Formal Elements of Film: The Big Four

Mise-en-scène (meez-on-sen)

Fr. "put into the scene"

This aspect of film form includes everything that appears before the camera within a shot. It can include planned elements like various props, lighting, costuming, make-up, staged body motions and facial expressions, the actors themselves, and computer-generated imagery as well as unplanned elements like passing traffic and insects flying through the frame.

Remember, even obviously static elements in the shot (like architecture and landscape) are still part of the shot's mise-en-scène because the director made the *choice* to include such elements in the frame.

Cinematography

This is a general term for all the manipulations of the film strip by the *camera* in the shooting phase. It also includes processes that occur in the laboratory after shooting. There are three general aspects of cinematography to keep in mind:

1. Camera Angles (High, Low, Straight-on, Bird's-eye)

2. Camera Distances (Extreme long shot, long shot, medium, close-up, extreme close-up)

3. Camera Movement (tracking/dollying, hand held, crane, pan, tilt, helicopter!)

It's also sometimes appropriate to determine the type lens used (wide angle, long, or normal), the type of film stock, and the speed at which a shot was filmed, all of which produce quite different visual effects.

Editing

In the simplest sense, editing is the linking of two different pieces of film (two different shots). Usually, the editing of a film follows some logic of development (e.g., an image of a woman staring into off-screen space followed by an image of a ticking clock, the object she is presumably looking at) or is meant to make some kind of statement through juxtaposition that might require the viewer to "fill in the gap" (e.g., an image of a pompous politico giving a speech followed by an image of a monkey hurling excrement).
• Graphic relations of editing

The filmmaker may link shots by graphic similarities, thus making what is called a **graphic match** (e.g., the helicopter blades and ceiling fan match in the opening sequence from <u>Apocalypse Now</u>). The graphic composition of linked shots may also appear abrupt and discontinuous.

• Spatial relations of editing

Editing also serves to give the viewer a sense of space, to literally construct the world in which the film's narrative is taking place. In other words, without careful editing, there is no "world of the story" (called **diegesis**). Some key concepts in spatial editing are as follows:

Establishing shot: A shot, usually framed from a distance, that shows the spatial relations among the important figures and setting in a scene. A film might begin with a long shot of a suburban home; a subsequent cut to an interior scene of domestic activity establishes a clear spatial link between the two shots, though they could have been shot on different continents.

Shot/reverse shot: An editing pattern that cuts between individuals according to the logic of their conversation

Eyeline match: The joining of different shots by following the logic and direction of a character's glance or look.

Sound

Because we tend to think of film as a fundamentally *visual* medium, the importance of film sound is often overlooked. Whether noticed or not, sound is a powerful film technique. Indeed, sound can actively shape how we perceive and interpret the image.

In the context of a film, moreover, sound falls into two categories: **diegetic** and **non-diegetic**. Again, the film's **diegesis** is the world of the film's story; this includes events that are presumed to have occurred and actions and spaces not shown onscreen. Diegetic sound, then, includes any voice, musical passage, or sound effect represented as originating *within* the film's world. This can include the sounds of cars and conversations during a scene depicting a busy metropolitan street. In contrast, non-diegetic sound would include mood music or narrator's commentary represented as coming from *outside* the space of the narrative (think of most film scores)[1].

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[1] The formal elements glossed here are developed in detail in <u>Film Art: An Introduction</u> (7th ed.) by Bordwell & Thompson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.