Topic 3. Introduction to Film Studies
Alejandro Melero, 2014

Contents:
3.1. Why Film Studies?
3.2. Film aesthetics
3.3. The visual attributes. The mise en scène

3.1. Why Film Studies?

Film Studies is a new discipline. This does not mean that it is not a solid, valuable and respected discipline; on the contrary, it is one field of study that grows at an immense expand rate, reaching universities all over the world, and becoming richer and richer as most people join it. One of the best departments of film studies is at Columbia University. Their explanation of how they teach Film Studies is, in fact, an beautiful definition of what Film Studies are: "Film Studies takes up the evolution of cinema as an art, an institution, an object of philosophical study and an international socio-cultural phenomenon. It is designed to consider current theoretical approaches and to look historiographically at trends such as the transition from film to digital media. The program is uniquely situated adjacent to the MFA programs in screenwriting/directing and creative producing, reminding students of the importance of filmmaking practice". (In http://arts.columbia.edu/film-ma-program).

Film Studies are not the first approach to the study of cinema. Before them, films had been studied in departments of Arts, History, Literature, Culture, Anthropology... This transversal quality is still maintained, and has proven to be very important for Film scholars. As students advance in their studies, they are surprised to learn that some of the best texts have in fact been written by psychologist, philosophers, linguists...

There are many disciplines within the now huge (but, let us remember, still new and expanding) School of Film studies. In this topic, only two aspects are looked at: 1) the Aesthetics of film and 2) the importance of Mise en scène. They intend to be seen as an exploration of what the Film scholar will face in his or her future as a person immersed in the fascinating world of Film Studies.

3.2. Film aesthetics

The previous sections have remarked how films are studied from two basic perspective: cultural studies and aesthetics. This is the section that focuses on the second approach. Some of the questions that will be presented in this section are the following: What is the difference betwen form and style? What types of meanings do a film and its aesthetics convey? What is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics? What are the most relevant aesthetic tendencies in film history?

This section is divided into four different sections, so as to approach the study of Film aesthetics from different perspectives. These sections includes theoretical approaches to film aesthetics, historical perspectives on film aesthetics, the relationship between aesthetics and film genres, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics... and many others.

3.2.1. Working with aesthetics.
There are many definitions for what 'Aesthetics' is, due to the fact that it is a category present in many disciplines, and a valuable term in all the different arts, from literature to photography, going through dance, theatre, architecture, et cetera. Thus, we find that in different times and different arts we have found various (sometimes conflicting) definitions for Aesthetics. Let us look ar the following ones: for thefreedictionary.com, aesthetics means "A guiding principle in matters of artistic beauty and taste; artistic sensibility" (in http://www.thefreedictionary.com/aesthetic). This double definition suggests that aesthetics has to do with some idea of beauty; this is a principle that we find in most definitions of this term. The second part of the definition focuses on the idea of sensibility, which is also important when talking about aesthetics. Sensibility is in itself a term with a difficult definition, which varies in time and culture, and is even discussed by those who, sceptically, do not trust the term, considering it too subjective. But it is, nevertheless, and inspirational concept in order to understand aesthetics, as it seems to suggest that in order to appreciate and/or create that Beauty, one must have some kind of sensibility.

The second entry that we find in the same web page runs as follows: "An underlying principle, a set of principles, or a view often manifested by outward appearances or style of behaviour". This is also an important definition for us, as it adds the idea that, in order to study that beauty, there must be some rules ("set of principles") that can guide as critics, spectators or creators.

There are two terms more whose definition can help us to grasp what Aesthetics are and how important they are for Film scholars. These are "form" and "style". In fact, it is more the struggle between on and the other, or the tensions sustained by them, what makes them interesting for us. They can be seen as two conflicting opposites, tow irreconcilable arch-enemies which, nevertheless, can work together despite themselves. Form can be defines as follows: "the result of the sum of all the parts of the film, unified and given shape by patterns such as repetition and variation, colours and lights, shape and volume, texture and image, story lines, and character traits". Now, let us consider the following definition of style: "the way a film and the people who work on it make use of the techniques of filmmaking so as to create a differentiated and personal whole". Can you feel now

how important they are for the study of the relationship between Film and Aesthetics? Different as they are, Style seems to be nothing but the result of working with the elements that constitute the Form. Likewise, Form seems to exist only to please Style, despite themselves; what is more, only when Style starts working does Form start its existence, as if it laid waiting for Style to show up and decide to start up a work of art.

