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HOW TO READ A FILM

The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media

Revised Edition

James Monaco

with diagrams by David Lindroth

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For Susan
With love
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theater as beginning and ending whenever a character entered or left the stage, are more amorphous in film (as they are in theater today). The term scene is useful, no doubt, but not precise. Sequences are certainly longer than scenes, but the "sequence-shot," in which a single shot is coterminous with a sequence, is an important concept and no smaller units within it are sequential.

It would seem that a real science of film would depend on our being able to define the smallest unit of construction. We can do that technically, at least for the image: it is the single frame. But this is certainly not the smallest unit of meaning. The fact is that film, unlike written or spoken language, is not composed of units, as such, but is rather a continuum of meaning. A shot contains as much information as we want to read in it, and whatever units we define within the shot are arbitrary.

Therefore, film presents us with a languge (of sorts) that:

a) consists of short-circuit signs in which the signifier nearly equals the signified; and

b) depends on a continuous, nondiscrete system in which we can’t identify a basic unit and which therefore we can’t describe quantitatively. The result is, as Christain Metz says, that: “An easy art, the cinema is in constant danger of falling victim to this easiness.” Film is too intelligible, which is what makes it difficult to analyze. “A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand."

DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANING

Films do, however, manage to communicate meaning. They do this essentially in two different manners: denotatively and connotatively. Like written language, but to a greater degree, a film image or sound has a denotative meaning: it is what is and we don’t have to strive to recognize it. This factor may seem simplistic, but it should never be underestimated: here lies the great strength of film. There is a substantial difference between a description in words (or even in still photographs) of a person or event, and a cinematic record of the same. Because film can give us such a close approximation of reality, it can communicate a precise knowledge that written or spoken language seldom can. Language systems may be much better equipped to deal with the nonconcrete world of ideas and abstractions (imagine this book, for example, on film: without a complete narration it would be incomprehensible), but they are not nearly so capable of conveying precise information about physical realities.

By its very nature, written/spoken language analyzes. To write the word “rose” is to generalize and abstract the idea of the rose. The real power of the linguistic languages lies not with their denotive ability but in the connotative aspect of language: the weight of meaning we can attach to a word that surpasses its denotation. If denotation were the only measure of the power of a language for example, then English—which has a vocabulary of a million or so words and is the largest language in history—would be over three times more powerful than French—which has only 300,000 or so words. But French makes up for its “limited” vocabulary with a noticeably greater use of connotation. Film has connotative abilities as well.

Considering the strongly denotive quality of film sounds and images, it is surprising to discover that these connotative abilities are very much a part of the film language. In fact, many of them stem from film’s denotive ability. As we have noted in Chapter 1, film can draw on all the other arts for various effects simply because it can record them. Thus, all the connotative factors of spoken language can be accommodated on a film soundtrack while the connotations of written language can be included in titles (to say nothing of the connotative factors of dance, music, painting, and so forth). Because film is a product of culture, it has resonances that go beyond what the semiologist calls its diegesis (the sum of it denotation). An image of a rose is not simply that when it appears in a film of Richard III, for example, because we are aware of the connotations of the white rose and the red as symbols of the houses of York and Lancaster. These are culturally determined connotations.

In addition to these influences from the general culture, film has its own specific connotative ability. We know (even if we don’t often remind ourselves of it consciously) that a filmmaker has made specific choices: the rose is filmed from a certain angle, the camera moves or does not move, the color is bright or dull, the rose is fresh or fading, the thorns apparent or hidden, the background clear (so that the rose is seen in context) or vague (so that it is isolated), the shot held for a long time or briefly, and so on. These are specific aids to cinematic connotation, and although we can approximate their effect in literature, we cannot accomplish it with cinematic precision or efficiency. A picture is, on occasion, worth a thousand words, as the adage has it. When our sense of the connotation of a specific shot depends on its having been chosen from a range of other possible shots, then we can say that this is, using the language of semiology, a paradigmatic connotation. That is, the connotative sense we comprehend stems from the shot being compared, not necessarily consciously, with its unrealized companions in the paradigm, or general model, of this type of shot. A
attaches to even the simplest statements in film. There is an old joke that illustrates the point: two philosophers meet; one says “Good morning!” The other smiles in recognition, then walks on frowning and thinking to himself: “I wonder what he meant by that?” The question is a joke when spoken language is the subject; it is however, a perfectly legitimate question to ask of any statement in film.

Is there any way we can further differentiate the various modes of denotation and connotation in film? Borrowing a “trichotomy” from the philosopher C.S. Peirce, Peter Wollen, in his highly influential book Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (1969), suggested that cinematic signs are of three orders:

- The Icon: a sign in which the signifier represents the signified mainly by its similarity to it, its likeness;
- The Index: which measures a quality not because it is identical to it but because it has an inherent relationship to it;
- The Symbol: an arbitrary sign in which the signifier has neither a direct or an indexical relationship to the signified, but rather represents it through convention.

Although Wollen doesn’t fit them into the denotive/connotative categories, Icon, Index, and Symbol can be seen as mainly denotive. Portraits are Icons, of course, but so are diagrams in the Peirce/Wollen system. Indexes are more difficult to define. Quoting Peirce, Wollen suggests two sorts of Indexes, one technical—medical symptoms are Indexes of health, clocks and sundials are Indexes of time—and one metaphorical: a rolling gait should indicate that a man is a sailor. (This is the one point where the Peirce/Wollen categories verge on the connotative.) Symbols, the third category, are more easily defined. The way Pierce and Wollen use it, the word has a rather broad definition: words are Symbols (since the signifier represents the signified through convention rather than resemblance).

