Introducing Cinematic and Theatrical Elements in Film

by John Golden

In order to begin looking at movies more critically, we need to learn a little bit about the tools that filmmakers use to create their products. If we were studying literature, we'd learn to identify similes, metaphors, and symbols; if we were studying painting, we'd learn about brush strokes, color choice, and composition; but since we're studying film, we need to identify cinematic technique and theatrical elements and learn how they affect audiences. Cinematic technique can include the framing, angle, and camera movement of a shot, as well as the sound and editing used in a film. Theatrical elements include costumes, props, sets, and acting choice. Each cinematic technique and theatrical element is used by a filmmaker for a particular purpose, and when we analyze films closely, we need to be able to explain the effect that each has on the audience.

Film Production

Throughout this article,, the terms "filmmaker" or "director" will be used when referring to the creator of a film, but this is not necessarily accurate. Even though a novelist often thanks his or her editor on the acknowledgments page, there is rarely any doubt that the true creator of the book is the writer him or herself. This is also true of the painter of an artwork, and the composer of a symphony. The same cannot be said of the director of a movie. While most people refer to the director as the "author" of the film, this is a bit too simplistic because, unlike most arts, filmmaking is a collaborative process. A director might have a great idea for a movie, but without a Producer to secure the financing and to manage the details and budget of a production, the director would have little hope of success.

Once the project of creating the film starts, the real collaborative process begins. During the actual shooting of the film, according to *Film Art: An Introduction* (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, 2006), there are five main areas of support for the director:

1. *The Design Team*, which is headed by the production designer. The production designer is responsible for the look of the film's settings. Working closely with the film's director, the production designer supervises the staff that creates the sets, designs the costumes, applies the makeup, and locates or constructs the props. Every one of these choices can have a tremendous effect on an audience's reaction to the film. The design team also includes: the art director, who constructs the sets; the set decorator; the costume designer; and the storyboard artist, who draws comic-strip like sketches of what each shot of the film will look like.
2. *The Director's Crew*, which supports the director in communicating with each of the other departments.
3. *The Photography Unit*, which is headed by the cinematographer (also called the director of photography or DP), who is in charge of the camera movements, focus, framing, and lighting. Have you ever seen credits at the end of a film for someone called the "best boy" or "gaffer"? The gaffer is the

head electrician, who places the rigging of the lights and the "best boy" is his or her assistant. And yes, if you look closely, you will see a few female "best boys."

4. *The Sound Unit* is responsible for all the on-set recording of dialogue and sound effects.
5. *The Cast* may include well-known stars, supporting players, or extras. Their work, obviously, is the most visible of all those involved.

After filming is completed, another set of people become involved, including the *Editor*, whose job is to take the hours of footage and assemble it into a piece that reflects the filmmakers' purposes. Other people are responsible for creating and inserting special visual effects, sound effects, music, voice-overs, dialogue dubbing, etc.

As you can see, there are too many people involved to accurately call movie making the work of a single director. Usually a director whose film just won an Academy Award is smart enough to realize this and to use his or her time thanking everyone involved in the film, rather than wasting precious minutes thanking his or her second grade teacher. However, for convenience, we will use the term "director" broadly, even though it was probably the DP who came up with the idea for lighting a particular scene or the costume director who selected the wig the actress is wearing.

Cinematic Technique

Throughout this section, the term "shot" will be used repeatedly. A shot refers to one, uninterrupted image that is seen onscreen in a finished film. The shot ends when the camera "cuts" to another image and there is just a tiny, split second of black. Your eye may not register "black" but it is very similar to the blink of an eye. Look at any scene from any movie or TV show and you can practice identifying shots.

Framing: One of the first decisions that a director makes when designing a shot, is deciding how it will be framed. The main choices are close-up, medium shot, and long shot. Each has different consequences for the impression the director is trying to convey.

When an actor is framed in ***close-up***, we will see only the actor's head from about the neck up; objects shot in close-up take up most of the screen. As stated above, each of these techniques is used for a particular reason, so why would a director want to use a close-up? There could be a number of reasons depending upon the film: close-ups can show enormous amounts of detail, they can reveal characters' emotions, they can be used to emphasize important objects and details, and they can show intimacy or claustrophobia, among many other effects.

If an actor were framed in a ***long shot***, we would see the actor's entire body; objects in this type of framing would appear to be seen from some distance. Imagine a character on screen framed in a long shot. You probably could not make out many facial expressions or emotions, but think about what you could see: you can see the character's surroundings. In a great scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, a man who has been framed for murder is lured to an isolated cornfield, and Hitchcock frames the scene almost entirely in long shots to emphasize the man's vulnerability and how out of

place he is. In addition to showing the setting of a particular scene, long shots can also reveal distance or a lack of emotional connection between characters.