3.2.2. Film and meaning.
This section is about the relationship between Film and meaning, as understood via the study of Film Aesthetics. It makes use of David Bordwell's distinction of different meanings in film. These theories were first presented in the seminal book Making meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema. According to Borwell (Harvard University Press, 1989), there are four different types of meanings, shown below:

1. referential meaning: allusion to particular items of knowledge outside the film that the viewer is expected to recognize.
2. explicit meaning: significance presented overtly, usually in language and often near the film's beginning or end.
3. implicit meaning: significance left tacit, for the viewer to discover upon analysis or reflection.
4. symptomatic meaning: significance that the film divulges, often against its will, by virtue of its historical or social context.

Let us take some examples to make this theory clearer. For instance, Steven Spielberg's blockbuster Jurassic Park. The first layer of meaning, referential meaning, alludes to those aspects of meaning that the film's narrative requires for the spectator to decode or simply understand the film; thus, spectators need to know that dinosaurs existed long time ago, but they disappear and are no longer among us. Secondly, under the label 'explicit meaning' we could include that information that the film text itself gives us, such as all the information about DNA, mosquitoes and amber, cloning... et cetera, which most people do not know but is indeed require to follow the film. In Jurassic Park there is even a short documentary that the characters in the film see, and so do spectators. Otherwise, the storyline would be impossible to follow. Implicit meaning refers to the meaning that is not overtly displayed but is part of the film's narrative too. In Jurassic Park there are clear references to the ethics of manipulating DNA. Spectators can learn a lot about this real fact, no matter that the film is a fiction, even a science fiction, and the topics that we see are, as yet, impossible (the cloning of dinosaurs is still a fantasy and we do not even know if it could happen some time in the future). The fifth level of meaning, the so-called 'Symptopatic meaning' is the one that Bordwell is most interesting in. It is also the less controllable of all, as it makes reference to those (potentially, endless) meanings that the film transpires despite itself. In a way, it is the most personal of all the meanings, as each spectator is free to find the meaning or meanings that he or she can or decide. For instance, one spectator, after seeing Jurassic Park, can be moved by the story of the children who re-encounter their grandfather, maybe because this imaginary spectator's biography includes a similar episode. For others, the landscape that we see in the film will be especially relevant; for instance, one spectator who grew on

a beautiful island and feels that is now living a very different, estranged, life, may find those particular meanings. The list is of symptomatic meanings is, needless to say, endless. The better the film is, the more open it will be to provide spectators with all different layers of meanings, especially symptomatic ones. These will result from the sum of a well constructed film narrative and the involvement of a prepared and willing audience.

Now, let us consider the following extract, taken from Bordwell's book (page 34):

For the practicing critic, it is not enough to discover—that is, construct—implicit or symptomatic meanings; one must justify them by means of public discourse. All the problems set by the institution have a rhetorical dimension, the demand for a persuasive interpretation being the most obvious instance. It is, moreover, chiefly through rhetoric that critics learn inferential processes and encounter exemplars, analogies, and schemata. Rhetoric also constructs a critical persona and an implied audience.

(Source: Making meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema. David Borwell (Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 34)

As we can see, the four levels of meaning are not independent, and in fact it is their interrelation what makes them so important and powerful. Moreover, other factors such as what Bordwell calls the "rhetorical" dimension, are to be taken into account to understand the complexity of the processes of creation of cinematic meanings.

3.2.3. Ethics and aesthetics
The relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics is a controversial one, and constitutes one of the most important, engaging and fascinating episodes in the study of Film Aesthetics. In order to explore this complex issue, this section will propose the student to consider some quotes and try to apply them to film theory.

QUOTE 1: "all arts become unequivocally altered after Auschwitz", Adorno

This quotation, taken form Theodore Adorno (one of the most important names in the study of aesthetics in different arts, namely music and literature) is important for us for several reasons. It provokes a disparity of reflections which are relevant for us because:
1) It suggests that there can be point in history in which arts can be changed, and in very drastic ways too. A number of questions arise: has this alteration happened before of after Auschwitz? If so, what are the requirements for these dramatic changes to occur?
2) Why did that change apply to ALL arts? It may be easy to understand why photography changed after the Holocaust and the graphic representations of the horrible massacres but, what about music? Or architecture? Could we establish a hierarchy of arts that were affected by that big event?
3) It is rather easy to assume that such Unequivocal alteration took place on moral and ethical grounds (after all, our topic here). But, were there any other factors contributing to this change? What about politics? Or geography and the new configuration of the world after the war?
4) No matter when or how that alteration took place, the question remains that not everybody must have perceived it contemporarily. When did the change start to be perceived by different cultures? How did it manifest? What is the legacy of it today?

