CIN105
2 – Form (11 May 2023)

Housekeeping
- Any questions?
- Clarification on quizzes – no quiz this week
    - First quiz will be next week and will be made available on Quercus after our Thursday class
    - You will have until the following Tuesday to complete the quiz, once started you will need to complete it within the 20 minute window
    - The quiz will contain questions from that week's material, either from the Tuesday or Thursday class/readings/screenings
- Please do not use devices during screenings – this is screening etiquette for those around you and actually poses an accessibility concern, as students behind you may be distracted by your screen and unable to fully pay attention to the film

FORM

- On Tuesday, I stressed that the main thing we are going to be doing together this year is something called *formal analysis*

- And so, this week we begin course material properly by thinking about what it means to consider a film *formally*.

- So what is form? Well, a dictionary definition might actually help.

- **SLIDE** As a noun Form is defined as the visible shape or configuration of something, i.e. the arrangement of parts, or shape; "a particular way in which a thing exists or appears." As a verb, it is defined as "to bring together parts or combine to create something," and to "make or fashion into a certain shape or form."

- All of these, variously give some indication of what we are talking about when we speak of a film's "form" – we mean: what is the shape of this thing, how is it structured, how was it molded by its creators and what is the final way in which it exists, ready to be seen by us, the viewer.

SLIDE

- For their part, Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, the authors of your textbook, define *film* form as "the overall set of relationships among a film's parts."

- Ideally, you can already see how this definition rhymes with the above definitions of form *in general*. Film form describes the overall way in which a film's components are structured in relation to one another.

- But ask yourself an important question: if a film's been formed in the forest, but there's no one around to see it, does it really exist?

- What I mean by this bad joke is, film form cannot only be a consideration of the relationship between a film's parts, because form has no effect if it is not being actively perceived and made sense of by a film viewer. In a real sense, no audience, no film.

- It is by being *experienced* that form produces meaning. The meaning lies not in the film per se, but in the middle somewhere, between viewer and film, in the act of perception.

- **SLIDE**

- So whenever we talk about form, and when we engage in formal analysis, what is at issue is a dynamic relationship between:

    1) The work of art, which has been created in and through a series of creative decisions on the part of the filmmakers and now exists in some final state…

    2) And the audience, which is addressed by that work of art and, in turn, becomes actively engaged in deciphering it by picking up on various CUES that have the potential to provoke a particular emotional response.

- **SLIDE**
-
- In other words, we could define "form" as
-
- **SLIDE**
-
- **<u>that which connects the filmmaker to the audience</u>**.

- This is essentially conveyed by Bordwell and Thomspon with the following quote: "If you are a director or screenwriter, you face perpetual choices about form. As a viewer you are responding to it at every moment."

- It is out of this dynamic relationship, a dynamic relationship between a work of art and its audience, that meaning emerges.

- Formal analysis is the methodology through which we attempt to understand and explain how movies make this meaning by addressing their audiences.

- So, what exactly does it mean to suggest that meaning is the product of a dynamic relationship?

- Well, it means that despite what we may assume, meaning does not reside entirely within the art work, waiting to be discovered by the perceiver; NOR does it reside entirely in a viewer who projects it on to an art work, as if that art work were a blank canvas.

- Another way to put this is artworks should not be thought of as entirely objective – existing with a stable set of meanings that are available to be discovered – nor should the interpretation of art be thought of as entirely subjective, where any meaning can be imposed on a work because I'm allowed to think whatever I want about it.

- Instead, we need to understand that meaning is the result of a collaborative effort between an artwork that provides cues and a viewer that perceives and then interprets those cues in an active process that we call *looking*. Looking is an active process whereby we, as viewers, sense-make based on the negotiation between the objective formal properties of the work and our own personal experience of being subjects in the world.

STOP

As such, it is important to emphasize the any given film has *multiple* levels of meaning. We're going to talk today about about 4 levels outlined in your textbook:

SLIDE

Explicit; Referential; Implicit; Symptomatic

The most important takeaway here is simply the idea that a film can be and mean many different things simultaneously.

