

BASICS

FILMMAKING

Robert Edgar
John Marland
Steven Rawle

The Language of Film

Second Edition



B L O O M S B U R Y

BASICS

FILMMAKING

**Robert Edgar
John Marland
Steven Rawle**

The Language of Film

Second Edition

Fairchild Books
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Fairchild Books

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square	1385 Broadway
London	New York
WC1B 3DP	NY 10018
UK	USA

www.bloomsbury.com

FAIRCHILD BOOKS, BLOOMSBURY and the Diana Logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in 2010

© Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Robert Edgar, John Marland, and Steven Rawle have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as authors of this work.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the authors.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4725-7524-1

ePDF: 978-1-4725-7525-8

ePUB: 978-1-4742-4922-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Edgar, Robert.

The language of film / Robert Edgar, John Marland, Steven Rawle. —

Second edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4725-7524-1 (paperback)

1. Motion pictures—Semiotics. 2. Motion pictures—Production and direction.

3. Cinematography. I. Marland, John. II. Rawle, Steven. III. Title.

PN1995.E345 2015

791.43014—dc23

2014041192

Typeset by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby





0.1

Pan's Labyrinth 2006

director

Guillermo del Toro

Pan's Labyrinth combines fantasy with social commentary and political debate. Part of the power of cinema is to engage us in the spectacle while intellectually challenging us. This is part of the language of film and is one of the reasons why this language is so specific to cinema.

Introduction 6



Semiotics 10

Images	12
The Visual Mind	14
Reading the Signs	16
Making Meaning	22
Codes and Filters	26
Case Study: <i>Seven</i>	30
Chapter Summary	36

Narrative 38

Theories of Storytelling	40
Structuralism	42
Theories of Structure	48
Genette's <i>Narrative Discourse</i>	56
Music	60
Short Film and Narrative	62
Case Study: <i>The Secret Life of Walter Mitty</i>	64
Chapter Summary	70

Intertextuality 72

Text	74
Quotation	78
Allusion	82
Cult Film	84
Genre	88
Case Study: <i>Citizen Kane</i>	92
Chapter Summary	98



Ideology 100

Ideological Analysis	102
Realism	108
Ideology and Genre	116
Case Study: <i>Dead Man's Shoes</i>	118
Chapter Summary	124



Constructing Meaning 182

Continuity Editing	184
Discontinuity Editing	190
Montage	194
Pacing	198
Case Study: <i>Psycho</i>	200
Chapter Summary	206



Frames and Images 126

The Shot	128
Distance, Height and Framing	130
Shot Distances	132
Mise en Scène	136
The Mobile Camera Frame	142
Time and the Long Take	144
Case Study: <i>Hero</i>	148
Chapter Summary	154



Sound 156

Film: An <i>Audiovisual Medium</i>	158
Sound Properties	160
Diegetic and Non-diegetic Sound	164
Offscreen Space and Audio	166
The Voice	170
Music	172
Case Study: <i>Berberian Sound Studio</i>	174
Chapter Summary	180

Conclusion 208

Film Language Glossary 209

Index 213

Picture Credits /
Acknowledgements 216

As the title of this book suggests, film has a distinctive language all of its own.

When we are watching a movie in the cinema or at home we seldom have any difficulty understanding this language. Even though most films are a mosaic of fractured images and fragmented narratives, we have little problem piecing them together into something complete, pleasing, and meaningful (so much so that we seldom experience them as fractured or fragmented in the first place). We are capable of following the most labyrinthine plots, feeling genuine emotion for the most improbable characters, and believing that their worlds continue to exist even after the film has ended. We don't know how we do it (or that we are *doing* anything at all) but we are.

We never had to learn "film." We are like people who had no need to learn the grammar of their "mother tongue" because it has come so naturally to them, merely by being exposed to it. However, becoming a filmmaker involves being deliberately mindful of the structures and conventions that allow film to communicate so effectively to a global audience. An effective filmmaker needs to know how this language works, how the screen communicates to people, how meaning is gradually built up of tiny elements, and how to control an audience's thoughts and feeling.

It isn't enough to be able to "read" the screen, you need to be able to "write" on it. The *implicit* knowledge we have as spectators has to be converted into the *explicit* knowledge of the practitioner who can *make* these things happen for *someone else*—who can create narrative complexity, stimulate feelings toward fictional characters, and generally suspend the disbelief of an entire movie theater. In other words, filmmakers need to learn how to create the experiences that audiences crave—and harness the power of illusion that makes film such a uniquely popular medium.