QUOTE 2: "a tracking shot is a moral issue", Jean-Luc Godard

Godard was one of the most influential European filmmakers of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. He was both a scriptwriter and director and a theorists, and his work as a film critic and thinker is still widely admired. This quotation, possibly his most famous statement, is directly connected to our topic of interest in this section. In many ways, his assertion comes to say that filmmaking is an art with strong moral implications. These implications are, indeed, so strong that even the slightest technical device (such as a tracking shot, but he could have said anything) must be careful considered, as it is a moral issue. Thus, when a director decides to capture one particular scene using a particular technical device (in this case, this fictional tracking shot) he or she is taking a moral stand, making a decision that is connected to ethics. So, what is the place of aesthetics in this debate? First, one could conclude that, if moral issues are such an important aspect of filmmaking, maybe there is not a lot of room for other aspects, such as aesthetics, which could

look irrelevant or even frivolous from this point of view. This idea is reinforced if we compare Godard's oeuvre with that of the filmmakers of classical Hollywood (many of whom Godard himself admired), one of the first conclusions would be that the European industry of the 1960s (so concerned with auterism) differs from the American industry of the previous years in several aspects, amongst which the minor role of aesthetics is an essential characteristic. The influence of this trend in auterism reached the United States, and many people believe that this neglect of the importance of aesthetics (together with other legal, social and economic factors) contributed to the end of the studio system that had paved the way for the best years of classic American cinema.

Now, let us look at the following case study: *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W.Griffith, 1915). Before reading further, please look at the following clip, from this film:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXlWwYNCO-8&feature=PlayList&p=4EA173F2A2B71F8F&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=13

There are obvious moral implications in the narrative of that film, in which we can see representations of black people as evil, and there is even an admiration to the Ku Klux Klan, which is presented as the saviour of the poor white lady, who is going to be raped by a gang of black men. But we are concerned with aesthetics here. Some of the questions that this debate inspire, in the light of what we have seen above, are:

1. What is the relationship between politics and cinema, and how do the aesthetics of cinema convey this relationship'
2. Can you find, in the clip, an example of how the technique of cinema affects 1) aesthetics; and 2) ethics? In other words, is there a technical device (say, tracking shot) that reveals the moral decision taken by the filmmakers who made *The Birth of a Nation*?
3. What is the role of history in this debate? In other words, could such a clip be made today? Is the relationship between aesthetics and ethics changeable'.

3.3. The visual attributes. The mise en scène

Film studies are very concerned with the visual aspect of films. There are many different categories or areas of study when approaching these visual aspects. One of the most interesting ways to look at a film (that is, at how a film is made, how spectators receive it, how filmmakers work to make images out of a script…) is the analysis of its mise en scène. This section studies de importance of mise en scene and locates its main elements.

Mise en scène is a French term that comes from the theatre; literally, it means 'to stage a scene'. This is a vague concept if it is not developed, as 'staging' a scene seems to suggest 'to arrange', 'to prepare', 'to block' (as in 'blocking', which refers to placing the actors and telling them which positions they should respect while performing), et cetera. Indeed, mise en scène makes reference to all that, and more. It is the term used by directors and other professionals of the film industry to explain the processes whereby actors, props, lights and scenery converge. This is an important word, Converge, as a good mise en scène is the result of the work to make those four element work in a single direction. In conclusion, we can say that there are four main elements to take into account when working on the mise en scène of your film: human figures, settings and stages, lightning and composition.

3.3.1. The setting.
Ideally, the settings should contribute to the narrative of the film, as much as any other element, or, arguably, even more than any other element. For instance, a change of setting should signal a change in the script, in the direction of our film, in the lives of our characters. The examples of films in which such use is present is endless. Alfred Hitchcock's Notorious is a good case of study. When the characters move to another country, the story changes for good. Likewise, we could think of traditional and popular stories in which a change of setting transforms the narrative, such as the very famous parable of the Country and City Mouse.

Settings can be divided into two different basic types: Interior or Exterior. These have to be clearly marked in the script, as Topic number 2 of this course has shown. Whether your characters are indoors or outdoors is going to be crucial for the story, not to mention for the crew worming on making it a film (think, for instance, about the people who work on the Location department, or make-up and hairstyle artists…). Some films show the importance of this distinction very clearly, such as Woody Allen's Interiors, and its use of interiors as oppressive, which complements the characters' feelings.