SLIDE

We'll go through each of these types of meaning using the example from your textbook, *The Wizard of Oz.* Who here has seen this film before?

Hopefully you are at least basically familiar with the premise, which is a little girl is transported away from her home in Kansas during the Great Depression to the magical world of Oz where she has a number of adventures.

So, first, what is the referential meaning of a film in general? The textbook says: "This layer of meaning is very concrete, close to a bare-bones plot summary. Here the meaning depends on the spectator's ability to identify specific items… A viewer unacquainted with such information would miss some of the meanings cued by the film. We can call such tangible meanings *referential,* since the film refers to things or places already invested with significance in the real world."

SLIDE

So the referential meaning is close to as literal a description of what we see as possible. For the Wizard of Oz, this is:

1. Referential meaning. *During the Depression, a tornado takes a girl from her family's Kansas farm to the mythical land of Oz. After a series of adventures, she returns home.*

The referential meaning is more specific than the next layer, which Bordwell and Thompson call the explicit meaning. But the explicit meaning is "still fairly concrete in the meaning it attributes to the film" and we might say that it is the overall point or message that the film's story is trying to get across.

In the *Wizard of Oz,* the explicit meaning is: *A girl dreams of leaving home to escape her troubles. Only after she leaves does she realize how much she loves her family and friends. Nothing she finds elsewhere can replace them.*

In both cases we are concerned more or less with the story of the film, in the first instance the events of the story and, in the second case, the lessons of that story.

But we can also describe the film less in terms of story and more in terms of theme – which would activate its implicit and symptomatic meanings: these meanings are more abstract than the referential and explicit meanings, and interpretations of them may vary from person to person.

Let's start with implicit meaning. Wizard of Oz's **implicit meaning is:** *An adolescent who must soon face the adult world yearns for a return to the simplicity of childhood, but she eventually accepts the demands of growing up.*

This layer of meaning involves an act of *interpretation*. To put it simply, the film may have a literal meaning (the referential), a fairly literal lesson (its explicit meaning), and then, if we read between the lines, a more *implicit* meaning, one that involves a leap of sorts on our part, but that is still based in the same story material as the first two meanings.

SLIDE

Finally, we could also identify broader implicit meanings that extend beyond the film itself to society at large, and here we would be talking about what Bordwell and Thompson call "symptomatic" meaning. Another term we will encounter later in the course for describing this level of meaning is "ideological" – what does the film have to say as an object which exists within a broader social political landscape that is governed by certain norms and assumptions about the way the world works?

The symptomatic meaning extends beyond the film to society at large, and constitutes the ways in which the film articulates or engages with social values.

Bordwell and Thompson say: "Symptomatic meanings remind us that meaning of all sorts is largely a social phenomenon. Many meanings of films are ultimately ideological; that is, they spring from systems of culturally specific beliefs about the world. Religious beliefs, political opinions, conceptions of race or gender or social class, even our most deeply seated notions of life's values—all these constitute our ideological frame of reference."

SLIDE

According to Bordwell and Thompson, *The Wizard of Oz*'s symptomatic meaning is that "*In a society in which human worth is measured by money, the home and the family may seem to be the last refuge of human values. This belief is especially strong in times of economic crisis, such as that in the United States in the 1930s*."

Here, we expand the implicit meaning, we ask what the lesson of the implicit meaning – nothing can replace family – might itself mean in the context of the period, 1930s America. In this way we ask how *The Wizard of Oz* either challenges or reinforces the values of the world that it exists in. And in this particular case, we attempt to look backward, considering not only what the film means now, in 2025, but what it would possibly mean to viewers at the time of its release.

SLIDE

Now of course all of these descriptions of meaning are still far too limited – they don't begin to account for *everything* that the *Wizard of Oz* means.

