compose *for* the frame plane *in* the geographical plane. Likewise, the geographical plane and the plane of depth perception are coordinated, since much of our ability to perceive depth in two-dimensional representations as well as three-dimensional reality depends on phenomena in the geographical plane. In fact, perception of depth depends on many important factors other than binocular stereoscopic vision, which is why film presents such a strong illusion of three-dimensional space and why stereoscopic film techniques are relatively useless.*

Figure 3-43 illustrates some of the most important psychological factors strongly influencing depth perception. Overlapping takes place in the frame plane, but the three others—convergence, relative size, and density gradient—depend on the geographical plane. We've already discussed in Chapter 2 how various lens types affect depth perception (and linear distortion as well). A photographer modifies, suppresses, or reinforces the effects of lens types through composition of the image within the frame.

Here are some other examples of how the codes of the compositional planes interact:

* If so-called 3-D film techniques simply added the one remaining factor to depth perception, there would be no problem with them. The difficulty is that they actually distort our perception of depth, since they don't allow us to focus on a single plane, as we do normally, and since they tend to produce disturbing pseudoscopic images (in which front and back are reversed) and pseudostereoscopic images in which left and right are reversed.

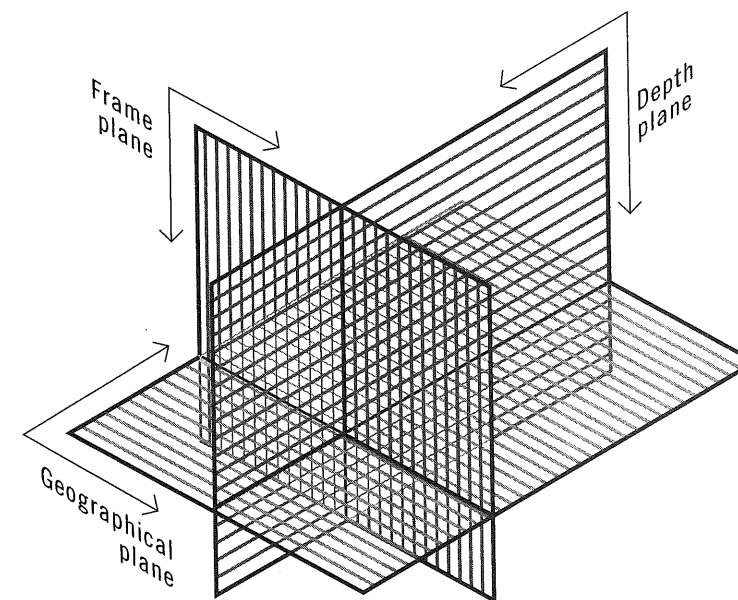


Figure 3-42. THE THREE PLANES OF COMPOSITION. These are the plane of the image; the geography of the photographic space; and the axis of depth perception.

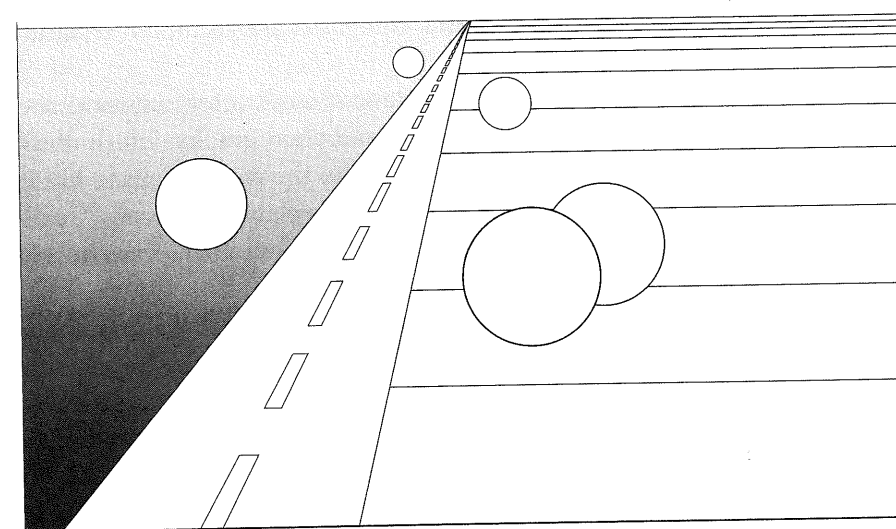


Figure 3-43. CONVENTIONS OF DEPTH PERCEPTION. Four major conventions of depth perception are illustrated here: convergence (the boundaries of the road, relative size (the near and far balls), density gradient (of shade on the left and lines on the right), and overlapping (the balls on the right).

Proximity and proportion are important subcodes. Stage actors are forever mindful of them. Obviously, the closer the subject, the more important it seems. As a result, an actor in the theater is always in danger of being "upstaged" by other members of the company. In film, of course, the director has complete control over position, and reverse angles help to redress the balance.

Figure 3-44, a classic shot from *Citizen Kane* (1941), gives us a more sophisticated example of the significance of proximity and proportion. Kane enters the room at the rear; his wife is in bed in the midground; a bottle of sleeping medicine looms large in the foreground. The three are connected by their placement in the frame. Reverse the order and the medicine bottle would disappear into the background of the shot.

One of the aspects of composition that differentiates Baroque from late Renaissance painting is the shift from the "square" orientation of the geographic plane to the oblique. There were several reasons for this—one was the quest for greater verisimilitude: the oblique composition emphasized the space of the painting, whereas the symmetrical Renaissance compositional standard emphasized its design. The net effect, however, was to increase the psychological drama of the design: geographical obliques translate into the plane of the frame as diagonals, which are read as inherently more active than horizontals and verticals. Here, as in the earlier examples, there is a relationship between compositional factors in separate planes.

Eventually the geographic and depth planes "feed" information to the plane of the frame. This is truer in painting and photography, which don't have the ability film does to move physically into the pictorial space, but it is still generally true in cinema as well. The frame plane is the only "real" plane. Most elements of composition, therefore, realize themselves in this plane.

The empty frame, contrary to expectations, is not a tabula rasa. Even before the image appears, we invest the potential space of the frame with certain qualities, ones which have been measured scientifically: our natural tendency to read depth into the two-dimensional design, for instance. Latent expectations determine intrinsic interest. Figures 3-45 and 3-46 demonstrate this. In 3-45, both verticals are precisely the same length, yet the left-hand line looks much longer. This is because we read the angles at top and bottom as representative of corners, the left receding, the right intruding. If both lines *seem* to be equal, we then calculate that the line on the left must be longer, since it is "farther away." In Figure 3-46, which

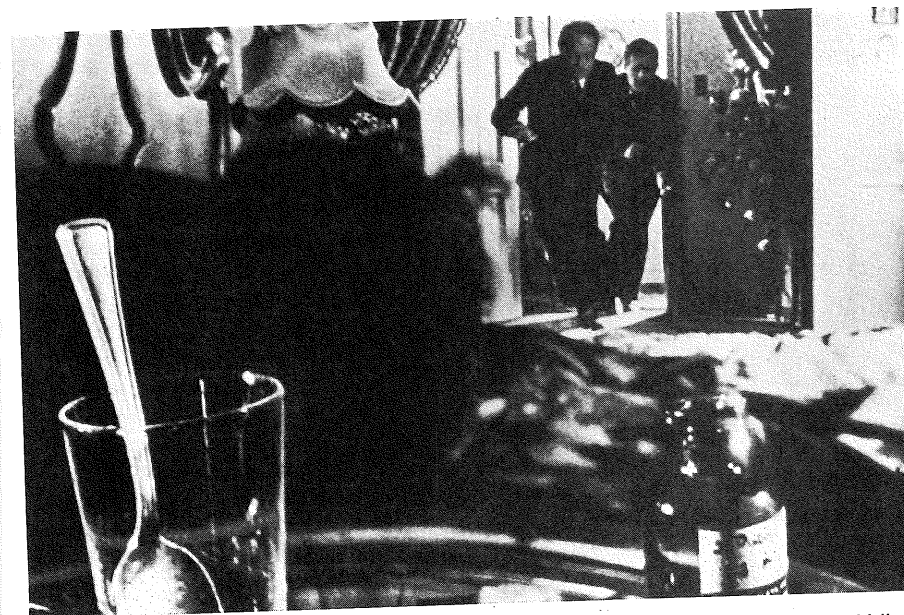


Figure 3-44. Dorothy Comingore (in shadow), Orson Welles, and Joseph Cotten in Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). It is not the material of the shot but its design that tells the story.

stairway ascends and which descends? The "correct" answers are that *A* ascends and *B* descends. The trick is in the verbs, of course, since stairs always go both up and down. But since Westerners tend to read from left to right, we see stair *A* ascending and stair *B* descending.

So, even before the image appears, the frame is invested with meaning. The bottom is more "important" than the top, left comes before right, the bottom is stable, the top unstable; diagonals from bottom left to top right go "up" from stability to instability. Horizontals will also be given more weight than verticals: confronted with horizontal and vertical lines of equal length, we tend to read the horizontal as longer, a phenomenon emphasized by the dimensions of the frame.

When the image does appear, form, line, and color are impressed with these latent values in the frame. Form, line, and color also have their own inherent values of weight and direction. If sharp lines exist in the design of the image, we tend to read along them from left to right. An object with a "light" inherent significance (Mrs. Kane's medicine bottle) can be given "heavy" significance through shape.

And color, of course, adds an entirely new dimension. Hitchcock begins *Marnie* (1964) with a close shot of his heroine's bright yellow pocketbook. The other color values of the scene are neutral. The sense is of the pocket-

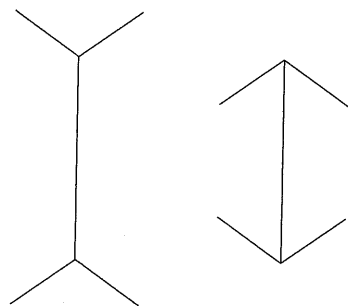


Figure 3-45.
THE MÜLLER-LYER ILLUSION. Both verticals are the same length, yet the left-hand line looks much longer. We read the angles at top and bottom as corners, the left receding, the right intruding. If both lines seem to be equal, we think the line on the left must be longer, since it is "further away."

Figure 3-46.
UPSTAIRS/DOWNSTAIRS ILLUSION. Which stairway ascends and which descends? Since Westerners tend to read from left to right, we see stair A ascending and stair B descending.

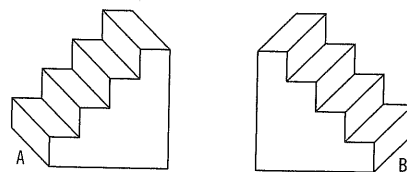


Figure 3-47. Mischa Auer in Orson Welles's *Mr. Arkadin* (1955): a typically tilted Welles composition. That the line of the table moves down from left to right disorients us even further. The observer in the frame strains, stretches his neck to see. The low angle of the shot increases our sense of foreboding. Most important, the trope of the magnified eye is doubled and redoubled with typically Wellesian irony by the echoing circles of the top hat and the light above. The "cheat" here is that the magnifying glass is positioned for our use, not Auer's. (Frame enlargement.)

Figure 3-48. Multiple exposure is one of the most unnatural codes of cinema (we seldom see two images at the same time in real life) but it can also be one of the most meaningful. Here, three multiple exposures from various films by Orson Welles, in increasing order of complexity. The first, from *Citizen Kane*, simply connects Susan Alexander (Dorothy Comingore) with her image in the press, a common use of the double exposure code. (Frame enlargement.)



