

CIN105 (Summer 2025)

8 – Style

Housekeeping

- Any questions about the assignment?
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Lecture

Over the last few classes we have spent a lot of time identifying and investigating the major formal components of film style.

We've done this in order to get a clearer view of how each element contributes to a film's formal system in isolation, or at least as in isolation as possible – and to explore the potential techniques a filmmaker has in their stylistic toolbox.

This unit on Style represents a culmination of this work we've done – hopefully today we will synthesize all of these elements into a cohesive whole by exploring the conceptual idea of film style.

In other words, this is the week we consider more than simply a film's mise en scene, or cinematography, or music, or editing – this is when we start to think about how all of these components work together; how they relate to each other; and how they function symbiotically to influence the audience's audiovisual experience. In particular, we want to think about how a specific or individual filmmaker uses the techniques that we have been learning about deliberately and to specific ends.

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To begin, then, it's important to note that style – like narrative – is not a unique element to cinema. We can speak of style in any artistic medium – and it can be even applied to everyday activities to the way we dress, the way we speak, the way we decorate our homes. Style is as much an attitude as it is a formal aesthetic system.

Yet in all these instances, the same thing is being implied by the term style: that is, an interactive system that depends upon the integration of different elements to produce a distinctive pattern.

When talking about style in a specifically artistic context, we often do so in order to describe the specificity of the work of a particular artist.

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For example, when we talk about a writer like Thomas Pynchon or musicians like The Rolling Stones, we're not only referring to the actual individuals, or to their art works, but to the feel we attribute to their work – the look, the sound, the texture of their work.

If I mention the name Pablo Picasso, who is here on the far right, you might think of those things that are evident across his body of work – the experimentation with form in painting, sculpture, printmaking and ceramics; the innovation of cubism and collage ...

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And, if we compare Picasso's work to other painters, we get a clearer view of how *his* style manifests itself – we see a personality that is distinct from the others, the personality that we imagine when we think of Picasso.

What distinguishes painters from one another? Here we have examples from the dead white men version of art history, Vermeer, Renoir, Picasso, de Kooning and Lichtenstein.

The subject matter is roughly the same – paintings of a woman. What differentiates the work – and what distinguishes their style – is the way the subjects are rendered – how color, line, and composition work together in a systematic fashion. In each case the idea “woman” manifests itself differently, and those differences are attributed to the stylistic system of each artist.

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We can also group artists together when they exhibit similarities in style – artists *like* Picasso who also worked in the cubist style at roughly the same historical period (along with others, such as Georges Braque and Fernand Léger).

We can say the same thing about cinema and filmmaking– filmmakers work in the same medium using the exact same tools as everyone else. As we have been discussing, many of these filmmakers, perhaps most, tell exceptionally clear stories using the semi-strict norms of the continuity system editing system established within Hollywood – but even among *these* filmmakers there are distinctive elements to their work. If we look at the work of two filmmakers side by side, we see differences that manifest in the ways they deploy the same techniques, or in the ways they deviate from established norms. We may, across a body of work, notice that a particular filmmaker is fond of a type of editing transition, or of a particular color palette, or perhaps of a particular type of close up.

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So, distinctive styles can help distinguish the works of filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein, whose films we have watched several clips from, or Hou Hsiao-hsien, who directed *Millennium Mambo*, or Spike Lee, who directed today's film *Do the Right Thing*.

But their films may also share key formal traits with a broader group style – so we think about Eisenstein as part of Soviet montage cinema of the 1920s, Hou as a member of the Taiwanese new cinema, a wave of filmmaking that emerged with film school graduates like him and Edward Yang in the 1980s, or Lee with new black cinema and the burst of American independent cinema that occurred in the late 80s and into the 1990s.

So how, then, do we actually go about this? How can we identify and analyze style across film history, properly taking into account the context of each film we encounter?

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B+T outline four questions that facilitate the process of analyzing style:

1. What is the film's overall form?
2. What are the primary techniques being used?
3. What patterns are formed by the techniques?
4. What functions do the techniques and patterns fill?

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The **first question** considers a number of factors that should be fairly familiar to you at this point since we have had multiple opportunities to consider them since the beginning of term.

When determining a film's overall form, you need to be thinking about...