These three categories are not mutually exclusive. Especially in photographic images, the Iconic factor is almost always a strong one. As we have noted, a thing is itself even if it is also an Index or a Symbol. General semiological theory, especially as it is put forth in Christian Metz’s writings, covers the first and last categories—Icon and Symbol—fairly well already. The Icon is the short-circuit sign that is so characteristic of cinema; the Symbol is the arbitrary or conventional sign that is the basis of spoken and written language. It is the second category—the Index—that is most intriguing in Peirce and Wollen’s system: it seems to be a third means, halfway between the cinematic Icon and the literary Symbol, in which cinema can convey meaning. It is not an
arbitrary sign, but neither is it identical. It suggests a third type of
denotation that points directly toward connotation, and may in fact not
be understandable without the dimension of connotation.

The Index seems to be one very useful way in which cinema can deal
directly with ideas, since it gives us concrete representations or
measurements of them. How can we convey the idea of hotness cine-
matically for instance? In written language it’s very easy, but on film?
The image of a thermometer quickly comes to mind. Clearly that is an
Index of temperature. But there are more subtle Indexes, as well: sweat
is an Index, as are shimmering atmospheric waves and hot colors. It’s a
truism of film esthetics that metaphors are difficult in cinema. Compar-
ing love with roses works well enough in literature, but its cinematic
equivalent poses problems: the rose, the secondary element of the meta-
phor, is too equivalent in cinema, too much present. As a result,
metaphors based on the literary model tend to be crude and
static and forced. The Indexical sign may offer a way out of this di-
lemma. It is here that film discovers its own, unique metaphorical
power, which it owes to the flexibility of the frame, its ability to say
many things at once.

The concept of the Index also leads us to some interesting ideas
about connotation. It must be clear from the above discussion that the
line between denotation and connotation is not clearly defined: there is
a continuum. In film, as in written and spoken language, connotations
if they become strong enough are eventually accepted as denotive
meanings. As it happens, much of the connotative power of film de-

depends on devices that are Indexical; that is, they are not arbitrary signs,
but neither are they identical.

Two terms from literary studies, closely associated with each other,
serve to describe the main manner in which film conveys connotative
meaning: A metonymy is a figure of speech in which an associated
detail or notion is used to invoke an idea or represent an object.
Etymologically, the word means “substitute naming” (from the Greek
meta, involving transfer, and onoma name). Thus, in literature we can
speak of the king (and the idea of kingship) as “the crown.” A synec-
doche is a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole or the
whole for the part. An automobile can be referred to as a “motor” or a
“set of wheels”; a policeman is “the law.”

Both of these forms recur constantly in cinema. The indexes of heat
mentioned above are clearly metonymical: associated details invoke an abstract idea. Many of the old clichés of Hollywood are synecdochic (close shots of marching feet to represent an army) and metonymic (the falling calendar pages, the driving wheels of the railroad engine). Indeed, because metonymical devices yield themselves so well to cinematic exploitation, cinema can be more efficient in this regard than literature can. Associated details can be compressed within the limits of the frame to present a statement of extraordinary richness. Metonymy is a kind of cinematic shorthand.

Just as, in general, our sense of cinema’s connotations depends on understood comparisons of the image with images that were not chosen (paradigmatic) and images that came before and after (syntagmatic), so our sense of the cultural connotations depend upon understood comparisons of the part with the whole (synecdoche) and associated details with ideas (metonymy). Cinema is an art and a medium of extensions and indexes. Much of its meaning comes not from what we see (or hear) but from what we don’t see or, more accurately, from an ongoing process of comparison of what we see with what we don’t see. This is ironic, considering that cinema at first glance seems to be an art that is all too evident, one that is often criticized for “leaving nothing to the imagination.”

Quite the contrary is true. In a film of strict denotation, images and sounds are quite easily and directly understood. But very few films are strictly denotative; they can’t help but be connotative, “for to speak [film] is partly to invent it.” The observer who adamantly resists, of course can choose to ignore the connotative power of film, but the observer who has learned to read film has available a multitude of connotations. Alfred Hitchcock, for example, has made a number of very popular films during the past half-century. We could ascribe his critical and popular success to the subjects of his films—certainly the thriller strikes a deep responsive chord in audiences—but then how do we account for the failed thrillers of his imitators? In truth, the drama of film, its attraction, lies not so much in what is shot (that’s the drama of the subject), but in how it is shot and how it is presented. And as thousands of commentators have attested, Hitchcock was the master par excellence of these two critical tasks. The drama of filmmaking in large part lies in the brainwork of these closely associated sets of deci-
Figure 3-12. **METONYMY.** In Red Desert (1964), Michelangelo Antonioni developed a precise metonymy of color. Throughout most of the film, Giuliana (Monica Vitti) is oppressed psychologically and politically by a gray and deathly urban industrial environment. When she manages to break away from its grip on several occasions, Antonioni signals her temporary independence (and possible return to health) with bright colors, which is a detail associated with health and happiness not only in this film but in general culture as well. In this scene, Giuliana attempts to open her own shop. The gray walls are punctuated with splotches of brilliant color (the attempt at freedom), but the shapes themselves are violent, disorganized, frightening (the relapse into neurosis). In all, complicated set of metonymies.

