



Post-Carroll

Functional Elements of the Moving Image

Philip Cowan

Abstract: Analyzing moving images is one of the fundamental practices in our attempt to understand the medium. Building on Noël Carroll's functional theory of film style, this article attempts to define a taxonomy of functional elements of shot composition in order to establish a clear methodology for the analysis of a moving image. Carroll criticizes forms of stylistic analysis that limit themselves to a few pre-selected aspects of the moving image, for example, genre motifs, individual filmmakers' personal traits, or broad studies of film movements. Numerous writers have presented breakdowns of component parts of a moving image, often in wider discussions of film form. However these lists are often incomplete or do not have a clear methodology. This article identifies the key components of a moving image that could serve a functional purpose in individual films.

Keywords: analytical aesthetics, Carroll, cinematography, film, Functional Theory, moving image composition

Often the cinematographic elements of a film are seen only as a conduit for communicating narrative, rather than embodying aspects of meaning in the way that they are constructed. A great deal of the early debates on whether film was an art centered on the use of film form rather than content (Astruc 2009). Content could be defined as subject matter, or simply "story" in narrative-based films. Murray Smith in his essay on *Film* and aesthetics concisely summarizes the history and development of the film as art debate and the

Often the cinematographic elements of a film are seen only as a conduit for communicating narrative, rather than embodying aspects of meaning in the way that they are constructed.

fluctuating interest of film theorists in the subject of film art and aesthetics (2001). He concludes his summary: "In all but a few benighted corners, film has been accepted as an art. But the way in which it fulfills artistic criteria, given its distinctive technological character—a character which has evolved and continues to evolve—is a fascinating and far from settled matter" (Smith 2001, 473).

Smith seemingly emphasizes technology, rather than technique. Vladimir Nilsen wrote, "Cinema technique possesses such various means of constructing and expressing an art-image



that it cannot be regarded as inevitably merely an instrument of recording” (1937, 16). A number of early theorists highlighted the distinction between a documentary recording of something happening in front of the camera and the use of cinematography as a means of expression in itself. Smith quotes Rudolf Arnheim, “Art begins where mechanical reproduction leaves off, where the conditions of representation serve in some way to mould the object (Arnheim 1957, 55)” (2001, 446). It is the distinction between technology and technique that I want to highlight as well as exploring the difference between mechanical reproduction and representation. All too often discussions of cinematography center on technology and the tools of the craft rather than the expressive use of technique to create meaning (Ballinger 2004; Etedgui 1998; Fauer 2008 2009; Goodridge and Grierson 2012; Keating 2014; Schaefer and Salvato 1984; van Oosterhout et al. 2012).

All too often discussions of cinematography center on technology and the tools of the craft rather than the expressive use of technique to create meaning.

Despite form being an essential part of this initial debate about film as art, traditional film studies has always had a literary bias, with a fixation on narrative, character, and the thematic ideas underpinning stories (content), with less emphasis on film form, which is often relegated to discussions of the individual stylistic approaches of various filmmakers rather than as a fundamental part of a film’s structure and means of communication. I have previously discussed (Cowan 2017) the oft-cited Butch’s Bar shot from *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946). André Bazin, in his analysis of the shot, states that “the true drama” (1997, 14) of the scene is the telephone call in the background (Figure 1). This is a literary reading of the scene, that is, it concentrates on the single element of narrative drive in the scene, which is Fred (Dana Andrews) calling Al’s daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright) to end their relationship. Al (Fredric March) observes this as he stands beside the piano, where Homer (Harold Russell) is demonstrating his newly found confidence and dexterity with his artificial hands (Figure 1).

Bazin claims that the foreground action is included for balance, and is “secondary in itself, whose spatial prominence would be conversely proportional to its dramatic significance” (1997, 15). However, one of the repeated visual motifs of the film is the framing of the three veterans, Fred, Al, and Homer, in a single shot. The sequential use of this technique initially underlines their unity, by grouping them closely together, and later contrasts their success in reintegrating into civilian life by visual separation. By the Butch’s Bar scene, Homer is the most advanced in his rehabilitation, hence his visual dominance in the frame. Al is supporting him, represented by him being framed on the same side of the shot as Homer. Al’s reintegration is also fairly advanced at this point. He is back with his family and back in his old job. Al has learned of Fred’s burgeoning relationship with his daughter and has told Fred to end it. Fred’s rejection from his fellow veteran and the loss of the relationship with Peggy has set back his