Figure 3-49. The second, from *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), suggests two levels of reality. (Frame enlargement.)



Figure 3-50. The third, from *The Lady of Shanghai* (1947), is from the famous mirror sequence in that film: will we survive the nightmare? (Frame enlargement.)

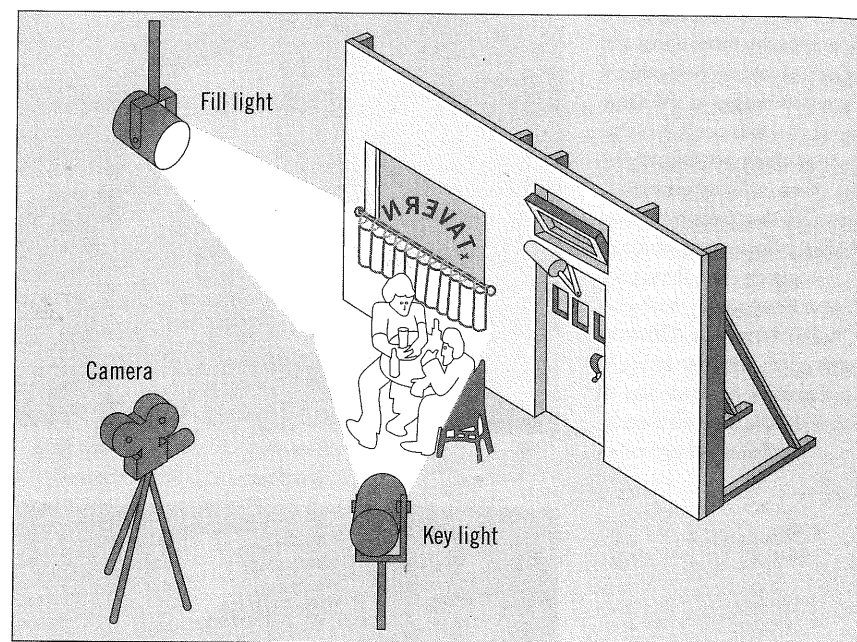


Figure 3-51. KEY LIGHTS AND FILL LIGHTS. The key light, usually at a 45° angle to the camera-subject axis, provides the main source of illumination. The smaller fill light softens the shadows in this classic Hollywood lighting technique.

book carrying the woman rather than vice versa, just the effect Hitchcock wants, considering that the yellow bulge contains the money Marnie had just stolen and that her life, as we later see, is dominated by her kleptomania. Before we learn any of this narratively, we "know" it. (*Marnie* is also an excellent example of other types of color dominance, since the subject of the film is color symbolism: Marnie suffers from rosophobia.)

Elements of form, line, and color all carry their own intrinsic interests, significant weights that counteract, reinforce, counterpoint, or balance each other in complex systems, each read against our latent expectations of the frame and with the senses of composition in depth and planar design combined.

Multiple images (split screen) and superimpositions (double exposures, et cetera), although they are seldom used, can multiply the intrinsic weights by factors of two, three, four, or more. Texture, although it is not often mentioned when speaking of film esthetics, is also important, not only in terms of the inherent texture of the subject but also in terms of the texture—or grain—of the image. One illustration will suffice: we have

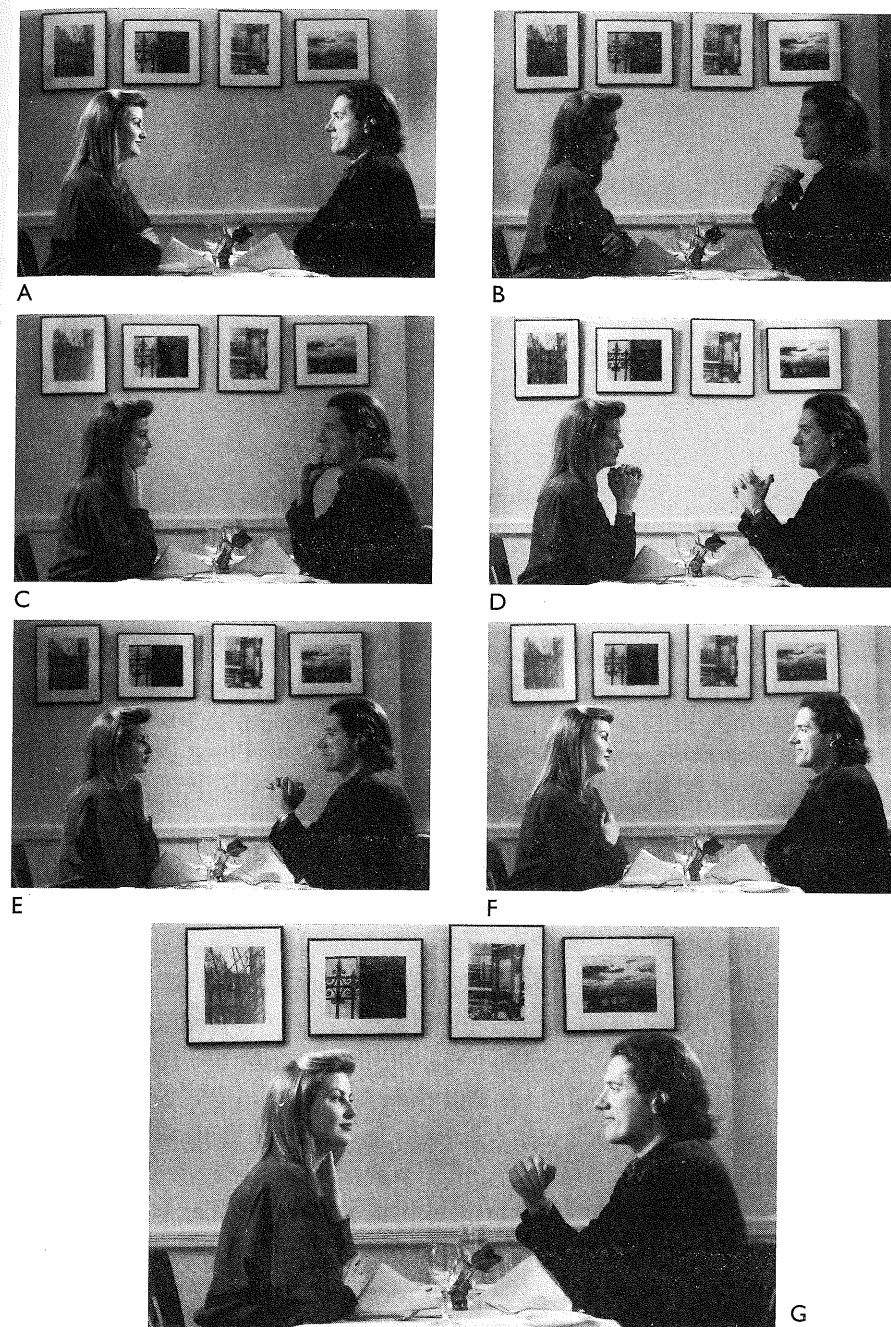


Figure 3-52. LIGHTING COMBINATIONS FROM "THE INTERFACE":

(A) Key light. Two key lights were used here. (B) Back light. (C) Fill light. (D) Key light and fill light. (E) Back light and fill light. (F) Key light and back light. (G) The final composition: key, fill, and back lights.



Figure 3-53. HOLLYWOOD LIGHTING. Margaret O'Brien and Judy Garland in Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). The set is vibrantly, thoroughly lit. There are only the faintest hints of shadows, even in the back room, which is out of focus. Since this was a Technicolor film, the lighting is even stronger than it might have been for black-and-white.

learned to associate graininess with enlargement, and with documentary. The filmmaker therefore has this code at his command. A grainy image signifies a "truthful" one. The grain of enlargement and its significance as a barrier to comprehension provided the basic metaphor of Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*, a classic study of the difficulty of perception.

Perhaps the most important tool the filmmaker can use to modify the meanings of form, line, and color, and their intrinsic interests, is lighting. In the days when filmstock was relatively insensitive (before the 1960s), artificial lighting was a requisite, and filmmakers made a virtue of necessity—as always. The German Expressionists of the twenties borrowed the code of chiaroscuro from painting to dramatic effect—it allowed them to emphasize design over verisimilitude. The classical Hollywood cinematographic style wanted a more natural effect and so developed a system of balanced "key" lights and "fill" lights (see Figure 3-52) that provided thorough but not overt illumination and therefore presented a minimal barrier between observer and subject. At its best, this sophisticated system was



Figure 3-54. HIGHLIGHTING. Jean-Pierre Melville and Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants terribles* (1950). The eyes are specially lit.

capable of some extraordinary, subtle effects, yet it was inherently unrealistic; we seldom observe natural scenes that have both the very high light level and the carefully balanced fill that mark the Hollywood style (and that is perpetuated today in both theatrical and television productions).

The development of fast filmstocks permitted a new latitude in the code of lighting, and today most cinematographers work for verisimilitude rather than classic Hollywood balance.

Needless to say, all the lighting codes that operate in photography operate in film as well. Full front lighting washes out a subject; overhead lighting dominates it; lighting from below makes it lugubrious; highlighting can call attention to details (hair and eyes most often); backlighting can either dominate a subject or highlight it; sidelighting is capable of dramatic chiaroscuro effect.

Aspect ratio; open and closed form; frame, geographic, and depth planes; depth perception; proximity and proportion; intrinsic interest of color, form, and line; weight and direction; latent expectation; oblique versus symmetric composition; texture; and lighting. These are the major codes operating within the static film frame.

In terms of the diachronic shot, however, we have just begun.

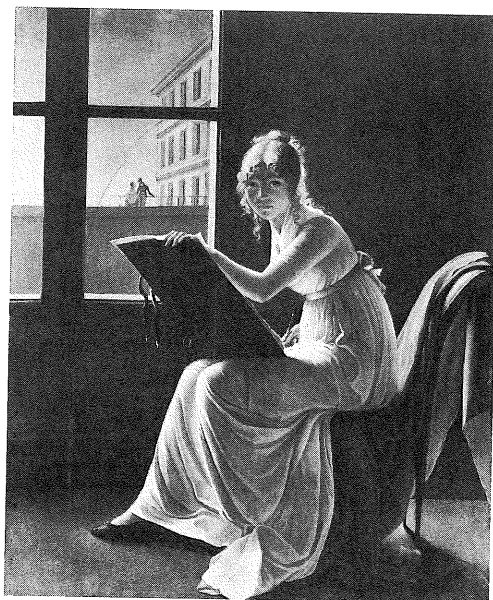


Figure 3-55. Backlighting is one of the more interesting lighting codes taken from painting. Here, a relatively early example from painting, Constance Marie Charpentier's *Mlle Charlotte du val d'Ognes* (c. 1801). The light source highlights the subject's hair and the folds of her dress. Although there is no perceivable light source from the front, details are nevertheless evident and the shadows are soft and elegant. (Oil on canvas, 60 1/2" by 50 5/8", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection. Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917.)



Figure 3-56. Jean-Luc Godard is one filmmaker who has been intrigued by this code. By the time of *Weekend* (1968), from which this shot comes, he had abstracted the backlit shot to the extreme of silhouette. The lighting is harsh, bold, and overwhelms the subject. In order to search out detail in the shot we have to work, which makes us feel, faced with the bright window, not unlike voyeurs—exactly the effect Godard wants. Jean Yanne and Mireille Darc in *Weekend* (1968). (Frame enlargement.)

