

Analysing Moving Image Texts: 'Film Language'

'Film language' describes the way film 'speaks' to its audiences and spectators. Directors, producers and editors work to create meaning from the moving images of film, video and television. We 'decode' these meanings in a not dissimilar way to interpreting spoken and written language. As with words, but more so, we don't merely 'read what we see' – we bring to our interpretation of moving images a range of pre-existing expectations, knowledge and shared experiences that shape the meaning we take from what we see. An important aspect of film language is its compelling nature and its appearance of reality (what is called 'verisimilitude'); it is not only as if we are watching an authentic 'window on the world', it's a window we want to keep on watching – like peaking nosily through the window at an argument in the street, enjoying guessing where it will lead! Through these means, moving images work to entertain, inform and educate but also persuade us to see the world in a particular way.

SIGNS, CODES and CONVENTIONS

Terms: denotation, denotes, denoting; connotation, connotes, connoting; iconic, iconicity; index, indexical, indexicality; symbol, symbolic, symbolically, symbolism...

Semiotics is a way of explaining how we make meaning. Semiotics recognises that all meaning is **encoded** in things that create meaning. When we see objects and images or hear / read words we cannot perceive more than an **idea**. This idea is what we call "meaning". We have learned to **decode** this meaning as we grow up and are educated. The important realisation is that such meaning is not our own idea but someone else's. For example, if you read the word "coward" you **decode** it by referring to values that our culture relates both to cowardice and its **binary opposite** term, heroism. In semiotics, a **sign** is the *smallest* single unit of meaning we can decode and which contributes to overall meaning, e.g. your clothes are a group of 'fashion signs' and might have been 'encoded' by you – consciously or otherwise – to create the meaning of 'coolness'; the 'FCUK' on your T-shirt, for example, is a group of signs that create a **code** of, perhaps, youthful rebelliousness. Simplistically speaking, meaning exists at two "levels": a sign always acts at a basic level – called its **denotation**; this is a literal meaning; but, when it occurs in certain contexts, a group of signs – a **code** – can also *suggest* or **connote** extra meaning, e.g. a rose **denotes** a kind of flower; but when handed to a girl by a boy, it also acts to **connote** romance (and, importantly, in a media text, this would also act to reinforce ways of thinking about how romance 'should' ideally be conducted – one of our society's **dominant ideologies**).

In semiotics, a **code** is any group of signs that seem to "fit" together 'naturally' to create an overall unit of meaning (e.g. the rose is a sign which when added to the signs of a girl and a boy creates the 'romance **cultural code**'; of course, we could call the petals signs, too – if they were wilting, the code would be read differently...). **Filmic codes** are a form of **technical code** because *filmic equipment* is needed to create them, e.g. cameras, microphones, lighting, etc. In **semiotics** there are three basic types of sign and code:

- **Iconic** signs and codes are created to *appear exactly like* the thing itself, e.g. an image of a cowboy looks like – **signifies** – a cowboy. But... importantly, **iconic codes** *always* act to represent *more* than the thing itself, e.g. when we see an image of a cowboy, our culture associates ideas of toughness and action with this particular **iconic code** (which also acts to **reinforce** what masculinity 'means' in our culture – an **ideological** meaning).
- **Indexical** signs are different. They act by *indirectly* "pointing" or suggesting what they mean by acting as 'cues' to existing knowledge, e.g. smoke **signifies** fire, sweating suggests hotness or exercise. These codes are a kind of *media shorthand*. They are very common and useful to media producers.
- **Symbolic codes** act as **signifiers** of meaning totally disconnected from what they denote, e.g. a red heart shape acts only to **symbolise** love; a white dove symbolises *peace*; red symbolises *danger, power* or *sexuality*, white symbolises *innocence*, etc.

An important realisation is that the meaning a code communicates is always **culturally determined**, i.e. we learn the meaning as we grow up in a particular group, society or culture, e.g. the national flag means much more than its **denotation** of a piece of coloured cloth; it also acts to **connote** patriotism and pride.

