CIN105
4 – Mise-en-scène (15 May, 2025)

Housekeeping
Assignment 1 – The prompt for assignment 1 will be posted next week and we will walk-over it in class together, probably during tutorial. The assignment will only properly be able to be done after we have learned all the stylistic elements, so I didn't want to post it too early to avoid confusion.

MISE-EN-SCENE

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Thus far, we have established our approach to film analysis as being formalist – which is basically a term that describes how a film is first and foremost a system of parts that function together to make a whole.

As I have stressed, the audience perceives those parts and uses them as cues through which to form expectations and make hypotheses about what will happen, all in service to the creation of meaning, a creation that happens in active dialogue between the audience and the film.

We have also established that film form works by way of two broad-based, inter-related systems: the narrative system and the stylistic system.

Last week we looked at the narrative system.
This week, we move on to the stylistic system.

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When we talk about a film's stylistic system, we are talking about **the patterned use of medium-specific elements**.

What I mean by medium specific elements is precisely those elements that are unique to film as a representational medium, those elements that distinguish it from other media like books or painting or music or live theatre.

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Medium specificity as a term was popularized in part by art critic Clement Greenberg, who defined it as: *the unique and proper area of competence of each art [that] coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium*

In other words, for Greenberg, not only does each medium possess qualities that no other does, but he makes a normative claim that each medium should also seek to maximize its differentiation, to focus on those ways in which it is different from all others.

This is perhaps a bit far, but it is an argument that pure formalists make – they suggest that if film has qualities that are unique to it and that it does not share with literature or painting, it should focus on those qualities to differentiate itself. Indeed a film's quality, in this view, is contingent upon the degree to which it manages to do this.

This type of criticism was the basis for the critique that certain French film critics lobbed at French cinema in the years after WWII, suggesting that most of the films released were merely "filmed theatre" and not true cinema, preceisely because they were not creative enough in their use of cinematography, editing, and mise en scene.

While approaching art from a medium specific standpoint is imperfect, it is also obviously valuable. Last week we talked at length about narrative structure in film, and while I hope this point has been made clear already, what we were concerned with is the way in which films communicate narrative *differently* than, say, the theatre, or literature. You can tell the same story in each medium, but the way we interpret that story will differ greatly based on its formal communication through artistic media.

The challenge that film poses to its analyst is the fact that it offers up an abundance of significant elements, all of which are **integrated** so as to produce an **effective whole**.

When watching a film it can be difficult to actually consider these parts in total isolation, because they are engaged in a constant process of mutual reinforcement – the editing is in service of the cinematography, and vice-versa, for example.

But in order to understand the effects produced by a given film, it is necessary to *try* and disentangle the complex weave of elements that create the finished product.

So the question we're going to face, then, is how do we recognize and assess a film's many formal components in a systematic and logical fashion when, typically, these things are experienced simultaneously and together?

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The answer that your textbook and this course offers, and which we've been alluding to for the past few classes, is that we can break film style down into four broad categories that constitute its major formal elements: mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, sound

One of the good reasons to break film style down into these categories is that each of the first three of them corresponds to a stage of the production or post-production process:

so in other words, there's a **progressive, step-by-step logic** to these categories that we can trace in the same way that filmmakers do when they produce films.

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Mise-en-scene, which we will be examining in depth this week, involves **anything that appears on the screen**, including the **sets**, the **props**, the **actors**, the **costumes**, and even the **lighting** (or at least the effects of lighting that can be seen on screen, not the lights themselves, which often don't appear).

It is often the case that all of the elements of mise-en-scène are in place before the camera is set in position, which then brings us to the second category—the second stage, you might say, in the process of making a film, and that is cinematography.

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When we talk about **cinematography** starting next week, we'll be talking about all of the technical factors that determine how the camera *renders* what is placed before the lens.

So for example, we'll be talking about things like how far the camera is from the things it films; what type of lens is being used; whether the camera is static or moving, and so on.

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Now, joining these individual shots together is the purview of the editor, and so **editing** is the next category we will explore, for it constitutes the process of selecting already filmed material for inclusion and then putting it together.

