Film Theory # 1

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Film Theory

- *Understanding Movies* divides the study of film theory into three categories:
  - Theories that focus on the work, itself, as the central area of study
  - Theories that focus on the artist as the central area of study
  - Theories that focus on the audience as the central area of study

The Work of Art as Focus

- Realism
  - Goal is to represent reality as closely as possible; the camera is only a recorder
  - Tend to have a moral or ethical bias
  - Tend to avoid conventional plot structures
  - *Bicycle Thief* is an example, as it did not even use professional actors but "real" people in roles

- Formalism
  - Uses cinematic technology and devices to express their themes as effectively as possible

The Artist as Focus

- Auteur theory
  - A director's personal vision will dominate a film
  - Directors tend to have their own styles
  - Criticism looks toward the differences of directors' films, particularly at films from the same genre
    - Within Action-Adventure films, for instance, James Cameron might use different mise-en-scene patterns or shot sequences than Steven Spielberg

The Audience as Focus

- Structuralism and Semiology
  - Focus on *how* the audience makes meaning of the film
  - Analyzes the "deep structure" of film by analyzing the pieces, the code—e.g., shots, angles, etc.
  - Structuralism is the application of these studies within one film
  - Semiology is the application of these studies within more than one film

American Practical Criticism

- Eclecticism
  - Recognizes that one theory is not comprehensive enough to definitively describe a film
  - Takes not only from film theory but other theories, like post-modernism and deconstruction, and other disciplines, like literature and psychology, and even social and cultural value systems, like feminism or the idea of "good taste"

Principle Elements of Film Theory

Understanding Film

Analysis of film comes through *content* (what is in the film) and *form* (how the film is portrayed).

- Types of Films (Realism, Classical, Formalism)
- Shots
- Angles
- Lighting
- Color
- Sound
- Editing
- Mise-en-Scene

Realism

A filmic style that favors the commonplace, portrays its subject objectively, and attempts to emulate real life without manipulation.

The Bicycle Thief
(dir. Vittorio de Sica, 1948)

Characteristics of Realism:

- Unprofessional actors
- No special effects
- On location sets and props
- Minimal editing
- Natural lighting
- Documentary-style

Once
(dir. John Carney, 2006)

classical

The mode that falls between the two extremes of Realism and Formalism; strives to achieve authenticity of real people and real events but with the manipulation of its creative production elements.

Citizen Kane
(dir. Orson Welles, 1941)

Characteristics of Classical Cinema:

- Professional actors
- Minimal or no special effects
- On location or in studio
- Editing used for time-lapse
- Lighting and sound used to create a mood

Milk
(dir. Gus Van Sant, 2008)

Formalism

A filmic style which alters reality and showcases the director's subjective experience.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
(dir. Michel Gondry, 2004)

Characteristics of Formalism:

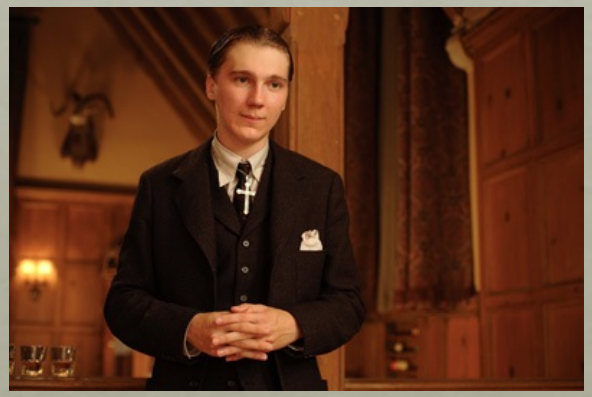
- Professional actors
- Relies heavily on special effects
- Editing speeds up or slows down time
- Lighting and sound create exaggerations
- Breaks illusion of reality

The Seventh Seal
(dir. Ingmar Bergman, 1958)

Shots

Extreme Close Up (ECU)

Close Up
(CU)



Medium Shot
(MS)

Full Shot
(FS)

Long Shot
(LS)

Extreme Long Shot
(ELS)

Shots (Cont'd)

Deep Focus

Over-The-Shoulder (OTS)

American Shot

POV Shot

Angles

Eye Level Angle

High Angle

Low Angle

Oblique Angle

Lighting

High Key Lighting

Low Key Lighting

Chiaroscuro Lighting

Silhouette/Back Lighting

Color

The use of red in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (dir. Lynne Ramsay 2011)

Color (cont'd)

Saturated Color:
conveys happiness, fantasies, romance, or some idyllic scenery

Desaturated Color:
conveys the past, struggle, depression, or some other dystopic scenery

Sound

DIEGETIC:

Sound whose source is visible on the screen or whose sound is implied to be present by the action in the film; also characterized by off-screen or on-screen