After all, if meaning is the product of an interactive relationship between a given film and its audience…and each viewer is an individual with his/her own way of perceiving the world – then it is certainly conceivable that the same film could be read differently by different viewers.

We could all walk out of a movie – the same movie - and take away something completely different from the experience. This in part has to do with the differences that define us, be they differences of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, or education – all of which lead innevitably to differences in the way we interpret the world at large and, by extension, specific works of art.

At the same time, however, as much as we are defined by differences, we as audience members are also defined by what have in common. We all, for example, live in the same historical moment, and we share a particular cultural context, both of which have shaped our perceptive faculties profoundly.

To take another important example, most of us share and have become familiar with certain representational conventions – what I mean by that is that we share implicit understanding of certain ways of representing the world that are so conventional, so commonplace, and so recurrent as to prove normalized. That is how we can all sit and experience a film and understand its construction, because film form itself is often conventionalized and repeats patterns of representing the world that are familiar to us.

When certain techniques are repeated, they become conventions, and those conventions – through their repeated use – produce a sense of how things ought to be – and they ultimately condition our viewing expectations.

This notion – that formal conventions become normalized and can actually play a role in legitimating broader societal norms or conventions, is something we will return to in greater detail in the second semester.

For now, let's return to B+T's definition of film form:

SLIDE

"the overall set of relationships among a film's parts"

Let's start to expand on this a bit.

It's a given that there is some pattern or logic governing the work's composition and that this pattern can be discerned by the audience, who, in turn, derives from it some kind of effect – a dramatic effect, an emotional effect, an intellectual effect.

Now, if a film (or a song, or a painting) were merely a random collection of elements thrown together with no systematic meaning, it would remain incomprehensible to you or me.

But it is extremely rare to come across such a thing – since a film, like any art work, is typically produced with some intention, which manifests itself through a form that is chosen for its capacity to produce a particular experience and/or communicate a particular idea in a particular way.

Filmmakers are actually constantly presented with choices when shooting a film – do I put the camera here, or there, what color should this shirt be, where do we put the lights – and while they may make one choice or another for any number of reasons, the important point is they *do* make those choices, and what we are left with – the film – is the result of those choices.

Now, there will be times – within our course and outside of it – when you'll be confronted with a film whose formal system is not immediately apparent to you.

The key to remember in moments like these is that you shouldn't automatically dismiss a work on the grounds that its logic is elusive. Instead, you should try to make sense of it as best as you can.

One of the things this class will give you is a set of tools that will assist you in accomplishing this task – a set of skills necessary to the analysis of all films, from the most familiar and accessible to those that may prove unfamiliar and inaccessible, even those may be unpleasurable.

To give you an idea of what I mean, let's take a brief look at the form of something other than a movie, something that we can take in all at once –

And we'll use as our example, Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting, "nude descending a staircase." Many of you have likely seen or heard of this painting before.

SLIDE

The very first thing one might do when confronted with a work of art is to figure out how it's affecting you – by simply paying attention to your perceptual experience, you can gain a lot of insight into an art work.

That's precisely why we began this course on Tuesday by merely gauging or emotional response to the opening of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.

Because we want to literalize this process. When we look at an artwork like this for the first time and we don't immediately have some take we can deploy about it, what do we do?

First: We should ask ourselves how it makes us feel – or perhaps, how does it make us *look*? How does it direct our eye? In what direction does your gaze move? Where does it end up?

After this initial reaction to the painting's formal system, we can then begin to discern some patterns….

Let's consider a number of these formal elements:

Color and Contrast

Almost, but not quite, monochromatic, not much variation. Biggest difference across the visual field is that between the dark sections and the light ones. Our eyes are usually drawn to the lightest part of an image, which in this case moves our eye across the top left to bottom right diagonal.

Line and Shape

The lighter portion of the image is dominated by straight lines, by these multiple tall rectangular lines. We also see the image punctuated with ovals and a series of fluid, curved lines that create a sense of movement.