This particular stage in the filmmaking process and this particular category of film style **foregrounds issues of order, pace, rhythm**, and the way **the various parts of a film relate to one another spatially, temporally, and causally.**

Editing is a very complicated and crucial process in the creation of a film. Typically, most films that run at 90 minutes are actually composed from hundreds of hours of potential footage. Each shot you see is selected likely from dozens of nearly identical takes, and it is the job of the editor to choose which ones to use and, crucially, where to put them in relation to other shots, as well as when to begin a shot and when to end it. Microsecond shifts in the relation between two shots can have huge consequences for the way we interpret a sequence thematically, emotionally, or intellectually.

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Finally, we will move on to **sound and music**. With sound we are not really talking about a final stage in the production process since sound, insofar as it must be produced, recorded, and mixed, is part of every stage of the filmmaking process.

When we talk about sound, we will distinguish between 3 important elements that are recorded and mixed separately from the image – dialogue, sound effects, and music. To study these sonic elements, we'll shift our attention from what we see to what we hear.

Now: As we deal with each of these categories, our manner of approach will be fairly consistent:

In lectures, we'll identify the techniques associated with that category and look at the way those techniques function in a variety of examples; Then, just as we've been doing so far, but with maybe a bit of a tighter focus on the specific element in consideration, in screenings you'll have the opportunity to watch a film and focus on the salient techniques up for discussion that week.

Then after we watch the film, we'll address specific questions about the concepts and terms we'll encounter in tutorial; things like:

How is a technique used and developed over the course of a film? Does it become a motif? How does it direct a viewer's attention? How does it create certain audience expectations? How does it contribute to the making of the film's meaning? Do certain elements have intrinsic meaning, or does it always depend on their relationship to the other parts?

With that overview of the weeks to come, let's start with mise-en-scène.

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MISE-EN-SCENE

Mise-en-scene is in some ways the most straightforward formal element we'll be discussing because what's involved in the mise-en-scène is the most visibly evident.

The category comes from French writing on film, and it literally means "Put into the scene," or perhaps more loosely, "staging an action," and it is also the French theatrical and also film term for directing, or the director, le "metteur en scène," or the one who puts into the scene.

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In fact, it can be helpful to think of mise-en-scene as if we are considering a stage play. Remove from your consideration anything to do with what the camera itself is doing, and ask only about: lighting, costume, makeup, staging of the actors, and performance.

While sometimes elements of the mise-en-scene are unplanned – for instance lets say you're shooting outside on a busy street, a car may drive by incidentally in the background - but most of the time mise-en-scène is strictly choreographed, planned, and deliberate *as if it were* a stage play. Actors do not stand wherever they want; most of the time they are following fairly strict choreography, and their relation to one-another is planned or intentional.

Now, to demonstrate these broad aspects of mise-en-scène, I want to show you two clips – these examples are from two very different types of film. But they have something in common: both films showcase people in the streets of Paris, but their use of mise-en-scène is extremely different.

Clip of *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1952).

Clip of *Breathless* (Godard, 1959)

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We're going to keep these two clips in mind as we work through four broad components of mise-en-scène: Setting, Make-Up/Costumes, Lighting, and Staging

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Setting

By setting we simply mean **the location** of the action.

But we need to remember that the **location of the action need not be, and most often is not, a passive backdrop**, for it can have **a dynamic role in the narrative**.

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Think, for example, if you know this reference, of the boulder from which Indiana Jones must run in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or, in more subtle ways from the films we've watched, the theatres of Sieges of the Alcazar, the Tokyo of April Story, or the Hollywood backlot of *The Player*

These spaces dictate characters' movements, the actions available to them, their interactions with one another, their motivations, among other things.

The first crucial choice that a filmmaker must make with regard to setting is whether to film **on location or on a studio set** -- that is, whether to use a pre-existing place as the setting or whether to construct one specifically for the sake of the film.

The second choice the filmmaker must make is how sparingly or lavishly to adorn that place with **props**, a term you probably know already that refers to objects that appear in scenes and have some role in the action.

So let's think back to those two clips we viewed of Paris in terms of their setting.

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What are some differences you notice about how Paris is presented in *An American in Paris* vs. *Breathless*?