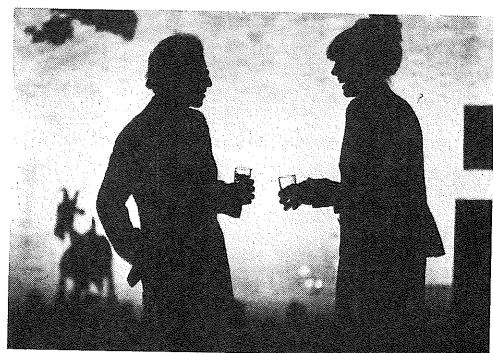


Figure 3-57. Woody Allen achieved an entirely different feel in this equally harshly backlit shot from *Manhattan* (1979). The silhouettes of Diane Keaton and Allen are instantly recognizable at a cocktail party in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art.

BACKLIGHTING



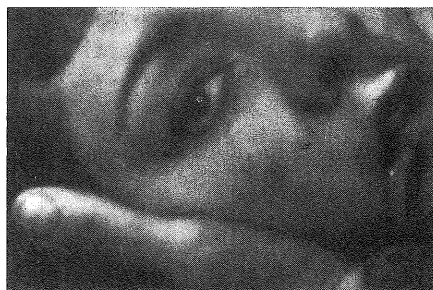
Figure 3-58. In addition to widescreen architectural composition, Antonioni was fascinated by the focus code. Here, in *Red Desert*, Monica Vitti enters the frame out of focus (just like her character). (Frame enlargement.)

The Diachronic Shot

Filmmakers use a wealth of terminology in regard to the shot. The factors that now come into play include distance, focus, angle, movement, and point of view. Some of these elements also operate within the static frame, but all are more appropriately discussed as dynamic qualities. Shot distance is the simplest variable. So-called normal shots include the full shot, three-quarter shot, medium shot (or mid-shot), and head-and-shoulders shot—all defined in terms of the amount of subject viewed. Closeups, long shots, and extreme long shots complete the range of distances.

Note that none of these terms has anything to do with the focal length of the lens used. As we saw in Chapter 2, in addition to being defined in terms of the distance of the camera from the subject, shots are also named for their lenses. Note, too, that in practice these terms are loosely used. One person's closeup is another's "detail shot," and no Academy of film has (so far) sat in deep deliberation deciding the precise point at which a medium shot becomes a long shot, or a long shot metamorphoses into an extreme long shot. Nevertheless, within limits, the concepts are valid.

A film shot mainly in closeups—Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), for example—deprives us of setting and is therefore disorienting, claustrophobic. The effect can be striking. On the other hand, a film



A. Sylvia Bataille in Jean Renoir's *Partie de campagne* (1936).



B. Bibi Andersson, Gunnar Björnstrand, Liv Ullmann in Bergman's *Persona* (1966).



C. Renée Longarini, Marcello Mastroianni in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1959).



D. Giulietta Masina in Fellini's *La Strada* (1954).



E. Masina in Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (1957).



F. Masina in Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965).

Figure 3-59. SHOT COMPOSITION. In practice, shot distance is much more idiosyncratic than the terminology suggests. Both A and B, for example, are somewhere in between closeups and detail shots. Both give us half a woman's face, yet in A the face takes up nearly the whole frame while in B it is part of a three-shot. The aspect ratio of the frame is an important consideration, too. Both C and D are, more or less, mid-shots, yet C, in the scope ratio, has a different effect from D, in the standard Academy ratio. C includes a lot more action than D; D is more like a closeup. Composition is a major element, as well. Shots E and F both must be classified as long shots—same actress, same director. In each, Giulietta Masina takes up three-quarters of the height of the frame, more or less. Yet in E, Fellini has composed a shot in which the other design elements—the road, the statues, the horizon—work to focus attention on Masina. Psychologically, the image of her is more impressive here. In F, composition (and her posture) works to de-emphasize her presence. (Frame enlargements.)

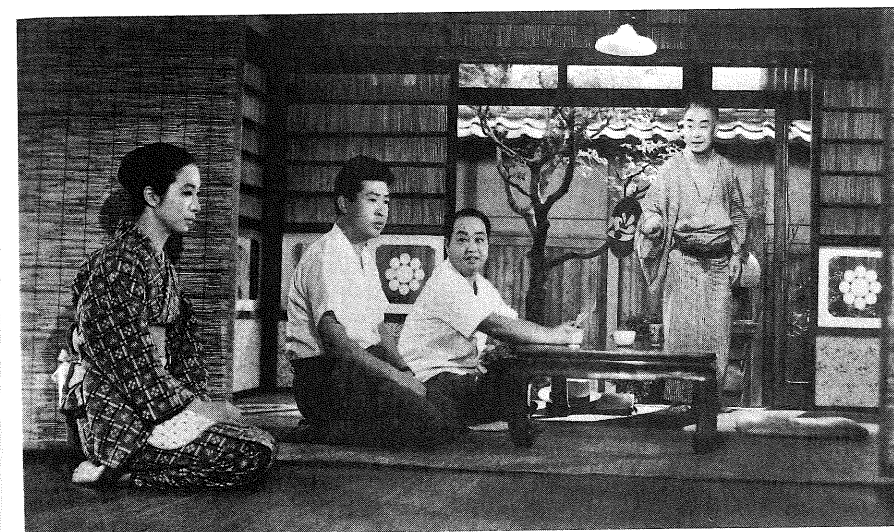


Figure 3-60. A typical low-angle shot from Yasujiro Ozu's *The End of Summer* (1961). The angle doesn't seem so disconcerting because the subjects are seated on the floor. (New Yorker Films.)

shot mainly in long shot—many of Roberto Rossellini's later historical essays, for instance—emphasizes context over drama and dialectic over personality. The code of shot distance is simple, but to a large extent it controls which of the many other codes of film we may use.

Focus is the next most important variable in the syntax of the shot. There are two axes in the determination of focus: the first choice is between deep focus, in which foreground, middle ground, and background are all relatively sharp focus, and shallow focus, in which the focus emphasizes one ground over the others. Shallow focus obviously allows the filmmaker greater control over the image. Deep focus, on the other hand, is one of the prime esthetic hallmarks of *mise-en-scène*. (It is much easier to "put things in the scene" when all three grounds are in focus, since the scene is then much larger, more accommodating.) (See Figures 2-18 and 2-19.)

The second axis of focus is the continuum between sharp and soft focus. This aspect of the shot is related to texture. Soft focus is generally associated with so-called romantic moods. Sharp focus is more closely associated with verisimilitude. These are generalizations that specific instances often contradict. (As always, the rules are made to be broken.) Soft focus is not so much romantic as it is mollifying. It smoothes out the identifying details of an image and distances it.

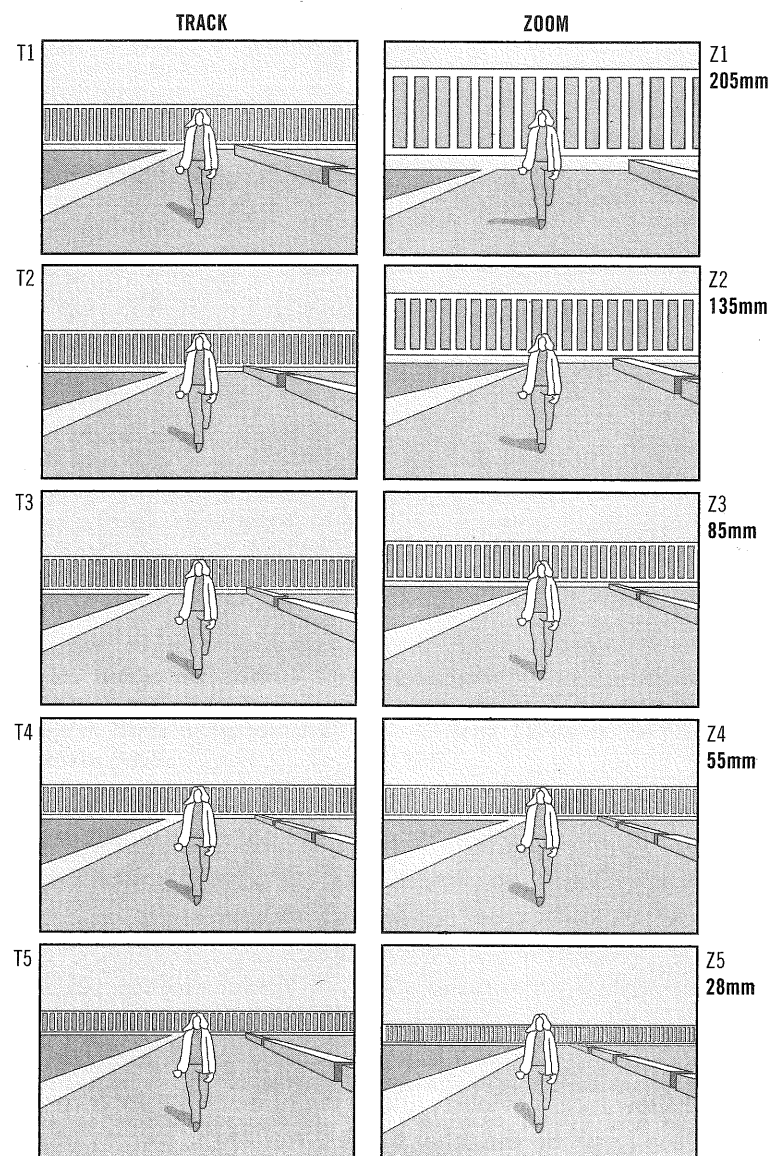


Figure 3-61. TRACKING VERSUS ZOOMING. These ten frames from parallel tracking and zoom shots illustrate the differences between the two techniques. In both series, the woman is walking towards the camera, covering a distance of approximately fifty yards between frame 1 and frame 5. The track was shot first, with a 55 mm lens. (Thus frames T4 and Z4 are identical.) The zoom was then shot to correspond to the track. The relationship between subject and background is dramatically different in the zoom. As the lens changes from telephoto (205 mm) to wide-angle (28 mm) focal lengths, depth perception changes from suppressed to exaggerated, and perspective undergoes a slight moderation as well. In the tracking shot, the distance between subject and camera is constant from one frame to another, and the building is far enough in the background so as not to change greatly between frames. In the zoom, the distance between subject and camera is constantly changing, and the relative size of the background building is magnified in the telephoto shots and distanced, or minimized in the wide-angle frame. Notice, too, that the angle of the shadow changes in the zoom. (Compare Figure 2-10.)

