

Elements of Film

Save this handout for future reference. Refer to it whenever we “read a film” in class.

Lighting

The language of lighting has its own vocabulary, and you probably understand it more than you think. In a low-light scene you can bet that someone will get killed or kissed. That is the universal language of lighting. Here are some terms you need to understand:

- **High-key:** The scene is brightly lit. This is normal lighting. You can see everything.
- **Low-key:** The scene is dark with sharp contrasts. It creates a romantic or eerie feeling.
- **Front:** This softens the face, giving it a look of innocence.
- **Bottom:** Faces become sinister by creating sharp contrasts (*Bride of Frankenstein*).
- **Back:** The figures are silhouettes, losing their identity (*Gone With the Wind*).
- **Shadows:** Shadows conceal identity or make a symbolic statement (*Strangers on a Train*).
- **Diffused:** Lighting that is altered by fog, smoke, or filter to create a mood, to obscure an aspect of the shot.
- **Spot:** Intense pool of light that isolates a small field of the shot, usually focused in on a face, a key element of the subject of the shot.

Color

You already understand the symbolic meaning of colors from your study of literature. These same symbols transfer to film. When watching an old western you can tell the good guy from the bad guy by the color of his hat. The director deliberately chooses color for its effect in the scene (*Gone with the Wind*, *Dick Tracy*, *Schindler's List*).

Framing

The four edges of a movie screen form the window in which we see the story. Placement of characters and objects within this window shows relationships and importance. Film is voyeuristic. Through the frame of the screen we peep into the private lives of the characters (*Citizen Kane*, *12 Angry Men*).

Motion and Speed

Motion in film is not limited to characters moving around the scene. It can be as big as a camera sweeping across a scene to small movements like gestures and facial expressions. Each type of movement adds to the story being told.

- **Pan:** The camera swivels (in the same base position) to follow a moving subject. A space is left in front of the subject: the pan ‘leads’ rather than ‘trails’. A pan usually begins and ends with a few seconds of still picture to give greater impact. The speed of a pan across a subject creates a particular mood as well as establishing the viewer’s relationship with the subject.
- **Tilt:** Pivot the camera vertically (*12 Angry Men*).
- **Tracking or dolly shot:** Tracking involves the camera itself being moved smoothly towards or away from the subject (contrast with zooming). Tracking in (like

zooming) draws the viewer into a closer, more intense relationship with the subject; moving away tends to create emotional distance.

- **Boom or crane shot:** The camera moves vertically on a boom or crane (*Far and Away*).
- **Zoom:** In zooming in the camera does not move; the lens is focused down from a long-shot to a close-up while the picture is still being shown. The subject is magnified, and attention is concentrated on details previously invisible as the shot tightens (contrast tracking). It may be used to surprise the viewer. Zooming out reveals more of the scene (perhaps where a character is, or to whom he or she is speaking) as the shot widens.
- **Crab:** The camera moves (crabs) right or left.
- **Hand-held camera.** A hand-held camera can produce a jerky, bouncy, unsteady image which may create a sense of immediacy or chaos. Its use is a form of subjective treatment.

Transition

Transitions are the punctuation marks of film. As periods, commas, question marks and exclamation points tell us how to end a sentence, transitions show us how to end a scene.

- **Cut:** Like a period, it abruptly ends the shot. Two pieces of film are spliced together. The most common transition. Cutting may:
 - Change the scene;
 - Compress time;
 - Vary the point of view; or
 - Build up an image or idea.
- **Fade:** The scene fades out until it is black (or white).
- **Dissolve:** One scene melts out into another melting in. Usually shows a shift in time or place (*Hope Floats*).
- **Iris in or out:** The iris of the camera closes or opens the scene (*Young Frankenstein*).
- **Wipe:** The scene changes in a line moving across the screen (*Young Frankenstein*).
- **Sound:** Sounds moves the viewer form one scene to another. A gunshot in one scene becomes a car backfire in another.
- **Superimpositions:** Two or more images placed directly over each other (e.g. and eye and a camera lens to create a visual metaphor).
- **Split screen:** The division of the screen into parts which can show the viewer several images at the same time (sometimes the same action from slightly different perspectives, sometimes similar actions at different times). This can convey the excitement and frenzy of certain activities, but it can also overload the viewer.
- **Montage:** Several small scenes connect bigger ones. It may shorten time.
- **Jump cut:** A technique that joins two shots together but that doesn't express continuity between the shots.

Camera Angle

The angle at which the shot is taken can have symbolic meaning.

- **Crane shot:** A shot taken from a crane or other very tall device.

- **Bird's-eye view or aerial:** Extreme high angle shot that takes in the view of the location and dwarfs and distorts figures in the shot.
- **Close-up:** A shot of the subject's face. (*Psycho*)
- **Detail shot:** A shot even closer, say of an eye or a hand. (*Psycho*)
- **Medium shot:** Shows the subject's body from the knees up.
- **Long shot:** Shows entire figure.
- **Low-angle shot:** A shot taken from below the subject's waist (*The Birds*).
- **High-angle shot:** Taken from above the subject's waist.
- **Point of View shot:** A shot taken from the point of view of the subject. We see through the subject's eyes (*The Birds, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*).
- **Establishing shot:** A long shot that reveals the time and place of the action.

Sound

There are five kinds of sound in movies:

- **Dialogue:** Characters talking to each other in synch with the picture.
- **Sound effects:** Sounds that occur in synch with the picture that have been dubbed in later on.
- **Music:** Adds to the emotional feeling of the scene. The source is not seen in the movie.
- **Voice-over:** A narrator speaking to the audience from some distant future, but not appearing on screen (*To Kill and Mockingbird, A River Runs Through It*)
- **Silence:** The lack of any sound can have a profound effect on the viewers (*The Birds*).

Special Effects

Special effects are techniques used by the director to create an illusion.

- **Stop-motion photography:** Shooting is interrupted at intervals while the scenery or props are rearranged. Simple to do with a video camera (*King Kong*).
- **Animation:** A drawing or clay object is changed slightly every time the camera stops. When film is projected at regular speed the object seems to move (*Wallace and Grommit, Disney movies*).
- **Miniature or models shots:** A small-scale model is filmed to look full-sized. The camera must run at faster speed to slow down the action of the model to make it look like it is moving at regular speed (*Star Wars*).
- **Glass shots:** Uses scenery painted on transparent glass. The camera photographs the action through the glass so that the painted portions look like they are part of the scene (*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*).
- **Rear projection:** Action is filmed in front of a screen while another action is projected on the screen from behind (*Singin' in the Rain*).
- **Matte shots:** Uses an opaque screen or matte to obscure certain portions of the frames. The film is shot twice, once with the first matte, then with a second that obscures the area covered by the first. When projected, the two separate shots appear to be one (*Forrest Gump*).
- **Computer-generated graphics:** Certain portions of the film to whole movies are created on the computer (*Geri's Game*).

Motifs

Motifs are recurrent thematic elements in an artistic or literary work.

- Rosebud and the sled in *Citizen Kane*
- The jagged line in *Joe vs the Volcano*
- The violin music in *Young Frankenstein*
- The MacGuffins in any Hitchcock movie