An actor framed in a ***medium shot*** would be seen from the waist up. A medium shot has some of the advantages of the long shot and the close-up. More detail can be shown in a medium shot than in a long shot while a medium shot can reveal more of the surroundings than a close-up. The vast majority of shots in a Hollywood film and on TV shows are medium shots.

Angles: Once the director has decided on the framing, the question of the angle of the shot presents itself. If the director positions the camera below a subject, looking up, the director is using a ***low-angle*** shot. This has the effect of making the subject look larger and more powerful than it normally would. Orson Welles, in *Citizen Kane*, used a number of low-angle shots (at one point digging a hole in the studio's floor!) to show that his main character, a wealthy politician and newspaper publisher, was much larger-than-life.

When a director places his or her camera above an object, looking down on it, the director is using a ***high-angle***. This has the effect of making a character look smaller than normal; it emphasizes a character's weakness or powerlessness. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, for example, the main character, L. B. Jeffries, is confined to a wheelchair with a badly broken leg. The large rear window of his third floor walk-up apartment opens to an interior courtyard from which he can see into the windows of many other apartments. A woman in one of the apartments has disappeared and Jeffries suspects that her husband has killed her. The husband has just caught Jeffries spying and is walking up the stairs to Jeffries' apartment. Jeffries is alone and help will not arrive in time to save him. Hitchcock shoots Jeffries in a series of high angle shots to remind the audience that this character is trapped and without any escape.

A shot in which the audience sees an object straight on, in which the angle is even with the character or object, is called an ***eye-level*** shot. While this type of shot may not carry a lot of effect the first time it is used, think about what a director might be saying when a character that had been shot with a low-angle is now shown at eye-level: his strength and power may be weakening. Most shots used in movies are eye-level because it is the normal way that we see each other in real life.

Camera Movement Within a Shot: There are a number of ways that a camera can move while the shot is being taken. Each has its own particular features and effects. Often, only a part of the camera moves, while the body of the camera remains in place. When a stationary camera's head moves left to right (or right to left), staying on the horizontal axis, the director is using a ***pan***. This is often used to show the setting because it tends to reflect a typical movement of our own eyes when we take in a new scene. Think about how you would look at, say, the Grand Canyon; you would probably scan the scenery moving your head left to right or right to left. If the stationary camera's head moves up and down on the vertical axis, it is called a ***tilt***. It moves just as you would move your head and eyes if you were standing at the base of a huge mountain and you started looking upward. When the focus of a stationary camera changes within a shot, the movement is called a ***zoom***, as when a director zooms in to reveal a key clue in the mystery, or zooms out to show the character's reaction to finding that clue.

Each of the above movements occurs while the camera itself stays in a fixed position. A ***dolly shot*** refers to any time the camera itself moves, either on tracks, from a helicopter, on someone's back, or in any other way. Dolly shots move the audience with the action and keep us from feeling like spectators.

Editing: An Editor is often referred to as the film's storyteller, connecting the images that the director shot into a cohesive and coherent narrative. There are several ways that an editor can connect images:

1. A ***cut*** is the quickest way to move between images. An editor joins two pieces of film (or two shots) together so that in the finished film it looks like an instantaneous change between shots. Sometimes this can be jarring or smooth depending upon the filmmaker's purpose.
2. A ***fade*** is when the image seen on screen slowly fades to black or white or some other color. A fade sometimes shows that time has passed, as when a couple in an older movie goes into a bedroom and the shot fades to gray; when the shot fades back in, they're smoking a cigarette. Hmmmm. What happened? A fade can show that a segment of the film has ended (like a chapter in a book). Fades tend to be slow paced and sometimes reflect a somber or pensive mood.
3. A ***dissolve*** is when an image on screen slowly fades away while the next image is slowly fading in. For a period of time, both images are on screen at the same time. Dissolves are used to connect images or to move between images in a smooth, rhythmic fashion. At the beginning of *Apocalypse Now* images of the Vietnam jungle dissolve into images of a man lying on his bed staring up at the ceiling. Through these dissolves we know that the man is a soldier and he is thinking about the war.