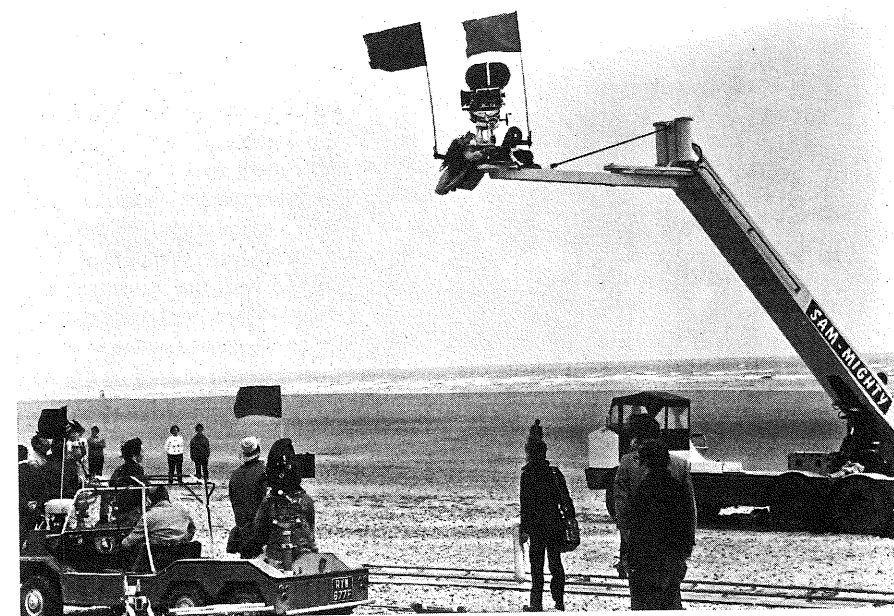


Figure 3-62. THE MOVING CAMERA. On the set of Jean-Luc Godard's *One Plus One* (1968). The typical camera at right is a "prop" in the film. (The red and black flags are not standard equipment.) The camera platform is counterbalanced by weights out of the frame. In the middle ground can be seen tracks laid for a camera that is barely visible at the extreme left. In the foreground, a third camera is mounted on a special truck.

Surely focus is a function of the still frame as well as of the diachronic shot. It is intimately associated with the compositional planes, since it permits concentration on a single ground. But it also tends toward movement. By maintaining relatively shallow focus and changing focus during the shot, the filmmaker can shift the intrinsic interest of the frame from one ground to another, which in a way parallels the effect of the pan, zoom, or tracking shot but does so within the frame and without moving the camera.

Focus changes within the shot are of two basic sorts: follow focus, in which the focus is changed to permit the camera to keep a moving subject in focus; and rack focus, in which the focus is changed to direct attention away from one subject and toward another in a different ground. Follow focus was one of the basics of the Hollywood style, admired for its ability to maintain attention on the subject. Rack focus is one of the hallmarks of the modern, intrusive style. Focus, then, is one of the codes that connect the codes of composition with those of movement.



Figure 3-63. ROLL. Pans, tilts, and tracks are common enough cinematic codes, but rolls are rare. The reason is obvious: pans, tilts, and tracking shots mimic common, everyday movements, but we seldom "roll" our heads (tilt them sideways), so this is often a striking perspective. While shots are often made at a rolled angle (see the illustrations from Orson Welles films in Figures 3-47 and 3-48) the movement of rolling is unusual. Here, Fred Astaire performs an entire dance routine in one unedited shot, gradually moving up the wall, across the ceiling, and down the opposite wall in Stanley Donen's *Royal Wedding* (1951). The precisely choreographed routine was accomplished on a set mounted in a drum. The furniture and the camera were secured. As Astaire moved from floor to wall, from wall to ceiling, the set turned and the camera turned with it.

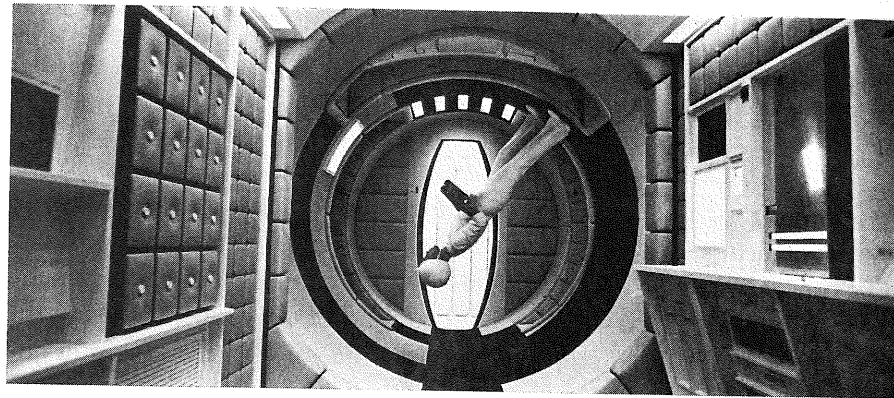


Figure 3-64. Stanley Kubrick used a similar apparatus for many unusual shots in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This particular shot was a setpiece to show off the device. The flight attendant walked full circle, supposedly held up by her Velcro slippers on the special path. (Frame enlargement.)

The third aspect of the diachronic shot—angle—also reaches back toward static composition and forward toward the movement of the shot. Because the relationship between camera and subject exists in three-dimensional space, there are three sets of separate angles that determine the shot.

TRACKING



Figure 3-65. Murnau's set for *Sunrise* (1927). The long tram ride has earned a place in film history. In this case, the tracking shot is purely verisimilitudinous: there is no other way to ride a tram than on tracks! (MOMA/FSA.)

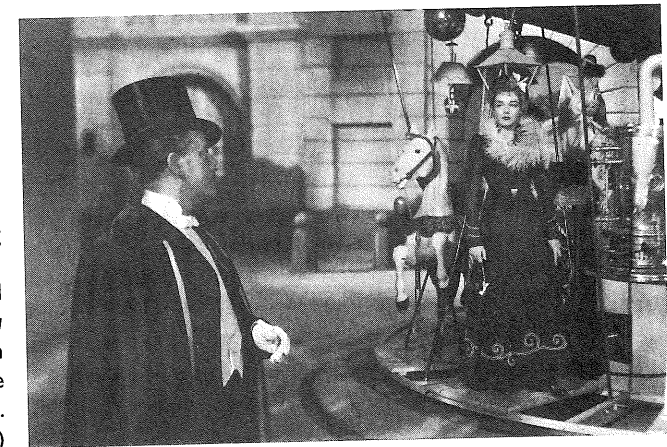


Figure 3-66. Max Ophüls was especially fond of the moving camera. This is a still from a long lyrical, and involved crane shot in *La Ronde* (1950). Anton Walbrook at left, Simone Signoret on the carousel. (MOMA/FSA.)

Figure 3-67. If the tracking shot was logical and realistic for Murnau, lyrical and romantic for Ophüls, it became, by 1968, a tool of intellectual analysis (as well as a grand joke) for Jean-Luc Godard. This frame comes from the middle of the seven-minute-long tracking shot of the traffic jam in *Weekend*. Godard's camera moves slowly



and inexorably past a seemingly endless line of stopped autos. Drivers and passengers honk incessantly, argue with each other, fight, stop for an impromptu picnic, play ball from car to car (as here), or test their gear on trailer-mounted sailboats. The poplar trees that line the road at regular intervals divide this magnificent continuous shot into segments that function as separate framing devices. (Frame enlargement.)



Figure 3-68. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) treated the tracking shot as a structural law, the subject of the film. This is a frame from about the middle of the forty-five minute zoom. By the end of the film, Snow's camera has moved into a closeup of the middle of the photograph tacked to the wall above the chair. The image? Waves, of course! (MOMA/FSA. Frame enlargement.)

We have already discussed one of these, the angle of approach (squarely symmetrical or oblique), in the previous section. To understand the relationships among the three types of angle, it may be useful to visualize the three imaginary axes that run through the camera (Figure 2-25). The pan axis (vertical) is also the axis of the angle of approach; it is either square or oblique. The tilt axis (horizontal from left to right) determines the elevation of the shot: overhead, high-angle, eye-level, and low-angle are the basic terms used here. It goes without saying that high-angle shots diminish the importance of the subject while low-angle shots emphasize its power. Interestingly, the eye-level shot, the least obtrusive, is not always so easily defined. The Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu is well known for the constant low-angle of his style, yet Ozu wasn't really trying to distort the basic design of his image: he was merely shooting from the eye level of a Japanese observer seated on a tatami mat. "Eye level," of course, depends on the eye of the beholder. Even in European and American cinema, the subtle differences among eye levels, although not immediately remarkable, can have significant effects over the course of a film.

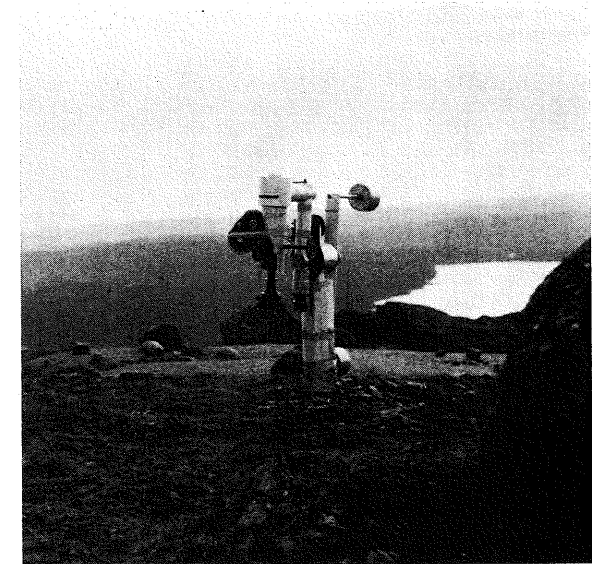


Figure 3-69. Michael Snow's ultimate pan/tilt/roll machine, with camera, set up to shoot *La Région Centrale*. Snow operated the camera from behind the rock at right so as not to appear in the picture. (MOMA/FSA)

The third angle variable, roll (horizontal from front to back), is determined by the movement of the camera around the last remaining axis, the horizontal that parallels the axis of the lens. Possibly because this axis represents the metaphysical bond between the observer (or camera) and the subject, possibly because roll destroys the stability of the horizon, the camera is very seldom revolved around this axis. The only common roll movement that comes to mind is that sometimes used to mimic the movements of the horizon as seen from the boat in heavy seas. Roll movement (or the oblique horizon of a static shot) is the only change of camera angle that does not significantly alter our focus of attention. To pan or to tilt is to change images; to roll is simply to alter the original image.

The camera not only revolves around these three axes, it is also moved from one point to another: hence "tracking" shots (also called "trucking" or "dolly" shots) and "crane" shots. The zoom shot, as discussed in Chapter 2, mimics the effect of a track in or track back, but not precisely. In the zoom, since the camera does not move, the relationships among objects in different planes remain the same; there is no sense of entering into the scene; our perspective remains constant, even if the image is enlarged. In the track, however, we do move physically into the scene; the spatial relationships among objects shift, as does our perspective. Although the zoom is often a less expensive alternative to the tracking shot, its effect is strangely distancing: we seem to move closer without getting any nearer,

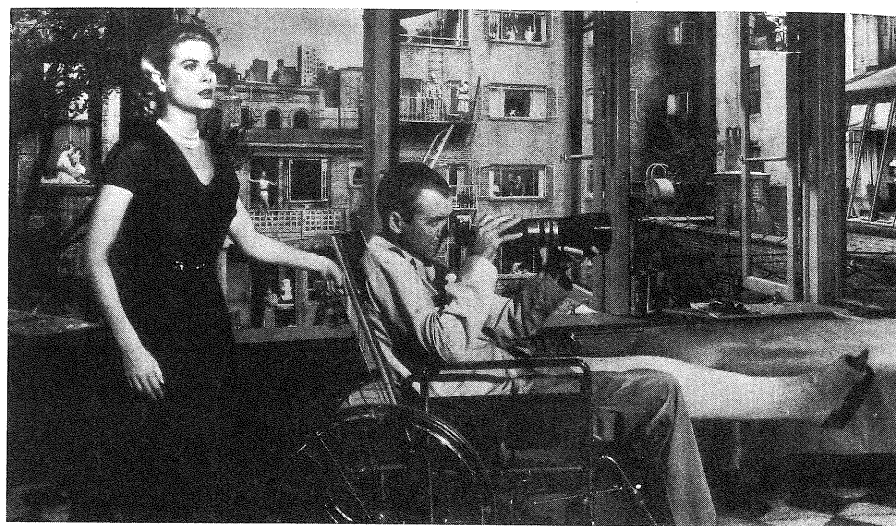


Figure 3-70. Grace Kelly and James Stewart in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). Stewart, a photographer, is immobilized in his apartment on Tenth Street in Greenwich Village. The "CinemaScope" picture windows of the building across the courtyard intrigue him. (Look closely!) He becomes deeply involved in the stories they tell. A metaphor for filmmaking? Certainly a study in "point of view." (MOMA/FSA.)

and that is disorienting, since we have no such experience in real life for comparison.