Figure 3-13. **METONYMY.** In Claude Chabrol's Leda (1959), André Jocelyn portrays a schizophrenic character. The image in the cracked mirror is a simple, logical metonymy.

Figure 3-14. **SYNECDÔCHE.** Giuliana in Red Desert, again, this time surrounded and nearly overwhelmed by industrial machinery, a “part” that stands for the “whole” of her urban society. It isn’t this factory, these particular machines, that oppress her, but the larger reality they represent.

Figure 3-15. **SYNECDÔCHE.** Juliet Berto in Godard’s La Chinoise (1967) has constructed a theoretical barricade of Chairman Mao’s “Little Red Books,” parts that stand for the whole of Marxist-Leninist/Maoist ideology with which the group of “gauchistes” to which she belongs protect themselves, and from which they intend to launch an attack on bourgeois society.

The terms “synecdoche” and “metonymy”—like “Icon,” “Index,” and “Symbol”—are, of course, imprecise. They are theoretical constructs that may be useful as aids to analysis; they are not strict definitions. This particular synecdoche, for example, might very well be better classified as a metonymy in which the little red books are associated details rather than parts standing for the whole. (The decision itself has ideological overtones!) Likewise, although this image seems easiest to classify as Indexical, there are certainly elements of the Iconic and Symbolic in it.
sions. "Literate" filmgoers appreciate Hitchcock's superb cinematic intelligence on a conscious level, illiterate filmgoers on an unconscious level, but the intelligence has its effect, nevertheless.

One more element remains to be added to the lexicon of film semiology: the trope. In literary theory, a trope is a "turn of phrase" or a "change of sense"—in other words, a logical twist that gives the elements of a sign—the signer and the signified—a new relationship to each other. The trope is therefore the connecting element between denotation and connotation. When a rose is a rose is a rose it isn't anything else, and its meaning as a sign is strictly denotative. But when a rose is something else, a "turning" has been made and the sign is opened up to new meanings. The map of film semiology we have described so far has been static. The concept of the trope allows us to view it dynamically, as actions rather than facts.

As we have noted in earlier chapters, one of the great sources of power in film is that it can reproduce the tropes of most of the other arts. There is also a set of tropes that it has made its own. We have described the way they operate in general in the first half of this chapter. Given an image of a rose, we at first have only its iconic or Symbolic denotative meaning, which is static. But when we begin to expand the possibilities through tropes of comparison, the image comes alive: as a connotative Index, in terms of the paradigm of possible shots, in the syntagmatic context of its associations in the film, as it is used metaphorically as a metonymy or a synecdoche.

There are undoubtedly other categories of film semiology yet to be discovered, analyzed, propogated. In no sense is the system shown in the chart on pp. 144–45 meant to be either exhaustive or immutable. Semiology is most definitely not a science in the sense that physics or biology is a science. But it is a logical, often illuminating system that helps to describe how film does what it does. Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand. The semiotics of film is easy to explain because it is difficult to understand. Somewhere between lies the genius of film.

SYNTAX

Film has no grammar. There are, however, some vaguely defined rules of usage in cinematic language, and the syntax of film—its systematic arrangement—orders these rules and indicates relationships between them. As with written and spoken languages, it is important to remem-

Figure 3-16 TROPE. An ant-covered hand from Dalí and Buñuel's surrealist classic Un Chien Andalou (1928). Another very complex image, not easily analyzed. Iconic, Indexical, and Symbolic values are all present: the image is striking for its own sake, it is a measure of the infestation of the soul of the owner of the hand; it is certainly symbolic of a more general malaise, as well. It is metonymic, because the ants are an "associated detail"; it is also synecdochic, because the hand is a part that stands for the whole. Finally, the source of the image seems to be a trope: a verbal pun on the French idiom, "avoir des fourmis dans les mains," "to have ants in the hand," an expression equivalent to the English "my hand is asleep." By illustrating the turn of phrase literally, Dalí and Buñuel extended the trope so that a common experience is turned into a striking sign of decay. (I am indebted to David Bombyk for this analysis. MOMA/FSA.)

ber that the syntax of film is a result of its usage, not a determinant of it. There is nothing preordained about film syntax. Rather, it evolved naturally as certain devices were found in practice to be both workable and useful. Like the syntax of written and spoken language, the syntax of film is an organic development, descriptive rather than prescriptive, and it has changed considerably over the years. The Hollywood Gram-
Figure 3-17. 

The language described below may sound laughable now, but during the thirties, forties, and early fifties it was an accurate model of the way Hollywood films were constructed.

In written/spoken language systems, syntax deals only with what we might call the linear aspect of construction: that is, the ways in which words are put together in a chain to form phrases and sentences, what in film we call the syntagmatic category. In film, however, syntax can also include spatial composition, for which there is no parallel in language systems like English and French—we can’t say or write several things at the same time.

So film syntax must include both development in time and development in space. In film criticism, generally, the modification of space is referred to as mise en scène. The French phrase literally means “putting in the scene.” The modification of time is called montage (from the French for “putting together”). As we shall see in Chapter 4, the tension between these twin concepts of mise en scène and montage has been the engine of film esthetics ever since Lumière and Méliès first explored the practical possibilities of each at the turn of the century.