- The general relationship between that film's plot and its story
- The means by which the film develops over time
- The ways that it employs devices such as repetition, variation, parallelism, and motifs over the course of its development and in service of its development
- The extent to which it provides the spectator with information or withholds it as it progresses

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We might think of the film's overall form as relating to its narrative form, how it is structured and put together. The second question -- what are the primary techniques being used? -- is one that I want to focus on for a bit since it takes us to the heart of the matter of style, and is the principle question you want to be asking yourself when you write your first assignment.

According to Bordwell and Thompson, there are a couple of steps involved in answering this question:

First, it is necessary to identify the techniques used.

This is the entire point of your shot by shot analysis. By breaking the film down at a shot-by-shot level, you account for literally everything as objectively as possible that the film is doing. And what you find by doing this kind of work is not only all the techniques that ARE used, but also all the ones that AREN'T used. It forces you to consider the artistic choices of filmmakers – and it forces you to ask WHY. Why this shot and not that shot?

There are always other ways to accomplish a task. Filmmakers are constantly facing questions, and their solutions are comprised of situational decisions, ones that are based on personal style, and ones that replicate tried-and-true solutions.

To some extent all those ways will accomplish the same thing -- they will relay that narrative action, they will allow it to occur.

But...at the same time, the impact or the effect, of that narrative action may be quite different, depending on the technique chosen.

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Another way of stating this idea is through language derived from the field of semiotics, which is dedicated to the study of various sign systems, including language.

We can say that multiple techniques have the capacity to denote the same action -- that is, to signify that action directly or to convey that action as the literal meaning of a scene. I can film a shot of someone gazing out of a window multiple different ways, I can change the lens, the shot scale, the angle, the color of the lighting, what they are wearing, anything I want. In all cases, the shot would denote a person staring out a window. What a scene denotes is the most literal or obvious meaning.

However, each of those different techniques will connote something different, will suggest or imply different things in addition to communicating the literal meaning of something. Is the character sad, happy, contemplative, yearning? I can connote all of those things through the choices in the cinematography, the mise en scene, or even the music I play over the image.

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So let's illustrate this idea by way of an example.

Let's say that a filmmaker wants to represent two characters engaged in dialogue, and we'll return to our trusty image of the 180 degree setup to illustrate.

The most popular way of doing this is by way of a technique that derives from the continuity editing system, which, has set in place a number of norms and conventions that have for decades shaped -- and continue to shape -- the way filmmakers solve stylistic problems.

The name of this technique, as we've learned, is SHOT/REVERSE SHOT EDITING

SLIDE – do the right thing

This example is derived from the film we will be watching today. But other possibilities exist as well...Let's watch a few, with minimal comments from me – you'll get the picture.

Clip – In the company of men

Clip – Orlando

Clip – Pulp Fiction

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Each one of these solutions to the “dialogue scene” problem dictates a number of things.

It dictates where our attention is directed – or isn’t directed – at any given moment.

It dictates how subjective or objective, restricted or unrestricted the narration is at any given moment;

How we relate to the two characters, as both a pair, and as individuals;

How we understand the relationship those characters have to each other AND to the space that they inhabit;

How much style supports the narrative, or alternately, draws attention to itself and thereby to the film’s status as a constructed art.

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Back to our list of questions.

Once you’ve identified the techniques used in any given scene in a film, then you can identify the primary and salient techniques used most often. Which ones does the film rely most heavily on?

Which techniques are stressed over others? Which ones serve to determine other elements?

For instance, *Heat* often uses over the shoulder shots because the dynamic between two characters is important; it’s important that we always remember the other person engaged in the conversation.

To demonstrate further what I mean, I have a few clips.

The first is probably familiar to you – if you haven’t seen the film, you still probably know about this scene.

CLIP of Psycho shower.

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It's disturbing and violent – but we don't ever actually see the knife hit the body of Marion Crane.

Hitchcock achieves this effect by relying on two key techniques more than any others: rapid editing and music and sound effects.

The editing carries the violence; the editing even speeds up as the sequence progresses, getting more intense as it unfolds. Rupture over continuity.

Music and sound is so important here in producing meaning because of the high strings from Bernard Herrmann's score; the repeated motif sounds like the knife thrusts; we also get the impact sound effects of the blade hitting flesh which sells the whole thing.

Other elements are present as well – but these two are the most significant – of course, performance, mise en scene, lighting, all contribute as well.

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Now, when talking about salient techniques we're also talking about the relationships among various techniques – camera movement, music, mise en scene. It's important because I want to stress these relationships – they are precisely what allows for a film to function as a formal system. How do techniques interact with other elements?