This book attempts to help you to make the transition from consumer to practitioner—from someone who just responds to the language of film, to someone who actively *uses* it.

Film is one of three universal languages, the other two: mathematics and music.
Frank Capra, director



0.2

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas 2006

director

Mark Herman

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas takes the audience on an emotional journey into history and imagination. The flickering lights (which all film is made from) convey a story of great power in personalizing the horrors of the Holocaust.

Starting Again

Ironically, the ease with which we consume film presents us with a problem. The very immediacy of film, its spectacle, and the directness of its impact on us, make it difficult to unpick and examine. We have to “unlearn” a lot of what we think we know, and start again. For this reason we will go back to the basic first principles from which all films grow.

Our familiarity with the form actually makes it more difficult to think about film constructively. This is what is most valuable about film theory, and why we will be referring to some key theoretical thinkers—they have the happy knack of making us look again at what we take for granted.

One such film theorist, Christian Metz, famously said that: “Film is hard to explain, because it is so easy to understand.” Here Metz is making the crucial distinction between knowing what a thing means and knowing how it comes to have that meaning, between “tacit” knowing and the sort of knowledge that can be readily articulated to others. Filmmakers—be they directors, cinematographers, designers, or actors—need to be able to talk to one another about what they are doing, about the “meaning” they are trying to create. Only then can they really be said to be working collaboratively in this most collaborative of art forms.

Film Languages

Film language is actually made up of many different languages all subsumed into one medium. Film can co-opt into itself all the other arts—photography, painting, theater, music, architecture, dance, and, of course, the spoken word. Everything can find its way into a movie—large or small, natural or fantastic, beautiful or grotesque. Not that film is without limitations. There are things that cinema struggles to do. The very fact that it is a predominantly visual medium makes invisible things (the stuff of the mind and the heart) impossible to convey except indirectly. Unlike a novel, a film cannot take us into the unconscious thoughts or secret longings of a character. We can only know of these things indirectly—by interpreting what we see of their external behavior.

This is a limitation indeed, but the same one we experience in real life.

Chapter by Chapter

Chapter 1: Semiotics

Film, like any “language,” is composed of signs. Film semiotics is the study of how these visual and auditory units function to construct the meaning we attribute to cinematic texts. Filmmakers and audiences share an understanding of the sign systems (the codes and conventions) that allow film to communicate meanings beyond what is seen or heard. Chapter 1 seeks to investigate and outline these codes and conventions.

Chapter 2: Narrative

The consideration of narrative is the consideration of how an audience derives meaning from a film—it is about comprehension. In Chapter 2, we’ll see how films are limited by time, and by their own language, and thus why their structure has to be very precise. Generally, the more successful a film is the more hidden its structure will be. It is your job to uncover that structure.

Chapter 3: Intertextuality

Texts are not produced or consumed in a vacuum, but in the context of other textual activity. Films relate to each other. Textual production occurs against a dense background of expectations, established by tradition and perpetuated by generic conventions. Textual “meaning” arises as the result of a process of recognition, comparison, and contrast to which all texts are subject. In Chapter 3, this “intertextuality” is examined to suggest some of the various ways film begets film begets film.

Chapter 4: Ideology

Chapter 4 examines the question of what films mean. The interpretations people give to films are many and varied but what is without doubt is that film always carries a message or messages. This chapter seeks to determine that all film and all aspects of film are ideological and the choices an audience has as to the meaning are actually very limited. They are limited by context, by expectation, and by the maker(s) of the film

Chapter 5: Frames and images

In Chapter 5 we’ll look at how the “seen” aspects of cinema relate to the ways in which the camera gives us a perspective on what we see and how we comprehend the many possible uses of the image. The various visual uses of the film image will be examined through the vocabulary of the moving image and a series of case studies, to show how the film camera shapes and distorts our perspective of cinematic objects and spaces.

Chapter 6: Sound

The visual has long obscured the craft and understanding of sound in cinema. Most audiences will forgive weaker visuals, but will never forgive poor audio, and many sound practitioners will tell you that professional films are defined by their attention to the crafting, recording, editing, and creative uses of sound. Chapter 6 examines how sound contributes to narrative, space and the unique properties of audiovisual media like cinema to tell stories, create imaginary worlds and shape the realist (and often non-realist) effect of cinema.