There are a number of reasons why an editor assembles his or her shots in a particular fashion. These reasons can include building suspense, making connections between scenes, and moving the story along at a particular flow and rhythm. One way that this is accomplished is through ***parallel editing***, also called ***cross-cutting***, which is used to cut between scenes that are happening simultaneously but not in the same location. When the damsel in distress is tied to the railroad tracks, the film cuts from the damsel to the oncoming train, then to the hero on his way, then back to the damsel, and so on. The question, stated without a single word, is "Will the hero make it in time?" This use of parallel editing obviously builds suspense. Other reasons for parallel editing are to make connections between events for thematic purposes. At the end of *The Godfather*, for example, Michael Corleone is seen attending the baptism of his godson. The editor cuts from the church to scenes of assassination; throughout the country Michael's rivals are being killed at the same time. We see Michael renouncing "evil" at the same time that his henchmen are killing in his name. By connecting these images through parallel editing, we are shown Michael's baptism of violence as the new godfather.

Another type of editing is called ***point-of-view*** editing. This occurs when an editor tries to show what a character is thinking. Imagine a film in which we see a man on a

subway platform looking around. The film then cuts to what he sees: handbags dangling from arms, wallets half-out of pockets. We then see the man's face again as a satisfied smile parts his lips. Through this choice of point-of-view editing, we know that the man is a thief who is confident of success. In *Psycho,* for example, Norman Bates, a psychotic killer, pushes a car into a swamp; there is a dead woman in the trunk. From Norman's point of view, we see the car start to sink, then the editor cuts back and forth between the sinking car and Norman's anxious face. When we see the car stop sinking, it is again through Norman's eyes. Immediately we, the audience, tense up just as if we were Norman, who is now looking around to see if anyone is watching. Will it sink? Will he (we) be caught? When the car finally starts to sink again, our relief matches Norman's. Through the use of point-of-view editing, we see through a character's eyes, which allows an editor to put us into that character's shoes. We can feel like the character and in a sense we become the character, even a character as monstrous as Norman Bates.

A final consideration for an editor is the length or **duration** of each shot. The typical shot in a Hollywood film lasts approximately 5-8 seconds. When an editor chooses to have a shot (or "take") last significantly longer or shorter, there is generally a reason for doing so. ***Long takes*** generally feel as if they unfold in real time, allowing the director to set up the scene realistically. The camera, using a long take, can reveal the entirety of a scene, showing relationships between characters and their environments. In a long take, the viewer often gets to decide where to look and what to look at, which creates a greater sense of realism. Long takes also can create a slower, more languid pace.

The final scene in *Big Night*, for example, is all shot in a single take. The scene shows the two brothers at the end of a very long night that cost them their business; the long take is in contrast to the craziness of the previous evening. The pace of the characters is in tune with the pace of the editing.

The ***short take***, on the other hand, is typical in the quick-cutting MTV videos in which a single shot can last under a second. This obviously creates a much more rapid, energetic style and pace. Action films will often use increasingly short takes to create suspense and drama in their fight sequences or car chases. When an editor uses a short take, he or she usually is directing our attention to what is important, in contrast to the long take in which the viewer has an opportunity to examine the scene.

The choices that an editor makes, while often invisible to the unaware viewer, have much more effect than most other parts of a finished film.

Sound: The sound track for a film can produce a layered effect, adding energy and depth to the visuals and ultimately to the story. Director Akira Kurosawa said, "Cinematic sound is that which does not simply add to, but multiples, two or three times, the effect of the image." Can you imagine a horror film without the creepy music or an action adventure film without the sounds of explosions or cars crashing? Of course not. What we hear in a film is as essential as what we see.

When listening to how film sound adds to your movie experience, keep in mind that there are generally considered to be three classifications of sound. The first is ***diegetic*** sound, meaning that the sound (be it music, dialogue, or sound effects) emanates from a source in the movie environment. Examples of diegetic sound can include characters talking, the sound of traffic or of a footstep, music from a radio, and any other sound that could logically be heard by a character.

The second classification of sound is ***nondiegetic***, which refers to sound that cannot logically be a part of the movie environment. Nondiegetic sound can be the music we hear while the title is rolling or the music that appears seemingly out of nowhere to heighten a romantic scene. During a deathbed scene, when the sound of mournful violins swells, the grieving characters don't look around to see where the music is coming from. They can't hear it; it isn't part of their movie environment; it's nondiegetic sound.

The third classification of film sound is a mix of the previous two and is called ***internal diegetic***. If the audience hears a character's thoughts (in a voice over or in an aside), we can presume that the character can hear that sound but the other characters in the same shot cannot. Therefore, it is diegetic sound for only a single character. Consider the voice-over narration from *Sunset Boulevard* in which the hero is already dead at the beginning of the film and is retelling his story in a series of flashbacks.

