

SCAND 360/COMP LIT 315 B*
Reading a Film Sequence
-Preliminary Notes-

The following is an outline of formal considerations that you should examine when doing a sequence analysis. Keep in mind, however, that the text is not merely a self-contained entity; it is also a product of the context in which it was made, and of the context in which it signifies.

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 whole. These texts are something like a stringing together of quotations, a reworking of conventions, an adding together 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. Thus you should also be thinking about how a text simultaneously represents a continuity of a particular tradition or convention as well as a deviation or a contribution towards a shift within that convention (i.e. each text is both “old” and “new”).

The work that goes into teasing out the different strands of a text involves, among other things, an awareness of historical situations, the assumptions and background of an artist and his/her team, the motivation behind a certain production. Beyond that, to talk about a film means to engage in a dialogue that brings us into the scene as participants in an exchange: we make certain assumptions, both methodological and theoretical. Even the statement “I didn't like this film” carries with it a sizable number 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 condition its making and explain its existence
- the traditions out of which a given film arises: the sorts of cultural quotations it partakes of, the conventions it makes use of, the degree to which it participates in certain specifically national patterns of expression
- the institutional positioning of a given film: its status in the public sphere in which it is received
- the director/author's larger body of work, of which the film is a part
- the “work” of the text itself, never forgetting that films issue from a larger extra-filmic whole
- the question of a film's reception in time and how this shapes our own expectations as well as the film's place in history
- the relation of the text to certain intertexts (these can be suggested by a film or they can be creative associations suggested by spectators)
- self-reflection on the part of the spectator on his/her own position vis-à-vis the film, a recognition of one's own closeness to (identification with) or distance from the images

I. Narrative

1. What is the (dramatic) function of a particular 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 by the visuals)? What is the selected sequence “really” about? What aspect of the story does it suggest, develop, or revise?
2. How is the story told (linear, with flashbacks, flash-forwards, episodically)? What “happens” in the sequence on the level of the plot? How do plot and story differ, if at all? What is the relationship between the time of narration and narrated time?
3. Can the sequence be divided up into individual segments (indicated, for instance, by shifts of location, jumps in time, intertitles, etc.)? Assuming that the film's story consists of several narrative threads, how many of these threads does the sequence pick up—and which ones does it leave dangling?
4. How do the various channels of information used in film—image, speech, sound, music, camera work—interact to produce meaning? Does one of the channels dominate in this sequence?
5. Is there a recognizable source of narration? Voice-over or off-screen commentary? What is the perspective of the narrator vis-à-vis the narrative? Is this perspective steady, or does it change?
6. Does the film reflect on its “constructedness” by breaking the illusion of a self-sufficient story apparently without a narrator? Are there intertitles, film-within-a-film (“nested”) sequences, obtrusive and self-conscious (“unrealistic”) camera movements, which call attention to the fact that the film is a construct?
7. Is there a break in the narration, i.e. for a performance? Who performs? How does the camera treat/view the performance? What is the significance of the performance within the diegesis?

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II. Staging

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

- *Setting*: On location or in a studio? “realistic” or stylized? historical or contemporary? familiar or “exotic”? Do particular props (like mirrors, crosses, windows, books) take on a symbolic function? How so?
- *Space*: Cluttered or empty? Does it express a certain atmosphere? Is the design symmetrical or asymmetrical? stylized or natural? Open form: frame is de-emphasized, has a documentary, “snapshot” quality. Closed form: frame is carefully composed, self-contained, theatrical or painterly; the frame acts as boundary and limit. Is space used as an indirect comment on a character’s state of mind? How is space used to signify?
- *Lighting*: What is illuminated, what is in shadow? Lighting quality: Hard lighting (bold shadows) or soft (diffused illumination)? Direction: Frontal lighting (flat images), sidelighting (for dramatic effect), backlighting (only the silhouette is visible), underlighting (e.g., from a fireplace)? “Realistic” or high-contrast (symbolic) lighting? Special lighting effects? Natural lighting or studio? How does the lighting enhance the expressive potential of the film?
- *Acting and Choreography*: What do appearance, gestures, facial expressions, voice signify? Professional actors (stars?) or non-actors? Movement of characters: toward or away from the camera, from left to right or vice versa: what does it suggest? Do characters interact with each other through their gaze? Who looks at whom? Grouping of characters before the camera; view of the characters (clear or obscured, isolated or integrated, center or off-center, background or foreground)? How do acting and choreography attract and guide the viewer’s attention (or manipulate his/her sympathies)? How do they create suspense, ambiguity, complexity, false clues, or certainties?
- *Costume and Make-Up*: “Realistic” or stylized? Social and cultural coding: what do the costumes signify (status, wealth, attitude, foreignness, etc.)? Does it act subversively within the given text (or within the greater social context)? How is gender coded through costume? Does the coding serve to support dominant ideological positions or does it undermine gender assumptions and codes? Do costumes quote other images? Is this a parody? How does the quotation position the two images in relation to one another? What is the overall effect on the spectator? Does costuming inspire pleasure or discomfort?