An important filmic and media code is the **enigma code** which work by creating an intriguing 'question' that the media text will go on to answer. Cinema trailers and posters use enigma codes to tempt the viewers. The term **convention** is important; it refers to an established way of doing something; we are so used to conventional ways that fail to account for their effect and often see them as somehow 'natural' – yet are anything but. So: women in Westerns are *conventionally* either 'very good' (the 'Madonna') or 'very bad' (the 'whore'), and this seems entirely 'normal' within this film genre; equally, the wheels of a car always screech; a gun always kills outright; a punch always knocks a person out cold. **Genre** and **narrative** are important media conventions (see later), as are editing techniques and the use of certain shot types (such as an establishing shot sequence or montage – see below).

MISE-EN-SCÈNE

(i.e. all that the director 'puts into the scene' and records on camera.)

Cinema and TV codes are created within an area bounded by the edges of a screen. What is shown is entirely controlled by the producer or director and by controlling what is in the frame controls the audience or spectators understanding. Asking 'who, what and where' of the characters and objects *and* their relative positions, expressions, appearance, costume, make-up, scenery, props, lighting, sounds, etc. in the **mise-en-scene** will help you analyse and understand it. **What effects** are created in a particular mise-en-scene, **what meaning** do they have (both denotation and connotation), **how** they have been created and **why** created that particular way (which is director's **purpose** – perhaps to develop a **character**, a **mood**, the storyline or **plot** and *always* to contribute to the exploration a deeper meaning or idea, i.e. a **theme**).

EDITING

Editing is a way of compressing time and space or creating the effect of a dream sequence or flashback; it usually is 'seamless' and natural-seeming such that we tend not to even notice it.

Editing is the cutting and joining of lengths of film to place separate shots together yet still manage to suggest a sense of a continuing, connected and realistic flow of events and **narrative** (see below). A **montage** is an edited series of shots that works as an 'individual unit' of meaning greater than the individual mise-en-scenes from which it is created.

Continuity editing refers to editing techniques that keep the sense of narrative flow such as **matched or eye-line cuts**. A **jump-cut** is a dramatic edit that **breaks time / space continuity** yet still appears continuous and 'natural'; an **MTV edit** is a rapid sequence of fast jump cuts that creates a conscious effect such as in music videos; a **cross-cut** follows action in two separate scenes; a **follow-cut** follow action to its consequence, e.g. a character looking out cuts to what they look at. **Fades** (sometimes to black) and **dissolves** create the sense of scenes moving forward. A **sound-bridge** carries sound across shots. **Parallel action** allows two scenes to be viewed yet still retain the continuity and realism and uses **cross cuts**. A **sequence** is a series of shots (i.e. a **montage**) that leads up to a climax as in a story sequence.

SHOT TYPES

A **shot** is a single take. An **establishing shot** is usually a **long shot** that helps to set the scene; it helps the spectator locate him or herself within the narrative (see below) of the film. It is often followed by a **mid-shot**