Chapter 7: Constructing Meaning

In addition to the visual and aural aesthetics of the camera, cinema has other techniques relating to the ways in which images are joined together to form plausible space and narrative sequences. Space, time, narrative, and style are all constructed by the use of editing techniques to manipulate the individual images into a coherent (or deliberately incoherent) whole. In Chapter 7, we’ll consider these “invisible” effects to see how editing adds another dimension to the visual image.





SEMIOTICS



1.0

Grease 1978

director

Randal Kleiser

Every picture tells a story. It's remarkable what can be read from a single image. Even if we haven't seen the complete film we already "know" a great deal about Danny and Sandy from the information contained in this one frame. Semiotics investigates how this is possible.

Basically, filmmaking is telling a **story** in pictures.

This sounds pretty straightforward. Simply let the camera roll, record the actors speaking their lines, and your film will be "in the can" in no time. Capture enough footage and you can always pull it into the desired shape later on. Right?

Wrong! Holidaymakers can afford to do this, proper filmmakers can't. Leaving the story to play itself out in front of a camera is wasteful of both time and money, and will almost always result in something as awkward, slow, drab and stagey as the average wedding video. The camera is not responsible for the pictures on the screen—you are.

Real movie-making begins with carefully choosing the precise images you need for the particular story you want to tell. This selection process is done in the best equipped editing room in the world—your imagination.

This leads inevitably to the study of semiotics.

This is essentially the study of "signs": It is the analysis of communication and can be applied to any form of communication. Film has its own language and therefore there is a branch of semiotics that concerns itself with film.

Filmmakers have the biggest canvas and the fullest paint box imaginable. With it they can fashion images that speak to virtually anyone who sees them.

Visual Culture

One look at the still from *Grease* on pages 10–11, and we feel we understand exactly what is going on. This is because everything has been arranged to ensure we do so.

The shot is framed to emphasize the way Danny (John Travolta) is “making advances” toward Sandy (Olivia Newton-John)—invading her space. It is obviously *his* car—and a *red* one at that. The white T-shirt and black leather jacket, regulation wear for a young rock’n’roller, conform to the stereotype of disaffected youth created by actors such as Marlon Brando. His thick glossy jet-black quiff and sideburns are the signatures of his manhood, dangerous and wild. This is who he is, or rather who we are meant to think he is. Sandy is also instantly recognizable. Her cardigan, high-buttoned blouse, and lace collar put her at the opposite end of conformity and respectability. The costume makes her a “good girl” in contrast to his “bad boy.” Her hairstyle is as virginal as his *isn’t*. The film goes on to have fun with these notions. Danny isn’t really so “bad” but has to keep up the pretense in front of his friends. The all-singing, all-dancing finale has them swap personas—sacrificing their “reputations” to prove their true feelings for each other. So Danny turns up at the “School’s Out” celebrations dressed like a college kid, while Sandy is transformed into a leather-clad vamp complete with cascading curls, red lipstick, and chewing gum.

She even stubs out a cigarette in *dangerously* high heels. For the transformation to work, the images must be clear and precise, and we must be able to “read” them.

In fact, we seem to pick up these signals quite effortlessly. This is because we belong to a visual culture adept at the transmission and reception of visual information. Filmmakers in particular need to be experts in this process.

Seeing comes before words.

John Berger, art critic, novelist, painter

Precision

Film images are *never* vague. They are stubbornly “concrete.” You may casually envisage a scene in terms of a man, a car, and a landscape. However, the camera will slavishly record *this* man, in *this* car, in *this* landscape—in all their specificity. The image will immediately convey a huge number of impressions (such as period and location) and suggest a host of ideas (such as romantic journeys, the open road, or the vastness of nature).

Are these the thoughts you want the audience to have? If you show Danny in his car the audience will think of 1950s America, “free spirit” and “trouble ahead.” Successful filmmaking depends on having a firm command of your material—exercising maximum control over what the viewers see and hear.

It is often the little things that count the most: for example, in a wedding scene it might be the gleam in the bride’s eye or the rather proud way she holds her head; the way the groom fiddles with his tie or fires a glance at another woman in the congregation; the stilted walk of the bride’s father and the tear on the mother’s cheek; the fidgeting children at the back and the panicky expression on the man’s face as he checks his pockets for the ring.

All these are wedding-scene **clichés**, but if they are chosen and arranged with sufficient care, then the tension for the audience in the cinema is as great as it would be for the guests in the church. The excitement and trepidation pours from the screen into the auditorium.

