

Reference Source for Media Literacy

The following reference resource compiles, condenses, and re-contextualizes terms and definitions from a number of different sources. It is a series of notes rather than an original, finished document and it is not intended for direct citation. For citations and more complete discussions of issues and terms presented here, please consult the bibliography below.

How Media Products Make Meaning at the Level of the Image/Shot

The Shot. A shot (or **take**) is one uninterrupted run of the camera to expose a series of frames. It could also be defined as a continuous recording of a dramatic scene or object from a single static or mobile framing (moving camera) until a punctuation or a transition. The **long take** is a shot whose duration on screen is longer than the average (within the same film, or in relation to the general practice according to genre etc.).

Framing the Shot. Framing is a term we use to call attention to the image in terms of how it is circumscribed for presentation in the shot from the perspective of its edges. The **frame** is not just a neutral border; it produces a certain vantage-point onto the material within the image—it defines the image for us. Framing can powerfully affect the image by means of (1) the size and shape of the frame; (2) the way the frame defines on-screen and off-screen space; (3) the way framing controls the distance, angle, and height of a vantage point onto the image; and (4) the way framing can be mobile in relation to the mise-en-scene (see below):

(1) Frame Dimensions and Shape. The ratio of the length on one side of the frame to the length on the top or bottom (**aspect ratio**) can be adjusted during filming or post-production with the help of different types of film, projectors, lenses and processing techniques. Cinema generally utilizes wider ratios and thus includes more material in the image while also creating greater foreground-to-background definition. TV has a squarer, more circumscribed aspect ratio allowing less visual

information. Aspect ratios have important effects: Wider ratios (widescreen cinema) emphasize horizontal compositions and include more in the image thus favoring spectacular types of films such as action-adventure, Westerns, or sci-fi. Wide ratio can also serve more intimate types of film to create significant foreground and background areas in more confined settings. Frame size and shape work together with mise-en-scene and soundtrack to guide the spectator's attention and shape his/her experience. A widescreen film format shown on TV has been "cropped" at the sides to fit the squarer TV frame.

(2) On-Screen and Off-Screen Space The frame selects a particular "slice" of the (depicted) world and implies the rest of it by creating an impression of **off-screen space**. Off-screen space is often an integral part of the media presentation, creating and enhancing meaning and turning the limitations of the frame edge to advantage. There are six potential zones of off-screen space: the space beyond each of the four edges of the frame; the space behind the set; and the space behind the camera.

(3) Angle, Level, Height, and Distance of Framing The frame implies not only space outside itself but also a position from which the material in the image is viewed. Most often such a position is that of a camera filming the event.

Angle (of the Camera). The frame positions us at a certain angle with respect to what is shown (all the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed; see mise-en-scene below). There are three general categories of camera angle: the straight-on angle, the high angle and the low angle.

Level. We can also distinguish the degree to which the framing is "level"—that is whether the horizon and objects are canted or horizontal.

Height. The framing also gives us a sense of being stationed at a certain height in relation to what is filmed/taped. Camera height is not the same as camera angle. It is a matter of where the camera films/tapes from.

Distance. Framing also supplies a sense of being far away from or close to the content of the shot. This aspect of framing is called **camera distance**. There are about eight different degrees of camera distance:

- i. the **extreme long shot** (human figures barely visible; preferred framing for landscapes, bird's-eye views of cities, etc.)

- ii. the **long shot** (figures are more prominent but the background still dominates)
- iii. the so-called "**American shot**" (very common in Hollywood cinema; the human figure is framed from the knees up; permits nice balance of figure and surroundings)
- iv. the **medium shot** (frames the human body from the waist up; gesture and expressions become more visible)
- v. the **medium close-up** (frames the body from the chest up)
- vi. the **close-up** (traditionally the shot showing just the head, hands, feet or a small object; emphasizes facial expression, detail, or a significant object)
- vi. the **extreme close-up** (singles out a portion of the face, isolates a detail, magnifies the minute)

Narrative Functions of Framing. Angles, distances and other qualities of framing are meaningful but we should beware of assigning absolute meanings to them. Technical qualities in media presentations are meaning-bearing in relation to all other aspects of the media presentation (context). Some examples of the possible narrative functions of framing: Camera distance can establish or reestablish settings and character positions. A framing can isolate a narratively important detail thus giving us a narrative cue. Framing also contributes to cueing a shot as "subjective," that is, conveying what a character sees or hears (perceptual subjectivity). When a shot's framing prompts us to take it as a character's vision, we call it an optically subjective shot or a **point-of view-shot (POV shot)**. Camera distance and angle can situate us in one area of the narrative's space. Also the repetition of certain framings throughout the film may be significant, creating motifs unifying the film. Sudden deviations from established patterns thus receive prominence.

(4) The Mobile Frame. In film it is possible for the frame to move with respect to the framed material. **Mobile framing** means that within the confines of the image we see, the framing of the object changes. Since the framing orients us to the material in the image, we often see ourselves as moving along with the frame. The mobile frame produces changes of camera height, distance, or level within the shot. Types of mobile framing (also referred to as camera movement):

- i. the **pan** (short for “panorama;” the camera rotates on a vertical axis; the camera as a whole does not displace itself; on screen the pan gives the impression of a frame horizontally scanning space)
- ii. the **tilt** (the camera rotates on a horizontal axis; it is as if the camera’s “head” were swiveling up or down; again the camera as a whole does not change its position; on screen the tilt movement yields the impression of unrolling a space from top to bottom or bottom to top)
- iii. the **tracking** (or **dolly** or **trucking**) **shot** (the camera as a whole changes its position traveling in any direction along the ground—forward, backward, circularly, diagonally, or from side to side)
- iv. the **crane shot** (the camera is lifted off the ground and can travel not only forward and backward, in and out, but also up and down; variations of the crane shot are the helicopter and airplane shots, which allow the camera to travel great distances above the ground)
- v. **hand-held camera** (the machine is not anchored on a tripod but supported by the operator’s body; usually produces a bumpy, jiggling image although new technology can eliminate these effects; it is associated with styles of filmmaking that seek to convey a sense of immediacy and artlessness like the documentary)
- vi. the **long take** (is often associated with the mobile frame; it may use panning, tracking, craning or zooming to present continually changing vantage points that are comparable to the shifts of view supplied by editing; frame mobility breaks the long-take shot into significant smaller units.
- vii. the **zoom** (a mobile frame effect can be achieved by photographing a still picture or a stopped frame of film and gradually enlarging or reducing any portion of that image; animation, special effects and the zoom lens can make the frame mobile by reducing or blowing up some portion of the image)

Functions of Frame Mobility. The mobile frame has enormous impact on the way space and time are represented in film/video and our perception of them. Camera movements tend to increase information about the space of the image. Objects’ positions become more vivid and sharp than in stationary framings and their solidity and volume is powerfully conveyed. Tracking and crane shots supply continually changing perspectives on passing objects. Camera movement acts as a surrogate for our eye and our attention. It can make us feel that we move towards, around, or away from

an object. It also serves to represent the view through the eyes of a moving character (POV shot). We can think of frame mobility as a way of controlling spatial changes. A very common way the mobile frame relates to space is by following a character's movements (reframing). The camera may also move to follow figures or moving objects in pans, tracking or crane shots. The mobile frame need not, however, be subordinate to figure movement. It can focus on space and objects alone. Our sense of duration and rhythm are also affected by the mobile frame. How fast or slowly the camera moves can influence the viewer's response to what is represented. Camera speed creates suspense, curiosity, surprise, or reveals information the characters are not aware of, and generally helps structure the narrative. The mobile frame can follow particular patterns throughout a media presentation.

Mise-en-scene This term refers to all the elements placed in front of the camera to be filmed/taped and appear in the frame. What appears in the film frame is part of the mise-en-scene. Aspects of mise-en-scene include:

Setting. Where the events depicted take place. Can be natural or constructed, realistic-looking or stylized. When part of the setting has a function in the action it becomes a prop.

Costume and Make-Up.

Figure expression and movement. A figure can be a person but also an animal, a robot, an object or an abstract shape. Too often viewers (and critics) tend to treat actors and personalities in media presentations as representing real people in a story. This is a misunderstanding. The creators of media products who control the mise-en-scene do not "capture" already existing events; rather they create the event to be filmed. An actor's performance in a media presentation should be seen as consisting of visual elements (appearance, gestures, facial expressions) and sound (voice, effects). The character the actor creates is in part a figure in the mise-en-scene. We must see a media character not as a real person but rather as a set of behaviors with a specific function in the context of the media presentation. By the same token, in order to analyze

an actor's or media personality's performance, we must ask if s/he behaves in a manner appropriate to his/her character's function in the context of the media presentation.