The dark corners of the image are characterized by either a lack of definition (upper right) or the appearance of rough shapes (lower left).

The lighter portions accentuate movement by popping out of the background.

Composition

Not symmetrical; this forces your eye to move to the right and down because of the orientation of the central figure

After discerning the shape, and considering it alongside the title, we see what it is, it's content: as the title suggests: this is a Nude Descending a Staircase, albeit rendered abstractly through particular formal choices.

SLIDE

To understand form better it might help us, in fact, to distinguish it from "content." If form is the container or shape or set of relationships between the parts of an artwork, then content is the stuff of the artwork – what its semantically about. In a film, some of the content might be the story, whereas the form is how that story is told.

What we call "form" and what we call "content" in art are oftentimes considered distinct, or even placed in an oppositional relationship. But you can't really fully separate form and content because it is *through* form that content emerges.

Clearly, Duchamp's A Nude Descending a Staircase is not simply another depiction of a person going down a set of stairs.

Instead, he re-conceives the body, using painting's formal system to emphasize the ways the human body is like a machine: comprised of an assemblage of parts, possessing the capacity for movement. The content is the in fact a nude body, but not so straightforwardly – its presentation (its form) forces us to think about the human body in a different way.

STOP

Now, the formal analysis of a film is obviously different from the formal analysis of a painting – simply because it's an audiovisual medium, and one that moves. It's not static.

We have to account for a range of techniques and formal properties, including: color, props, setting, shot scale, camera angle, camera movement, editing, sound, music, and narrative.

We are going to learn more about these specific stylistic techniques in the coming weeks. For now, we're going to focus on some over-arching governing principles that these techniques will be used in the service of: what we're going to call the principles of film form.

SLIDE

<u>Principles of Film Form</u>

The relationships that are between these various elements of film form are dictated by these principles.

The five principles outlined in your textbook are Function, Similarity and Repetition, Difference and Variation, Development, and Unity-Disunity – each of which directs the patterns and relationships that define a film's form.

SLIDE

The first principle that Bordwell and Thompson discuss is **Function**.

As they write: “If form is a pattern of elements, we would expect that those elements fulfill purposes. They do something in the larger whole. Of any element in a film we can ask, What are its functions?”

And the lesson to take from this first overriding principle is that we can learn more about the overall set of relationships that make up a film’s form by simply asking of any element that stands out to us – a notable shot, a cut, or even the role of a certain character – what *function* does this serve the film as a whole? Why was this choice made and not another?

SLIDE

Similarity and Repetition

The next formal principal is that of similarity and repetition. Many elements in films are repeated and become motifs – some are visual, others musical or sonic, or some might be situational. In *The Player* we have many examples of motifs – ideas or words or sounds that come up over and over – can you think of any examples?

Similarity and repetition seems like a self-explanatory idea, but it is very important. Once you start to pay attention to the way ideas or elements repeat in the film, you will begin to notice the way many artworks find structure through this type of repetition.

SLIDE

Similarity and repetition finds its necessary counterpart in the third principle: **difference and variation**.

In fact the two should be often thought of in tandem, because elements are often repeated broadly but differ slightly – a musical motif may change ever so slightly as the film progresses, for instance.

SLIDE

Next we have what Bordwell and Thompson call **Development**: as elements undergo change (difference), we move towards a film’s resolution (things develop and change). They tell us that, “Filmmakers often treat formal development as a progression moving from beginning through middle to end.”

By comparing elements from different moments of the film, most obviously the beginning and the end, a progression of sorts can be charted. In other words, as elements undergo change, the dynamism of a film become apparent

With *The Player*, we might think of how, by the end of the film, Griffin has resolved all of his conflicts, however improbably. He has retained his job and literally gotten away with murder in the process. He has also, finally, resolved his issue with the mysterious writer who has been sending him threatening postcards by striking a script deal. This gives the film a sense of final closure, as the conflicts opened by the narrative previously have developed over the film and are now closed – however in this particular case this is not necessarily a happy ending in the conventional sense, as Griffin is not a likeable protagonist who has done virtuous things – he is the bad guy and he wins, which gives the film's ending an uneasy, almost dissonant or ironic quality.

