

Cinema as Art

Cinema as an art form grew out of the industrial age. The technology of photography advanced to allow moving pictures. The Hollywood system of producing films grew out of an extraordinarily efficient business model. The development of sound in film by the late 1920's was in many respects the final component in the art form we know today. The idea of creating a musical score for a film is really an outgrowth of the theatrical ideas of the German Romantic composer Wagner- in fact film composer Max Steiner called Wagner "the father of film music." But cinema, while borrowing from photography and theatre and classical music is really an entirely new art form. With the speed and efficiency of the modern age it has swept the world and allowed more people access to a shared artistic reality. Our hope is that as BYU Idaho students you'll be more aware of what makes the magic happen.

One of the great challenges in dealing with film is its rather paradoxical state. The great film star Charlton Heston described the paradox in these words: "The trouble with movies as a business is it's an art. And the trouble with movies as an art is that it's a business. And it is- and every one of us that makes films struggles with that." Motion pictures are an extraordinarily collaborative art. While a live theatre production would include a writer, director, actors, prop people, makeup artists, and stage-hands, for a motion picture that only scratches the surface. Have you ever stayed watching a movie to include the closing credits? It's almost shocking how many people are involved in the process. What's an assistant Best Boy?

Cinema is a unique art form in that it is **mediated**- meaning that the creators of the art, writers, actors, musicians in most instances work separately from one another and the end product we see on the screen is a compilation by the work of others. When we watch a live stage play (cinema is of course closely linked to theatre) we are seeing real live actresses in real time in front of us. Our view of the action remains constant- it is entirely dependent upon where our seat in the theatre is. One of the most obvious examples of this mediation is the process of **editing**- not only visually but with sound as well. Separate pieces of film (or video clips) are combined to create a narrative image when in fact the movie (or TV show, or video) was shot out of sequence. We are given a sense of **continuity** through the blending together of visual images and aural things (sounds, music) to create a sense of reality which is in fact very artificial. The fact that (with the exception of cartoons) we are looking at real people in real looking places makes it easier for us to **suspend disbelief** than in live theatre. Projecting images to enormous size in darkened rooms filled with other spectators makes cinema a powerful experience.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

In many ways the camera work in film mirrors the techniques of still photographers, there is concern about organization (the rule of thirds is alive and well in movie horizons). But camera work in a film is far different than simply placing a camera in the audience and recording a play. There is a new visual grammar that we have come to know and accept.



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Consider how changing the length of distance between camera and subject can change the viewer's perspective.



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For example the camera allows the audience to see through the eyes of a character in the film. In this clip the camera gives us the perspective of a fly being killed. We can get closer to the face of actors than was ever possible on stage- even with really good seats. Notice in this clip the interplay between **point-of-view** shots (where we see through the character's eyes) and **reaction** shots, where we see a character's reaction to something they've seen.



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Here is an explanation by Alfred Hitchcock of how editing can change meaning using these shots:



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An **establishing shot** tells us the time and place of a scene. It is usually a long shot and can visually explain how and where things are taking place. Often the opening of a film consists of a series of establishing shots to give the audience its "bearings" on where we are.



(The “talent” we would call an actor)

COMMUNICATION THROUGH CAMERA ANGLES

Where the cameras are placed in relation to the characters on the screen can suggest a great deal about how the film-maker wants us to perceive them. Long-time movie critic Roger Ebert reflected on how after watching hundreds (thousands really) he noticed some patterns in communication through camera placement:

In simplistic terms: Right is more positive, left more negative. Movement to the right seems more favorable; to the left, less so. The future seems to live on the right, the past on the left. The top is dominant over the bottom. The foreground is stronger than the background. Symmetrical compositions seem at rest. Diagonals in a composition seem to "move" in the direction of the sharpest angle they form, even though of course they may not move at all. Therefore, a composition could lead us into a background that becomes dominant over a foreground. Tilt shots of course put everything on a diagonal, implying the world is out of balance. I have the impression that more tilts are down to the right than to the left, perhaps suggesting the characters are sliding perilously into their futures. Left tilts to me suggest helplessness, sadness, resignation. Few tilts feel positive. Movement is dominant over things that are still. A POV (point of view) above a character's eyeline reduces him; below the eyeline, enhances him. Extreme high angle shots make characters into pawns; low angles make them into gods. Brighter areas tend to be dominant over darker areas, but far from always: Within the context, you can seek the "dominant contrast," which is the area we are drawn toward. Sometimes it will be darker, further back, lower, and so on. It can be as effective to go against intrinsic weightings as to follow them.

MONTAGE

Montage is a French term that means, “putting stuff together.” Putting together different segments of film is an effective way to visually tell a story. As was



mentioned earlier the shooting of a movie can be a long and separated process. Frequently films will have montages consisting of a series of newspaper headlines to give a rapid overview of an event.

Combining these images can either compress time, or expand our view of a single incident. Here comes an example of compressing time. One of the most

moving montage segments in the last few decades actually came from an animated work, Pixar’s UP.

CONTINUITY

Since a motion picture is shot out of sequence it is important to make sure that the separate segments are conveying a sense of connection- that the action on the



screen is continuous. Failure to do so results on one of the most common errors in cinema, lack of continuity. Here is an example of a simple photographic technique that is central to giving the needed continuity in a scene: If a scene is shot over the course of several days, it is essential that the lighting, props, costumes, and even backgrounds be

maintained- otherwise the spell is broken and the audience will realize that this moment was shot out of sequence.

SOUND



One of the major mediated features of film is the ability to manipulate sound. It’s possible to create the perfect sound levels- or even a better singing voice for movie music. For example Marni Nixon made a career out of being a “ghost singer” for big stars in films like West Side Story and My Fair Lady (she also got work as a cartoon voice, and as a nun in The Sound of Music).



Notice how skillfully sound is manipulated in this clip from *The Natural*. All of the camera angles and techniques mentioned above are present, (there's a powerful approach to lighting here) but there is also a very powerful, sometimes subtle use of sound. Notice how easily the sound moves back and forth from the radio announcements to the musical score, to crowd noises, player comments and sounds produced by the baseball.