Another relevant aspect of settings is the emotional implications attached to them. This has to do with the cultural meanings of particular places, and is an attribute that is therefore unstable, dependent upon the culture receiving your images. Think, for instance, about the presence of the Twin Towers in films which were filmed in New York before 9/11. Possibly, many New Yorkers will be touched by these images. Let us think now of the last shot (and this is a big spoiler) in The Planet of the Apes (Franklin Shafttner, 1968), in which spectators realise that the entire film was supposed to take place on Earth, and not another planet. We know

this once we see the Statue of Liberty, one element with strong cultural resonances for most people.

3.3.2. The human figure
The human figure is the most fragile element of the mise en scène. Directors need to learn how to work with actors, and never treat them as props, or make them feel that they are treated like props. Having said that, there is one point in the elaboration of the mise en scène in which the director must choreograph the movements of the performers, and clearly let them know what these are. This is called blocking. A bad blocking can ruin the performer's interpretations, and thus ruin your film.

There are two basic elements to take into account when working with the human figure. The first one is the placement and movement of figures. Ideally, you should come across a movement that is fluid and, above all, organic. This is a key work to mise en scène; very rarely a non-organic approach will make your film better. You must make sure that the performers feel comfortable with the blocking that you have prepared. The director must listen to the performers' suggestions, and accept them if the make a better mise en scène, even if they are far from what the director had originally intended. If the actor feels unsure about he blocking, the director should wonder why, and revised the proposed movements and marks.

The second element has to do with acting styles. Actors come from very different schools and traditions of acting. It is part of the director's job to be familiar with these styles, and to learn to work with people of different acting backgrounds. In fact, this should never be a problem and, rather, can become a positive aspect if the director is able to listen and appropriate the actor's knowledge. Very rarely, actors working together, no matter how different their styles are, will feel that what they do is incompatible, if the director knos how to handle these situations. When it comes to mise en scène, some actors may uncomfortable if the blocking is to precise or exact, or if the director is unclear when reasoning why certain positions are required. Again, it is part of the director's work to find the best ways to clearly justify his or her decisions.

3.3.3. Lightning.
Lighting is one of the most important aspects in filmmaking, as any student will very easily learn as soon as he or she starts making his/her own films. It is also a very difficult task, and a professional will be required if you want to achieve satisfactory results. Lighting is very important because it comprises multifold functions. Some of them are:

- underscoring particular actions, or hiding them 8and this is also one way to underscore)
- establishing moods and what we can call 'atmosphere'. It is the perfect way to give your film a tone.
- creating effects. All effects are visual, even if we are not working on a science-fiction project.
- Determining the look of the film. This adds to the previous point, and stresses the importance of lighting in the final steps of the creation of the film. It is the light (amongst other factors) what will 'close' the look of the film.

There are two basic types of lighting, and this has been so since the very beginning of film. In fact, this is a principle that filmmaking inheret4ed from photography. These two types are:

- available of natural light
- artificial light

the decision to use one or the other is the director's but must be reached after discussing with the cinematographer. There are various ways in which this decision will determine the look of the film, and filmmakers must therefore be very careful when working on this. Unfortunately, more often than not, money and financial reasons will be the main factor to determine this.

3.3.4. Composition.
Roughly described, composition is the art of arranging the elements of the scene in the best possible position, taking into account elements such as movement, shape, size, and many others. Composition is a vast field, and, of all the elements that create Mise en scène, it is arguable the most difficult to learn. This is not to say that it cannot be learned, but some people argue that the talent to find good compositions is a gift that some people have, while others do not. The art of composition is present in all the arts. Students who pursue a career in filmmaking must practise a lot so that their composition skills improve with time, and should try to join courses specialised on this field. For this first approach to it, just a few hints are necessary:

- Composition is an ancient art and, therefore, it is always advisable to look at the classics, and the pioneers. No time is wasted in a museum.
- Composition is a multi-discipline feature. This means that filmmakers and media people must pay attention to the art of composition in other arts. It is often said that filmmakers should go to the theatre in general and to the opera in particular. Operas are generally difficult to stage, and the pleasure of seeing how stage directors work in order to find the best compositions can be a thrilling experience.
- Composition is personal, but the more people you discuss your compositions with, the richer your feedback will be. It is not possible to discuss your choices of composition with the big masters of the past, but there are many people who can help with their ideas. What about your fellow students?