

Reading a Film Sequence

© This document has been prepared by Eric Rentschler and Anton Kaes.
Source: Peter Götz. "Ger439-New German Cinema." [<http://castle.uvic.ca/german/439/seq.html>]

Film as a text

Every text is a function of at least two contexts:

- the context in which it was made (historical background)
- the context in which it functions (cultural traditions)

Every text speaks in a number of different ways, i. e., it recycles the givens of tradition, engaging various forms of discourse, putting them together in a way to produce an aesthetic entity. These texts are something like a stringing together of quotations, of reworking conventions, of adding together a number of impulses from the world in which one lives, appropriating various elements in a way that leads to something different, and in that sense, new.

The work that goes into ferreting out the different voices in a text involves, among other things, an awareness of historical situations, the assumptions and background of an artist and his/her team, the motivation (s) behind a certain production. Beyond that, to talk about a filmic text means that we engage in a dialogue that brings us into the scene as a participant in an exchange: we make certain assumptions, both methodological and theoretical ones. Even the statement "I didn't like this film" carries with it a sizable amount of implicit assumptions.

Any thorough analysis of a film involves studying the following:

- the socio-historical background to the film, economic and political factors that conditioned its making and explain its existence
- the traditions out of which a given film arises
- its status in the public sphere in which it is received;
- the director/author's larger body of work, of which the film is part of a larger whole;
- the "work" of the text itself
- the question of a film's reception in time and how this has pre-shaped our own expectations as well as the film's place in history
- the relation of a text to certain inter-texts; these can be directly suggested by a film or they can be creative associations suggested by the spectator.

What to pay attention to when analyzing a film:

I. Narrative

1. What is the function of this sequence within the larger narrative action: exposition, climax, foreshadowing, transition, etc.? Does the sequence encapsulate the major oppositions at work in the film? What are the underlying issues in the sequence (often glossed over and obscured in the overt action and in the dialogue, but possibly alluded to in the visuals)? What is the selected sequence "really" about? What aspect of the story does it establish, revise, develop? How do the visuals express it?
2. How is the story told? (linear, with flashbacks, flash-forwards, episodically?) What "happens" on the level of the plot? How do plot and story differ, if at all?
3. Can the sequence be divided into individual segments (indicated, for instance, by shifts of location, jumps in time, inter-titles, etc.)? Assuming the film's story consists of many "wisps of

narratives, " all intricately interwoven with each other, how many simultaneous narratives (sub-stories) does the sequence contain?

4. How do the various channels of information used in film--image, speech, sound, music, writing--interact to produce meaning? Does one of the channels dominate in this sequence?
5. Is there a recognizable source of the narration? Voice-over or off-screen commentary? What is the narrator's perspective?
6. Does the film acknowledge the spectator or do events transpire as if no one were present? Do characters look into the camera or pretend it is not there? Does the film reflect on the fact that the audience assumes the role of voyeurs to the screen exhibition?
7. Does the film reflect on its "constructedness" by breaking the illusion of a self-sufficient "story apparently told by nobody? " Are there inter-titles, film-within-film sequences, obtrusive and self-conscious ("unrealistic") camera movements calling attention to the fact that the film is a construct?
8. How does the narrative position the spectator vis-à-vis the onscreen events and characters? Are we made to respond in certain ways to certain events (say, through music that "tells" us how to respond or distances us from the action)? How are women portrayed? Are they primarily shown as passive objects of the male gaze? Does the camera transfigure them (through soft-focus, framing, etc.)?
9. Does the narrative (as encapsulated in the sequence) express (indirectly) current political views? Does the film sequence conform to, affirm, or question dominant ideologies? Does the filmmaker (unconsciously) subvert the expression of minority or non-conformist views by recourse to old visual clichés?

II. Staging

The filmmaker stages an event to be filmed. What is put in front of the camera? How does the staging comment on the story? How does it visualize the main conflicts of the story?

Setting:

On location or in the studio? "Realistic" or stylized? Historical or contemporary? Props that take on a symbolic function? Are things like mirrors, crosses, windows, books accentuated? Why? How do sets and props comment on the narrative?

Space:

Cluttered or empty? Does it express a certain atmosphere? Is the design symmetrical or asymmetrical? Balanced or unbalanced? Stylized or natural? Open form: frame is de-emphasized, has a documentary "snapshot" quality; closed form: frame is carefully composed, self-contained, and theatrical; the frame acts as a boundary and a limit. Is space used as an indirect comment on a character's inner state of mind?