Figure 1. This shot from The Best Years of Our Lives (William Wyler, 1946) visually represents a number of aspects of the narrative, including the relationships between the three main characters and their relative successes in reintegrating into civilian life after World War II.

rehabilitation considerably. This is represented in the composition. Fred is now physically separated from Al, who is no longer supporting him, and his size in the frame represents the powerlessness of his situation and the relative failure of his reintegration into civilian life. Bazin's interpretation of this shot has been repeated and unchallenged (Bordwell 1997, 64; Cousins 2011, 179). However, by considering the form of the film as a whole, we can have a richer and deeper understanding of the film's meaning.

The technicalities of cinematography have often been seen as a means to an end, that is, to get the story on the screen, rather than a collection of emblematic techniques exploited for representational expression. Andrew Klevan highlights the disparate fields in contemporary film studies and the lack of focus on these aesthetic issues.

In my experience, living in the United Kingdom, many academics, journalists, and broadcasters do not view films with an aesthetic attitude. Their prime interest is not in the form and style of a work, but its subject matter, or in its milieu, or in the biography of its director or performers, or in the reception of its audiences, or in its cultural or political import, or in its place in a particular history. To perceive primarily from the point of view of these interests is not to perceive from an aesthetic point of view. (Klevan 2018, 22)

Noël Carroll makes a similar point: the majority of discussions of form or style that do take place are made within the restricted frameworks of other boarder topics. “In film studies, the examination of style or form of the individual film is usually subordinated to frameworks that conceptualize the style or form of the individual film as exemplary of something else, usually the personal style of a director, or a period style, or the style of an influential movement or school” (2003, 130). Klevan suggests that we develop our analytical and evaluative skills, in order to breakout of these restrictive frameworks (2018, 27). My intention here is to aid this process by providing a methodology for analyzing any moving image. I am specifically talking about images because that relates to my background and interest. I am not talking about the use of sound, performance, or editing although these are of course valuable areas to study. Thomas Wartenberg highlights the fact that “moving image” is Carroll’s preferred terminology for “film,” “because he rejects the claim that film is a specific artistic medium ... distinct from a range of others” (2006, 163–164), for example television, video, DVD, Blu-ray and computer generated images. I will argue that originating formats and materials only partially inform our experience of a moving image. Carroll states, “What the moving image is made of, in other words, is of less importance than its characteristic devices, strategies, and functions” (2003, xxi), which is the central point of the choice of terminology.

My aim is to synthesize the previous work of Rudolf Arnheim (1957), Ernest Lindgren (1963), Raymond Spottiswoode (1950), Sharon Russell (1981), David Bordwell and Kirsten Thompson (1990), and Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet (1992), as well as others, to identify the commonalities, reconcile the differences, and update or amend any gaps or inconsistencies in their approaches to film form. I do not claim to be creating a new grand theory, but I hope to be doing more than re-inventing the wheel. The three common issues with some of the existing texts on this subject are that they either attempt to list all the variable applications of a particular element, or emphasize the technical processes involved in creating moving images, or they ascribe predefined meanings to particular techniques. Giles Deleuze ascribes particular meanings to specific shot types, for example, his affection-image is invariably a close-up (1986, 72). Specific aspects of form should not be tied to singular, fixed meanings, or functions, as these invariably do not apply in every case. Bordwell avoids this with his discussion of shot functions (2005, 33–34), although by exclusively talking about the content of moving images his categorization of shot functions are independent of form.

My hope is that by creating a new taxonomy of aesthetic elements of the moving image it will be complete,

The three common issues with some of the existing texts on this subject are that they either attempt to list all the variable applications of a particular element, or emphasize the technical processes involved in creating moving images, or they ascribe predefined meanings to particular techniques.

comprehensive, and useful as a tool to analyze them. This is an attempt to identify all the significant, formal elements of moving images. By significant I mean those elements that could have an inherent purpose in the communication of meaning to an audience. I have presented embryonic versions of this taxonomy at various conferences worldwide and would like to thank those who gave constructive feedback on those occasions.