Examples:
- Voices of characters
- Sound made by props
- Music coming from instruments in film

NON-DIEGETIC:

Sound whose source is not visible on the screen nor has been applied by the action of the film; basically any sound that comes outside the story place

Examples:
- Narrator's commentary
- Sound effects added for dramatic effect
- Mood music

Editing Styles

- **Continuity**: collapse of time and space while preserving fluidity
- **Classical**: first popularized by D.W. Griffith, this style jumps from long shot to medium shot to close up for dramatic effect
- **Radical Subjective Continuity**: cuts of different time and space for dramatic effect
- **Thematic**: edits that are driven by a particular theme
- **Associative**: juxtaposition of two shots that when combined have meaning (but separate, they do not)
- **Dialectic**: edits driven by expressing a contradiction

Mise-En-ScÉne

A french word that means

"placed on stage."

Everything that appears before the camera and how it's arranged on the screen to convey meaning in the film.

1. Placement around frame
2. Face to camera
3. Territorial space
4. Frame constraints

Placement around the frame

Face to camera

Full Turn

Three Quarter Turn

Quarter Turn

Half Turn (Profile)

Back

Territorial space

Background

Mid-ground

Foreground

Frame Constraints

<u>Tight Frame</u>: conveys subject's intensity, importance and inability to escape

<u>Open Frame</u>: conveys desolation, space, freedom, or insignificance

Analysis Activity

Consider:

- ❑ Shot
- ❑ Angle
- ❑ Lighting
- ❑ Color
- ❑ Placement around frame
- ❑ Face to camera
- ❑ Territorial space
- ❑ Frame constraints

Homework

Do a shot-by-shot analysis of a scene from a film of your choosing. Determine if the scene is characteristic of Realism, Classical, or Formalism, and support your assertion by analyzing each individual shot based on:

- ❑ Type of shot
- ❑ Angle
- ❑ Lighting
- ❑ Color
- ❑ Sound
- ❑ Editing Style
- ❑ Mise-en-Scene (placement of frame, face to camera, territorial space, frame constraints)

FILM APPRECIATION

WHY READ FILM ?

Why read a film?

The better a viewer reads an image the more he/she understands:

- Its artistic quality
- Its reflection of culture and its values
- Its various sets of metaphorical meanings

When you look at a frame, one of the first things to consider is space.

How complex is the *mise-en-scene*?

- Is it claustrophobic?
- Is it wide-open space?

How much of the space of the frame is filled by the characters?

A claustrophobic set design builds tension and anxiety.

A spacious, open set design can create loneliness, isolation, or freedom.

Another thing to consider is distance.

How much do you see of the character(s)?

- Is it a close up?
- Is it a full shot?
- Is it a medium shot?

How much distance is between the viewer and the characters?

In general the closer the camera gets to the characters, the closer the viewer feels towards the characters.