Lighting:

What is illuminated, what is in the shadow? Lighting quality: hard lighting (bold shadows) or soft (diffused illumination)? Direction: frontal lighting (flat image), side-lighting (for dramatic effect), backlighting (only the silhouette is visible), under-lighting (from a fireplace, for example)? "Realistic" or high contrast/symbolic lighting? High key/low key? Special lighting effects? (e. g. shadows, spotlight). Natural lighting or studio? (Hollywood has three light sources: key light, fill light, and backlight.) How does the lighting enhance the expressive potential of the film?

Acting and Choreography:

What do appearance, gestures, facial expressions, voice signify? Professional actors or non-actors? Why? Movement of characters: toward or away from the camera, from left to right or vice versa? Do characters interact with each other through their gaze? Who looks at whom? Grouping of characters before the camera; view of characters (clear or obscured [behind objects], isolated or integrated, center or off-center, background or foreground?) How do acting and choreography attract and guide the viewer's attention (and manipulate his/her sympathies)? How do they create suspense, ambiguity, wrong clues, complexity, and certainties?

Costume and Make-Up:

"Realistic" or stylized/abstract? Social and cultural coding: what do the costumes signify (status, wealth, attitude, foreignness, etc.)?

III. Cinematography

The filmmaker controls not only what is filmed but how it is filmed: how the staged, "pro-filmic" event is photographed and framed, how long the image lasts on the screen.

1. Photography:

Film Stock: What type of photographic film is used? (Fast film stock to achieve grainy, contrasty look) Tinting? Over/underexposed? Black and white or color? Symbolic use of colors? Subjective use/colors linked to certain characters? Colors as leitmotif?

Speed of Motion: "Normal" speed (24 frames per second for sound film; 16 for silent); slow motion; accelerated motion; freeze frame; time-lapse (low shooting speed: a frame a minute; see the sun set in seconds)?

Lens: Wide-angle; normal; telephoto lens (depth reduced)? Zoom lens?

Focus: Depth of field; shallow focus; deep focus (everything is in sharp focus)? Rack focus (lens refocuses)? Soft focus?

Special Effects: Glass shot; superimposition; projection process?

How do such photographic manipulations of the shot function within the overall content of the film?

2. Camera/Framing:

Angle/Level: High angle, low angle, straight-on angle; eye-level shot; oblique angle; canted frame?

Distance: Extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, (extreme) close-up?

Movement (Mobile Framing): Pan: horizontal "panorama" shot? Tilt: up or down? Tracking shot: camera travels forward, backward, in various directions? Crane? Aerial shot? How do camera movements function? What information do they provide about the space of the image? Does the camera always follow the action? Does it continually offer new perspectives on the characters and the objects? Subjective camera movement? How does it relate to on-screen/off screen space?

Type of shot: Establishing shot? Point-of-view shot? Reaction shot? Shot-counter shot?

IV. Editing

Transition Techniques: Gradual changes: dissolve (superimpose briefly one shot over the following; fade-in or -out (lighten or darken the image); cuts (instantaneous changes from one shot to another); abrupt shifts and disjunctions. Does editing comment on the relationships between characters and spaces?

Purpose of Editing: Continuity editing, thematic or dialectical montage, "invisible" cutting, shock cutting, cross-cutting (alternates shots of two or more lines of actions going on indifferent places).

Rhythm and Pace: flowing/jerky/disjointed/more pans than cuts? /fast-paced/slow-paced/ are there major changes in rhythm due to different editing? Shot duration?

V. Sound

Music: Is its source part of the story (= "diegetic") or added on (= "non-diegetic")? With diegetic sound the source of the sound can be visible (on-screen) or unseen (off-screen). What kind of music: classical/rock/exotic/familiar? Typical for the period depicted? Does music comment (foreshadow or contradict) the action? Does it irritate? What is the music's purpose in a film? How does it direct our attention within the image? How does it shape our interpretation of the image?

Sound effects: Artificial or natural sound? On- or off-screen source? Is there subjective sound? What does it signify?

Dialogue/silence: Stilted or artificial language? Do different characters use different kinds of language? Slang, dialect, profanity? Allusion to other texts, quotations? Do certain characters speak through their silences?

Voice-Over/Narration: Who is speaking and from where? Is voice-over part of the action or (non-diegetically) outside of it? What does the narrator know and what is his/her relationship to the action? Is s/he reliable, omniscient, unreliable?

Synchronization: Is sound matched with the image? Non-simultaneous sound? (For instance, reminiscing narrator or when sound from the next scene begins while the images of the last one are still on the screen. This is also called a "sound bridge".)