Carroll's Functional Theory of Film Style

In *Engaging the Moving Image*, Carroll makes “An Argument for a Functional Theory of Style in the Individual Film” (2003). He states that films are made up of many different parts and if we were to consider all the elements that constitute an individual film we would end up with a very long list of components. Carroll calls this the “descriptive account” (2003, 138). Although comprehensive Carroll questions the usefulness of the descriptive account, and states that generally elements of film form are discussed if they contribute to a film’s meaning. This approach he calls the “explanatory” approach (2003, 139). However, Carroll’s criticism of this approach is that it presupposes that all films have a meaning, and that meaning is generally derived from what he loosely calls “content” (2003, 140). Carroll points out that not all films have meaning, although a meaningless or contentless film is never formless (2003, 134). Therefore taking the meaning as a starting point of an analysis is flawed. Carroll suggests a subtle shift in our approach to analyzing individual films, which he calls the functional account of film form, where “the form of an individual film is the ensemble of choices intended to realize the point or the purpose of the film” (2003, 141). He later amends this to “choices intended to realize the presiding or dominant point(s) and/or purpose(s) of the motion picture” (2006, 177). Carroll describes the functional approach as one that

Carroll describes the functional approach as one that looks at the form of a film in order to determine its purpose or point by asking what are elements of the form designed to do?

looks at the form of a film in order to determine its purpose or point by asking what are elements of the form designed to do (2003, 145)? As an example, a literary-oriented approach to film analysis, which places primary importance on content-led meaning, leads to Bazin’s interpretation of the shot from *Best Years* described above, as it privileges the narrative content of the scene and determines the purpose of the form within that narrow context, whereas my analysis of the shot is derived from a more functional observation of the film’s form overall.

Carroll advocates looking at the use of film techniques on a case-by-case basis, as the application of moving image techniques does have a contextual dimension. The same technique, or application of form, may have different functions in different contexts. In considering my own taxonomy, I have attempted to include only those components of the moving image that could serve a purpose. However, by defining choices in film form as intentional, Car-

roll perhaps assumes that every decision involving technique has a deliberate purpose. This may not be the case. This is where the discussion of “film as art” becomes relevant in Carroll’s functional theory. Granted that Carroll does add the proviso that “the form of an individual film is the ensemble of choices intended to realize the point or the purpose of the film” (2003, 141). If the point or purpose of the form is simply to convey the meaningful “content,” then the form becomes a mechanical process involving the transmission of information, rather than being form that is designed to enhance or communicate meaning in its construction. Wartenberg claims that Carroll’s citing of Norma’s (Gloria Swanson) final close-up in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) is primarily about plot rather than an element of the film’s style. Wartenberg acknowledges that the way the scene is filmed is highly stylized, but states the narrative episode it depicts is not itself an aspect of the film’s style (2003, 167). However, Carroll clearly states that the point of the scene, to show Norma in a monstrous way, infected by her desire for stardom, is emphasized by the stylistic choices. The analyst cannot discount narrative as Wartenberg implies, as stylistic choices are often made to emblemize aspects of character and theme, adding to our understanding of the narrative, as in this case, and as in the *Best Years* example. Personally, I would have preferred Wilder, and cinematographer John F. Seitz, to continue the unnatural up-lighting that is evident in the previous wider shot of Norma coming down the stairs, and also place the camera at a lower angle for the close-up. Both these stylistic adjustments could have emphasized the point of the scene more strongly, without altering the action. Wartenberg’s approach would have us separate plot and style completely, “I wish to distinguish between the telling of a narrative film and the told or, to use a more standard film-theoretic vocabulary, between a film’s narration and its story” (2006, 168). To my mind, this is a return to an old-fashioned literary-oriented approach to film analysis, which privileges story, character, and thematic issues and treats film form as secondary, almost optional. The point Carroll makes is that you can have “contentless” films, which preclude Wartenberg’s approach, but you cannot have “formless” films (2006, 174). Form is ever present, so where there is content there is form. In the case of narrative-based films, stories are embedded in the images and sound. Bordwell has explicitly stated that the audience’s understanding of a narrative is informed by a film’s “texture.” “Film style matters because what people call content comes to us in and through the patterned use of the medium’s techniques. Without performance and framing, lens length and lighting, composition and cutting, dialogue and music, we could not grasp the world of the story. Style is the tangible texture of the film” (2005, 32).