Just as debates have evolved between proponents of deep focus and shallow focus, and between champions of *mise-en-scène* and montage, so, too, the moving camera has its adherents and detractors. Because it continually changes our perspective, the tracking shot significantly increases our perception of depth. More important, the moving camera has an inherent ethical dimension. It can be used in two essentially different ways (like focus shifts, pans, and tilts): either to follow the subject or to change it. The first alternative strongly emphasizes the centrality of the subject of the film; the second shifts interest from subject to camera, from object to filmmaker. As André Bazin has pointed out, these are ethical questions, since they determine the human relationships among artist, subject, and observer.

Although some estheticians insist that the moving camera, because it calls attention to the filmmaker, is somehow less ethical than the stationary camera, this is as specious a differentiation as the earlier dichotomies between *mise-en-scène* and montage and between deep and shallow focus. A tracking or crane shot need not necessarily shift interest from subject to camera; it can, rather, call attention to the relationship between the two,

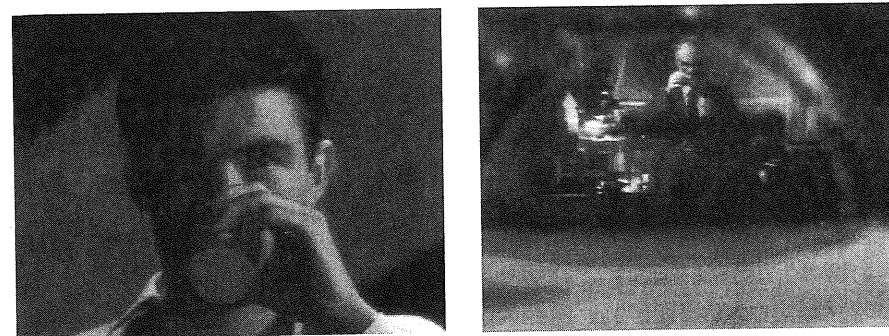


Figure 3-71. Gregory Peck drowns his interlocutor in a glass of milk—and we share the viewpoint and the experience—in this memorable pov shot from Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. (Frame enlargements.)

which is arguably both more realistic and more ethical, since there is in fact a relationship.

Indeed, many of the best and most lyrical tracking shots are the cinematic equivalents of making love, as the filmmaker courts, then unites with his subject; the track becomes the relationship, and the shot a synthesis of filmmaker and subject, greater than the sum of its parts.

F. W. Murnau and Max Ophüls loom large in the history of the moving camera. Their use of it was, essentially, humanistic—to create a lyrical celebration of their subjects and to involve their audiences more deeply. Stanley Kubrick, a filmmaker closely identified with tracking shots, also used camera movement to involve his audience, but in a colder, more intellectual way.* Michael Snow, an important abstract filmmaker and artist, explored in great depth—in a series of three seminal films—the signifiatory potential of the moving camera.

Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) is an obsessive zoom, lasting forty-five minutes, which takes us from an image of a rather large New York loft in its entirety to, in the end, a detail shot of a photograph hanging on the wall at the opposite end of the large room. The potential of the simplest pan from left to right and back again is explored in $\leftrightarrow$ (1968–69, also called *Back and Forth*). Snow set up his camera in an empty classroom, then panned continuously and quickly over a sector of about 75° and in periods ranging from fifteen cycles per minute to sixty cycles per minute. *La Région Centrale* (1970–71), Snow's masterwork lasting more than three hours, gives

* By 2002 technological advances allowed Aleksandr Sokurov to produce the ultimate tour-de-force tracking shot: the 99-minute single take of *Russian Ark*. (See Figure 5-6.)

us an obsessive "map" of the complete sphere of space that surrounds the camera on all sides. Snow constructed a servomechanism control head for his camera, set it up in a remote and rocky region of northern Quebec, and controlled its patterns of movement hidden behind a hill. The camera swoops, swirls, gyrates, twirls, tilts, zigzags, sweeps, arcs, and performs figure eights in a multitude of patterns while nothing is visible except the barren landscape, the horizon, and the sun. The effect is the thorough liberation of the camera from both subject and photographer. The global space that surrounds it becomes raw material for Snow's complex patterns of movements. Movement is all.

The liberated, abstract quality of Snow's images leads us directly to a consideration of the last of the five shot variables: point of view. Unlike the first four, this is more a matter of metaphysics than of geometry. The point of *La Région Centrale*, for example, is that it has no point of view, or rather that its point of view is abstract and global. Most narrative films, however, do show some sort of subjective point of view. This varies from the objective point of view of long shots, deep focus, and static camera, to the more subjective approach of closeups, shallow focus, and moving camera. We've already noted that the moving camera has an ethical aspect to it. The question of point of view is at the heart of this ethical code, and critics and semioticians are only now beginning to investigate the phenomenon specifically.

Considering the structure of the artistic experience we set up in Chapter 1, the ethics of film—the quality and shape of the relationships among filmmaker, subject, artwork, and audience—is elemental: all other ideas about film must stem from it and relate back to it.

Point of view is easier to describe in prose narrative: novels are either narrated by someone in the story—the first-person narrator—or by someone outside it—the omniscient narrator. The first-person narrator may be either a major or a minor figure in the events; the omniscient narrator is sometimes developed as a separate character, sometimes characterless, except insofar as he represents the character of the author. In its totality, film can fairly well duplicate these fictional models.

Most films, like most novels, are told from an omniscient point of view. We see and hear whatever the author wants us to see and hear. But when we come to the first-person mode—which has proved so useful in prose fiction because of the resonances that can be developed between events and the character or persona of the narrator who perceives them—problems arise in film. It's easy enough to allow a film character to narrate the story.



Figure 3-72. The title frame from Orson Welles's tour de force establishing track at the beginning of *Touch of Evil* (1958). In a few minutes, we know all that we need to know. (Frame enlargement.)

The difficulty is that we see what is happening as well as hear it. In the novel, in effect, we only hear it. As we've noted earlier, Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1945) is the most famous example of rigid adherence to the first-person rule applied to cinema—and the most obvious demonstration of its failure.

In *Stage Fright* (1950), Alfred Hitchcock discovered, to his chagrin, that the first-person point of view in film is fraught with problems even when it is used perfunctorily. In that film, Hitchcock had one of his characters narrate a flashback—and lie. Audiences saw the lie on screen, and when they later found out that it was false they reacted angrily. They weren't able to accept the possibility that the *image* would lie, although they would have been quite willing to believe that the *character* had lied. The screen image is vested with an immutable aura of validity.

By the early 1940s, Hollywood had evolved a very smooth, efficient, and clearly understood idiom of point of view. The establishing shot—a long shot—established place, often time, and sometimes other necessary information. Hitchcock was a master of the establishing shot. The opening pan and track of *Rear Window* (1954), for example, tells us where we are, why we are there, whom we are with, what is going on now, what has happened to get us there, who the other characters of the story are, and even

suggests possible ways the story might develop—all effortlessly and quickly and without a spoken word! Paragraphs of prose are condensed into seconds of film time.

The Hollywood dialogue style is equally efficient: we normally begin with a shot of both speakers (an establishing two-shot), then move to a montage of one-shots as each of the participants variously speaks and listens. Often these are “over-the-shoulder” shots, an interesting use of the code, since it suggests the speaker’s point of view but is also physically separate from it—you’re looking over his shoulder! The shot of the first character from (approximately) the second character’s point of view is usually termed a reverse-angle shot. The rhythms of this insistent and intimate shot-countershot technique are often intoxicating: we surround the conversation.

This is the ultimate omniscient style, since it allows us to see everything from the ideal perspective. More contemporary techniques, which tend to emphasize the separateness and individuality of the camera, may allow us to “see everything,” but always from a separate, distinct point of view. Antonioni’s camera, for instance, often holds on a scene that a character has either not yet entered or already left. The effect is to emphasize environment over character and action, context over content. We might call this the “third-person” point of view: the camera often seems to take on a personality of its own, separate from those of the characters.

In either omniscient style—the Hollywood or the modern—the point-of-view shot (abbreviated “POV”) has its uses. And soundtrack narration is often able to strengthen the sense of the character’s perspective of events. Yet the psychologically insistent, ever-present image attenuates this perspective. In print we need not always be “looking” at a scene: writers don’t always describe or narrate, they often explain or theorize. In film, however, because of the presence of the image, there is always the element of description—even when the soundtrack is used concurrently for explanation, theorizing, or discussion. This is one of the most significant differences between prose narrative and film narrative. Clearly, the only way to circumvent this insistent descriptive nature of the film image is to eliminate it entirely, in which case the soundtrack can duplicate the abstract, analytical potential of written language. Jean-Luc Godard experimented with just this technique in his highly theoretical films of the late sixties. Sometimes the screen is simply black, while we listen to the words on the soundtrack.

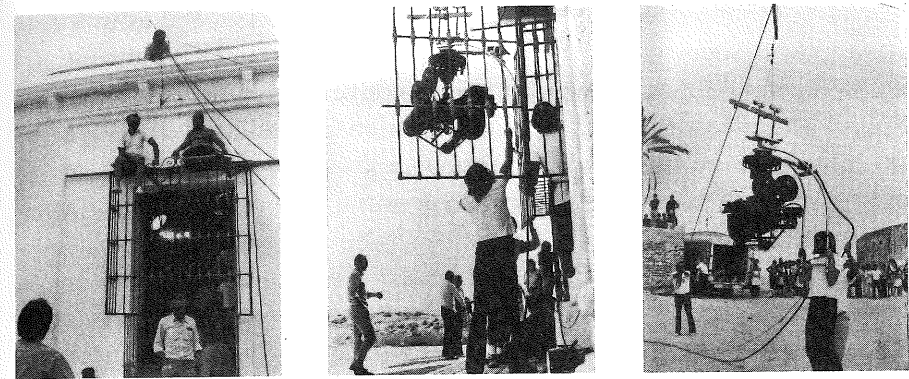


Figure 3-73. To end *The Passenger* with a long, majestic, and mysterious track up to and through a window, Antonioni set up this complicated apparatus—sort of a combination of a Steadicam, Skycam, and overhead track. The operator guided the camera, suspended from a crane, up to the window grill, which grips then opened while attaching the camera to the crane so that it could move out into the courtyard. Could you do this today with CGI? Maybe. Would it be as exhilarating to watch? No.

