

ANALYSING A FILM EXTRACT

'Film language' is the term used to describe the way meaning is created by the moving images and sounds of film and TV using simply sound and light. We can interpret this 'language' because we have learned to 'read' or 'decode' the meanings it creates over a lifetime of being exposed to it. But reading a film is a complex business because we do not just 'read what we see' – we also bring to a film a whole range of pre-existing expectations and prior knowledge all of which affects our 'reading' or interpretation of the images we see.

SIGNS, CODES and CONVENTIONS

Denotation, denotes, denoting; connotation, connotes, connoting; iconic, iconicity; index, indexical, indexicality; symbol, symbolic, symbolism...

Semiotics is the name given to an important way by which meaning can be studied, especially in the mass media. In semiotics, meaning is said to be created by **signs** and **codes**, **denotation** and **connotation**. A **sign** is the basic unit of meaning: it is *any individual thing* that creates meaning, for example, your clothes are a group of 'fashion signs' (perhaps you are trying to suggest 'coolness?'). There are two ways that signs create meaning: all signs have a literal meaning, which is called their **denotation**; but, depending on the context, many signs also *suggest* other 'layers' of meaning, which is called their **connotation**. For example, an image of a girl dressed all in white *denotes* just that, i.e. this is what you 'see'; but it may also *connote* innocence or purity (and all that this means in our society and culture), i.e. this is what you 'think'. Connotation, therefore, is always *more than* the denotation.

Signs rarely work alone. They are most often combined with other signs to form a **code**. A code is a group of signs that we recognise as going 'naturally together' to create an overall meaning (e.g. a rose is a sign; but being handed to a girl by a boy could create a 'romance code' and suggest love). Film and TV codes are often called **technical codes** because technical equipment is used to create them. There are three ways through which codes and signs can create meaning:

- **Iconicity:** an **iconic** sign or code *looks just like* the thing it represents, e.g. an image of a cowboy seems to be a real cowboy; but it is called **iconic** because the image suggests far more than it should: for example, our culture tends to associate extra meanings with the idea of 'cowboy', such as toughness, heroism, masculinity, etc. Iconic signs are *never* reality: they are merely their creator's **representation** of reality; they could be said to create an **alternative version of reality** – however real it seems to be.
- **Indexicality** (an **indexical** sign or code) in a sign directly suggests meaning because what it shows seems to be the result of something we associate with the thing it represents, e.g. smoke suggests fire, sweat suggests exercise, appearance can suggest wealth, etc. This can be a short-cut way for a media text to create or suggest meaning.
- **Symbolism:** a **symbolic** sign or code suggests the meaning that our culture has taught us it does; a symbol, in itself, has no association with what we take it to mean, e.g. a red heart shape suggests love; a dove suggests peace; letters combine to make words, etc.

The meaning we gain from codes is said to be **culturally determined** which means that our culture 'taught' us that particular way to interpret the meaning. For example, when we see our country's flag, we see more than what it simply denotes – a piece of coloured cloth: patriotism and pride, etc. Meaning is also affected by **context:** the time, place and situation in which the code is a) created and b) interpreted.

An important code is called an **enigma code**. This code works by creating a puzzle that we feel we want to try to solve; but only by watching the movie (or whatever media text) can we find the answer. Movie posters and trailers use enigma codes.

A **convention** is another important idea in semiotics: it is a way of doing something that we are so used to we fail to notice what is really happening and see what the media text wants us to see; conventions seem 'perfectly natural' or 'realistic' yet are anything but. So: women in cowboys tend *conventionally* to be either 'very good' or 'very bad' – and this seems 'normal' within the **genre** of cowboy movies; in films, the wheels of a car always screech; guns always kill 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 later).

MISE-EN-SCÈNE

(French for 'put in the scene')

Cinema and TV codes are created within an area bounded by the edges of a screen. By controlling what objects and action are in this frame, a film director creates what is called a **mise-en-scène**. Asking questions such as 'who, what and where' of the characters and objects *and* their relative positions, expressions, appearance, costume, make-up, scenery, props, lighting, sounds, etc. in a mise-en-scene will help you analyse it. Try to consider **what effects** are created in a mise-en-scene, **what meaning** they have (their denotation and, most importantly, connotation), **how** they have been created and **why** they were created (which will be the director's **purpose** – perhaps to develop a **character**, a **mood**, the storyline or **plot** and sometimes to explore a deeper meaning or idea, i.e. a **theme**).

EDITING

Some important edits are called: continuity (or 'Hollywood') edits; MTV ('music television') edits; cross-cuts; follow-cuts; match-cuts; jump-cuts; eye-line matches; dissolves; fades; montages; bridging; flashbacks...

Editing is the placing of separate shots together. This allows a director to manipulate space and time – hundreds of miles or weeks of time can be reduced to a few scenes that appear perfectly natural and believable to the audience. A **montage** is a most important editing technique. It is a series of shots that are edited together to create a kind of 'individual unit' of meaning.

Continuity edits – especially **matched cuts** – where two shots seem naturally and smoothly to fit together are called 'Hollywood edits'; such edits can be almost unnoticeable. They create a realistic and seamless flow to the story (i.e. **narrative** – see below) where one event leads naturally onto its "result". **Jump-cuts** are dramatic edits; **MTV edits** are rapid sequences of fast jump cuts that were first used in music videos; **cross-cuts** follow different actions such as two people talking; **follow-cuts** follow an action to its consequence, e.g. a character looking edits to what they look at; **eye-line matches** are a kind of **follow cut**. A **sound-bridge** is a sound edit that allows sound from one shot to cross into the next to create continuity.