	(MS) then a close-up (CU) . A subjective point-of-view shot (POV) is an eye-line shot that allows the spectator to feel as if he or she is a part of the scene.
CAMERA ANGLE <i>Eye-line match/high/low/tilt</i>	Camera angles always act to signify meaning, e.g. a subjective POV high angle shot can suggest superiority; a low angle shot can connote weakness.
CAMERA MOVEMENT <i>Zoom track/pan/hand-held</i>	Camera movement always creates significant meaning. A zoom into a close-up of a face can suggest emotion, a pan across a war scene can suggest widespread chaos; a POV tracking shot or a POV hand-held camera shot can create tension and involvement by making the spectator feel as if he or she is a part of the action. A following shot pans or tracks (on rails or a wheeled platform - a ' dolly ') to keep the subject in the shot. A hand-held shot can be kept from overly shaking by the use of a steadicam .
LIGHTING <i>High key, neutral, low key</i>	Lighting can create <i>atmosphere</i> and <i>mood</i> as well as signify meaning, e.g. in the horror genre, light and shade are codes of meaning . High-key lighting is harsh; soft-key lighting creates romance; spotlighting picks out a character from a group, etc. Available light suggests natural light. Full-face lighting suggests openness and honesty; shadow can suggest fear or lack of trust, and so on.
'DIEGESIS' AND SOUND	The diegesis is the 'world of the film': if something is on the screen (including sounds from objects within the <i>mise-en-scene</i>) it is 'in the diegesis' or said to be ' diegetic '. Sound that is a part of the action is diegetic , e.g. wind noise, screeching cars, music from a hi-fi, etc; sound that is <i>added</i> to create mood or atmosphere is non-diegetic . Diegetic sounds may, of course, also be dubbed after filming, or may be exaggerated for effect (e.g. loud footsteps, whistling wind, etc.).
VISUAL EFFECTS / SFX	SFX ('special effects') often utilise computer-generated images (CGI) to create realism and meaning.
NARRATIVE	Narratives are stories. They are our way of making sense of our lives and the world. When we want to tell or hear about life, we want to tell it and hear it in the form of a story. This means that we frequently follow a particular form and structure when we tell about things, whether we tell about <i>real</i> or <i>imaginary</i> events. We have learned to use narrative as the means of telling about people and events such that it has become 'hard wired' into our mind as the most interesting way to tell about events in life and the world. Because we have grown so used to using it, narrative has become "transparent", i.e. we don't know we use it. This means we can call it a convention ; it seems the natural way to tell of things. The paradox of narrative is that despite massively simplifying reality, it creates the illusion of offering authenticity and truth. A narrative typically begins with a sense that the world is in equilibrium – a calm place; this equilibrium becomes disrupted before eventually returning to a new equilibrium; because we believe that the world should be in a state of calm, we expect any disruption to be resolvable and to be returned to calm. This results in a connected beginning-middle-end structure in which the calm of a 'hero's' world is disrupted by a 'villain'. In the real world, of course, people are never wholly good or wholly evil; life is not necessarily 'naturally' calm and events are never so simply related one to another. But, that's the way we see the world and by presenting a word of people and events in the form of a narrative, media texts work easily to trick us into believing we are being shown a ' window on the world ' – reality. TV ads are mini-narratives in which we add in missed aspects in our desire to see a story unfold and be resolved. Often we <i>become the hero</i> and the advertised product becomes the 'helper' – equivalent to the magical potion of ancient fairy tales that helps change the frog into a handsome prince and so on...
GENRE	Genre is the <i>kind of narrative</i> being told, e.g. detective, Western. It defines a text by its <i>similarities to other texts</i> . Watching a film, we have many pre-existing memories and expectations regarding characters, settings and events: it is this that helps us enjoy predicting what might happen next and working out where events will lead. Genre allows a director to create seeming realism because we fail to see that what we see is <i>not</i> reality but a media convention . So... in the gangster genre, we don't mind the owner of a casino being horribly killed because we see him, within this genre, as belonging to the side of the 'villain'. Film companies use genre <i>both</i> to sell and help make successful films: a popular genre creates a greater chance of commercial success, so genre is a cost efficient way of planning a film, making it cheaper to write new stories and reducing the need for entirely new sets; a negative aspect is that it being 'safe', it can also act to reduce choice and creativity.
ICONOGRAPHY	Iconography is an important aspect of genre . We expect to see certain objects on screen when we see a particular genre, for example, in a Western, dusty lonely roads, saloon bars, cowboy hats and horses, jails, sheriffs badges, guns, etc.; in a modern horror film, we expect young girls, 'normal' objects, use of dark and light, etc. These 'genre indicators' are called the iconography of the <i>mise-en-scene</i> or genre .
'THE STAR SYSTEM'	Certain film stars can be an important part of a film's iconography and become signifiers of meaning; they create expectations of character and action, genre , and powerful iconic representations of such as masculinity and femininity. In the past, stars were contracted to stop them moving studios and genres.
REALISM <i>'Verisimilitude'</i> <i>'Generic verisimilitude'</i> <i>'Cultural verisimilitude'</i>	The media can offer ultra-high levels of seeming 'realism': the bright screen, clear and powerful Dolby sound, darkened room, etc. are highly compelling and persuasive. Such 'appearance of reality' is called verisimilitude . This is a convention as there is nothing genuinely 'realistic' about media images. There are two important types of verisimilitude: generic verisimilitude convinces us because of the genre we are watching (in horror it seems realistic for a vampire to sink its teeth into a person's neck); cultural verisimilitude seems realistic because it <i>mimics</i> real life.
TIP: when you struggle to recognise the effect on an audience of a sign, code or element of film language, mentally switch it to something very different. The suggestive power (that is, the connotation) of the code will then become clear.	