With all the above in place you can be sure your audience will jump when the bride calmly lifts her veil, slowly withdraws a knife from beneath her bouquet and stabs the bridegroom straight through the heart. Now there’s a wedding scene! And what of the final image: the flower in its buttonhole, slowly turning from white to red? Not subtle, but indelible—and *worth a thousand words*.

Recommended Reading

Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* is a collection of articles written between 1954 and 1956 for the left-wing French magazine *Les lettres nouvelles*. The articles show how even seemingly trivial aspects of everyday life can be filled with meaning and are wonderfully playful about “the little things”—including the meaning of Marlon Brando’s hairstyle in the film *Julius Caesar* (dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz 1953).

Clichés: Overused, stale and out-worn expressions, mostly to be avoided. But they are overused for a reason—they tend to work, especially when given a slight “tweak.”

Recommended Viewing

Watch the end of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and spot the numerous ways he finds to make us frightened for Jimmy Stewart and Grace Kelly. Draw a simple graph charting the rise and fall of anxiety and empathy in the audience.

Auteur: A director whose individual vision is the sole or dominant driving force behind an entire body of work.

We can all think of film images that have stamped themselves indelibly on our memory. Once seen, never forgotten. As a filmmaker your minimum aim should be to create something that is memorable and rewards repeated viewing. But before your film will stick in anyone else's mind, it has to first live in your own.

A Vivid Imagination

Alfred Hitchcock seems to have found directing rather tedious. As far as he was concerned all the essential creative work had been done well before he stepped on set. The film was already made—in his head.

This reveals Hitchcock as the quintessential **auteur**, and central to this is his ability to vividly imagine his films—to construct them in his mind's eye, detail by detail, and frame by frame. This is not only an indication of his having a good “inner camera.” Not only did he “see” the images in advance, he also knew how his audience would interpret them. He was a master manipulator who combined great craftsmanship with a shrewd understanding of what made his audience tick.

Look, for example, at *Psycho* (1960) and the cunning way Hitchcock gets us to “collude” with Norman Bates even as he is covering up the evidence of a murder. When he is attempting to hide the car carrying the innocent woman's body, and it gets stuck only half submerged in the waters of the lake, almost everyone in the audience thinks, “Oh no!”

Once the screenplay is finished, I'd just as soon not make the film at all... I have a strong visual mind. I visualise a picture right down to the final cuts. I write all this out in the greatest possible detail in the script, and then I don't look at the script while I'm shooting. I know it off by heart...

Alfred Hitchcock, filmmaker and producer



1.1

Peeping Tom 1960

director

Michael Powell

Cinema embodies a way of seeing that is inherently voyeuristic—indulging the guilty pleasure we get from secretly watching other people. Directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Michael Powell know how to exploit film's potential to arrest and disturb us by using the camera as an instrument to expose our darkest fears and desires.

A movie is a highly complex act of communication, and no act of communication is effective unless it takes into account how the recipient will receive it. If a film is to have the desired effect, the filmmaker needs to know exactly how the screen communicates. They need to know how the images produced will be understood by the audience and work upon their imaginations moment by moment. This is where **semiotics is useful.**

Units of Meaning

Semiotics: The study of signs. It has its origins in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist who was the first to identify some of the basic principles that apply to any sign-based system.

Sign: An object, quality, or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else.

When we talk about movies we typically refer to characters, action, and dialogue. In fact each of these elements is made up of much smaller units. Characters, for instance, are built from tiny fragments of information (such as physical features, bodily gestures, and spoken words), each selected and juxtaposed to create the illusion of a real-life three-dimensional human being.

Film theorists refer to a detail of this sort as a **sign**. Film semiotics, the study of cinematic signs, breaks film down into its constituent parts to identify the atomic building blocks from which the complexity of narrative is constructed. Signs are the most fundamental units of meaning—the atoms from which films are formed.

A sign is anything we can see or hear or feel that refers to something we can't—usually something absent or abstract. For example, the sign we commonly see by the roadside instructing us to STOP is there to warn us of potential hazards not yet visible.

In the specific context of cinema a “sign” is anything, large or small, which we find ourselves responding to. Put another way, something becomes a sign when we single it out for special attention. For instance, we may take no real notice of anything outside the car as we watch the family having a violent argument, but once we hear the sound of a pneumatic drill and spot the workmen with their shovels these become “danger signs.”

Visual Abbreviation

Imagine a Western. The ringing of a church bell is an ominous sign. A crowd gathered around a body lying in the middle of Main Street is a sign that there has been a gunfight. The badge on his shirt indicates that he was the sheriff—it's a sign of his status. The sight of another man removing it and pinning it on himself is yet another sign, either that the sheriff's deputy is taking over the job or that a gunman is taking control of the town.