Pause

Finally, we have **Unity/Disunity**

Typically, films will try to create a scenario in which everything fits, everything coheres. A scenario in which each element reinforces the presence of others. We say a film has unity when we want to describe its elements as *tight* – everything fits, there is little left unresolved or ambiguous, either intentionally or unintentionally.

We would probably say *The Player* has unity, because all the various plot elements of relevance are tied together in the end. While we never really learn who the disgruntled writer that kicks-off the plot is, it doesn't matter because he and Griffin strike a deal at the film's end that seems to guarantee Griffin will get away with the murder.

A film may possess some level if *disunity* if narrative threads or codes of action are left unresolved – casually, viewers often describe instances like this as *plot holes* – gaps in narrative logic that are either unaddressed or simply do not make sense according to the rules of the story world.

That said, it is important to note that while many filmmakers strive for formal unity, some use disunity strategically —they might, for example, leave a certain strand of the narrative unresolved on purpose. In this sense, the filmmaker may *want* their film to feel *ambiguous*, they may want the viewer to leave the theatre unsure exactly what to think, unable to tie everything together neatly.

As viewers we may find such examples of disunity jarring, but they are no less deliberate than those choices which create unity.

PAUSE

With that, we're going to take a short break and then when we reconvene I will introduce this week's film, which is much shorter than normal at only 55 or so minutes.

INTRODUCE FILM

The film we will be watching together today is a bit of an odd one. Directed by Luc Moullet and released in 1989, *Les Sièges de l'Alcazar* or The Sieges of the Alcazar is a meta-comedy about film criticism.

Moullet began his career as a critic at the famous French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s and 1960s. We will learn more about the influence of this magazine as the term goes on. For now, you should know that at this time, post-world war two, as international film distribution circuits that had been closed during the war began to reopen, critics like Moullet played a huge role in championing lesser known film directors through their writing.

Moullet in particular was a huge fan of American B movies – genre movies and other low budget fair – that were often overlooked or dismissed by other critics. He played a large role in championing the work of director Sam Fuller, for instance, whose films in the years since are often recognized and praised for their progressive social commentary despite their somewhat rudimentary form.

Moullet would go on to be a film director himself, a contributing member to the film movement in France known as the French New Wave – other notable directors of this period would include Agnes Varda, Jean Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, etc.

I decided to show this film of his to you all today because I think its funny that someone like him made a movie that is, essentially, making fun of the idea of loving movies. This is a film about a film critic named Guy who works at Cahiers du Cinema, much like Moullet himself did, and who is portrayed as somewhat of a pitiful figure and whose love of cinema is seen as somewhat pathetic. Guy wants to champion filmmakers that no one else loves, and goes out of his way to see films many consider bad in the hopes that he will "discover" the next big-name director.

Guy has a rivalry with a woman critic as a rival magazine called *Positif*, which

really did exist and did function as something of a rival to *Cahiers du Cinema*. Their romantic rivalvry centres around intellectual one-upmanship.

But why chose this for our week on form? Well, first, I want you to consider the degree to which what I just told you about Moullet can be *seen* in the film itself.

For instance, his love of American B movies, I think, is reflected in his formal style – how does this film *feel* to you? For my money, I think you will think it feels low-budget, even rudimentary in form. Consider the degree to which this may actually be intentional.

Secondly, just pay attention to the ways characters speak about films in this movie. At times they attempt to articulate what it is about a certain director that they like or dislike. Most of the time this is written as jokes, but there's something there that captures, humorously, exactly what it is that we're trying to do.

In the end, while in this course we are going to *try* to analyze in words what makes films work or not, ultimately these are artworks that evade description. We are all going to have to be a little like these critics, grasping for words to describe things that speak for themselves through audio-visual form.

TUTORIAL