Lighting. By manipulating the lighting in an image one can achieve a great variety of effects and communicate much information. Lighting shapes objects by creating highlights and shadows. There are four features of film/TV lighting: **quality** (refers to relative intensity of the illumination; "hard" and "soft" lighting create different effects); **direction** (refers to the path of light from its sources to the object lit); **source** (a shot will rarely have only one source of light; there is usually at least a key light and a fill light) and **color**.

Graphics/Text.

Mise-en-scene in Space and Time. Mise-en-scene as a whole helps compose the film shot in space and time. It contains a host of spatial and temporal factors that guide our attention and create expectations as we are viewing the image. Setting, lighting, costume, figure behavior and graphics interact to create patterns of foreground and background, line and shape, light and dark, and movements. These patterns guide our perception and attention from frame to frame but also help create the overall form of the film.

Photographic Qualities of the Shot. Although they are technologies and formal systems based on moving images, film and video depend to a large extent on photography, that is, the imprint of patterns of light onto celluloid or tape (digital images display or simulate photographic qualities as well).

Color/Film Stock. A great range of visual qualities can be achieved by manipulating film stock and exposure. **Film stocks**, or the different types of photographic film, vary in their light sensitivity. The choice of film stock has many implications. Stocks that are "slower," that is less sensitive to light, such as the black-and-white kind, will produce a larger range of grays, more detail in textures, and softer contrasts. A "faster" black-and-white stock tends towards a narrower gray range, less well-

defined details and more contrasts. Color film stocks yield, of course, a much wider range of the spectrum. Different color stocks (for example, Technicolor, Agfa, or Eastman) give different color qualities. The range of tonalities in the image can also be affected by the **exposure** of the image in the course of the photographic process. Exposure can be controlled by regulating how much light passes through the camera lens, though correctly exposed images can also be altered (overexposed or underexposed) in developing and printing.

Perspective Relations. Different types of photographic lenses can render perspective relations, that is, information about scale, depth, and spatial relations, in different ways. If two different lenses photograph the same scene, the perspective relations in the resulting image will be drastically different. In controlling perspective relations the chief variable is the **focal length** of the lens.

- i. The **wide-angle, or short-focal-length lens**. This lens tends to distort straight lines toward the edges of the screen, bulging them outward. Depth is also exaggerated. When a wide-angle lens is used for a medium shot or close-up, the distortion of shape becomes very evident. This lens also makes movement to or from the camera seem more rapid in that it takes less time to cover what looks like a greater distance.
- ii. The **normal or middle-focal-length, lens**. This lens seeks to avoid noticeable perspective distortion. With a normal lens, horizontal and vertical lines are rendered as straight and perpendicular. Parallel lines should recede to distant vanishing points. Foreground and background should seem neither stretched apart (as with the wide-angle lens) nor squashed together (as with the telephoto lens).
- iii. The **telephoto, or long-focal-length, lens**. Longer lenses make the space of the shot appear flattened. Depth is reduced and planes seem squashed together. The most familiar uses of telephoto lenses are in the filming or televising of sports events. Telephoto shots make figures look unnaturally close to one another. They also reduce differences of size between figures. These lenses affect subject movement as well. Movement towards or away from the camera seems to be prolonged, since the flattening effect of the lens makes the figure take more time to cover what looks like a small distance. Hence the widely used “running-

in-place” type of shots. Finally, the telephoto lens creates reverse perspective. Parallel lines do not recede to vanishing points in the background but rather seem to meet “in front” of the image.

Lens length can distinctly affect the spectator’s experience. Our expectations about how the action will develop will be quite different if a wide-angle lens makes the figures look yards apart or if a telephoto lens puts them virtually side by side. For example, suspense and surprise can be generated by switching between focal lengths. Expressive qualities can be suggested by lenses which distort objects or characters.

iv. The **zoom lens**. This lens makes it possible to manipulate focal length and transform perspective relations during a single shot. A zoom lens is optically designed to permit the continuous varying of focal length. It is often used to substitute for moving the camera forward or backward. Onscreen the zoom shot magnifies or demagnifies the objects filmed, excluding or including surrounding space. The zoom is not a genuine movement of the camera, since the camera remains stationary and the lens simply increases or decreases its focal depth. It can, however, produce very interesting transformations of scale and depth that are specific to it.

Depth of field and focus. Focal length not only affects how shape and scale are magnified or distorted. It also determines the lens’s depth of field. **Depth of field** is the range of distances before the lens within which objects can be photographed in **sharp** focus. A lens with a depth of field of ten feet to infinity will render any object in that range clearly, but the sharpness of the image will decrease when the object moves closer to the lens (say, to four feet). A wide-angle lens has a relatively greater depth of field than does a telephoto lens.

Depth of field vs. Deep Space. Depth of field should not be confused with the concept of **deep space**, which refers to the way filmmakers establish the action of the scene as taking place on several different planes, *regardless of whether or not all of these planes are in focus*.

Shallow Focus vs. Deep Focus. Considering that depth of field controls perspective relations by choosing what planes will be in focus, it is possible to focus on only one plane and let the others planes blur—thus opting for **shallow focus**. Conversely, it is possible to seek a greater depth of field (using faster film, shorter focal-length lenses, and more

lighting) thus placing a number of plane in sharp focus. This practice is called **deep focus**.

Since the lens may be refocused at various points, it is possible to adjust perspective relations while filming-taping by **racking** or **pulling focus**. A shot may begin on an object close to the lens and rack-focus so that something in the distance springs into crisp focus.

Special Effects. The image's perspective relations may also be created by means of certain special effects. The following special effects can today can also be achieved digitally, bypassing the laboratory work.

i. **Superimposition.** Separately photographed planes of action may be combined on the same strip of film to create the illusion that the two planes are adjacent. This is achieved either by double exposure in the camera or in laboratory printing.

ii. **Process or composite shots.** These are more complex techniques for combining strips of film to create a single shot. They can be divided into projection process work and matte process work. In projection process work footage of a setting is projected onto a screen and actors perform in front of the screen (rear projection). Or, the setting is projected onto a two-way mirror, angled to throw the image onto a high-reflectance screen (front projection). Front projection blends foreground and background better than rear projection. The camera then photographs the actors against the screen by shooting through the mirror. In matte work, a portion of the setting is photographed on a strip of film, usually with a part of the frame empty. Through lab printing the matte is joined with another strip of film containing the actors.

Sound. Sound is as important a formal and technical component of a media presentation as those creating the image. It carries meaning in more ways than simply by accompanying a visible object or a person on screen and can actively shape how we interpret the image.

“Natural vs. Media Sound.” “Natural sound” is three-dimensional, that is, in order to be produced, it requires: (i) a vibration; (ii) a medium in which the vibration must take place (air, water, hard surface, etc.); and (iii) a change in pressure taking place in the absorbing-transmitting medium. Sound is an event that takes place in time as well as in space. It begins (**attack**), it holds (**sustain**) and fades away (decay)—the temporal

dimension of sound is called its **sound envelope**. The **spatial and temporal nature of sound** is reinforced in our perception by the fact that sound does not travel directly to our ears as it is produced (**direct sound**). There is also a great deal of **reflected sound or reverberation** produced as the sound that reaches the hearing ear bounces off one or more surfaces. The **ratio of direct to reflected sound** influences our ability to understand and differentiate between sounds. We have developed cognitive abilities that enhance our capacity for picking out from among a host of sounds the one we are most interested in. We can also gauge, based on a sound's envelope and direct-to-reflected ratio, the circumstances surrounding the production of that sound. Thus we can surmise about the size and material of its source, the environment in which it was produced, the distance of the source, the direction of the sound, etc. **Media sound** is not the same as "natural" sound, although it still has a **spatial signature**, that is, it carries the marks of the particular spatial circumstances in which it was produced. Media sound represents sound; it does not reproduce it. The media sound event is shaped by a variety of technical factors: (i) The way sound is collected affects its spatial signature depending on the type, location, and movement of the microphone; the choice of recording location and recording system. (ii) Media sound is manipulated and enhanced in the post-production process through gating, amplification, filtering, equalization, noise reduction, reverb addition and other techniques. (iii) Media sound can be simulated and artificially produced. **Post-production manipulation** thus substitutes an apparent sound event for the original phenomenon.