Raymond Durgnat went further when he coined the phrase “content-style” (1967, 27). Durgnat expressed the view that style was content. The way an actor performs, the way the lighting is composed, the way a camera might move,

The way an actor performs, the way the lighting is composed, the way a camera might move, all of these stylistic techniques create the audiences' experience, which in turn influences perceived meaning.

all of these stylistic techniques create the audiences' experience, which in turn influences perceived meaning. I believe Wartenberg misses this point. He states that Carroll's functional theory would not recognize Hitchcock's cameos in his own films, since they do not contribute to the film's purpose or point, and therefore would not be recognized as part of the director's style (2006, 167). Clearly Wartenberg agrees that Hitchcock's cameos do not contribute to the point of his films, and I agree.

I would go further and say that they actually do not represent the director's style, as Durnat states style is content, and the characters that Hitchcock "plays" in his films have absolutely no influence on our understanding of the films in which they occur. I would describe the cameos as a trait of the director's work, which may inform biographical studies of the director, rather than any analysis of his style. They are relevant only if one recognizes Hitchcock as a real person, outside the context of the film. They do not inform stylistic studies of the films in question, as their inclusion is irrelevant to our understanding of the films. This argument, of course, depends on a much more nuanced definition of "style." In this context, style equates to form, interpreting Durnat's "content-style" as "content-form." Carroll uses the terms form and style interchangeably. Wartenberg therefore dismisses Carroll's functional theory for the wrong reasons. Wartenberg criticizes Carroll for not identifying "how to distinguish a film's form from its content" (2006, 166), but that is not the point of a functional approach to style, quite the contrary, Carroll suggests that elements of style emblemize the point or purpose of a film, which could relate to what is commonly referred to as content, that is the narrative, characterization, or thematic aspects of a story. As an alternative, Wartenberg presents his "modal account of the style of an individual film," which he summarizes as "an element in a film will be part of its style so long as it is part of how the film tells its story" (2006, 168). Wartenberg's approach is problematic, as it is reverting to advocating the primacy of the narrative, the literary-oriented approach, to the exclusion of all else, whereas Carroll's account considers the general point or purpose of the film, rather than specifically the narrative content. In his own response to Wartenberg's alternative modal approach Carroll argues that the functional approach is more flexible.

Even with respect to narrative motion pictures, the idiom of points and purposes is superior to speaking about how the story is told. For even in a narrative film, the presiding point or purpose may be something other than telling the story. Of course, where the presiding purpose of a narrative film is to tell the story, then the functional approach to style will focus upon the same repertoire of choices that Tom recommends. That

is, those choices that function as the means of advancing the plot—the how of the way the story is told—will command our analytic energies. But where the narrative has points or purposes other than or in addition to telling a story, the broader, more flexible functionalist framework will do a better job than Tom's. (2006, 178)

Recent studies of embodied cognition would also be compatible with the functional approach. Michele Guerra's account of style includes the spectators' sensory engagement with film form. "Cinematic meaning does not depend just on concepts and propositions, but also relies on sensory-motor schemas that play a decisive role in getting the viewer 'in touch' with the screen, and in shaping a multimodal form of simulation which exploits all the potentialities of our brain-body system" (2015, 143).

In developing the functional approach, we initially need to identify elements of film form that could be purposeful, and then we need to determine whether each element is influencing our understanding of, or response to, a film. It should be noted that I do not consider, or claim, that all films exploit all the elements I describe to communicate meaning at all times. The issue here is the use of moving image techniques in individual films. Pauline Kael refers to "standard methods" that filmmakers can fall back on (2008). The intention of some filmmakers is to simply record events that are happening in front of the camera, and intentionally or not, they do not exploit elements of the moving image to communicate further meaning. Aumont et al. allude to this when they quote Marcel Martin's *La Langage cinématographique*. "Far too often traditional film language appears as a sort of childhood disease of the cinema, especially when it limits itself to being a collection of prescriptions, processes, and devices that anyone may use, and which are automatically guaranteed to provide clarity and efficiency to the narrative" (Aumont et al. 1992, 137).