Whether a sound is diegetic, nondiegetic, or internal diegetic can be open to interpretation but a director makes the choice and our job, as the audience, is to interpret that choice.

Once we have identified the type of sound a director is using, we should next consider why the director has selected that particular sound. More often than not, sound is realistically portrayed in movies: people talk, papers shuffle, a car backfires. These are the elements needed to move the story along. There are, however, other reasons for sound, one of which is that sound can be a powerful emotional trigger. For example, in *All That Jazz*, the character Joe Gideon is sitting with members of his cast, reading a script. Everyone is laughing and talking when all of a sudden we can't hear their laughter anymore. We still see people laughing, but all we can hear are the intimate sounds of Joe Gideon as he's getting ready to have a heart attack: his labored breathing, his ticking wristwatch, his shoe grinding a used cigarette into the floor. By isolating these particular sounds, the director is heightening the suspense of the moment and bringing the viewer inside the character at the character's most vulnerable state. Music is often a key element in creating an emotional trigger. The driving techno-beat of the zombie attacks in *28 Days Later* reflects the mechanical, nonhuman feelings of the zombies toward their victims.

To really understand the power of sound in film, try turning the volume down to nothing. Do you still feel as connected to the images you are seeing? Probably not.

Lighting: Think back again to the horror movie we discussed earlier. Even if it took place in that old mansion, would it still be scary if every light in every room worked or if there were no dark passageways? Probably not, since lighting is extremely effective at setting the mood of a scene and for characterization. Our horror movie, like most scary movies, would probably be lit using ***low-key lighting***, a lot of shadows with sharp contrasts between light and dark. Mysteries and suspense thrillers are also often shot in low-key light indicating that things are hidden, or that something unexpected can happen at any time.

The opposite of low-key lighting is called, logically enough, ***high-key lighting***, which is characterized by brightness, openness, and light. Romantic comedies, musicals, and important scenes in family dramas, are shot with this lighting: characters' motives are not hidden, nor are there likely to be many scares or sudden surprises. Individual lighting on a particular character can affect how we feel about that character. Norman Bates, the

delusional killer in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, is often lit with ***side lighting***, where one side of the actor's face is darker than the other. This lighting can hint at a character's secrets or that the character is somehow torn between opposing forces. When a character is brightly lit, without any shadows appearing anywhere, the director is using ***front lighting***. Heroes and heroines are shot this way to show pureness and honesty.

The cinematic elements of a film are important ways in which directors convey the emotions and messages of their movies. However, films share elements with other art forms, such as live performance theater. To understand the artistic elements of movies, it is helpful to learn about their theatrical components as well.

Theatrical Elements in Film

In this section we will not compare live theater to movies; instead we will examine those elements that are typically found in drama that also appear in film. The discussion will include an explanation of the effects of theatrical elements when applied to film. The main categories of theatrical elements are sets, costumes, props, and acting choice.

Sets: Imagine going to a horror movie. Would it be scarier if it took place in a brightly lit, modern-day condo or in a dark, decrepit mansion? The answer is clear: the ***set*** determines an audience's expectation for the action. Almost every scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* takes place within a single room to which the main character, Mr. Jeffries, is confined after having broken his leg. The set conveys the claustrophobic feelings experienced by Jeffries and the pull of the huge window that overlooks the neighbors' apartments. Jeffries has become a voyeur and the set encourages the audience to want to look out that window and become voyeurs as well. In the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the director asked that the set walls be moved closer to each other as the film progressed so that it seemed as if the world was pressing down on the characters, compressing them to the breaking point.

Not all movie sets are located in a studio; often, films are shot on location, which can still be described as the "set" of the scene. The same questions can be asked about the sets of films on location as of sets located in a studio. Why does New York City look absolutely beautiful in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, but frightening in Abel Ferrara's *The King of New York*? The answer is found in what the filmmakers were trying to get the audience to feel about their subjects. They use the sets to help achieve their purpose.

Costumes: If you watch any old Western, you can always identify the good guys and bad guys just by the colors of their hats. ***Costumes*** are a quick signal for characterization and how we feel about characters often comes simply from the way they are dressed. Think about Indiana Jones; when he is teaching at the college, he wears a suit, a tie, and glasses, and clearly looks uncomfortable, but as soon as he is out on an adventure, he dons his leather jacket, whip, and his trusty hat, and is more relaxed and at ease; the Indy we like best is the second one, of course.

Costume designers often try to show contrasts between characters through the clothes they wear. In a scene from *Rocky*, when our hero is introduced as Apollo Creed's

next opponent, Rocky appears in a simple pull-over sweater with his shirt collar poking out. He stands next to Creed, who is wearing a tailored three-piece suit. The differences between these two men could not be made more clear.