The best way of illustrating this idea of interaction is to think in terms of that norm I mentioned a few minutes ago: continuity editing.

Remember that continuity editing relies upon a general rule (observation of the 180 degree line) and then proceeds through a number of related devices to carve up space and deliver narrative information in an easily comprehensible fashion (these devices include shot/reverse shot, match on action, and eyeline matches).

Collectively, these stylistic elements interact to produce a particular style of editing

But this set of editing procedures also interacts with elements of the mise-en-scene, cinematography, and sound, as I mentioned when I introduced the concept of continuity.

In other words, continuity might be established primarily through editing, but it is shored up through other means.

In terms of mise-en-scene, continuity editing typically dictates that figures get placed within the central portion of the frame and that three point lighting gets employed in order to maintain even lighting across multiple shots.

Continuity editing often depends on certain predictable patterns in terms of cinematography, especially when it comes to shot scale and shot duration.

And, finally, continuity editing often works hand in hand with sound, especially dialogue and music, that is continuous across cuts and thereby lends a scene or a sequence a sense of cohesion despite its being composed of multiple shots.

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What we are doing here, in thinking about common practices that inevitably *end up* being used a system like the continuity editing system, is the third question outlined earlier – we are thinking about patterns.

When we think about patterns in film style, we are thinking about recurring techniques, recurring ideas.

As a note, one thing to remember about patterns of style is that their disruption is just as important as their introduction. If a filmmaker frequently uses long takes and then abruptly interjects a series of rapid cuts, that is probably significant.

But the point, generally, is that we want to look at our shot by shot breakdown and consider if there seems to be any ornamentation, any recurring motif.

As an example, think back to *Millennium Mambo*. One pattern we should note from this film is the recurring motif of scenes that begin with a camera out of focus, slowly surveying the mise en scene. The camera is moving, it pans around the room and, as the focus shifts, slowly begins to establish space. This happens frequently throughout the film, shots just like this:

CLIP

But this is obviously not the only way to stage your characters and establish space. These shots are stylistic choices. They deliberately disorient us, immersing us in abstract coloration, before showing us where we are, and establishing where figures are relative to each other.

Another director closely associated with the Taiwan new cinema, Edward Yang, to suggest only one counter-example, was instead a frequent user of static frames and elaborate staging of his performers in almost tableau-like configurations. Here's a clip from a film of his released right around the same time as *Millennium Mambo*.

CLIP

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Finally, the last question involved in analyzing film style is related to the functions fulfilled by the techniques and patterns we've already identified.

In order to do that, you need to start by asking yourself certain questions:

Does a repeated technique operate in the same or a similar way from one use to the next?

How does it direct my attention and/or affect me as a spectator, intellectually, physically, and emotionally?

Does it create similar expectations each time it is employed?

Does it affect other elements in the same way from one instance to the next?

If not, what variations are evident?

At what points in the plot's -- or story's -- development does it appear?

Final thoughts:

First, style in and of itself is neither good nor bad.

Identifying and describing a stylistic system is not a matter of appraisal or evaluation, but simply analysis. As film scholars, it's not our job to decide if something is good or bad, we leave that to film critics. We obviously have our preferences, but the point of what we do is not to evaluate.

Instead, we look at style to think about what the film is communicating and what the combination of images and sound are doing, and how we might interpret their meaning.

This is because we are not interested in providing a review of a film for consumption by others, we are interested in better understanding how cinema, as a medium, works on a fundamental level.

Second, every film employs style. It is not the case that some do and some don't, all films by definition *have* to use the techniques that we've spent the last few weeks learning about to some effect.

Throughout his career, filmmaker Kevin Smith has frequently joked about being a filmmaker with no style. No matter how genuine or disingenuous that claim is, it isn't true.

Smith's style might be quite conventional (as in, adhering to established norms in terms of how to represent material) or it might be lacking in flair or appeal or even coherence, but he still employs it.

Discussion

1. What is the film's overall form?
2. What are the primary techniques being used?
3. What patterns are formed by the techniques?
4. What functions do the techniques and patterns fill?
 - Does a repeated technique operate in the same or a similar way from one use to the next?
 - How does it direct my attention and/or affect me as a spectator, intellectually, physically, and emotionally?
 - Does it create similar expectations each time it is employed?
 - Does it affect other elements in the same way from one instance to the next? If not, what variations are evident?
 - At what points in the plot's -- or story's -- development does it appear?