How the Technical Assembly of Media Products Creates Meaning

Editing. Editing may be thought of as the coordination of one shot with the next. We must distinguish how editing is done in production from how editing appears on the screen to viewers. The editing process involves joining shots, the end of one to the beginning of the other. This junction may be made in two ways: by *gradually* interrupting one shot and replacing it with the other and by changing from one shot to the other *instantaneously*.

The gradual joining of shots can be made in the following ways: A **fade-out** may gradually darken the end of shot A to black, and a **fade-in** may accordingly lighten shot

B from black. A **dissolve** may briefly superimpose the end of shot A and the beginning of shot B. In a **wipe**, one image replaces another as a moving boundary line crosses the screen. Both images can be in screen at the same time for a brief period but they do not blend as in the dissolve. These shot changes are also known as **punctuation**.

The **cut** is the instantaneous joining of two shots is the most common. It is possible to cut during shooting but such “editing in the camera” is rare. Most cutting takes place after shooting in a lab/studio (post-production).

Editing can create a great variety of patterned relations between shots but it can also follow a specific code for joining shots into sequences that maximizes continuity and minimizes the disruptions in the transitions.

Creating Relations between Shots.

Graphic Relations between Shot A and Shot B. Editing can emphasize patterns in the graphic configurations among shots in terms of light and dark, line and shape, volumes and shapes, direction of speed and movement. The graphic similarities between shots can be enhanced with a **graphic match**. Discontinuities and differences in graphic relations can also create meaning.

Rhythmic Relations between Shot A and Shot B. Each segment of uninterrupted screen time, space or graphic configurations, i.e. shot, is necessarily of a certain length. That length can be determined by the creator of the media presentation. The physical length of any shot corresponding to a measurable duration onscreen constitutes the most basic rhythmic potential in editing. Editing thus opens the possibility of controlling the rhythmic succession of shots by adjusting their *screen duration*. The creator of the media presentation can construct a steady rhythm by making all of the shots approximately the same length. An accelerating rhythm may arise from successively shorter shots; a spasmodic irregular rhythm may be produced by a combination of shots of widely different lengths. It must be noted that cinematic rhythm as a whole derives from not only editing but other film techniques as well (mise-en-scene, camera position and movement). Although the viewer can not count frames, s/he feels the pace and recognizes the cutting tempo. In general, by controlling editing rhythm, the creator controls the

amount of time we have to grasp and reflect on what we see. Rhythmic editing can thus be a source of surprise (as through an unexpected series or rapid shots) or of suspense (as when several short shots prolong the expectations by reiterating information we already have).

Spatial Relations between Shot A and Shot B. Editing also serves to construct film space. It parallels omniscience in that it enables to viewer to be omnipresent and observe events from one spot to another. With editing, any two points in space can be related through similarity, difference, or development. One may, for instance, start with a shot that establishes a spatial whole and follow this with a shot of a part of this space. This is a very common editing pattern in continuity editing, the predominant code of constructing shot sequences in all mainstream media presentations (see below). One may, alternatively, construct a whole space out of component parts. Such **spatial manipulation through cutting is fairly common.** In films compiled from newsreel footage, for example, one shot might show a shell hitting its target; we infer that the cannon fired the shell (though the shots might easily have been pieced together from entirely different battles). Again, if a shot of a speaker is followed by a shot of a cheering crowd, we assume a spatial coexistence. In contrast to editing that builds up a single locale, editing can also juxtapose two or more distinctly separate locales. Such parallel editing, or **crosscutting**, is a common way films construct heterogeneous spaces.

Temporal Relations between Shot A and Shot B. Like other film techniques, editing usually contributes to the plot's manipulation of story time. (**Story** in narrative media is all the events that we see and hear, as well as those that we infer or assume to have occurred, including their presumed causal relations, chronological order, duration, frequency, and spatial locations. Opposed to **plot**, which is the actual presentation of certain events in the narrative. See below, **Narrative Structure**).

Editing guides the spectator to construct the story time out of the plot time by emphasizing **order, duration and frequency.**

1) Order. The events' order of presentation can be controlled with editing. Temporal succession may be maintained but also manipulated. These manipulations affect the relation between story and plot. Examples of "out-of-order" placement of events:

- (i) **flashbacks** present one or more shots out of their presumed story order;
- (ii) the rarer **flashforward** also breaks the presumed order of story events, by juxtaposing a shot of the “present” with a shot of a future event before returning to the present.

We may assume that, if a series of shots traces a 1-2-3 order in the presentation of story events, it is because the creator has chosen to do that, not because of any necessity of following this order.

2) Duration. Editing offers ways to alter the “natural” duration of story events as presented in the film’s plot. **Elliptical editing** presents an action in such a way that it consumes less time on the screen than it does in the story (temporal **ellipsis**). This can be done by using a punctuation shot change such as a dissolve, wipe or fade thus signaling that some time has been omitted. **Empty frames** placed on either side of a cut and **cutaways** (a shot of another event elsewhere that will not last as long as the elided action) can also be used to signify the passage of time. Editing can **expand** as well as contract the duration of an action. The same point in an action can be shown twice from different perspectives (**overlapping editing**).

3) Frequency. Events on the screen need not be presented the same number of times that they occur in the story. A shot or parts of it, could also be repeated to achieve a particular effect.

Continuity Editing: A Shot Sequence Editing Code. Editing can be seen as a series of codes which regulate how a series of shots or scenes are organized into sequences that are meaningful. The most widely used and pervasive of these codes is continuity editing. The purpose of continuity editing is to tell a story coherently and clearly, to map out the chain of characters’ actions with the minimum of disruption or distraction. Cinematography and mise-en-scene are thus planned accordingly to ensure narrative continuity.

Continuity Editing and Media Verisimilitude. Continuity editing (CE) was created to minimize the jarring transitions that might occur from connecting various visual segments and create a smooth flow. Its role is to mask the technical and technological nature of the media presentation and make the narrative construction of the content as unobtrusive as possible. Given its function, CE has been listed as an example of the

general tendency of mainstream media to efface the “construction” marks from the finished media product and to hide the role of convention, structure, technique as well as ideology in shaping media meaning. The “seamlessness” of media products coupled with the audience’s life-long habituation with their formal conventions has often been examined as a possible reason for the perceived verisimilitude of media presentations. Most viewers (often without realizing it) tend to respond to the content of media presentations as a very close approximation of real life situations and experiences or to treat it as unmediated and transparent—that is, as if it does not in itself require a metalevel of analysis. Media verisimilitude has been associated with one or more of the following qualities of the media content: (i) believability or credibility (we accept that it could have happened); (ii) plausibility (could be possible within its own terms of reference), (iii) probability (causality); (iv) actuality (immediacy, physical reality); (v) verisimilitude (behavior is life-like, authentic-seeming); (vi) truthfulness (a story can convey a truth about human behavior or motivation even if it is improbable in situation and background). In terms of narrative development, media verisimilitude involves: 1) linearity of cause and effect within an overall trajectory of enigma resolution and general coherence in the media presentation’s constituent parts (dramatic unity); 2) high degree of narrative closure; 3) fictional world governed by spatial and temporal verisimilitude; 4) centrality of the narrative agency of psychologically rounded characters (plausible motivations and focus on individuals and emotions). All these qualities create not so much a replica of “reality” but, as scholar Mimi White puts it, “a certain limited sense of meaning and logic, whereby the terms of clarity and understanding are contained by the medium itself rather than by reference to the “real world.”¹ Because CE is geared to the kind of narrative development mentioned above, it could be said to foster the confusion between media worlds and reality. In any case, it contributes in constructing the media presentation’s internal, self-consistent logic and thus leading the viewer to respond and think in the terms dictated by this internal logic.