Over the years, theories of mise en scène have tended to be closely associated with film realism, while montage has been seen as essentially expressionistic, yet this pairing is deceptive. Certainly it would seem that mise en scène would indicate a high regard for the subject in front of the camera, while montage would give the filmmaker more control over the manipulation of the subject, but despite these natural tendencies, montage can be the more realistic of the two alternatives, and mise en scène on occasion of the more expressionistic.

Take, for example, the problem of choosing between a pan from one subject to another and a cut. Most people would agree that the cut is more manipulative, that it interrupts and remolds reality, and that therefore the pan is the more realistic of the two alternatives, since it...
preserves the integrity of the space. Yet, in fact, the reverse is true if we judge panning and cutting from the point of view of the observer.

When we redirect our attention from one subject to another we seldom actually pan. Psychologically, the cut is the truer approximation of our natural perception. First one subject has our attention, then the other; we are seldom interested in the intervening space, yet the cinematic pan draws our attention to just that.*

It was André Bazin who, more than anyone, developed the connections between mise en scène and realism on the one hand, and montage and expressionism on the other. At about the same time, in the middle

*It has been suggested that the zoom pan, in which the camera moves so quickly that the image in between the original subject and its successor is blurred, would be the most verisimilitudinous handling of the problem. But even this alternative draws attention to itself, which is precisely what does not happen in normal perception. Perhaps the perfect analogue with reality would be the direct cut in which the two shots were separated by a single black frame (or better yet, a neutral gray frame), which would duplicate the time (approximately 1/20 of a second) each saccadic movement of the eye takes!

fifties, Jean-Luc Godard was working out a synthesis of the twin notions of mise en scène and montage that was considerably more sophisticated than Bazin's binary opposition. For Godard, mise en scène and montage were divested of ethical and esthetic connotations: montage simply did in time what mise en scène does in space. Both are principles of organization, and to say that mise en scène (space) is more "realistic" than montage (time) is illogical. In his essay “Montage, mon beau souci” (1956) Godard redefined montage as an integral part of mise en scène.
Setting up a scene is as much an organizing of time as of space. The aim of this is to discover in film a psychological reality that transcends physical, plastic reality. There are two corollaries to Godard’s synthesis: first, mise en scène can therefore be every bit as expressionistic as montage when a filmmaker uses it to distort reality; second, psychological reality (as opposed to verisimilitude) may be better served by a strategy that allows montage to play a central role. (See Chapter 5, pp. 328–38.)

In addition to the psychological complexities that enter into a comparison of montage and mise en scène, there is a perceptual factor that complicates matters. We have already noted that montage can be mimicked within the shot. Likewise, montage can mimic mise en scène. Hitchcock’s notorious shower murder sequence in Psycho is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. Seventy separate shots in less than a minute of screen time are fused together psychologically into a continuous experience: a frightening and graphic knife attack. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts (see Figure 3-20).

CODES

The structure of cinema is defined by the codes in which it operates and the codes that operate within it. Codes are critical constructions—systems of logical relationship—derived after the fact of film. They are not pre-existent laws that the filmmaker consciously observes. A great variety of codes combine to form the medium in which film expresses meaning. There are culturally derived codes—those that exist outside film and that filmmakers simply reproduce (the way people eat, for example). There are a number of codes that cinema shares with the other arts (for instance, gesture, which is a code of theater as well as film). And there are those codes that are unique to cinema. (Montage is the prime example.) The culturally derived codes and the shared artistic codes are vitally important to cinema, naturally, but it is the unique codes, those that form the specific syntax of film, which most concern us here. Possibly “unique” is not a completely accurate adjective. As you will see, not even the most specifically cinematic codes, those of montage, are truly unique to cinema. Certainly, cinema emphasizes them and utilizes them more than other arts do, yet something like montage has always existed in the novel. Any storyteller is capable of switching scenes in midstream. “Meanwhile, back at the ranch,” is clearly not an invention of cinema. More important, for more than three-quarters of a century film art has had its own strong influence on the older arts. Not only did something like montage exist prior to 1900 in prose narrative, but since that time novelists, increasingly influenced by film, have learned gradually to make their narratives even more like cinema. The point is, simply, that codes are a critical convenience—nothing more—and it would be wrong to give them so much weight that we were more concerned with the precise definition of the code than with the perception of the film.

Taking the shower scene in Psycho once again as an example, let’s derive the codes operating there. It is a simple scene (only two characters—one of whom is barely seen—and two actions—taking a shower and murdering) and it is of short duration, yet all three types of codes are evident. The culturally derived codes have to do with taking showers and murdering people. The shower is, in Western culture, an activity that has elements of privacy, sexuality, purgation, relaxation, openness, and regeneration. In other words, Hitchcock could not have chosen a more ironic place to emphasize the elements of violation and sexuality in the assault. Murder, on the other hand, fascinates us because of motives. Yet the dimly perceived murderer of Psycho has no discernible motive. The act seems gratuitous, almost absurd—which makes it even more striking. Historically, Jack the Ripper may come to
mind, and this redoubles our sense of the sexual foundation of the murder.