III. Cinematography

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

- *Photography*

Lens: wide-angle / normal / telephoto / zoom

Focus: depth of field / shallow focus / deep focus (everything is in sharp focus) / soft focus

Special effects: superimposition, etc.

How do these photographic manipulations of the shot function within the overall context of the film? How do they shape the viewer’s experience?

- *Camera / Framing*

Angle/Level: high angle / low angle / straight-on / eye-level shot / oblique angle: significance?

Distance: extreme long shot / long shot / medium shot / close-up / extreme close-up

Movement (mobile framing): Pan: horizontal “panorama” shot / tilt: up or down / tracking (or dolly) shot: camera travels forward, backward, in various directions / crane or aerial shot. How do camera movements function within a given text? What information do we get about the space of the image? Does camera always follow the action? Continually new perspectives on the characters and the objects? Subjective camera movement? How does it relate to on-screen/off-screen space? How does the camera interpret the action? How does the camera movement link characters with one another?

Duration: long take / quick cutting: signifies?

Type of shot: establishing shot / point-of-view (pov) shot / reaction shot / shot-counter shot / flashback?

IV. Editing

Coordination of one shot with the next.

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, disjunctions. Does editing comment on the relationships between characters and spaces?

Purpose of editing: Continuity editing, thematic, or dialectical montage; cutting on motion, “invisible” cutting, shock cutting, cross-cutting (alternate shots of two or more lines of action going on in different places)

Rhythm and Pace: flowing / jerky / disjointed / more panning shots than cuts / fast-paced / slow-paced. Are there major changes in rhythm due to different editing? Why?

V. Sound

Music: is the music’s source a part of the story (= diegetic) or added on (= non-diegetic) to enhance the action? In diegetic sound, the source can be visible (on-screen) or outside the frame (off-screen): signifying? What kind of music: classical / rock / rap / “foreign” / familiar? is it typical for the period depicted? Does music comment on the image track? Does it irritate? What is the music’s purpose in a film? Is music conspicuously withheld at a moment when one might expect to hear it? How does music direct our attention? How does it shape our interpretation of the image?

Sound effects: artificial or natural sounds? on- or off-screen source?

Dialogue / Silence: stilted or affected language? slang? do different characters use different kinds of language? code-switching (from one language to another)? allusions to other texts?

Voice-over / Narration: who is speaking and from where? is voice-over a part of the action or (non-diegetically) outside of it? what do they know, and what is the nature of their relationship to the action? are they reliable / omniscient / unreliable? do they pretend to occupy an ‘objective’ position? or do they comment upon the action or characters?

Synchronization: is the sound track matched with the image track? non-simultaneous sound? (e.g., reminiscing narrator or when sound from the next scene begins while the image of the last scene are still on the screen: “sound bridge”) significance?

VI. Audience Address / Spectator Position

Where is the spectator positioned in relation to the image? Is the spectator voyeuristic, or do the characters break the “fourth wall” and directly address the camera?

Is the spectator positioned so as to identify with certain characters? Do particular codes cue us in as to how we are to react to certain characters (costume, lighting, music, camera angle, etc.)?

Does the film appeal to conventional expectations of the genre?

Does the film address contemporary social issues? Is it intended to convince us of something? Is it controversial? “hard to watch”? sympathetic?

Is there a visible narrator or voice-over? how do we relate to this voice of authority? do we believe and/or identify with him/her/them?

Is there a particular audience being addressed by the film? (if so, do other, “unintended” audiences still gravitate to or comment upon the film? why?) are there in-jokes? what is the position of the spectator to the film’s mode of address? does its decoding require special or privileged information (i.e., knowledge of old monster movies, 1970s sitcoms, etc.)?

VII. Writing

Intertitles (stylized in silent film? used in sound film? for what purpose?)

Subtitles (not only in foreign films; also used for parody)

Literary quotations (poems, epigraphs, etc.)

Letters

Written signs (advertising in the background, road signs, etc.)

Credits