Space and Time in Continuity Editing. Since CE seeks to present a narrative action, it is chiefly through the handling of space and time that it furthers narrative continuity. In CE the space of the scene is constructed along what is called the “**axis of action**”, the “center line,” or the 180° line. The scene’s action—a person walking, two people conversing, a car racing along a road—is assumed to project along a discernible, predictable line. Consequently, the planning, filming/taping, and editing of the shots

¹ In *Channels of Discourse*, see bibliographic sources listed at the end of the glossary.

will be done so that this center line is established as clearly as possible and maintained throughout. Imagine two people conversing. The axis of action is an imaginary line connecting them. According to the continuity code, the director will arrange the mise-en-scene and camera placement to ensure that the camera stays on the same side of the line at all times. The 180° system ensures some common place from shot to shot as well as constant screen direction. (For a detailed explanation of the 180° system with graphics, see Bordwell). It delineates space clearly so that viewer knows where the characters are in relation to one another and to the setting. More important, the viewer knows where s/he is with respect to the story action. Such smooth and clear unfolding of narrative space channels the viewer's attention to the chain of causes and effects and does not distract or disorient him/her from that object. The "realistic" narrative mentioned above often subordinates time, motivation, and other factors to the cause-effect sequence. CE enables that subordination. CE subordinates space to causality through the following cutting techniques:

- (i) The **establishing shot**. It delineates the overall space where the action is going to take place. Often it is a long, wide-angle view. Once laid out for the viewer in the establishing shot(s), the space can be further analyzed into its components. Because the 180° line established at the outset is adhered to (each shot presents the actors and objects from the same side), we know their location and spatial relationships.
- (ii) The **long shot to medium shot to close-up sequence**. It signifies entry to space of action (widely used in sitcoms). It builds on the establishing shot to provide more access to the scene or to information.
- (iii) The **medium shot to long shot sequence**. It prepares us to expect action on a larger scale or leave-taking from the action. The last shot in such a sequence can be a way to re-establish the initial location after a series of actions (**reestablishing shot**). CE follows a pattern of *establishment/breakdown/reestablishment* (a principle of narrative unity) in the concatenation of shots.
- (iv) The **shot/reverse shot sequence** (a.k.a. reverse angle shots). Once the 180° line has been established, we can show first one point of the line, then the other, cutting back and forth. This tactic is used in two-character scenes. It changes the angle of view and reveals subject matter from the opposite end of the axis of action.

(v) The **eyeline match**. Shot A presents someone looking at something offscreen; shot B shows us what is being looked at. In neither shot are both looker and object present. This tactic is extremely effective in creating spatial continuity: to be looked at, an object must be near the looker (infers the viewer).

(vi) The **match on action**. Another editing device for ensuring spatial continuity. It carries a movement across the break between shots. (Shot A shows the figure's movement beginning and shot B shows the continuations of the movement).

(vii) The **cheat cut**. When no perfect continuity between shots can be achieved, the 180° system will allow some mismatch in the mise-en-scene from shot to shot. Since narrative motivation and flow subsume other elements overall, the director can cheat a little without noticeable distraction.

(viii) The **point-of-view cutting** (a.k.a. **optical POV** or "**subjective POV shots**"). Point-of-view cutting is a variety of eyeline match editing used to evoke the interiority or subjectivity of a character. A shot of a character looking at something is followed by a shot of what s/he sees—from his/her **optical** POV. We, as spectators see what the character sees.

NOTE: It is perfectly legitimate to cross the axis of action depending on the setting and requirements of filming.

(ix) **Cross-cutting**. It can be useful within the context of continuity editing even if it may break the axis of action and thus cause spatial discontinuity. It can bind the action together by creating a sense of cause and effect and temporal simultaneity.

In the continuity editing system, **time**, like space, is organized according to the development of the narrative. Chronological sequence and one-to-one frequency: CE typically presents story events in 1-2-3 order (except for the flashback which is an conventionally acceptable violation). Also, in CE events that happen once in the story are presented only once. Story duration is seldom expanded. Usually plot time equals story time or the latter is greater than the former. There are usually no ellipses in the story action (reinforcing causality and agency). Sound contributes to temporal and spatial continuities created in CE (see below).

(x) The **Montage sequence**. When it is necessary to employ temporal ellipsis to show the passing of a great amount of time, the unfolding of a long process, CE relies on the montage device. Brief portions of a

process, informative titles, stereotyped images, newsreel footage, newspaper headlines, and the like, can be swiftly joined by dissolves and music to compress a lengthy series of actions into a few moments. We are all familiar with the most hackneyed montage ellipses: calendar leaves flying away, newspaper presses churning out an Extra, clocks ticking. Montage sequences are still used and can be turned to great artistic advantage even.

(xi) Other editing techniques intended to maintain continuity between shots that do not match. The **cut on the action** hides a cut (door slam, punch, coin flip, etc.). In **cutaways/reaction shots** the director cuts away from the main action to a shot showing a character “responding” to an event;

NOTE. There are editing alternatives to continuity, which this brief glossary can not go into since it emphasized the most widely used conventions and techniques. Many of these alternative editing styles exhibit the opposite characteristics from CE and they can be very expressive and aesthetically powerful. (See Bordwell)

Sound Editing and Mixing. The creation of the sound track resembles the editing of the image track. Just as shots are framed, photographed, and arranged in meaningful sequences so are elements of sound **selected**—collected or created (synthesized or simulated)—then **mixed** together after further manipulation into a multi-layered whole. Just as shots are joined together so are sounds—back to back or “over” each other. Though we are not usually as aware of the manipulation of the sound track, it demands as much selection and control as the visual track.

Sound in Space and Time. Sound has both spatial and temporal dimensions. Media sound is classified, according to its spatial signature and temporal relationship to the image, into the following categories:

1) Diegetic Sound. If the source of a sound is a character or object in the story space of the media presentation, we call the sound **diegetic**. (**Diegesis** is the “story” in a narrative media presentation and whatever is part of that story in terms of what takes place, where (space/ place), when (time), and who is involved in it.) Diegetic sound can be either onscreen or offscreen, depending on whether the source is within the frame or outside the frame. Varieties of diegetic sound:

(i) **Diegetic dialogue** Dialogue as required by the “story.” Simultaneous in story with image.

(ii) **Diegetic narration** The narrator is a character in the story. Types: intradiegetic or homodiegetic (the narrator is also a participant in the events) and heterodiegetic (the narrator is only an observer). This narration is often represented as taking place later in story than image, such as a reminiscence (**displaced diegetic narration**).

(iii) **Diegetic music** Music that is part of the diegetic world or story played and/or heard by the characters.

(iv) **Voice-over narration.** This is a special-case narrator. Neither entirely intradiegetic nor heterodiegetic. Mostly used in semi-narrative media forms (educational, investigative, rhetorical, informative/observational (documentary)) and in docudramas (dramatized renditions of real events). In this case the narration is understood as being of a later date than the story space/topic depicted and added over the images.

(v) **Internal diegetic sound.** Sound represented as emerging from the mind of a character within the story space of which we, as spectators, are aware of but of which the other characters are presumably not aware. Sound simultaneous in story with image.

(vi) **External diegetic sound** (noise). Sound represented as coming from a physical source within the story space and which we assume the characters to be aware of. Sound simultaneous in story with image.

(vi) **Displaced diegetic sound.** Sound which originates in the represented space of the story but temporally, it represents a time anterior or posterior to that of the images with which it is juxtaposed.

2) Non-diegetic Sound. All sound coming from a source outside the story space. Types:

(i) **Non-diegetic or redundant music** (a.k.a. mood music). Accompanying music intended for and heard only by the spectators. According to its intended function, redundant music can be contrapuntal (the music works against what takes place on screen), empathetic (the music seeks to involve the viewer emotionally in what goes on onscreen), a-empathetic (music merely complements what goes on onscreen), didactic-contrapuntal (the music tries to influence the spectators’ attitude towards what goes on onscreen).

(ii) **Non-diegetic sound marked as past.** Sound marked as having been produced before than the image is put over the image. Example: a speech by a historical personality used in a documentary.

Continuity Sound Editing. Many techniques of soundtrack construction have a similar aim to that of continuity editing, that is, to enhance narrative flow and minimize jarring transitions. The two most important techniques for enhancing continuity through the use of sound track are the following:

- (i) The **establishing sound.** Sound that establishes, from the very beginning of a scene, the general character of the surroundings. Establishing sound is usually removed or drastically reduced in volume during dialogue, but may return in the form of reestablishing sound (sometimes, but not systematically, accompanied by a reestablishing shot).
- (ii) The **sound bridge.** Sound issuing from the story space (diegetic) that “bleeds over” the next shot to enhance temporal and spatial continuity—usually, after a match on action cut.
- (iii) The **sound advance.** The practice of introducing a sound before the image with which it is associated. The sound advance is particularly prevalent in: suspense films (where music or effects connoting danger are often heard just before we cut to the monster or other menace); live network TV (where audience applause or theme music is regularly used to introduce a celebrity; action/adventure films.



How Media Products Make Meaning by Relying on Formal Conventions

Genres, formulas, and stereotypes can be seen as abstract systems of formal restrictions and relationships that developed over time and now dominate the way media presentations are made.

Genres. These are categories of media products with standardized formats that are distinctive and easily identifiable. Genre features have come to be well understood and recognized through being repeated over a period of time. In film/TV, the concept of genre relates to the system of production and the economic and market interests of the media industries. Examples: horror films, “chick-flicks,” sci-fi, sitcoms, westerns, the evening news. Genre limits the free play of signification. It provides the context for interpreting what is presented and names a specific set of intertexts (other texts of the same genre) according to which the new text is to be read thus providing and enforcing a “pre-reading.” The key elements of a genre are its formulas.