Sound

While the fact of the image is a disadvantage of a kind in terms of point of view in film narrative, the fact of sound—its ever-presence—is a distinct advantage. Christian Metz identifies five channels of information in film: (1) the visual image; (2) print and other graphics; (3) speech; (4) music; and (5) noise (sound effects). Interestingly, the majority of these channels are auditory rather than visual. Examining these channels with regard to the manner in which they communicate, we discover that only two of them are continuous—the first and the fifth. The other three are intermittent—they are switched on and off—and it is easy to conceive of a film without either print, speech, or music.

The two continuous channels themselves communicate in distinctly separate ways. We “read” images by directing our attention; we do not read sound, at least not in the same conscious way. Sound is not only omnipresent but also omnidirectional. Because it is so pervasive, we tend to discount it. Images can be manipulated in many different ways, and the manipulation is relatively obvious; with sound, even the limited manipulation that does occur is vague and tends to be ignored.

It is the pervasiveness of sound that is its most attractive quality. It acts to realize both space and time. It is essential to the creation of a locale; the “room tone,” based on the reverberation time, harmonics, and so forth of a particular location, is its signature. A still image comes alive when a

soundtrack is added that can create a sense of the passage of time. In a utilitarian sense, sound shows its value by creating a ground base of continuity to support the images, which usually receive more conscious attention. Speech and music naturally receive attention because they have specific meaning. But the "noise" of the soundtrack—"sound effects"—is paramount. This is where the real construction of the sound environment takes place.

But "noise" and "effects" are poor labels indeed for a worthy art. Possibly we could term this aspect of the soundtrack "environmental sound." The influence of environmental sound has been felt—and noticed—in contemporary music, especially in that movement known as "musique concrète." Even recorded speech has been affected by this new ability. In the great days of radio, "sound effects" were limited to those that could be produced physically. The advent of synthesizers, multitrack recording, and now computer-manipulated digitized sound has made it possible for the sound effects technicians, or "Foley artists," as they are now called, to recreate an infinite range of both natural and entirely new artificial sounds.

Much of the best modern sound drama (which has appeared mainly on records, and public radio stations) has recognized the extraordinary potential of what used to be known simply as sound effects. Garrison Keillor, who has almost single-handedly kept the tradition of the radio variety show alive for more than thirty years, makes a point of featuring sound effects routines on every episode of *A Prairie Home Companion*. He knows it's the heart of the radio art. Robert Krulwich, certainly the most creative radio commentator of the last thirty years, has an equal regard for the SFX art, weaving rich effects into his commentary tapestries. Contemporary music also celebrates this formerly pedestrian art.

Film, too, has recognized sound's essential value. In the early days of the sound film, Musicals, for instance, were extraordinary elaborate visually. Busby Berkeley conceived intricate visual representations of musical ideas to hold an audience's interest. Now, however, the most powerful film musical form is the simple concert. The soundtrack carries the film; the images serve it.

We can conceive of nonmusical cinema in this vein as well. In England, where radio drama lasted longer than in the U.S., a tradition of aural drama was maintained from the *Goon Shows* of the 1950s through *Monty Python's Flying Circus* of the 1970s.

In the United States much of the best comedy has been almost exclusively aural since the days of vaudeville: beginning with the masters Jack



Figure 3-74. Robert Altman's magnificent satire of the film industry, *The Player* (1992), begins with a reel-long tracking shot that is the equal of Murnau's, Welles's, or Godard's: establishing the location, setting up the action, introducing the characters, passing by small incidental dramas, tossing off inside jokes, peering in windows, setting up the premise, and, postmodernly talking about its antecedents at the same time that it pays homage to them, even while Altman's own shot surpasses those of his predecessors, distanced with insouciant wit, as if to say, "long tracking shots, like long sentences, separate the players from the rest." (Frame enlargement.)

Benny, George Burns, and Fred Allen, this exuberant if unsung tradition has given us Nichols and May, Mel Brooks, and Bill Cosby; the complex "cinematic" constructions of the Firesign Theatre and Albert Brooks; and the work of Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, Jerry Seinfeld, Steven Wright, and Louis Black. Much of recent comedy extends the boundaries of the old vaudeville tradition: aural artists have moved into more complex modes.

In cinema, Francis Ford Coppola's fascinating *The Conversation* (1974) did for the aural image what *Blow-Up* (1966) had done for the pictorial image eight years earlier. While the soundtrack can certainly support greater emphasis than it has been given, it cannot easily be divorced from images. Much of the language we employ to discuss the codes of soundtracks deals with the relationship between sound and image. Siegfried Kracauer suggests the differentiation between "actual" sound, which logically connects with the image, and "commentative" sound, which does not. Dialogue of people in the scene is actual, dialogue of people not in the scene is commentative. (A filmmaker sophisticated in sound, such as Richard Lester, whose films were characterized in part by highly worked

soundtracks, often used commentative dialogue of people who were in the shot, but not part of the action of the scene.)

Director and theorist Karel Reisz used slightly different terminology. For Reisz, who wrote a standard text on editing, all sound is divided into "synchronous" and "asynchronous." Synchronous sound has its source within the frame (the editor must work to synchronize it). Asynchronous sound comes from outside the frame.

Combining these two continua, we get a third,* whose poles are "parallel" sound and "contrapuntal" sound. Parallel sound is actual, synchronous, and connected with the image. Contrapuntal sound is commentative, asynchronous, and opposed to or in counterpoint with the image. It makes no difference whether we are dealing with speech, music, or environmental sound: all three are at times variously parallel or contrapuntal, actual or commentative, synchronous or asynchronous.

The differentiation between parallel and contrapuntal sound is perhaps the controlling factor. This conception of the soundtrack as working logically either with or against the image provides the basic esthetic dialectic of sound. The Hollywood sound style is strongly parallel. The programmatic music of thirties movies nudged, underlined, emphasized, characterized, and qualified even the simplest scenes so that the duller images as well as the most striking were thoroughly pervaded by the emotions designed by the composers of the nearly continuous music track. Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Max Steiner were the two best-known composers of these emotionally dominating scores.

In the experimental 1960s and 1970s, contrapuntal sound gave an ironic edge to the style of film music. Often the soundtrack was seen as equal, but different from, the image. Marguerite Duras, for example, experimented with commentative soundtracks completely separate from the image, as in *India Song* (1975). Watching American films from the 1970s today, you may be struck by the paucity of music: filmmakers then did not want to depend on the emotional groundbase a continuous music track provides—they wanted to focus your attention on their images.

In the 1980s, Hollywood returned to programmatic music. John Williams, composer of the soundtracks for many of the blockbusters of the late 1970s and 1980s from *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) to *Home Alone* (1990) and *Jurassic Park* (1993), has defined the musical themes of a gen-

* I am indebted to Win Sharples Jr, "The Aesthetics of Film Sound," *Filmmakers Newsletter* 8:5, for this synthesis.

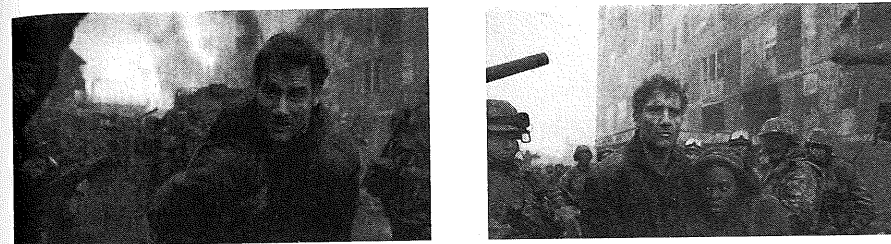


Figure 3-75. Alfonso Cuarón employed several inventive tracking shots in *Children of Men* (2006). Here in the final tracking shot Clive Owen and Clare-Hope Ashitey make their way through a war zone with precisely timed explosions and much action. (Frame enlargements.)

eration, just as his notable predecessors had done. But music is still used commentatively as well. Rock, for example, offers filmmakers a repertoire of instant keys to modern ideas and feelings, as George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973), Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* (1983), or any of the films of John Hughes demonstrated clearly.

Ironically, music—which used to be the most powerfully asynchronous and commentative element of the soundtrack—has now become so pervasive in real life that a filmmaker can maintain strict synchronicity of actual sound and still produce a complete music track. The ubiquitous Walkman, Boom Box, and iPod have made life a Musical.

Montage

In the U.S. the word for the work of putting together the shots of a film is "cutting" or "editing," while in Europe the term is "montage." The American words suggest a trimming process, in which unwanted material is eliminated. Michelangelo once described sculpture similarly as paring away unneeded stone to discover the natural shape of the sculpture in a block of marble. One edits or cuts raw material down. "Montage," however, suggests a building action, working up from the raw material. Indeed, the classic style of Hollywood editing of the thirties and forties, revived in part in the eighties—what the French call *découpage classique*—was in fact marked by its smoothness, fluidity, and leanness. And European montage, ever since the German Expressionists and Eisenstein in the twenties, has been characterized by a process of synthesis: a film is seen as being constructed rather than edited. The two terms for the action express the two basic attitudes toward it.

Whereas *mise-en-scène* is marked by a fusion of complexities, montage is surprisingly simple, at least on the physical level. There are only two

ways to put two pieces of film together: one can overlap them (double exposure, dissolves, multiple images), or one can put them end to end. For images, the second alternative dominates almost exclusively, while sounds lend themselves much more readily to the first, so much so that this activity has its own name: mixing.

In general parlance, "montage" is used in three different ways. While maintaining its basic meaning, it also has the more specific usages of:

- ❑ a dialectical process that creates a third meaning out of the original two meanings of the adjacent shots; and
- ❑ a process in which a number of short shots are woven together to communicate a great deal of information in a short time.

This last is simply a special case of general montage; the dialectical process is inherent in any montage, conscious or not.

Découpage classique, the Hollywood style of construction, gradually developed a broad range of rules and regulations: for example, the practice of beginning always with an establishing shot, then narrowing down from the generalization; or, the strict rule of thumb for editing dialogue scenes with master shots and reverse angles. All the editing practices of the Hollywood grammar were designed to permit seamless transitions from shot to shot and to concentrate attention on the action at hand. What helped to maintain immediacy and the flow of the action was good; what did not was bad.

In fact, any kind of montage is in the end defined according to the action it photographs. Still pictures can be put together solely with regard to the rhythm of the succeeding shots. Diachronic shots, inherently active, demand that the movements within the shot be considered in the editing. The jump cut, where the natural movement is interrupted, provides an interesting example of the contrasting ways in which découpage classique and contemporary editing treat a problem.