Since this particular scene is so highly cinematic and so short, shared codes are relatively minor here. Acting codes hardly play a part, for instance, since the shots are so brief there isn't time to act in them, only to mime a simple expression. The diagonals that are so important in establishing the sense of disorientation and dynamism are shared with the other pictorial arts. The harsh contrasts and backlighting that obscure the murderer are shared with photography. The musical code of Bernard Herrmann's accompaniment also exists outside film, of course. In addition, we can trace the development of the use of the culturally derived codes in cinema and allied arts: Hitchcock's murder scene might be contrasted with the murder of Marat in his bath (in history, in the painting by Jacques-Louis David, and in the play by Peter Weiss), the bathtub murder scene in Henri-Georges Clouzot's Les Diaboliques (1955), or that in The Last of Sheila (1973), written by Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkins (who played in Psycho), or the direct homages to Psycho in Mike Hodges's Terminal Man (1974) or Brian De Palma's Dressed to Kill (1980).

As we have already noted, the specifically cinematic codes in Hitchcock's one-minute tour de force are exceptionally strong. In fact, it's hard to see how the montage of the sequence could be duplicated in any other art. The rapid cutting of the scene may indeed by a unique cinematic code.

Hitchcock manipulates all these codes to achieve a desired effect. It is because they are codes—because they have meaning for us outside the narrow limits of that particular scene: in film, in the other arts, in the general culture—that they affect us. The codes are the medium through which the "message" of the scene is transmitted. The specifically cinematic codes together with a number of shared codes make up the syntax of film.

**MISE EN SCÈNE**

Three questions confront the filmmaker: what to shoot, how to shoot it, how to present the shot. The province of the first two questions is mise en scène, that of the last, montage. Mise en scène is often regarded as static, montage as dynamic. This is not the case. Because we read the shot, we are actively involved with it. The codes of mise en scène are the tools with which the filmmaker alters and modifies our reading of the shot. Since the shot is such a large unit of meaning, it may be useful to separate a discussion of its components into two parts.

The Framed Image

All the codes that operate within the frame, without regard to the chronological axis of film, are shared with the other pictorial arts. The number and range of these codes is great and they have been developed and refined in painting, sculpture, and photography over the course of thousands of years. Basic texts in the visual arts examine the three determinants of color, line, and form, and certainly each of the visual codes of film fits within one of these rubrics. Rudolf Arnheim, in his highly influential study *Art and Visual Perception*, suggests ten areas of concern: Balance, Shape, Form, Growth, Space, Light, Color, Movement, Tension, and Expression. Clearly, a full exposition of the codes operating in the film frame would be a lengthy undertaking. We can, however, describe briefly the basic aspects of the syntax of the frame. Two aspects of the framed image are important: the limitations that the frame imposes, and the composition of the image within the frame (and without necessary regard to it).

Since the frame determines the limit of the image, the choice of an aspect ratio suggests the possibilities of composition. With the self-justification that has been endemic to the elusive subject of film esthetics, early theoreticians waxed eloquent over the value of the Academy aperture, the 1.33 ratio. When widescreen ratios became popular in the 1950s, the classical estheticians bemoaned the destruction of the symmetry they perceived in the Academy aperture, but, as we demonstrated in the last chapter, there was nothing sacred about the ratio of 4:3.

The point is not which ratio is "proper" but rather which codes yield themselves to exploitation in which ratios? Before the mid-fifties, it seems, interiors and dialogue dominated American and foreign screens. After the introduction of the widescreen formats, exteriors, location, shooting, and action sequences grew in importance. This is a crude generalization, but there is some useful truth to it. It's not important whether there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the two historical developments, only that wide screens permitted more efficient exploitation of action and landscape codes.

Cinemascope and Panavision width ratios (2.33 and above) do make it more difficult, as the Hollywood estheticians had suggested, to photograph intimate conversations. Whereas the classic two-shot of the 1.33 screen size tended to focus attention on speaker and listener, the very wide anamorphic ratios cannot avoid also photographing either the space between them or beside them and therefore calling attention to their relationship to the space surrounding them. This is neither "better" nor "worse" ideally; it simply changes the code of the two-shot.

The filmmaker can also change the dimensions of the frame during
Figure 3-20. The bathtub shower code. Hitchcock’s spellbinding shower murder in Psycho (1959) has become notorious over the years for its vertiginous editing, yet the bathroom murder was not a new idea. (From Psycho. © 1974. Ed. by Richard J. Anobile. Frame enlargement.)

Figure 3-21. Several years earlier. Henri-Georges Clouzot’s Diabolique had shocked audiences with an altogether quieter but no less eerie murder scene. (Paul Meurisse is the victim.) (Walter Daran. Time-Life Picture Agency. © Time. Inc. Frame enlargement.)

Figure 3-22. Psycho’s star, Anthony Perkins, cowrote the script for Herbert Ross’s The Last of Sheila. Joan Hackett attempts suicide in an elegant shipboard bath.

Figure 3-23. Murder isn’t the only activity that takes place in tubs. In Godard’s poetic masterpiece Pierrot le fou (1965), Jean-Paul Belmondo relaxes in a tub as he shares some thoughts on the painter Velázquez with his daughter. (l’Avant-Scène. Frame enlargement.)

Figure 3-24. In Jean-Charles Tacchella’s Cousin, cousine (1975), Marie-France Pisier finds the empty tub a pleasant place to think.

the course of the film by masking, either artificially or naturally through composition. This has been an important aspect of the syntax of frame shape ever since D. W. Griffith first explored its possibilities.