Formulas. All genres have a portfolio of key elements which constitute them—the formulas. A formula is a conventional, fixed, structuring formal device for delivering meaning. Formulas can predetermine a number of aspects of a media presentation, such as function, premise, structure, plot, or set of characters. Formulas can be specific to one genre but they can also “float” to other genres and media contexts. Common formulaic elements are: 1) protagonists; 2) stock characters; 3) stock plots and situations; 4) icons (key symbols of the genre)—these could be objects, backgrounds/settings, or star actors; and 5) themes.

Stereotypes Simplified representations of human appearance, character, beliefs, and behavior established through years of repeated use. They are based on exaggeration and simplification. Stereotypes contain implicit judgements, carry covert value messages about: minorities/ethnic groups, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability or shape, intellectual ability

Meaning and Formal Conventions. Large systems of formal conventions, as used in the media, tend to rely on a limited set of views and values. While they try to tap on new social trends and cultural preoccupations to attract audiences, they simplify and mold them into comforting and/or familiar explanations. Large-scale formal conventions contain in-built interpretations of the events and situations they portray. The following is a brief demonstration analysis of the sitcom genre that shows the relationship between its formulaic apparatus and its function, premise, structure, plot, and characters.

The Situation Comedy (sitcom):

Structure: Half-hour format

No or limited character development (characters are stereotypes). Because the sitcom is a comedic form, its characters will inevitably be stereotypical to a large extent. All comic characters possess a limited number of traits compared to actual people.

No or limited plot development.

Premise: The “problem of the week” that must be resolved.

Family-oriented.

Personal and family concerns over collective social and political issues.

Gradual shift from situation to person. As the genre evolved since the 50’s the emphasis was placed more and more on the mental and emotional problems of individual characters within the family unit with family love and bonding as the overarching preoccupation.

Function: Basis in humor

Sample critical views on the ways the sitcom constructs meaning:

(a) the sitcom is highly conservative

Because it lacks dramatic development of any kind, the sitcom serves to reassert the status-quo; it rejects the traditional comic plot, which is social in nature; it reaffirms the family as an institution (D. Grote)

(b) the sitcom is reassuring in that it alludes at conflict without requiring any re-examination of values.

Although largely ritual and limited in its capacity for ambiguity, development and the ability to challenge our values, the sitcom provides reassurance for its audience: the initial situation involves confusion and complication created by human error and thus explores ideas of conflict; yet complication is soon alleviated and confusion is reduced without any serious re-examination of values; the problem-solution formula is reassuring (H. Newcomb)

(c) the sitcom has subversive potential because it can be made to deliver social satire

When its capacity to thwart identification is deliberately cultivated (since characters are not expected to be psychologically well-developed), the genre can portray “pure cultural conflict” and test our cultural and ideological assumptions. If not a satire per se, the sitcom can be a nihilistic caricature of modern life (D. Marc)

Sound Conventions. As mentioned earlier, media sound does not reproduce but rather represents sound. It does not seek absolute fidelity but rather relative fidelity—recognizable and/or acceptable by the viewers—while prioritizing intelligibility and narrative continuity or coherence. The most widely used sound conventions are the following:

1) Deliberate Asymmetry Between Image Scale and Sound Scale. Due to the fact that sound collection and sound-track construction can not reproduce the hearing process which includes cognitive as well as physiological characteristics, it has become standard practice in media not

to match in scale images to sounds in certain situations. Although intuitively it makes sense that the sounds produced by characters and objects in media presentations would match their size and characteristics, this is not always the case in media sound. The most common instance of scale mismatch is when the size and distance of speaking characters change while the volume and reverb in their voices remains unchanged. Much of media sound (particularly dialogue and narration) has the quality of being directed straight toward the viewer from relatively close-up with a high ratio of direct to reflected sound. This quality of film sound, which Rick Altman has called "for-me-ness," shows that soundtrack is designed so that it addresses the viewer at an intimate level regardless of the content of the image. "For-me-ness" also makes for a smooth, continuous soundtrack without great fluctuations that emphasizes dialogue intelligibility over other considerations. Another, equally common example of scale-mismatch in media sound is the disparity between the spatial characteristics of a sound (say, an explosion) and the size of its source as shown onscreen.

2) Room Tone, Generic Sound, Semi-sync, Sound Loop. Onscreen absence of noise or speech does not mean absence of sound track. Silence can not be represented in the sound track. The jarring effect of complete soundless-ness is avoided in sound editing with the addition of a token signifier of sound space, also called room tone. Another convention of sound editing is to add generic sound to onscreen images. Generic sound is a sound that clearly represents a specific, easily recognizable, type of sound event, but without salient particularities. It is often chosen from a **sound library**, and usually used in **semi-sync** (that is synchronized with onscreen actions of secondary importance) as background sound with a generic long-shot image (for instance, of a crowd, a street scene, a race, or a battle). Generic sound is **looped**, that is, replayed regularly to as background sound in a number of occasions in media presentations.

3) Non-diegetic or redundant music. Its use contravenes logic and verisimilitude, yet it is one of the most pervasive conventions in media sound.

4) Lip-sync. The practice of adding a prerecorded sound to a live performance event (which is then, videotaped or filmed). The sound event, in this case, is not synchronous to its performance while the

performer may be physically present in the space of the performance but his/her voice is not.

How Media Products Make Meaning Through their Narrative Structure

Narrative structure. Stories are structured in different ways. The way the sequence of storytelling is organized also suggests what the story means. Most narratives are structured on the basis of an opening and a closure. In between these two stages there is often a contradiction, mystery, or conflict to be resolved.

Narrative meaning. The way of telling a story is as meaningful as the story itself. Narrative creates meaning and places the spectator in a relationship to the story. Because it puts the story in space and time, narrative involves decisions about what to include and what to omit, the sequencing of the content and the pace of the action. Narrative also determines how much and what kind of knowledge about the events and characters the audience will be given, and from what/whose vantage-point the events are to be recounted. Narrative is responsible for the emotional impact of what is being portrayed but also heightens its “believability” or plausibility—or, at least, achieves a suspension of disbelief. **Editing is the technological aspect of the creation of narrative meaning.**

Narrative conventions. Sets of established rules used by producers of media presentations to tell stories. They organize the narrative. The rules of narrative conventions often coincide with the rules of **genre** and of **narrative continuity** in editing. For example: In the TV genre known as “biography” the life-story of a famous person is always explained in the following way: overcame adversity, attained wealth/fame/power, but all the wealth/fame/power was not enough to make him/her truly happy, endured personal tragedy and transcended it by putting his/her wealth/fame/power to a good use. The presence of narrative convention is indicated by **narrative cues**. Narrative cues direct our understanding of the unfolding story regarding where things take place, when, and how quickly. Cues may be verbal or visual. For example: The villain is cued by a close-up on an unshaven face. The time shift is cued by a pull-in on the character’s eyes as s/he remembers something that happened before. The place shift is signaled by an announcement or an establishing shot with the name of the

location appearing on the screen. The villain's intention to draw a gun is cued by a cutaway shot to his hand reaching for a gun.

Point-of-View (POV) POV is a concept that can be explained in two ways: 1) It is a set of narrating techniques based on both sound and image for rendering the subjectivity of the character—his/her emotional and cognitive state. 2) It is a set of narrating techniques that evaluate, ironize, confirm or disconfirm the character's thoughts, perceptions and attitudes. The manipulation of POV allows the text to vary or "refract" the material of the story, presenting it from different perspectives—restricting it to only one POV, or privileging one POV as hierarchically superior to others. POV is one of the areas of greatest difficulty and confusion in film/TV analysis. The term has come to stand for a number of narrative functions and techniques:

- i) the POV shot (see above); ii) the orienting of the work through a certain character's perspective;
- iii) the "attitude" of the narrator or his/her overall perspective of toward the characters and the events of the fictional world or diegesis;
- iv) the worldview of the author;
- v) a technique of eliciting an affective response from the spectator and screening the information s/he is given.

POV affects the viewer's relationship to the presentation and its content: it can encourage personal or emotional involvement or identification or it can distance the viewer from the subject-matter.

Optical POV and Narrative Authority. The character who commands the optical POV (whose gaze or look dominates the sequence and determines what the spectator sees) does not necessarily have narrative authority. Often, it is possible to discern a more powerful agency controlling the messages which flow from the scene, enabling the spectator to assess the validity of the represented POV as simply one perspective among others. A combination of narrative authority and spectatorial identification produces a perspective which overrides the represented, optical POV.