Anything the eye or ear picks up on, whatever we single out for attention and draw a specific meaning from, is functioning as a sign. It stands for something that contributes to our overall understanding. The sheriff's gray beard may be a sign that he was too old for the job. The gun still in his holster is a sign he was hopelessly outclassed, taken by surprise or shot in the back. Amid this field of implicit signs is a single *explicit* one—a crumpled poster carrying the gunman's picture and the word "Wanted."

A sign is not always so clear-cut. A scar on the deputy's face might indicate that he too is a victim of violence. On the gunman it would signal that he habitually *deals* in violence—he is a villain. Context determines the exact meaning we derive from a sign, and this context is made up of other signs. A smile on the gunman's lips would tell us how to read the scar on his cheek.

Film is the art of visual abbreviation. Filmmakers use smiles and scars, badges and beards, to tell the audience more than they can be explicitly shown or told. The audience sees meaning in them because it is a movie—and they have been deliberately placed there for a reason. A movie is a matrix of interrelated signs erected by the filmmaker to guide the audience on their journey.





1.2

The Pillow Book 1996

director

Peter Greenaway

It has been said that filmmaking is "painting with light." Well, here the words projected onto a woman's body create an unusual connection between the subject and the viewer. She is reading signs and so are we. Greenaway knows that overlaying images not only creates aesthetic depth, but intellectual complexity.

A Compound of Signs

The still from *The Pillow Book* on pages 18–19 is an unusually intricate image. In a sense, the reclining figure is itself a compound of signs from which we gather an impression of luxuriant sexuality and cultural sophistication. Although we probably don't notice it directly, we are also affected by the dark, rich earth colors in the background—adding to the sense of warmth, seclusion, and erotic intimacy. These too are signs that inform our reading.

Most striking (because “unnatural”) is the fact that the woman's nakedness is “clothed” in light—words (more signs) projected onto her skin. The fact that she is also in the act of writing, creates a dialogue between the two things that gives the image a complex meaning alluded to in the phrases used to promote the film: “The word is made flesh” and “Treat me like the page of a book.”

It is disturbing whenever a person is depersonalized, treated like a thing—in this case a canvas or a screen. As an audience, it makes us self-conscious of the fact that she is an object for us.

It is the interaction of signs—the juxtaposition of “nature” and “artifice,” which prompts this sort of interpretation. In a sense, the image *represents* the rather abstract thoughts Greenaway is aiming to stimulate in us. This level of intellectual suggestion is difficult to achieve in film—and rare.

The most important point here, however, is that just looking at the image and responding to it, we are already doing semiotics—constructing meaning through interaction with the signs.

EXERCISE: INTERPRETING SIGNS

Choose a moment from a favorite movie—one compound image that sums up your experience of the entire film. Write down ten words that describe the thoughts and feelings it evokes. Now attach each word to a particular aspect of the image and reflect on the impact the smallest details can have.

The Flow of Signs

Technically speaking, a “motion picture” is in fact a sequence of individual pictures, but it is *experienced* quite differently—as a steady stream of sensations. A movie is a vast outpouring of signs.

The filmmaker’s task is to control and channel this flow of information in order to create the desired illusion and shape the audience’s experience of it. It is a game of consequences—if I show them this, they will think or feel *that*. The way in which you craft and organize your film’s signs will determine the reality and meaning an audience will attribute to them.

Changing any one aspect of Peter Greenaway’s “reclining woman” will alter the way the audience perceives her at that moment. If she turns the page they become aware of her as a writer; if she closes her eyes they see her as someone resting or dreaming, if the light moves over her skin they see her as a strange canvas—an aesthetic “object.” These implications are already there of course, but are reemphasized by slight changes in the play of signs around her. And changing one thing can change *everything*. Just imagine what an accompanying soundtrack of sleazy music would do to the scene.

An audience may not be able to dwell on every single frame of a film but it is extraordinary just how much and how quickly they can process what you give them. Having said this, cinematic images are extraordinarily fleeting. A crucial plot point may occur in a split second. If you overload your audience with too much information, or it comes too quickly, they may single out and concentrate on the wrong thing—miss a crucial element of characterization or miss a necessary stage in the narrative.

Successful filmmaking involves keeping the audience “on-track” and pointing them in the right direction throughout—steering their perception and focusing their attention, without seeming to do so.