In Hollywood cinema, "invisible cutting" was the aim, and the jump cut was used as a device to compress dead time. A man enters a large room at one end, for instance, and must walk to a desk at the other end. The jump cut can maintain tempo by eliminating most of the action of traversing the long room, but it must do so unobtrusively. The laws of Hollywood grammar insist that the excess dead time be smoothed over either by cutting away to another element of the scene (the desk itself, someone else in the room) or by changing camera angle sufficiently so that the second shot is clearly from a different camera placement. Simply snipping out the

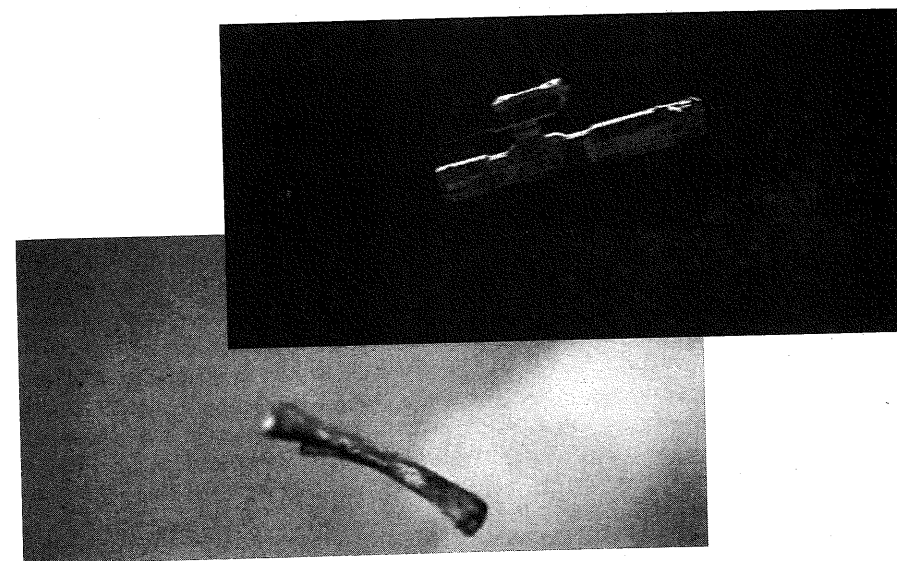


Figure 3-76. Kubrick's transcendent match cut. (Frame enlargements.)

unwanted footage from a single shot from a single angle is not permitted. The effect, according to Hollywood rules, would be disconcerting.

Modern style, however, permits far greater latitude. In *Breathless* (1959), Jean-Luc Godard startled some estheticians by jump cutting in mid-shot. The cuts had no utilitarian value and they were disconcerting. Godard himself seldom returned to this device in later films, but his "ungrammatical" construction was absorbed into general montage stylistics, and jump cuts are now allowed for rhythmic effect. Even the simple utilitarian jump cut has been streamlined: edited from a single shot (single angle), it can be smoothed by a series of quick dissolves.

The lively 1960s films of Richard Lester—especially his Musicals *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *Help!* (1965), and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966)—popularized jump cuts, rapid and "ungrammatical" cutting. Over time, his brash editorial style became a norm, now celebrated every night around the world in hundreds of music videos on MTV and in countless commercials. Because these video images now dominate our lives it's hard to understand how fresh and inventive these techniques seemed in the 1960s. Because this style is now so pervasive in television, Lester must be counted as—at least in one sense—the most influential film stylist since D. W. Griffith. Except for morphs, there are few techniques of contemporary music videos that Richard Lester didn't first try in the 1960s. (But then, there isn't much about contempo-

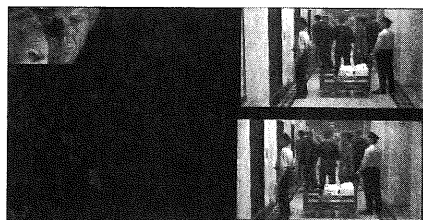


Figure 3-77. COLLAGE MONTAGE. One unusual code that is gaining in popularity due to digital editing is the collage. Filmmakers had experimented with it in the past, but when the work had to be painstakingly accomplished on the optical printer it was expensive and time-consuming; now it's a matter of drag and drop. Norman Jewison employed the technique effectively in *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), left. Michael Wadleigh's *Woodstock* (1970) famously used a split-screen to accommodate miles of footage (although split-screen isn't quite the same as collage). Collage is especially useful when the soundtrack leads the image, as it often does in news coverage: right, a screen from a 2008 PBS *Newshour* report on education. (See also Figures 2-72 and 3-78.)

rary music that the Beatles and their colleagues didn't first explore in the 1960s.)

It's important to note that there are actually two processes going on when shots are edited. The first is the joining of the two shots. Also important, however, is determining the length of any individual shot, both as it relates to shots that precede and follow it and as it concerns the action of the shot. *Découpage classique* demands that a shot be cut so that the editing doesn't interfere with the central action of the shot. If we plot the action of each shot so that we get a rising then a falling curve, Hollywood grammar demands a cut shortly after the climax of the curve. Directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, however, reversed the logic, maintaining the shot long after the climax, throughout the period of aftermath. The last shot of *The Passenger* (1975) is an excellent example.

The rhythmic value of editing is probably best seen in the code of "accelerated montage," in which interest in a scene is heightened and brought to a climax through progressively shorter alternations of shots between two subjects (often in chase scenes). Christian Metz pointed to accelerated montage as a uniquely cinematic code (although Charles Ives's antagonistic brass bands provided an illustration of this kind of cross-cutting in music). Accelerated montage points in the direction of a second type of editing.

Montage is used not only to create a continuity between shots in a scene but also to bend the time line of a film. "Parallel" montage allows the filmmaker to alternate between two stories that may or may not be

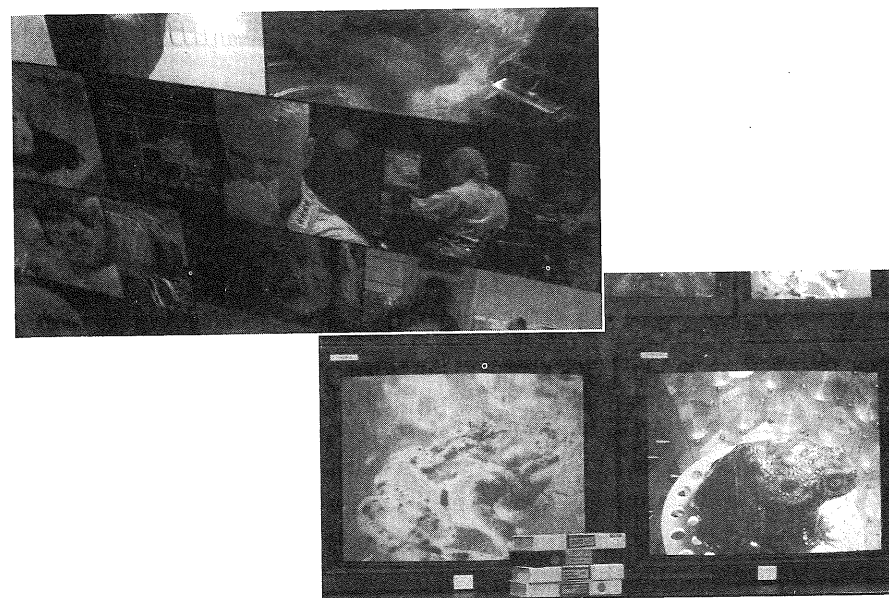


Figure 3-78. COLLAGE MONTAGE. For *Hulk* (2003) Ang Lee devised a collage that echoed the multiple screens the characters confronted in the film. The conceit also recalled the essential framing technique of comic strips.

interrelated, cross-cutting between them. (Accelerated montage is a special type of parallel montage.) The flashback and the flash-forward permit digressions and forecasts. "Involved" montage allows a sequence to be narrated without particular regard for chronology: an action can be repeated, shots can be edited out of order. Each of these extensions of the montage codes looks toward the creation of something other than simple chronology in the montage itself, a factor very little emphasized in classic *découpage* continuity cutting.

Possibly the most common dialectic device is the match cut, which links two disparate scenes by the repetition of an action or a form, or the duplication of *mise-en-scène*. Stanley Kubrick's match cut in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), between a prehistoric bone whirling in the air and a twenty-first-century space station revolving in space, is possibly the most ambitious match cut in history, since it attempts to unite prehistory with the anthropological future at the same time as it creates a special meaning within the cut itself by emphasizing the functions of both bone and space station as tools, extensions of human capabilities.

The codes of montage may not be as obvious as the codes of *mise-en-scène*, but that doesn't mean that they are necessarily less complex. Few

theorists have gone further than differentiating among parallel montage, continuity montage, accelerated montage, flashbacks, and involuted montage. In the 1920s, both V. I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein extended the theory of montage beyond these essentially practical concerns. Pudovkin identified five basic types of montage: contrast, parallelism, symbolism, simultaneity, and leitmotif. He then developed a theory of the interaction between shots variously called "relational editing" or "linkage." Eisenstein, on the other hand, saw the relationship between shots as a collision rather than a linkage, and further refined the theory to deal with the relationships between elements of individual shots as well as the whole shots themselves. This he called the "montage of attractions." Both theorists are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

In the late sixties, Christian Metz attempted to synthesize all these various theories of montage. He constructed a chart in which he tried to indicate how eight types of montage were connected logically. There are a number of problems with Metz's categories, yet the system does have an elegance all its own and it does describe most of the major patterns of montage.

Note that Metz is interested in narrative elements—syntagmas—that can exist within shots as well as between them, an important refinement since, as we have already indicated, the effects of many types of montage can be accomplished within a shot without actually cutting. If the camera pans, for example, from one scene to another, those two scenes exist in relationship to each other just as they would if they were cut together.

Metz's grand design may seem forbidding at first glance, but it reveals a real and useful logic when studied. He begins by limiting himself to autonomous segments of film. These must be either autonomous shots—which are entirely independent of what comes before and after them—or what he calls "syntagmas"—units that have meaningful relationships with each other. (We might call these "scenes" or "sequences," but Metz reserves those terms for individual types of syntagma.) At each stage of this binary system, a further differentiation is made: the first bracket differentiates between autonomous shots and related shots, clearly the primary factor in categorizing types of montage. Either a shot is related to its surrounding shots, or it is not.

The second bracket differentiates between syntagmas that operate chronologically and those that do not. In other words, editing either tells a story (or develops an idea) in chronological sequence, or it does not. Now, on the third level, the differentiations branch out. Metz identifies two sep-

arate types of achronological syntagmas, the parallel and the bracket. Then he differentiates between two types of chronological syntagmas: either a syntagma describes or it narrates. If it narrates, it can do so either linearly or nonlinearly. If it does so linearly, it is either a scene or a sequence. And finally, if it is a sequence, it is either episodic or ordinary.

The end result is a system of eight types of montage, or eight syntagmas. The autonomous shot (1) is also known as the sequence shot (although Metz also places certain kinds of inserts—short, isolated fragments—here). The parallel syntagma (2) has been discussed above as the well-known phenomenon of parallel editing. The bracket syntagma (3), however, is Metz's own discovery—or invention. He defines it as "a series of very brief scenes representing occurrences that the film gives as typical examples of a same order or reality, without in any way chronologically locating them in relation to each other" [Metz, p. 126].

This is rather like a system of allusions. A good example might be the collection of images with which Godard began *A Married Woman* (1964). They all alluded to contemporary attitudes toward sex. Indeed, Godard in many of his films seemed to be particularly fond of the bracket syntagma, since it allows film to act something like the literary essay.

The descriptive syntagma (4) merely describes. The relation between its elements is spatial rather than temporal. Almost any establishing sequence (such as the one already discussed in *Rear Window*) is a good example of the descriptive syntagma. The alternate syntagma (5) is very much like the parallel syntagma except that the parallel syntagma offers two separate scenes or sequences that do not have a narrative connection, while the alternate syntagma offers parallel or alternating elements that do. The effect here is of simultaneity, as in chase scenes in which the montage alternates between shots of pursuer and pursued.

If events do not happen simultaneously, they happen one after the other, in linear sequence, and this brings us to Metz's remaining three categories of montage: the scene (6) and two types of sequence—episodic (7) and ordinary (8). There has always been a great deal of confusion in the vocabulary of film criticism between the concepts of scene and sequence, and Metz's elaborate system is valuable for the precise definitions he offers. Metz takes his definition of scene from theatrical parlance. In the scene, the succession of events—the linear narrative—is continuous. In the sequence, it is broken up. It is still linear, it is still narrative, it is still chronological, it is still related to other elements, but it is not continuous.