SHOT TYPES

Establishing shot / long-shot / mid-shot / close-up / point-of-view shot / soft-focus...

An **establishing shot** opens a sequence and 'sets the scene', locating the action. It is often followed by a **mid-shot** and a **close-up shot**. A **subjective point-of-view shot (POV)** is an eye-level shot that makes it appear you are viewing the scene from the character's perspective (as in 'Blair Witch'). An **objective point-of-view shot** acts as if you are an observer looking into the scene.

CAMERA ANGLE <i>Eye-line match / high / low</i>	Camera angles can suggest meaning, e.g. a subjective POV high angle shot can suggest superiority.
CAMERA MOVEMENT <i>Zooming / tracking / panning / hand-held</i>	Different camera movements can create significant meaning – a zoom into a close-up of a face can suggest emotion, a pan across a war scene can suggest violence; POV tracking shots and POV hand-held camera shot can create tension, fear and involvement by making the audience feel a part of the action.
LIGHTING <i>High key, neutral, low key</i>	Lighting can suggest atmosphere and mood, e.g. in a horror movie, light and shade are important codes of meaning and are major signifiers of genre . High-key lighting is harsh, soft-key lighting creates a romantic atmosphere, spotlighting picks out a particular character from a group as special in some way.
'DIEGESIS' AND SOUND	Diegesis means all that exists within the imaginary world of the film. Sound that is a part of the scene itself – of the diegesis of the film – is called diegetic sound , e.g. wind noise, etc; but sound that is <i>added</i> to create a mood is called non-diegetic sound – this is often music. Diegetic sounds may also be added in after filming, or may be exaggerated for effect (e.g. unnaturally loud footsteps in a thriller or horror movie).
VISUAL EFFECTS / SFX	Hi-tech SFX ('special effects') often uses computer-generated graphics to suggest various meanings.
NARRATIVE	The relating of events in the form of a story or narrative is a major convention of cinema and TV. We are all immersed in narratives since childhood and prefer – insist – on telling of and hearing about complex events not in the form of complex details accounts or dry information but as absorbing and interesting stories to which we can relate. Yet this way of explaining events massively oversimplifies complex reality – whilst at the same time, paradoxically, appearing entirely realistic and believable. For instance, events are rarely so obviously 'connected' by a 'cause and effect' relationships as they always are in a story. And in the real world people are not only good (i.e. 'heroes') or evil (i.e. 'villains'); yet in narrative they tend to be. And so on. For better or worse, we tell and hear of world events using narrative style and structure and media producers know this and use it to create media texts that rely on narrative structures and forms to be absorbing, compelling and convincingly realistic. Because of this, filmed narratives can easily trick us into thinking we are viewing a real 'window on the world'.
GENRE	Genre means the <i>kind of narrative</i> being told, e.g. detective, sci-fi, horror, etc. Genre defines a text by its similarities to other texts. Importantly, when we watch a genre film we have many pre-existing expectations of the types of characters, setting and events we want to see (prediction is a major aspect of our enjoyment of a film, and genre helps this). Genre conventions are an important way a director can create believable 'versions of reality' because we fail to see that what is shown is not reality at all, but a media convention that we have become accustomed to seeing in that kind of film. So... we don't mind the owner of a casino being horribly killed because we see him, in the gangster genre as naturally a 'villain'. Film companies use genre to sell and make films: a popular genre creates a greater chance of commercial success; and genre can be cost effective, making it cheaper to write new stories and reducing the need for entirely new sets.
ICONOGRAPHY	Iconography is an aspect of genre . We expect to see certain objects within the mise-en-scene of a particular genre, for example, in a Western, we expect to see dusty lonely roads, saloon bars, cowboy hats and horses, jails, sheriffs badges, etc.; in a modern horror film, we expect lonely girls, 'normal' objects, use of dark and light, etc. These 'genre indicators' are called the iconography of the genre.
REALISM	Cinema and TV are able to offer high levels of 'realism': the bright screen, the clear and powerful Dolby sound, darkened room, etc. are highly compelling and persuasive. Such 'appearance of reality' is given the odd name of verisimilitude . This is yet another convention of course – there is nothing 'realistic' about an image on a flat screen. There are two kinds of verisimilitude: generic verisimilitude is the 'realism' that convinces us because of the genre we are watching (in the horror genres it seems highly realistic for a vampire to sink his teeth into a person's neck); cultural verisimilitude is the kind of reality that convinces us because it looks like the way things are or should be within our own society.
THE 'STAR SYSTEM'	Stars are an important part of the signifying system of meaning in the cinema. They create expectations, they help identify genre, and they create issues of representation of culture, masculinity and femininity.

TIPS WHEN ANALYSING A FILM EXTRACT

Remember that films create compulsive viewing for audiences. We love anticipating, predicting, feeling tense, laughing, crying... The cinema provides all of this and more. When you analyse a film extract keep these things in mind as you discuss the key mise-en-scenes and montage sequences that contribute significantly to the meaning you are describing and explaining.

Within a particular mise-en-scene or montage, look for the way codes and connotations are created by such aspects as shot type, camera angle, lighting, sound, and so on. Consider how iconography creates genre and how genre conventions and stars are used to create realism; also consider the use of stereotypes and other aspects of representation of men, women, sexuality and culture. Think about such important aspects as how character, tension, mood, etc. are created and why.

*There should be three key aspects to your analysis: the **METHOD** of creation, the **EFFECT** of this on the audience; and the **PURPOSE** or **INTENTION** of the director (which means you should relate what you find to characters, plot and theme.*