Plot Types. These plot types have been adapted from the work of N. Friedman. Although the classification was originally developed for literature, it can be useful in developing student's awareness of the different qualities given to main characters by different kinds of conventionally established plots. It can also provide an opportunity for thinking about whether different plots encourage the questioning of accepted ideas about

gender roles, race, class and ethnicity and about social issues, history and politics. Another way of using this classification is in examining how emotional appeals are used in different plot-types and when the viewer is encouraged to distance him/herself from the story and characters and use judgement. Elements from several plot types may be blended in one media product. It is always a matter of debate as to what media product uses what plot. Debate is beneficial because it encourages critical thinking about the formal construction of media products. There is also the possibility that there are media products that may defy this classification. All typologies have limitations and problems. They are only useful for prompting thought. This classification follows the broadest way of distinguishing among plots, which is whether they are concerned mainly with events (things that happen and the order in which they happen) or with drama (that is, with character, emotions, and relationships). A fruitful direction for class discussion would be to explore how plot-types/movies become vehicles for representing ethical and social dilemmas.

1. Plots of Fortune.

- a) The action plot. The only question the viewer asks it, What happens next? The plot is organized around a problem and its solution: to catch a fugitive, discover a murderer, find the money, accomplish a mission. Example: *Indiana Jones*
- b) The pathetic or melodramatic plot. A series of misfortunes befalls an attractive but weak protagonist; s/he does not deserve them. The narrative has an unhappy ending and asks for the viewer's pity. Example: *The Insider, Philadelphia*
- c) The tragic plot. The protagonist, still attractive, is in some way responsible for his own misfortune, but he does not discover this until too late. Examples: *The Perfect Storm, Citizen Kane*
- d) The punitive plot. The protagonist does not have the viewer's sympathy, even though the is admired for certain of his/her qualities (often satanic or perverse); the story ends with the failure of the protagonist. Examples: *Godzilla*
- e) The cynical plot. A "wicked" central character triumphs in the end, instead of being punished. Examples: *Pulp Fiction*
- f) The sentimental plot. The protagonist, attractive and often weak, undergoes a series of misfortunes but triumphs in the end. Examples: *Shine*
- g) The admiration plot. The protagonist, strong and responsible for his actions, undergoes a series of perils but conquers them in the end. The response sought from the audience is respect or admiration/amazement. Examples: *Rambo, The Hunt for Red October*.

2. Plots of Character.

- a) The maturing plot. The protagonist is attractive but inexperienced or naïve; events allow him to mature. Examples: *Good Will Hunting*
- b) The reform plot. As in the above, the attractive protagonist changes for the better. In this plot, however, the protagonist is him/herself responsible for the misfortunes that punctuate his/her career. Thus, during part of the story, the viewer denies him compassion, For example: *Rain Man*
- c) The testing plot. All of the protagonist's initiatives fail one after the other; in the wake of these failures, the protagonist renounces his/her ideals. Examples: *Barton Fink*

3. Plots of Thought.

- a) The education plot. Improvement in the outlook of the attractive protagonist. This plot resembles the maturing plot, but in this case, the psychic change does not influence the character's actual behavior. Example: *American Pie*
- b) The revelation plot. At the beginning, the protagonist does not know his own condition. Examples: *Platoon*, *Born in the Fourth of July*, *Norma Ray*
- c) The affective plot. The protagonist's attitudes and beliefs change, but not his/her philosophy. Examples: *Star Wars*
- d) The disillusionment plot (opposed to the education plot). The character loses his/her fine ideals and withdraws into despair. At the end of the story, the viewer may no longer sympathize with him/her. Examples: *The Graduate*

Narrators. They help position the spectator in relation to what is being narrated. There are two basic sites or zones in which a narrator operates in the film/TV text: the zone of the **master narrator (extradiegetic narrator)** and the zone of **character narrators**. (See also sound editing).

- (i) **Master narrator (extradiegetic narrator)**. An external, impersonal narrator (can also be thought of as an implied author) who has the overall control of the visual and sound registers. This type of narrator manifests itself not through verbal discourse but through the whole range of cinematic codes and channels of expression—for example, through the interplay with POV. When there are unreliable character narrators, the role of the implied author comes to the fore; a.k.a. camera narrator, image maker, primary N. The implied author is what we perceive as an agent who stands between the real author and the narrator(s) and serves as the

means by which we evaluate the truthful and the untruthful versions of the story.

(ii) **Character narrators.** They may be active participants in the story they relate or may be witnesses to it. Authentication authority (reliability) varies among types of character narrators. The character narrator always has his/her story embedded within the larger narration produced by the ensemble of narrative codes—the overarching discourse of the external, impersonal narrator who renders the text in a non-verbal form. The discourse of the character-narrator is controlled by the extradiegetic narrator. Types: 1) *character narrators* “invoke” a set of visual images as an accompaniment or illustration of their verbal narration; “invoking narrators,” however, produce images which may or may not correspond directly to the verbal account they give; often the images simply overrun or exceed the knowledge or capacity of the verbal character narrator; discrepancies in tone, in content and in authority between the verbal and visual versions juxtaposed are common; 2) *frame-narrators* are more believable character narrators who begin their narrations with the first images of a film but whose act of narration is not visualized; 3) *embedded narrators* begin narrating after the story has begun and are visualized in the act of narration (less reliable); 4) *homodiegetic voice-over narration* (first-person narration); *heterodiegetic voice-over narration* (third-person narration).

Semi-Narrative Structure. All TV viewers are familiar with this structure by virtue of being exposed to it continuously. It has a higher ratio of discourse to image and a more utilitarian purpose than purely entertainment-oriented programming. The semi-narrative structure delivers information and knowledge, makes an argument, investigates issues or events. Entertainment and expository/ educational purposes may easily become blurred, however. The semi-narrative structure is subject to the same representational conventions and ideological constraints as entertainment products. A semi-narrative structure can take four different directions:

Rhetorical. Wants to persuade. Based on ideas. Uses supporting arguments and demonstrations.

Informative/ Observational. Found in documentaries and news casts.

Investigative. Researches a questionable or controversial event, person, act.

Educational. Its main purpose is didactic.

Narrative Role of Sound. Media sound has a significant narrative role along with or independently of the image. The techniques listed under **Sound Conventions and Sound Editing** above also fulfil narrative functions. Another important narrative use of sound is as Point-of-Audition Sound.

Point-of-Audition Sound is a kind of sound that is identified by its physical characteristics (principally reduced volume and increased reverb) as it might be heard by a character within the media presentation. It is regularly used to both join spaces whose relationship cannot easily be presented in a single establishing shot, and to promote identification between the audience and carefully selected characters. Unlike the point-of-view sequence, which often moves from the viewer to the object or character viewed, the point-of-audition sequence typically begins with a shot of the sound source, introducing point-of-audition sound only when we cut to a shot of the auditor.

Gate-keeping. It is the equivalent of narrative structure and editing for the delivery of information. It is a broad process of information control that includes all aspects of message encoding: not just gathering and selection but also withholding, transmission, shaping, display, repetition and timing of information. The gate-keeping process involves every aspect of message selection, handling, and control. Gate-keeping is an institutional-corporate process, even though aspects of it involve interpersonal exchange. In another level, gate-keeping can be thought of as the process of reconstructing the essential framework of an event and turning it into news. There are many “extra-institutional factors” outside the news organizations that influence gate-keeping: sources, audiences, markets, advertisers, interest groups, government, public relations, and the economic and political system itself. Gate-keepers create the media’s picture of social reality. The decisions regarding both what to include and what to omit from a information-oriented media presentation (news-related media, investigative report-type shows, etc.) are made during the **pre-production editing process**. These decisions have been reached before the presentation reaches the public. The audience is not in a position to make a critical judgement about the selection process.

Representation

Representation refers to both 1) the creation of a likeness through the use of signs and, 2) the creation of meanings through those signs. Film and TV are representational *technologies*, that is, they make signs with technological means. Technology in itself is not enough, however. The other practices, techniques, and conventions listed earlier are also needed to create a media representation. How something is represented in the media depends on how it is ideologically **framed** and on the **narrative mode** in which it is cast.