Just as important as the actual frame size, although less easily perceived, is the filmmaker’s attitude toward the limit of the frame. If the image of the frame is self-sufficient, then we can speak of it as a “closed form.” Conversely, if the filmmaker has composed the shot in such a way that we are always subliminally aware of the area outside the frame, then the form is considered to be “open.” Open and closed forms are closely associated with the elements of movement in the frame. If the camera tends to follow the subject faithfully, the form tends to be closed; if, on the other hand, the filmmaker allows—even encourages—the subject to leave the frame and reenter, the form is obviously open. The relationship between the movement within the frame and movement of the camera is one of the more sophisticated codes, and specifically cinematic. Hollywood’s classic syntax was identified in part by a relatively tightly closed form. The masters of the Hollywood style of the
treats of the relationship between sound and image. Siegfried Kracauer
suggests the differentiation between actual sound, which logically con-
nects with the image, and commentative sound, which does not. Dia-
logue of people in the scene is actual, dialogue of people not in the
scene is commentative. (A filmmaker sophisticated in sound, such as Richard
Lester, often uses commentative dialogue of people who are in the shot,
but not part of the action of the scene.) Director and theorist Karel Reisz
uses slightly different terminology. For Reisz, who wrote the standard
text on editing, all sound is divided into synchronous and asynchronous.
Synchronous sound has its source within the frame (the editor must work
to synchronize it). Asynchronous sound comes from outside the frame.

Combining these two continuums, we get a third* whose poles are
parallel sound and contrapuntal sound. Parallel sound is actual, syn-
chronous, connected with the image. Contrapuntal sound is commentative,
 asynchronous, and opposed to or in counterpoint with the image.
It makes no difference whether we are dealing with speech, music, or
environmental sound: all three are at times variously parallel or contra-
puntal, actual or commentative, synchronous or asynchronous.

The differentiation between parallel and contrapuntal sound is per-
haps the controlling factor. This conception of the soundtrack as working
logically either with or against the image provides the basic esthetic
dialectic of sound. The Hollywood sound style was strongly parallel.
The programmatic music of thirties movies nudged, underlined, em-
phasized, characterized, and qualified even the simplest scenes so that the
dullest images as well as the most striking were thoroughly pervaded by
the emotions designed by the composers of the nearly continuous
music track. Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Max Steiner were the two
most egregious examples.

More recently, contrapuntal sound has given an ironic edge to the
temporary style. Often the soundtrack is seen as equal, but different from,
the image. Marguerite Duras, for example, has experimented with commen-
tative soundtracks completely separate from the image, as in
India Song (1975). Programmatic music still exists (television is especi-
ally fond of it), but more often the music is used commentatively.
Rock, for example, offers filmmakers a repertoire of instant keys to
contemporary ideas and feelings, as George Lucas's American Graffiti
(1973) demonstrated clearly. Ironically, music—which used to be the
most powerfully asynchronous and commentative element of the sound-
track—has now become so pervasive in real life that a filmmaker can

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* I am indebted to Win Sharples, Jr.: "The Aesthetics of Film Sound," Filmmakers
Newsletter 8-5, for this synthesis.

maintain strict synchronicity of actual sound and still produce a com-
plete music track. The ubiquitous transistor radio and Muzak have made
life a musical.

MONTAGE

In the U.S., the word for the work of putting together the shots of a
film is "cutting" or "editing," while in Europe the term is "montage." The
American words suggest a trimming process, in which unwanted
material is eliminated. Michelangelo once described sculpture similarly
as paring away unneeded stone to discover the natural shape of the
sculpture in a block of marble. One edits or cuts raw material down.
"Montage," however, suggests a building action, working up from the
raw material. Indeed the classic style of Hollywood editing of the
thirties and forties—what the French call découpage classique—was in
fact marked by its smoothness, fluidity, and leanness. And European
montage, ever since the German Expressionists and Eisenstein in the
twenties, has been characterized by a process of synthesis: a film is seen
as being constructed rather than edited. The two terms for the action
express the two basic attitudes toward it.

Whereas mise en scène is marked by a fusion of complexities, mon-
tage is surprisingly simple, at least on the physical level. There are only
two ways to put two pieces of film together: one can overlap them
(double exposure, dissolves, multiple images) or one can put them end
to end. For images, the second alternative dominates almost exclu-
sively, while sounds lend themselves much more readily to the first, so
much so that this activity has its own name: mixage.

In general parlance, "montage" is used in three different ways. While
maintaining its basic meaning, it also has the more specific usages of:
• a dialectical process that creates a third meaning out of the original
two meanings of the adjacent shots, and
• a process in which a number of short shots are woven together in
order to communicate a great deal of information in a short period of
time.

This last is simply a special case of general montage; the dialectical
process is inherent in any montage, conscious or not.

Découpage classique, the Hollywood style of construction, gradually
developed a broad range of rules and regulations over the years: for
example, the practice of beginning always with an establishing shot,
then narrowing down from the generalization; or, the strict rule of
thumb for editing dialogue scenes with master shots and reverse angles.
All the editing practices of the Hollywood grammar were designed to
permit seamless transitions from shot to shot and to concentrate attention on the action at hand. What helped to maintain immediacy and the flow of the action was good, what did not was bad.

In fact, any kind of montage is in the end defined according to the action it photographs. Still pictures can be put together solely with regard to the rhythm of the succeeding shots. Diachronic shots, inherently active, demand that the movements within the shot be considered in the editing. The jump cut provides an interesting example of the contrasting ways in which découpage classique and contemporary editing treat a problem.