Aside from the opening shots, which serve to locate the viewer in Paris by offering up iconic landmarks of the city, *An American in Paris* is shot primarily on a stage set. Those opening shots of Paris itself use stock footage of the real place, but then we seamlessly switch over to a studio set. How do we know this shift has taken place? In short, we know in this case because everything looks clean and sharp, and it seems like it exists just for the characters on screen and for us.
The choice of stage sets offers a filmmaker a controlled environment in which:

- multiple spaces are both visible and accessible
- all movement can be perfectly choreographed
- all props can be precisely placed
- and the camera can move around freely, whether on a track or a crane or some other way

The main *drawback* of shooting on a set is, obviously, that it's less realistic looking. That said, in the golden era of studio filmmaking some pretty remarkable images were achieved with artificial sets.

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Take for instance these stills from *Black Narcissus,* a British film from 1947 that was shot entirely on stage sets that are given the illusion of three dimensions using extremely detailed painted backdrops that trick perception. Here is a before and after of a famous sequence in the film. This is pre-CGI, but a not-dissimilar special effect technique was used where an elaborate painting was super-imposed over the image, typically either in the lens itself or by filming the original shot through a pane of glass that had the painting on it.

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Here is another example from the same film

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Sometimes, of course, a less realistic or more artificial looking setting is precisely what a filmmaker wants, such as the 1920 film The *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which is one of film history's most iconic examples of mise-en-scène in an expressionist style that named a whole film movement.

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In contrast to these examples, the scene we watched from *Breathless* was filmed on location -- and, more specifically, on the streets of Paris itself.

In contrast to *An American in Paris*, its setting is characterized by:
deep space
lots of spontaneous activity that cannot be fully controlled by the filmmakers, which leads to:
a more realistic or naturalistic feel
and less reliance on props (one might say that here the cigarette is the most important one)

As these two examples of Paris films may suggest, shooting on location *tends* to produce a more naturalistic setting, while shooting on a set typically achieves a more *stylized* effect.

BUT this need not necessarily be the case.

For example, a constructed set might be manufactured to appear even more convincing than its real-life counterpart.

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A good example of this is … *All the President's Men*, whose Washington Post newsroom is a set piece that oozes authenticity despite the fact that it was constructed specifically for the film. This is not a "real" office, but it looks like one. The advantage of doing this is that you can build the office specifically to be filmed, with room for all the equipment necessary to do so built into the architecture.

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By the same token, a "real" location might be rendered more artificial depending on how it is manipulated and shot. Someone like Wes Anderson puts a lot of care into transforming real locations into even more quaint versions of themselves.

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Makeup and Costumes

As with the case of setting, makeup and costuming can operate along a wide spectrum ranging from self-consciously stylized to painstakingly realistic.

Graphically, costumes and makeup can help focus our attention to a particular performer in frame.

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A really obvious example is something like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, where, in a sequence like this, Marilyn Monroe's costuming is designed to have her leap out from the frame.

These uses of costume and makeup are, most generally speaking, used to forge some kind of visual relationship between a performer and the rest of the set or even the other performer's – our eye is drawn through the color and contrast of her design vs everyone else.

But Narratively, costumes generally just serve to help construct a character's persona.

In *Breathless* – Patricia's shirt establishes her job as a salesperson for the New York Herald Tribune, while Michel's costume, especially his hat, evokes the style of Humphrey Bogart, thereby creating a connection to film history.

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We find similar strategies in the use of makeup, which can and often does look entirely naturalistic, used to accentuate natural features of performers, but which can also enhance age or appearance, define place or time, and shape our understanding of an actor's demeanor.

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The popularity of horror and sci-fi has spotlighted the artistry of make-up artists who transform actors into older versions of themselves, or into aliens or monsters.

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Lighting

This is probably the most crucial aspect of mise-en-scène because it is integral to the composition of the image – without light, we arguably don't have film, which is, after all, when broken down to its most basic elements, an interplay of light and dark.

So, aside from helping to actually create the image, what does light do?

Well, it creates mood; it can help guide a spectator across an image, showing us where to look; and to use a metaphor from the fine arts, it *sculpts* images by creating highlights and shadows so that we get a sense of three-dimensionality even on a two-dimensional screen.

To be more specific, when we analyze light it's helpful to think about four different attributes:

The first of these attributes is **quality**, by which we mean the relative intensity of the illumination. How bright is the light?