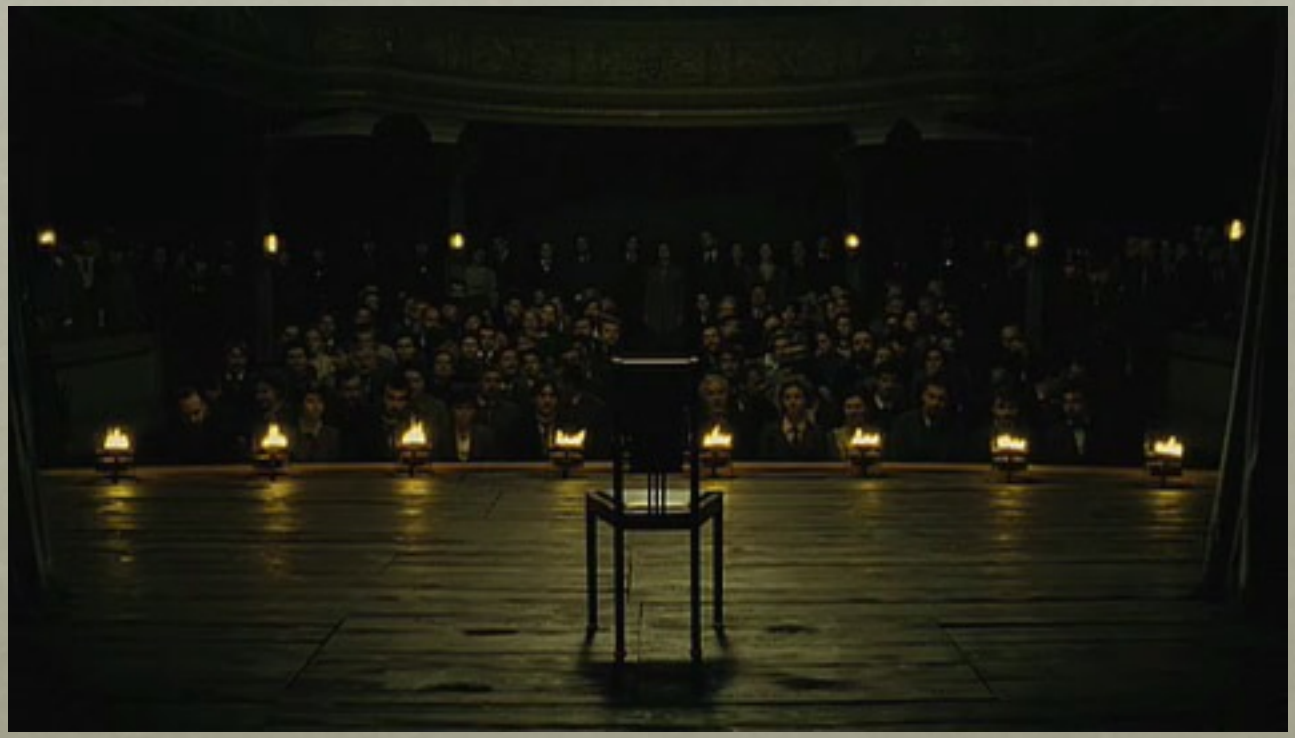
Close-ups are most common in…

- love scenes
- horror films
- emotional dramas

As the camera moves further away from the character(s), the viewer is provided more information about them or about their situation.

The further the camera is from the subject, the more distant you will feel from what is happening in the scene or to the character(s).

The Establishing Shot



It lets the audience have a look at the subject in relation to its surroundings. It usually appears at the beginning of a film or scene to establish the setting or to introduce a film.

The Two-Shot

Makes two characters the subject of the frame. It allows you to understand how the characters interact and react to each other.

Something else to consider when observing A frame is the angle or camera position.

- Was the frame shot from high above? (a high angle)
- Was it shot at eye level?
- Was it shot from a low angle?

A frame shot from a high angle is often referred to as <u>God's eye view</u> because it suggests that 'someone' is observing the characters. It can suggest danger and helplessness.

A frame shot from a low angle makes the subject seem larger.

A character that seems larger than another in a frame is usually the dominant character.

A *Dutch angle* suggests that something is wrong either in the character or the story's situation.

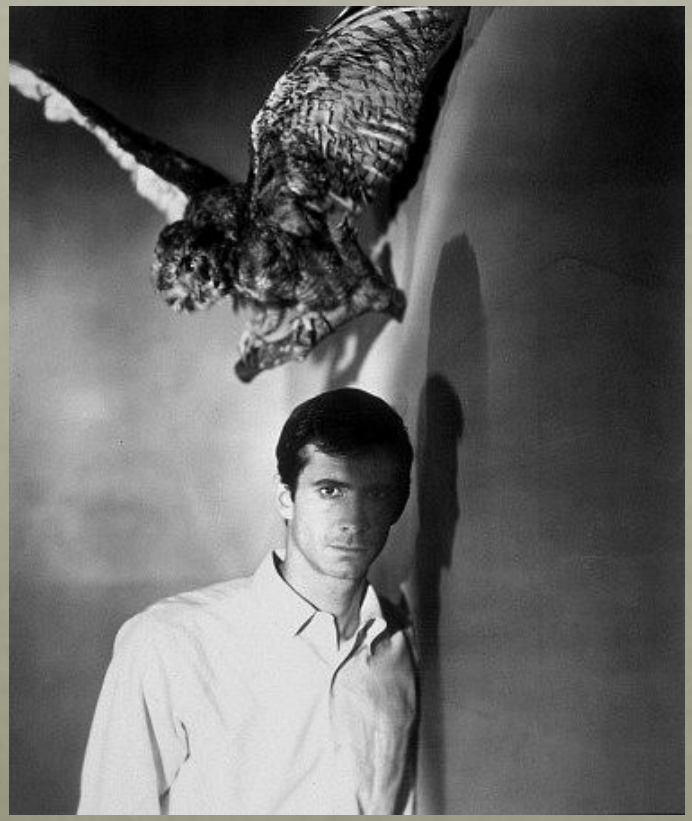
ALL OF

Besides shots and angles, you should also watch for symbols.

Some common symbols are:

Images of entrapment are usually shown through characters framed by doors, gates, or confined spaces (like closets).

Images of duality are usually represented by characters reflected in mirrors , water, glass, or in accentuated shadow.



Stairs, dark alleys, Dutch angles, darkness enveloping a character, seeing only part of a character are some images of <u>imminent danger</u>.

Light cutting through a character or lines that divide the frame [simulated chiaroscuro] usually mark characters that are in turmoil.

Other Symbols

Christ figures/Biblical References

Other Symbols

Religious Symbols

Phallic symbols

Art represents all that we experience as humans.

Understanding film as an art means understanding yourself and the world around you.