Growth or development in a character can also be stressed by costumes. In a scene from *Elizabeth*, the young and nervous queen is shown rehearsing for an important speech dressed in a simple white nightgown; we feel scared for her because she looks so vulnerable in her nightgown. Later, as she is delivering the speech, she is regal in a bright red gown that stands in sharp contrast, not only to her earlier dress, but also to her audience, which is dressed almost entirely in black. Elizabeth delivers her speech successfully and her manner, reflected in her costume, is one of confidence and control.

Props: Objects that actors manipulate or that are a part of the set are called ***props***, and they too can reveal information about character, setting, and theme. For example, an opening shot of Steven Soderberg's *sex, lies, and videotape* shows a man talking on the phone. He idly takes off his wedding ring and carelessly spins it on his desk. This simple use of a prop reveals that this man does not take his marriage seriously. A scene from *Philadelphia* has a character suffering from AIDS touch a picture frame, a box of cigars, and other personal items on the desk of a lawyer who is clearly watching the infected man's movements very closely. When you pay close attention to the seemingly little details of a film, you can see the filmmaker's purposes.

Acting Choice: Probably the most essential – or at least the most visible – component of the theatrical elements of a film is the performance of the actors. Too often we quickly say, "he is a good/bad/terrible/fantastic actor," without really examining the many aspects that go into a film performance. In this discussion we are not going to evaluate the actors, but rather we'll identify the choices that an actor can make and try to explain how these choices impact viewers and add to characterization and theme.

The goal of every actor in any film is to effectively and realistically capture the essence of the character that they have chosen to portray. While we don't always consider this fact, the first choice that actors make is whether they will take a role that has been offered to them. Though they may deny it, most actors are typecast for certain roles, either by their own decision or by audiences' perceptions of the actor. Do we want to see Woody Allen in an action movie? Julia Roberts tried to change her looks and persona in *Mary Reilly*, and the audiences stayed away in droves. An actor, whether by his or her physical type, voice, ethnicity, or public persona, carries certain baggage to a film role, so we can certainly discuss whether an actor is appropriate for a particular role or not.

Poor casting choices that seriously compromise the believability of the character and negatively affect the film's goals abound in Hollywood movies. Some examples that come to mind are: Tom Cruise as Lestat in *Interview with a Vampire*, Kevin Costner with a British "accent" in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Katherine Hepburn as a hillbilly in *Morning Glory*, and Robert Redford in *The Great Gatsby*.

Acting, like painting and filmmaking, is an art and there are many tools that an actor has at his or her disposal to communicate a character to an audience. One is the actor's delivery of lines. The way that an actor chooses to say his or her lines greatly affects the audience's reaction to the character; an actor can shout, whisper, cry, laugh, etc. The same actor can portray totally different characters simply by the way the lines

are said. Al Pacino, for instance, is extremely exuberant with a Cuban accent as *Scarface*, while in the first two *Godfather* films he is subdued and quietly menacing. When a film, or a specific scene, calls for a particular mood and tone, we should be able to isolate how the actors' delivery of the lines helps to convey that mood or how the delivery detracts from it. Again, this is not necessarily an evaluation of the actors' performances, but rather, it is a way to identify the contributions that this theatrical element can make to a film.

Other tools used by actors are movement and gesture. Think about Anthony Hopkins, as Hannibal in *The Silence of the Lambs*: the way his eyes follow Clarice around, how his hands wave lightly to the music before he strikes, and his animalistic smile at the taste of human blood. All of these contribute to the audience's feelings toward the character. When you focus on the seemingly small details of an actor's movements, you can begin to understand even more about the film's purposes.

These theatrical elements allow us to expand what we can look for in a film and to see even more clearly the amount of fine attention to detail that goes into the creation of a movie. When we notice how the cinematic elements support the theatrical, we can see the number of ways that filmmakers can communicate their ideas and how complicated this process can be.

Conclusion

In addition to cinematic and theatrical elements, film also incorporates plot, characterization, theme and the other components of storytelling. In addition, many of the devices of literature carry through and are used in film, including: foreshadowing, flashback, flashforward, foil, and irony. One of the most important questions we can ask when analyzing any film is: how does the director use cinematic and theatrical elements to tell the story? Understanding the techniques of cinematic art can lead us to a greater understanding of the story that the filmmaker is trying to tell.

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For more, see http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/curriculum/Film_Unit.doc a film unit written for the Portland Public Schools by the author of essay, John Golden.