In Hollywood cinema, “invisible cutting” was the aim, and the jump cut was used as a device to compress dead time. A man enters a large room at one end, for instance, and must walk to a desk at the other end. The jump cut can maintain tempo by eliminating most of the action of traversing the long room, but it must do so unobtrusively. The laws of Hollywood grammar insist that the excess dead time be smoothed over either by cutting away to another element of the scene (the desk itself, someone else in the room) or by changing camera angle sufficiently so that the second shot is clearly from a different camera placement. Simply snipping out the unwanted footage from a single shot from a single angle is not permitted. The effect, according to Hollywood rules, would be disconcerting.

Contemporary style, however, permits far greater latitude. In Breathless (1959), Jean-Luc Godard startled some estheticians by jump cutting in mid-scene. The cuts had no utilitarian value and they were disconcerting. Godard himself seldom returned to this device in later films, but his “ungrammatical” construction has been absorbed into general montage stylistics and jump cuts are now allowed for rhythmic effect. Even the simple utilitarian jump cut has been streamlined: edited from a single shot (single angle), it can be smoothed by a series of quick dissolves.

It's important to note that there are actually two processes going on when shots are edited. The first is the joining of the two shots. Also important, however, is determining the length of any individual shot, both as it relates to shots that precede and follow it and as it concerns the action of the shot. Découpage classique demands that a shot be cut so that the editing doesn’t interfere with the central action of the shot. If we plot the action of each shot so that we get a rising then a falling curve, Hollywood grammar demands a cut shortly after the climax of the curve. A contemporary director like Michelangelo Antonioni, however, reverses the logic, maintaining the shot long after the climax, throughout the period of aftermath. The last shot of The Passenger (1975) is an excellent example.

The rhythmic value of editing is probably best seen in the code of accelerated montage, in which interest in a scene is heightened and brought to a climax through progressively shorter alternations of shots between two subjects (often in chase scenes). Christian Metz points to accelerated montage as a uniquely cinematic code (although Charles Ives's antagonistic brass bands provided an illustration of this kind of cross-cutting in music). Accelerated montage points in the direction of a second type of editing.

Montage is used not only to create a continuity between shots in a scene but also to bend the time line of a film. Parallel montage allows the filmmaker to alternate between two stories that may or may not be interrelated, cross-cutting between them. (Accelerated montage is a special type of parallel montage.) The flashback and the flash-forward permit digressions and forecasts. Involved montage allows a sequence to be narrated without particular regard for chronology: an action can be repeated, shots can be edited out of order. Each of these extensions of the montage codes looks toward the creation of something other than simple chronology in the montage itself, a factor very little emphasized in classic découpage continuity cutting. Possibly the most common dialectic device is the match cut, which links two disparate scenes by the repetition of an action or a form or the duplication of mise-en-scène factors. Stanley Kubrick's match cut in 2001: A Space Odyssey, between a prehistoric bone whirling in the air and a twenty-first-century space station revolving in space, is possibly the most ambitious match cut in history, since it attempts to unite prehistory with the future anthropologically at the same time as it creates a special meaning within the cut itself by emphasizing the functions of both bone and space station as tools, extensions of human capabilities.

The codes of montage may not be as obvious as the codes of mise en scène, but that doesn’t mean that they are necessarily less complex. Few theorists have gone further than differentiating among parallel montage, continuity montage, accelerated montage, flashbacks, and involved montage. In the 1920s, both V.I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein extended the theory of montage beyond these essentially practical concerns. Pudovkin identified five basic types of montage: contrast, parallelism, symbolism, simultaneity, and leit-motif. He then developed a theory of the interaction between shots variously called “relational editing” or “linkage.” Eisenstein, on the other hand, saw the relationship between shots as a collision rather than a linkage, and further refined the theory to deal with the relationships between elements of individual shots as well as the whole shots themselves. This he called the “montage of attractions.” Both theorists are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
In the late sixties, Christian Metz attempted to synthesize all these various theories of montage. He constructed a chart in which he tried to indicate how eight types of montage were connected logically. There are a number of problems with Metz's categories, yet the system does have an elegance all its own and it does describe most of the major patterns of montage. More important, despite its idiosyncrasies and occasional confusions, it remains the only recent attempt to comprehend the complex system of montage.

Note that Metz is interested in narrative elements—syntagmas—that can exist within shots as well as between them, an important refinement since, as we have already indicated, the effects of many types of montage can be accomplished within a shot without actually cutting. If the camera pans for example, from one scene to another, those two scenes exist in relationship to each other just as they would if they were cut together.

Metz’s grand design may seem forbidding at first glance, but it reveals a real and useful logic when studied. He begins by limiting himself to autonomous segments of film. These must be either autonomous shots—which are entirely independent of what comes before and after them—or what he calls “syntagmas”; that is, units that have meaningful relationships with each other. (We might call these “scenes” or “sequences,” but Metz reserves those terms for individual types of syntagmas.) At each stage of this binary system, a further differentiation is made: the first bracket differentiates between autonomous shots and related shots, clearly the primary factor in categorizing types of montage. Either a shot is related to it surrounding shots, or it is not.