When we speak about the quality of light—this level of brightness—we distinguish between two terms: hard lighting and soft lighting.

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Hard lighting is a variety of lighting that tends to produce a high contrast image characterized by strong shadows and hard edges.

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Soft lighting, in contrast, creates a more diffused effect — often used, at least in classical Hollywood, to light women.

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The second quality of light is its **direction**, by which we mean the path that light takes from its source to its object

So, we have frontal lighting, which eliminates shadows and produces flat-looking images.

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We have side lighting, which tends to sculpt the features of the object illuminated.

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We have back lighting, which typically renders the foreground objects much darker, creating a silhouette effect.

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We have underlighting, which throws light upon the photographed subject from below, often with a menacing effect.

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Finally, we have top lighting, which shines light down upon the subject from above.

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This question of direction brings us to the third broad category of lighting, which is its **source**.

When we talk about a light's source, we may be talking about diegetic sources—so remember from last week, when we talk about diegesis, we're talking about what exists in the story world. In the case of light, then diegetic light refers to lights the characters can see within the world of the story.

And then we have non-diegetic sources: those which the filmmaker uses to add light to the story world that don't already exist.

It is very rare for all of the illumination in a shot to come entirely from diegetic sources; typically some additional lights, mostly there not to call attention to themselves but simply to contribute to the general effect, are used as a supplement.

A very rare exception you may be familiar with is Stanley Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon*, which famously shot entirely with diegetic and natural light sources despite being shot on film, which was incredible difficult and led to some very soft, almost painterly images such as this

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As your book points out, the two primary sources for light are typically what we call the **key light** and the **fill light**.

The **key light** refers to the chief source of illumination, while the **fill light** serves to eliminate or soften shadows and thus "fill in" the effects of the key light.

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One of the most well-known and ubiquitous lighting systems is the one adopted by Hollywood during the classical studio era. This is known as the **three-point lighting** system and it refers to a setup involve a key light, a fill light, and also a back light, the combination of which attempts to create a very evenly lit image with background definition. The function of the backlight here is such that the character will appear to

pop-out slightly from the background, but not so much that it feels stylistic. Here is an example from the film *Double Indemnity* (walk through example)

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This three-point lighting setup **typically** produces an overall effect called **high-key lighting**

High-key lighting describes lighting schemes in which the figures on screen are very well and evenly illuminated so that there are no harsh contrasts or strong shadows. A good example of this is the scene we watched from *An American in Paris*.

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The opposite of high key lighting is **low-key lighting**.

CLIP

Here is an example of low key lighting in Robert Siodmak's 1946 film *The Killers*.

In low key lighting, somewhat unintuitively given the name, the **key light** tends to dominate, and relatively little fill light is used. The result is a high contrast image; sharp distinction between light and shadow

The fourth and final attribute of cinematic lighting strategies is **color**.

Filmmakers do not only work with white light, or a yellowish incandescent light – it is also possible to enhance the lighting scheme of a scene by using colored filters.

For those of you who might have theatrical experience, I am talking here about the use of a color gel in front of a light, which lends the light a different hue.

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This use of color can sometimes be diegetically motivated. Take, for example, this brief sequence from Douglas Sirk's film *Written on the Wind*. [clip]

In this scene, a blue filter has been used to create the impression of the outdoors at nighttime within the confines of a studio stage.

The use of colored filters or color effects can also be motivated by something other than diegetic factors and be used solely for expressive possibilities.

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In this CLIP from Sergei Eisenstein's 1958 film *Ivan the Terrible, Part Two*, for instance, color changes cannot be explained within the diegesis.

Rather, the director, Sergei Eisenstein, changes the color of the lighting – from a reddish yellow to a greenish blue – in order to signal a shift in consciousness for this character.

In other words, this change in light marks the moment when the character realizes that danger is impending – when he catches a glimpse in his mind of his soon to be assassin.

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Staging

The fourth aspect of mise-en-scene is staging, which your book defines in terms of movement and performance.

Staging addresses things like placement, expression, and movement of all figures in a film – and by figures I mean human figures, the actors themselves,

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but also animals, for instance the donkey Balthasar in Au Hasard Balthazar, the bresson film,

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or even objects if they're given some kind of expressive or narrative power, perhaps like Wilson, the volleyball from *Cast Away* starring Tom Hanks.