Framing. Framing is a socially and culturally defined process of *selecting* and determining *salience*. Frames are ready-made conceptual schemata that come with the culture and social grouping to which we belong. Frames are relatively enduring. They are the way most of us assimilate new information. Frames serve four main purposes: 1) to define problems, 2) to diagnose causes, 3) to make moral judgements, and 4) to suggest remedies. Types of frames:

- (i) **National/ cultural myths.** Sets of beliefs that may not be true but, nevertheless, tell us something significant about ourselves and our culture. Examples: the US as the greatest democracy / the freest country in the world (ethnocentrism / nationalism); responsible capitalism (corporations are engines for social good); marketplace democracy (free trade and the market will bring democracy); the American dream (anyone in this country can become wealthy and powerful if they work hard no matter what their family background, race / ethnicity, gender)
- (ii) **National/cultural preoccupations.** The types of issues to which a culture devotes interest and attention. Examples: anticommunism and the cold war (through the 1980s); the gun culture; abortion and reproductive rights; global security uncertainty (after the fall of the Soviet Union); free-trade; the death penalty.
- (iii) **Hierarchies of values.** Examples: individualism and personalization; the romantic ideal (assuming control of one's life; individual against all odds; life is coherent / meaningful; optimism); rejection of social regulation; mistrust of government.
- (iv) **Word choice and connotation.** The kind of vocabulary used to talk about a topic influences how that topic is understood and judged.

Connotation refers to the meaning associated with a word beyond its denotative, or dictionary, definition. The following words carry substantial connotative meaning that reflects the history of American politics and the power of public relations. Examples: “moderatism” / “middle-of-the-road” (vs. “extremism”); “right to work”; “the market”; “free-trade.” These words were chosen because of their inherently positive connotations and were further used by the media and in political discourse to denote positive things. Imposing negative connotations on widely used terms with already established connotative baggage is not only rarely allowed in the media but very difficult as well. To interpret “the market” to mean placing corporate profit above society and the environment or “free-trade” to mean freedom of corporations to evade national laws and other standards of responsible citizenship is to go against established belief.

(v) “**Audience-seen-as-consumers.**” The media industries are in the business of selling people to advertisers and encouraging consumption. TV broadcasters are paid by advertisers on the basis of the statistical probability that at a certain time of day X number of a particular category of viewers (men, women, teenagers, children) will be tuned to a particular program and thus will be in a position to watch the advertiser’s message. The media industry’s construction of the viewer as a consumer does not stop there though. TV programming is tied to branding, the creation and promotion of fashion and style trends, tie-in merchandizing, and promotion of similarly “themed” entertainment products in music, amusement parks, books, magazines, software, etc. The same is true for film, which does not contain advertising as part of its “flow” but is a vehicle for product placement (plugs) and all the other related commercial objectives (merchandizing, fashion creation, branding, etc.). The overwhelmingly promotional nature of the media today is dictated by the fact that the same media conglomerates who own TV networks and the Hollywood system also control commercial publishing and the recording industry (see below **The Hegemonic Role of Media Products**).

Although we all rely on frames in our discourse and thinking, only the makers of media products (which include news organizations as well as entertainment-oriented venues)

are primary actors in the framing process in that they control the vehicles of communication. The media industry has a significant role in deciding what frames are prioritized by appearing into the TV frame. What does not appear within the TV frame is, in many ways, off the public agenda. Media frames categorize events, connect present events with those of the past, indicate causal relationships and facilitate oppositions. **Frames facilitate familiarity.** As B. Sparrow argues, media frames enable the new to be expressed as the known. Frames enable journalists to identify the particular significance of complex events; they also may contain within them moral judgements and suggested remedies. According to Robert Entman, **framing has a role in the exertion of economic and political power:** “Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions...Framing in this light plays a major role in the exertion of political power, and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power—it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text.” For example, with respect to political reporting, the frames orient and limit political and partisan battles. The casting of news and narrative media presentations in the frames of nationalism, capitalist democracy, free-trade, global security uncertainty, and individualism is consistent with the pro-market and strong-defense positions of the US government, Congress, State Department and Defense Department. Such frames are also consistent with the continuation of existing budgets and administrative configurations. With respect to the media industry’s own commercial purposes, the pro-market and individualist news frames are consistent with corporate- and consumer-oriented society and inconsistent with a regulatory and collectivist society.

Narrative Modes. They regulate the relationship and attitude of the viewer to the characters of the media presentation and the world in which they live and act as depicted. According to the narrative mode into which a particular media presentation is cast, the viewer perceives him/herself to have more, equal, or less knowledge, freedom, abilities, authority, and understanding than the media character and is placed in a position of more or less distance, empathy, and involvement with the fate of that character. Narrative modes foster viewer relationships and attitudes toward media characters by creating around them a world with its own rules about what is feasible, probable and believable. Narrative modes, in conjunction with genres, formulas, plot-types, and narrative conventions and structures, help audiences derive meaning and

pleasure from media products. Narrative modes originated in oral and written literature but have evolved drastically as they were adopted by the media. The following listed modes must not be seen as insular from each other. They often combine. Most Hollywood-type products combine several modes as a matter of course.

Fantasy. The world of fantasy is beyond the ordinary laws of nature and rules of probability. It is populated by monstrous or marvelous (non- or ambiguously human) creatures. The hero is identified as human but is endowed with extraordinary or miraculous powers and qualities and conquers his/her environment. Fantasy narrative modes provide easy wish-fulfillment and rely on thrills, suspense, action/adventure, and sex or romance.

Leadership Dramas. Hero is a man (mostly) with superior social status and/or exceptional abilities and qualities—authority, stronger passions and powers of expression. He is faced with decisions or dilemmas that ordinary people do not usually encounter, although he is not above social or natural laws. He may fail because of the unintended or unforeseen consequences of his actions/decisions or his own greatness causes his downfall. He is redeemed or overcomes his fall. The leadership drama invites the viewer's favorable or unfavorable moral judgement because his fall or his dilemmas are shown as having moral and social implications.

Mimetic. The characters in mimetic narrative modes represent ordinary humanity faced with its problems, dilemmas, and afflictions. They do not have special powers and qualities or social status (although they range from very poor to very wealthy and well-positioned socially in conventional ways). All media presentations that purport to represent or recreate some aspect of ordinary social or private existence belong to this mode. Mimetic modes can be **serious** or **comedic**. Comedic mimetic modes involve some kind of conflict between the individual and his/her environment. Comedic modes emphasize integration and conciliation by turning potentially disastrous situations into happy endings and opportunities for amusement. Mimetic modes seek emotional responses from the viewers—laughter, sympathy, terror, aversion, etc. A particular type of mimetic mode worth mentioning in more detail are melodramas. They are recognizable by excess in characterization and setting: the

characters' emotions and "moral profiles" are magnified and exaggerated often in formulaic ways and the staging is extravagant. Soap operas are contemporary examples of melodramas.

Ironic. Media characters depicted in ironic mode make viewers feel superior to them in power or intelligence. Viewer responses to characters include a sense of bondage, frustration, and absurdity. Even if viewers recognize that they might also find themselves in a similar situation, they judge it by the norms of a greater freedom or from a vantage point of more understanding. Examples: murder-mysteries, and crime-and-punishment dramas can be considered ironic modes. Some argue that melodrama is an ironic mode by suggesting that the viewer consumes it "knowingly."

Ideology. Adherence to a particular economic and political system that is reflected in the production of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, values, and tastes. Ideology is produced and reproduced through scholarship and education, but also through cultural products (literature, art, music, the media, etc.) and thus through **representation**.

While there may be various ideologies, only one is predominant on the level of representation and culture thus being **hegemonic**.

Hegemony. The predominance of the interests of a particular social class, or of a larger political and economic system on the level of representation and culture. In media this predominance is reflected in the **framing**. Arguably, all popular culture is **hegemonic** in the sense that it creates a common ground between the dominant economic system, those that stand to gain the most by it, and the **audience-seen-as-consumers**.

Transformations in the Understanding of the Hegemonic Role of Media

Products. Media products organize our understanding of people and groups in society, as well as institutions, social relations, gender roles, history, culture, and other cultures/countries. They also represent attitudes towards these things and suggest to the viewer what s/he should think about them. They often privilege certain views over others—the views, media critics say, which help the economic interests of the media industry itself as well as of the politically and economically powerful segments of society. Certain ways of understanding, or **frames** prevail because they generalize, universalize or

“naturalize” dominant economic interests within the global system. These frames define what is considered “commonsense,” “mainstream,” or “cool.”

The discipline of media studies in the 1980s adopted a less deterministic view of the hegemonic role of media products, preferring to see the media as venues for negotiating hegemony. Scholars pointed to the fact that the media seemed to allow for the expression of a relatively wide range of beliefs and ideas. They also argued that audiences do not respond to media monolithically without negotiation or contestation. Hegemony was seen as “up for grabs,” so to speak. Powerful segments of society would have to be always vigilant and engage in constant effort to have their interests recognized and accepted as the prevailing ones through the media. Competing voices struggling to get heard would succeed at least some times. Social and cultural conflict was understood as a struggle both to assume and undo media hegemony.