The second bracket differentiates between syntagmas that operate chronologically and those that do not. In other words, editing either tells a story (or develops an idea) in chronological sequence, or it does not. Now, on the third level, the differentiations branch out. Metz identifies two separate types of achronological syntagmas, the parallel and the bracket. Then he differentiates between two types of chronological syntagmas: either a syntagma describes or it narrates. If it narrates, it can do so either linearly or nonlinearly. If it does so linearly, it is either a scene or a sequence. And, finally, if it is a sequence, it is either episodic or ordinary.

The end result is a system of eight types of montage, or eight syntagmas. The autonomous shot (1) is also known as the sequence shot (although Metz also places certain kinds of inserts—short, isolated fragments—here). The parallel syntagma (2) has been discussed above as the well-known phenomenon of parallel editing. The bracket syntagma (3), however, is Metz’s own invention or discovery. He defines it as “a series of very brief scenes representing occurrences that the film gives as typical examples of a same order or reality, without in any way chronologically locating them in relation to each other” [Metz, p. 126]. This is rather like a system of allusions. A good example might be the collection of images with which Godard begins A Married Woman (1964). They all allude to a concept of modern attitudes toward sex. Indeed, Godard in many of his films seems to be particularly fond of the bracket syntagma, since it allows film to act something like the literary essay.

The descriptive syntagma (4) merely describes. The relation between its elements is spatial rather than temporal. Almost any establishing
sequence (such as the one already discussed in *Rear Window*) is a good example of the descriptive syntagma. The alternate syntagma (5) is very much like the parallel syntagma except that the parallel syntagma offers two separate scenes or sequences that do not have a narrative connection while the alternate syntagma offers parallel or alternating elements that do. The effect here is of simultaneity, as in chase scenes in which the montage alternates between shots of pursuer and pursued.

If events do not happen simultaneously, they happen one after the other, in linear sequence, and this brings us to Metz’s remaining three categories of montage—the scene (6) and two types of sequence—episodic (7) and ordinary (8). There has always been a great deal of confusion in the vocabulary of film criticism between the concepts of scene and sequence, and Metz’s elaborate system is valuable for the precise definitions he offers. Metz takes his definition of scene from theatrical parlance. In the scene, the succession of events—the linear narrative—is continuous. In the sequence, it is broken up. It is still linear, it is still narrative, it is still chronological, it is still related to other elements, but it is not continuous. Metz’s last differentiation, between the episodic sequence and the ordinary sequence, is a bit arbitrary. In the episodic sequence the discontinuity is organized; in the ordinary sequence it is not. A good example, then, of the episodic sequence is the one in *Citizen Kane* in which Orson Welles portrays the progressive deterioration of Kane’s marriage by a set of successive episodes at the breakfast table. In fact, we might call this a “sequence of scenes,” and this is a major characteristic of the episodic sequence—that its elements are organized so that each of them seems to have an identity of its own.

Some of these differentiations might still not be clear. For most film viewers, the concepts of the bracket syntagma and the descriptive syntagma are so close that differentiation may seem spurious. Parallel syntagma and alternate syntagma present the same difficulty, as do episodic and ordinary sequences. Yet, despite its problems, Metz’s system remains a helpful guide to what is, as yet, relatively uncharted territory: the ever-shifting, complex, and intricate syntax of film narrative. Whether or not his eight categories seem valid, the factors of differentiation that he defines are highly significant and bear repeating:

- Either a film segment is autonomous or it is not.
- Either it is chronological or it is not.
- Either it is descriptive or it is narrative.
- Either it is linear or it is not.
- Either it is continuous or it is not.
- Either it is organized or it is not.

We have only to describe the punctuation of cinema to complete this quick survey of the syntax of mise en scène and montage. Because punctuation devices stand out and are simply defined, they often take pride of place in discussions of cinematic language. They are useful, no doubt, as are, well, commas, for example, in written language. The simplest type of punctuation is the unmarked cut. One image ends,
another begins. The fade calls attention to the ending or the beginning, as does the iris (a favorite of early filmmakers that has now fallen into disuse). The wipe, in which one image removes another in a dizzying variety of ways (flips, twirls, pushovers, spirals, clock hands), was a favorite in the thirties and forties. Optical houses offered catalogues of scores of patterns for wipes. Now it is used in film only for nostalgic effect, although it has found new life in television where electronic special-effects generators permit new variations on the theme, sometimes shifting the preceding image so that it looks like a page of a book is being turned, in three dimensions.

Intertitles were an important mark of punctuation in the silent cinema and are still used on occasion today. The freeze frame has become popular since it was used to such effect by François Truffaut in The 400 Blows (1959). (Truffaut, by the way, is the C. S. Lewis of film punctuation.) Filmmakers today have modernized some of the old forms, fading to colors instead of black (Ingmar Bergman) or cutting to blank, colored frames (Godard). There is even a not uncommon mark of punctuation that has no workable name: this is the effect of going slowly out of focus at the end of the shot, or in focus at the beginning.

All these various marks are periods, end points. A fade out/fade in may suggest a relationship, but it is noticeably not a direct link. The dissolve, however, which superimposes fade out and fade in, does connect. If there is a comma in film amongst this various catalogue of periods, it is the dissolve. Interestingly, it serves a multitude of purposes: it is commonly employed to segue or lead into a flashback, it is also used in continuity montage with the jump cut, while at the same time it can represent the passage of long periods of time, especially when it is sequential. It is the one mark of punctuation in cinema that mixes images at the same time as it conjoins them.