Staging, literally where objects and people are placed relative to eachother in a frame or sequence, can have powerful effects over how we take in an image, and constitutes an element of composition, which we will talk more about when we talk about cinematography.

As for performance, here we begin to bleed our study into what could be considered an entire other discipline, performance studies. But we should think about a few things.

One thing that B+T note about performance is that it is helpful to evaluate it in terms of two dimensions:

- the first relates to how individualized the performance is – in other words: does it produce a highly **unique character**, or a broad, general **type**?

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- One important director who famously relied upon types was Sergei Eisenstein, whose films made in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, were typically about class struggle and thus involved typically clear dichotomies between two types: capitalists and proletarians, each of which had a distinct look that would be readily recognizable by audiences.
- To this end, Eisenstein's capitalists were typically obese or old or both
- While his proletarians were always young, muscular, hearty, and hyper-masculine

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- Films often rely on types, and some of cinema's greatest performers are the so-called character actors who specialize in playing a particular type: the tough guy, the villain, the femme fatale, the cop, the drunk, and so on.
- For instance, to use an example that was mentioned frequently in *The Player* because he was reaching the peak of his stardom at the time, Bruce Willis, prior to the release of *Die Hard*, was thought of as a typical romantic lead, but after that film his persona as a star changed, and he became a type associated with action stardom. IN turn, he as a personality slowly changed our standard association of what an action star looks like, away from huge muscle-bound stars of the 80s like Arnold Schwarzenegger and toward a slightly more every-man look.

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The second dimension B+T posit is related to how **stylized or naturalistic** the performance is.

If we go back to the two clips we watched at the beginning, the one from *Breathless* showcases a more naturalistic variety of acting.

In contrast, *An American in Paris* is comparatively stylized since, among other things, it is, as a musical shot on stage set, highly choreographed.

When we think about stylization, we don't often think about understatement, but of course a highly understated style is itself a style that departs from naturalism.

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One of the most famous actors of stylized understatement is Buster Keaton, whose

comedy derived in part from his unflinching face and stoicism in the face of most any situation.

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The last thing I want to talk about is how we fit all these ideas of performance and staging together. We want to think about scene space and time. While duration of a shot is an element of cinematography – we'll talk about that Tuesday – mise-en-scene encourages us to think about the space of the frame in three dimensions, and physical performance is a huge part of that.

In this clip from Jackie Chan's film *Miracles*, I want you to pay attention to the way the space is used through performance, and how the performers capitalize on the fact that the space exists in three dimensions, using their bodies and movements to accentuate the setting – the setting is not merely a backdrop, but a living element of the film that the actors play with to certain effects, using the props of the diegesis for humour but also to advance the action.

CLIP

END LECTURE – BREAK IF TIME, OTHERWISE INTRO FILM

Intro to Film

Like *Miracles*, *Dreadnaught* is a 1980s Hong Kong martial arts film directed by Jackie Chan contemporary Yuen Woo-ping and starring one of Chan's close collaborators Yuen Biao. For anyone familiar, the 1980s were something of a golden era of Hong Kong studio filmmaking, and this film comes a little earlier than some of the more well-known hits, like Chan's own *Police Story*, for instance.

I chose this film for a few reasons. For starters, as you will see, all of the things we just talked about – stylized performance, make up and costume, color, high contrast lighting, and elaborate staging and use of space – are exploited in this film for various dramatic and thematic effect.

When watching, pay attention to these things.

- Setting
- Costumes, make-up
- Lighting
- Staging and performance

- Screen space

Ask why a scene was shot where it was, why do the actors move the way they do? Pay attention to the way their physical performances are stage-like, but modulated through cinematic form. While we haven't talked about these things yet, think about how these theatrical elements are changed, molded through cinematic shot choice, editing, and the use of sound effects and music.

But finally, I also chose this film because its just really fun, and I think you'll enjoy it. It's funny and very exciting, and the choreography is Yuen Woo-ping, who also served as the choreographer on *The Matrix*, which we will be watching next semester, working at his absolute best.

With that, lets start the film