Nevertheless, I advocate Carroll's approach in terms of analyzing form first and foremost, as an analysis of the image would reveal whether, and in what way, film form has been exploited or applied for a specific purpose. I would refine the methodological approach by considering the creative construction of the moving image in terms of what meaning it communicates beyond its "content." What we might call a "representational" approach. The notion of representational I take from Nilsen's definition of three stages in the evolution of cinematographic art, reproductional, pictorial, and representational (1937). Reproductional cinematography is the simple technical recording of events that happen in front of the camera with no creative or expressive use of cinematographic techniques, such as the news or documentary footage, but more subtly by the use of standard techniques like establishing shots, shot-reverse-shot, the purpose of which may simply be to record and screen performances and locations in a purely objective manner. This is akin to Arnheim's notion

of “mechanical reproduction” (1957, 57). Pictorial cinematography, according to Nilsen, includes deliberate creative choices, which enhance the visual quality or interest of the image, but do not add any additional meaning to the image. Finally, representational images convey a meaning in the way they are constructed, beyond simply conveying content. The *Best Years* example can be considered representational as the spatial relationship of the three veterans, and their relative sizes in the frame, emblemizes a meaning beyond the simple narrative action. Whereas Nilsen considers these types of cinematography a chronological evolution, I consider them alternative methods of applying cinematographic technique, thus, three different ways of approaching functional form. Arnheim talked of abstract meaning embedded in the compositional pattern of expressive art (1974, 460), and Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kra- vanja continue that train of thought with notions of embodied visual meaning in moving images (2015, 63–80). The communication of this meaning is partly dependent on the use of representational technique (Nilsen 1937), and Carroll provides the framework for a methodological approach to analyzing films from this perspective. I hope to add detail to that framework.

Functional Elements of the Moving Image

Clearly other theorists have attempted taxonomies of components of film form before, but there are gaps in their summaries, and their list of elements of a moving image either need updating, for example, the early theorists did not talk about color for obvious reasons, or their lists need refining, for example, Arnheim lists four basic characteristics that actually talk about the same element.

2. Objects Are Put Behind Or Beside One Another By Perspective. . .
3. Apparent Size. Objects Near The Front Are Large, And Those Behind Small. . .
6. Distance From The Object Is Variable. . .
9. Lessening Of Depth Perception. (1957, 128–130)

All of these refer to the use of depth, which could be considered as a single element. Alongside my intention to create a comprehensive list, I wish to clarify and perhaps simplify the various approaches taken by others and create a unified approach by questioning some of the contrasting, or at times conflicting, terminology each of the writers use.

I have identified fourteen distinct elements that contribute to the construction of a cinematographic image, which I have divided into four broader categories, characteristics of the medium, spatial elements, lighting, and temporal elements. These categories act as a guide to the specific elements and their relationships to each other. I do not have enough space to go through them all in detail, but I will highlight some specific issues, and hopefully by illuminating comparisons with the writers mentioned illustrate my intentions.

Characteristics of the Medium

This category refers to those elements restricted by the general technicalities of the moving image, certain characteristics of the medium that we need to consider as they impact on the form.

The Frame-Line

The cinematographic image specifically, as opposed to more genetic forms of moving image, which may include moving billboards or gifs, has a predefined boundary and aspect ratio. Contemporary films usually have a widescreen format (1.85:1), or sometimes Cinemascope (2.35:1). Historically 1.33:1 was the norm. The frame-line limits what the viewer can see and contains the image. Other forms like moving billboards and gifs still invariably have a limited frame, and therefore a frame-line, but like photography and paintings can be practically any shape, height, or width.

Most theorists highlight this element of the cinematographic image, however their terminology varies: “the limitations of the picture” (Arnheim 1957, 17), “limited border” (Aumont et al. 1992, 9), “The Limits Of The Shot” (Nilsen 1937, 27), “proportions of each composition” (Spottiswoode 1950, 142), “standardized horizontal rectangle in the fixed proportions” (Lindgren 1963, 115). Frame-line is a clearer term. Frame often refers to the content of the image, frame-line clarifies that the discussion concerns the edges of the image.

Focus

Focus is another characteristic of the medium, which arises from the photographic nature of the cinematographic image and is often emulated in digitally created images. Again most writers identify this characteristic, with the exception of Lindgren (1963). Arnheim talks of the “manipulation of focus” (1957, 125). Bordwell and Thompson discuss focus within the context of the technical use of lenses (1990). This is characteristic of Bordwell and Thompson’s general approach, which is rooted in a discussion of the technical processes involved in the production of the cinematographic image. This approach is fairly common in the majority of literature on cinematography. Discussions that purport to be on the artistic or creative aspects of cinematography, often majoritively concentrate on technical issues or processes (Ballinger 2004; Ettetdgui 1998; Fauer 2008 and 2009; Goodridge and Grierson 2012; Keating 2014; Schaefer and Salvato 1984; van Oosterhout et al. 2012).