In the 1990s, the idea of contested media hegemony lost ground and was replaced with a much grimmer view of the power of media in society. The 1990s saw an unprecedented concentration of ownership of media content and venues among a small number of giant multimedia conglomerates and a restriction of real choice for consumers in spite of the apparent dizzying variety of entertainment offerings. The six largest media giants are Viacom, NewsCorp, Universal Vivendi, Bertelsman, AOL-Time Warner, and Walt Disney. They own or control virtually all of commercial film production and distribution, radio broadcasting, cable and network TV, and music industry. They also have huge stakes in cable and satellite communications, the internet, book and magazine publishing, sports, and recreation. The media conglomerates are also tied to or owned by other corporate-business interests and have ongoing partnerships with other kinds of industries like apparel, food/beverages, toys, etc. The media giants are global companies. Their reach and economic stakes are world-wide. There is little real competition among these companies. They cooperate with each other for maximum profit. This unprecedented concentration of ownership has resulted in **hypercommercialism**, that is, the usurpation of all media content by marketing. All preexisting barriers between content and marketing or advertising are eroding quickly. The media giants use the media venues they own to sell their own media products and other products. Fast profit is now the only motive behind most media production. This results in the kind of “lowest-common-denominator” media products that are guaranteed to sell and to pervasive “copycatting,” which minimizes risks. Extensive, insidious, and very sophisticated promotional research into target audiences—the most coveted of which are the teenagers—by media companies

helps devise ever newer ways of overcoming audience cynicism and familiarity with media conventions. The result is a phenomenon that media scholars describe as the **feedback loop**, the usurpation of culture itself by marketing. Because the media giants control much of cultural production, the consumer imperative reigns throughout reducing human beings to what they buy. The self-perception, taste, behavior, and frame of reference of entire generations of viewers are now being shaped by a hypercommercialized media culture.

Media culture not only subordinates all value systems to the consumer imperative but it actively promotes the ideology that benefits the interests of global capitalism and shapes content to accommodate these interests. Media content is dictated and/or restricted by advertisers and the media companies' own business ventures. It also promotes a **de-politicized** of the world and the individual. Media culture acknowledges dissatisfaction and malaise among its target consumers but can only respond by selling products that discourage meaningful political dissent or make it unthinkable. Mark Krispin Miller's evaluation of TV a medium that "exacts universal assent, not through outright force, but by creating an environment that would make dissent impossible" applies to media culture as a whole. Rather than risk representing issues that might prove politically damaging to the consumerist imperative, we are offered empty rage (i.e. *WWF* and *Eminem*); the glorification of war as a patriotic value (i.e. *History Channel* and much of what passes for historical documentary on PBS); and law-and-order type of shows that allude to social and political issues through the frame of reference of criminality and violence (i.e. *Law and Order* and its spin-offs, *Oz*, *The Sopranos*). Although seemingly provocative, the increasing reliance on sex and titillation in the representation of the genders, is based on very traditional ideas about the roles of men and women in society. Maintaining the illusion of male supremacy has now become part and parcel of media culture. Where the representation of the genders in the media is concerned, the consumerist imperative and the de-politicized view of the world are wedded to a kind of sexual explicitness that is male-oriented (it focuses on displaying the female body) and purports to convey a female "world-view" that revolves around sex (i.e. *Sex and the City*). When media products eschew an overtly sexualized representation of femininity (the so-called "chick flicks" and the programming produced by women-oriented cable channels like Lifetime Television for Women), they promote a traditional "romantic" view of female desire or portray women as helpless victims in society. The representation of gender in the media thus further complicates the representation of social issues. See **Framing** above.

Media Illiteracy and the Reality Effect. The largest obstacle to teaching with narrative film and TV profitably and well is the pervasive and largely unconscious tendency we all have to confuse media with reality. College teachers in the humanities and social sciences who use TV and film in their classroom are as prone to take media presentations for reality as their students. This confusion takes two forms:

(i) The content of film and TV presentations is treated as a very close approximation of real life situations and experiences. For example, psychology students are routinely asked to prepare diagnostic case studies of media characters.

(ii) Media content is treated as unmediated and transparent—that is, as if it does not in itself require a metalevel of analysis. This assumption of transparency allows instructors to use media content to illustrate other metalanguages (theoretical concepts, explanatory models, hypotheses etc.) that attempt to explain society, human interaction, economic systems, history, communication etc. For example, in a course on the theories of communication, students are asked to refer to a film as a means of understanding how communication theories can explain behavior in the “real world.” Also in communication courses, students are often asked to use the experiences of film characters to explain to themselves their own experiences, and interpersonal and social relationships. Another way in which historians make the transparency assumption is when they see screen-based historical fiction as potentially able to reproduce/recreate the emotional reality of past events as it was experienced by contemporary witnesses and participants. (The latter view has been seriously advanced in **Perspectives**, the electronic newsmagazine of the American Historical Association.)

Our media illiteracy is understandable, however. Since relatively recently, film analysis at the high school and college level was seen as a form of art appreciation or a hands-on production project (students shooting their own “news” features, for example). Film- or TV-watching and -making are still, moreover, domains of the school experience where students are asked to consult their personal experience and emotional response.

These ways of approaching the media phenomenon are inadequate today. Students should first learn to see media products not only as sources of pleasure, entertainment, or emotional compensation but also as vehicles of economic, political, and social persuasion that must be mistrusted and scrutinized. By learning to identify the beliefs and assumptions that underlie all media products, students can avoid their insidious

effect on their own self-perception and world-view (see **The Hegemonic Role of the Media**). High school media studies can not be content with teaching students the rudiments of production (an option available only to wealthy school districts anyway). By first being critical interpreters, students will be more conscious about the ideas and assumptions they put into their own class production projects. High school and college media studies can not limit themselves to studying “great films” either because aesthetics and formal considerations can only be fully understood unless placed in the wider contemporary context of commercial media products, with which young people are most familiar.

Our media illiteracy may also be compounded by our neurological, physiological, mental and emotional apparatuses, which may as yet be unable to help us make distinctions between mediated stimuli and real stimuli. Recent research has suggested that humans respond socially and emotionally to media in the same way they respond to real-life experiences and that the perception of (emotional or visceral) reality prompted by the media is powerful no matter how unrealistic the content. (See Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996))

Media Literacy Organizations. Since the 1980s, a number of media literacy and organizations have emerged prompted by the concern over the quality of the media, particularly as it affects children and young adults (K-12 emphasis). These organizations’ websites provide useful and fairly comprehensive web links to other media literacy resources and media watchdog websites. It is important to keep in mind that the resources and services such organizations offer and their approach to media literacy might present credibility problems due to their own ideological perspectives, level of staff expertise, and sources of funding. For example, a prominent media literacy organization, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (www.nmec.org) receives its funding from corporate media sponsors. AMLA’s sponsors include AOL-Time Warner, a giant media conglomerate who owns a dizzying variety of media venues targeting children for marketing. Another AMLA sponsor is the Fox Family Channel which is owned by News Corp., another giant media conglomerate with similar market share. Such media companies are not only responsible for targeting children with inappropriate material and creating the media culture of de-politicization and hyper-commercialization but have a vested interest in presenting a benevolent front to parents

and educators. One of AMLA's consultants, Renne Hobbs, has even produced programming for the controversial Channel One, the in-school news program sponsored by AOL-Time Warner. Partnerships with corporations place doubt on media literacy organizations' ability to offer teaching aids that are free of corporate PR and hurt their credibility. Proper disclosure is also important in evaluating the media literacy organizations. The web sites must disclose not only their sources of funding but also the names of staff members who research and write the classroom material and other publications they produce. Other media literacy organizations include the Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org), , and The Media Education Foundation (www.mediaed.org). The Media Literacy Clearinghouse (www.med.sc.edu:1081) is a website begun as part of a grant project at the University of South Carolina Medical School and continues to provide links and information on media literacy. Subjects covered in the Media Literacy Clearinghouse resources are gender issues, tobacco advertising, commercialism, advertising, media literacy resources, propaganda, and the internet.

Other important media watchdog and public interest organizations worth consulting for evaluating the quality of information offered in media literacy sites are:

The Center for Media & Democracy (www.prwatch.org)

Center for Media and Public Affairs (www.cmpa.com)

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (www.fair.org/whats-fair.html)

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