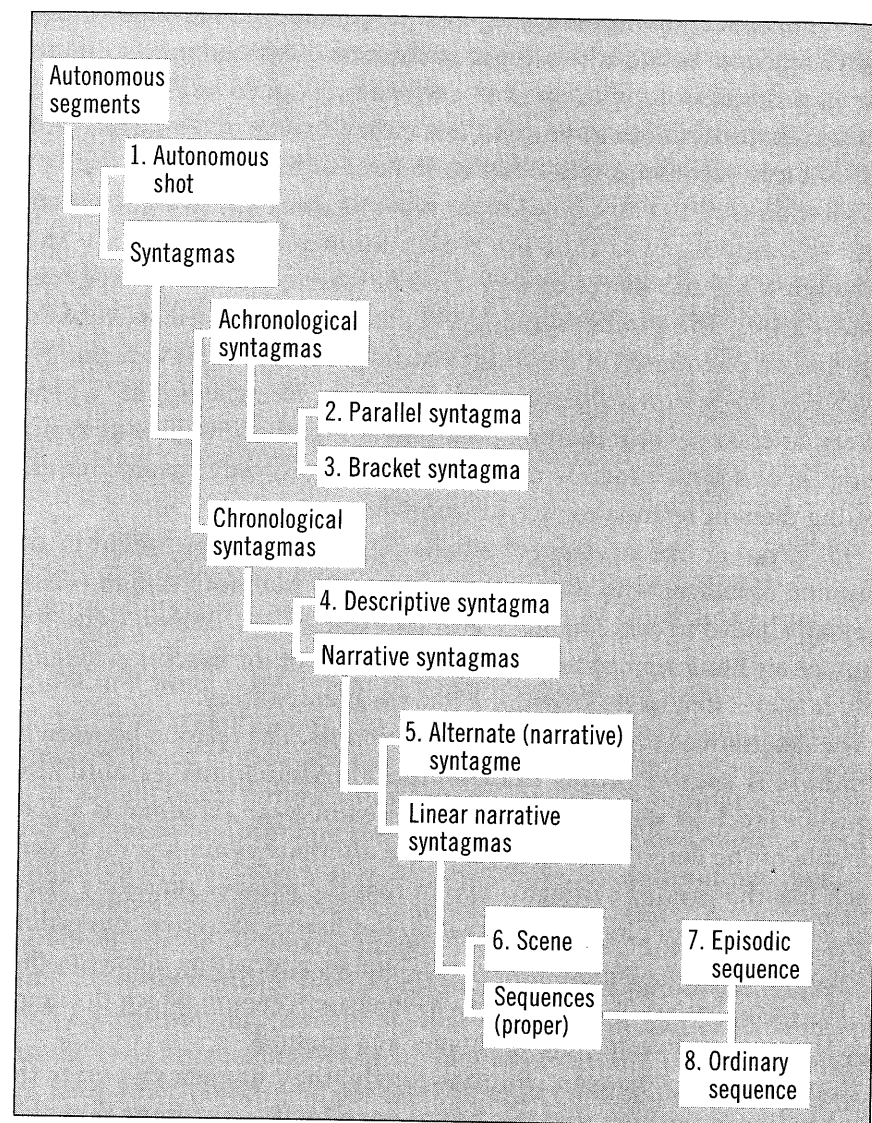


DIAGRAM J. METZ'S SYNTAGMATIC CATEGORIES.

Metz's last differentiation, between the episodic sequence and the ordinary sequence, is a bit arbitrary. In the episodic sequence the discontinuity is organized; in the ordinary sequence it is not. A good example, then, of the episodic sequence is the one in *Citizen Kane* in which Orson Welles portrays the progressive deterioration of Kane's marriage by a set of successive episodes at the breakfast table. In fact, we might call this a

"sequence of scenes," and this is a major characteristic of the episodic sequence—that its elements are organized so that each of them seems to have an identity of its own.

Some of these differentiations might still not be clear. For most film viewers, the concepts of the bracket syntagma and the descriptive syntagma are so close that differentiation may seem specious. Parallel syntagma and alternate syntagma present the same difficulty, as do episodic and ordinary sequences. Yet, despite its problems, Metz's system remains a helpful guide to what is, as yet, relatively uncharted territory: the ever-shifting, complex, and intricate syntax of film narrative. Whether or not his eight categories seem valid, the factors of differentiation that he defines are highly significant and bear repeating:

- ☐ Either a film segment is autonomous or it is not.
- ☐ Either it is chronological or it is not.
- ☐ Either it is descriptive or it is narrative.
- ☐ Either it is linear or it is not.
- ☐ Either it is continuous or it is not.
- ☐ Either it is organized or it is not.

We have only to describe the punctuation of cinema to complete this quick survey of the syntax of *mise-en-scène* and montage. Because punctuation devices stand out and are simply defined, they often take pride of place in discussions of cinematic language. They are useful, no doubt, as are, well, commas, for example, in written language.

The simplest type of punctuation is the unmarked cut. One image ends, another begins. The "fade" calls attention to the ending or the beginning, as does the "iris" (a favorite of early filmmakers that has now fallen into disuse). The "wipe," in which one image removes another in a dizzying variety of ways (flips, twirls, pushovers, spirals, clock hands), was a favorite in the thirties and forties. Optical houses offered catalogues of scores of patterns for wipes. Now it is used in film mainly for nostalgic effect, although it has found new life in television, where digital CGI permit new variations on the theme—now even morphs.

"Intertitles" were an important mark of punctuation in the silent cinema and are still used on occasion today. The "freeze frame" has become popular since it was used to such effect by François Truffaut in *The 400 Blows* (1959). (Truffaut, by the way, was the C. S. Lewis of film punctuation.) Filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s modernized some of the old forms, fading to colors instead of black (Ingmar Bergman) or cutting to blank, colored frames (Godard). Focusing in and out (the effect of going

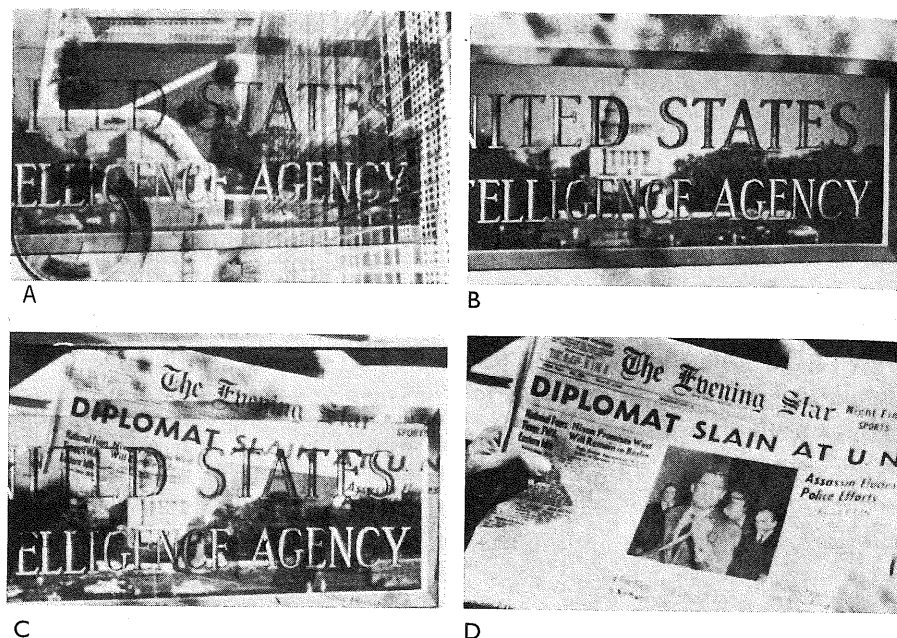


Figure 3-79. This sequence of four shots is a double dissolve from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). At first it seems no more than a highly economical transition from the previous scene at the UN building, in which Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) has been mistaken for a murderer, to a conference at the CIA in Washington, at which this turn of events is discussed. Hitchcock segues from his striking overhead shot of the antlike Thornhill running away from the slab of the UN Secretariat (barely visible in A) to the building nameplate in B. Since Hitchcock has had the wit to use a mirrored surface for the sign, it can reflect the Capitol building, thus identifying the city as well as the "company" and neatly saving an extra shot.

He then dissolves to the newspaper headline in D, which tells us that (1) time has passed, (2) Thornhill has been identified, and (3) he has so far eluded capture. The newspaper is being held by the head of the intelligence agency. Hitchcock pulls back from the paper and goes on with the conference scene.

At the same time, however, there is some rich metaphorical information in this elegant little dissolve, for, if we analyze these still images, we can see that the CIA imposes itself on the UN, that the Capitol is a reflection of the CIA (or that the intelligence agency has superimposed itself over the seat of government), and finally, that the CIA gives birth to the newspaper headlines that include, in addition to the one conveying the necessary information: "National Fears Tieup" and "Nixon Promises West Will Remain in Berlin."

Fifty years later? ...Well, you make the call. "We're [still] all in the same alphabet soup." (Frame enlargements.)

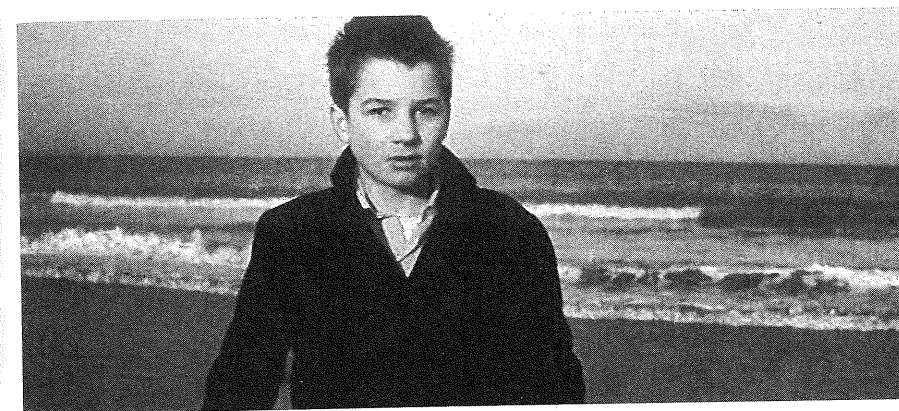


Figure 3-80. Truffaut's landmark freeze frame brings *The 400 Blows* to an abrupt and quizzical stop. (Frame enlargement.)

slowly in focus at the beginning of the shot, or out of focus at the end) paralleled fading, and Antonioni was fond of beginning a shot on an out-of-focus background before an in-focus subject moved into the frame.

All these various marks are periods. End points. A fade out/fade in may suggest a relationship, but it is not a direct link. The dissolve, however, which superimposes fade out and fade in, does connect. If there is a comma in film amongst this catalogue of periods, it is the dissolve. Interestingly, the dissolve serves a multitude of purposes: it is commonly employed to segue or lead into a flashback; it is also used in continuity montage with the jump cut, while at the same time it can represent the passage of long periods of time, especially when it is sequential. It is the one mark of punctuation in cinema that mixes images at the same time that it conjoins them.

Now that we've examined the technology and the language of film, and set the medium in the context of the other arts, it's time to review the history of this remarkable new way of communicating.