Texture

I refer primarily to the quality of the image (and format) rather than an abstract notion of texture discussed by theorists like Lucy Fife Donaldson. “I will approach texture in film both in the sense of materiality, a piece of cloth or surface evoking a particular feel, and in the sense of an overall fabrication, a

densely textured world indicating a complex and fully formed fiction, occupied by three-dimensional characters” (2014, 2). Donaldson’s is a very broad approach to texture, which encompasses both literal depictions of characters touching things within the narrative, and a metaphorical “textural” definition relating to text, that is, narrative complexity, rather than tactile qualities. Most of the theorists I have quoted do not consider texture in any way, with the exception of Bordwell and Thompson who talk about the texture created by the use of different types of film stocks (1990, 156).

I would define four broad origins for the textural quality of a cinematographic image; the first is film grain, which arose out of the use of different light sensitive film stocks, as noted by Bordwell and Thompson. The other could be digital noise. Film grain comes from the physical properties of film stock, whereas digital noise comes from poor signals, or lack of information. Grain or texture could also come from post-production effects added to the original image, or finally the physical copying or transcoding of the image may degrade the image in some way. The varying qualities of the texture of an image can affect an audience’s experience or cognitive understanding of that image, regardless of how it is produced.

Duration of the Shot

Individual shots are on the screen for a finite length of time in a normal viewing. Aumont et al. explicitly list this as an element of the moving image. Nilsen refers to duration under his classification “The Time Factor” (1937, 65), in which he also includes slow-motion, fast motion, and time-lapse effects. Arnheim also lists four types of speed as separate components (1957, 130–131). However, I would argue that this becomes a discussion of content rather than form. The specific element of movement that I shall introduce can consider the pacing of the movement within the shot. A number of the theorists I am referring to tend to expand their lists by including various uses of specific techniques, including possible variations of the application of techniques or elements, which obviously do not apply to every film. These lists of variants are often not exhaustive and only complicate the breakdowns. Arnheim is particularly guilty of this, as we have seen with his discussions of perspective and motion.

In the normal running of a film the viewer has no choice in how long they can study an individual shot. The length of individual shots can vary enormously and the timing of them can be used for various connotative effects and functions.

Spatial Elements

Orientation

Camera height on a vertical axis and camera angle on a horizontal axis relative to a subject are discussed by most of the writers I am comparing, although

some tend to categorize these together as either “viewpoint” or “point-of-view” (Arnheim 1957; Aumont et al.1992; Lindgren 1963). Bordwell and Thompson group angle, height, distance, and level together when discussing framing. Level refers to tilted frames where the horizontal line is at an angle, which they refer to as a “canted frame” (1990, 175).

Modern cinematographic techniques can allow a camera, or virtual camera, to be placed almost anywhere in relation to a subject, and the somewhat two-dimensional aspects of height and angle do not appear sophisticated enough to allow for this. Bordwell and Thompson’s notion of level begins to add a further dimension but there is an implied restriction to its application to a horizontal line. Geometry uses the notion of an Orientation Matrix to describe an object’s place in space. While this could be described by using notions of height, angle, levelness, and distance, it also includes notions of rotation, which could be described as “canted frames” but is not just restricted to horizontal offsets. Whereas geometry is attempting to identify an object’s place in space, our aim is to describe the spatial relationship between the viewer and the subject. If one imagines an expandable bubble with the subject at its center (Figure 2), the camera can be placed anywhere on the surface of that bubble, at any rotational angle.

The expanding bubble around the subject is linked to the apparent distance between the camera and the subject, often described as long shots, mid-shots, and close-ups. These simple descriptions do not account for the use of depth perspective, which applies to moving images that have more than one plane of interest, for example, the shot from *Best Years* or *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) (Figure 3). We cannot describe either of these as simply close-ups, mid-shots, or long shots. They are all of these shot types simultaneously. I use the term apparent distance as the focal length of any given lens affects the representation of actual physical distance. By imagining my orientation bubble we can illustrate a more sophisticated notion of the audience’s spatial relationship to the subject. I am deliberately avoiding the terms “point-of-view” or “viewpoint” as in film studies they often have stronger narrational connotations, which could result in misunderstandings or confusion.

Depth Perspective

This refers to the relationship of foreground, mid-ground and background elements of the shot. Depth, of course, remains as an optical illusion in terms

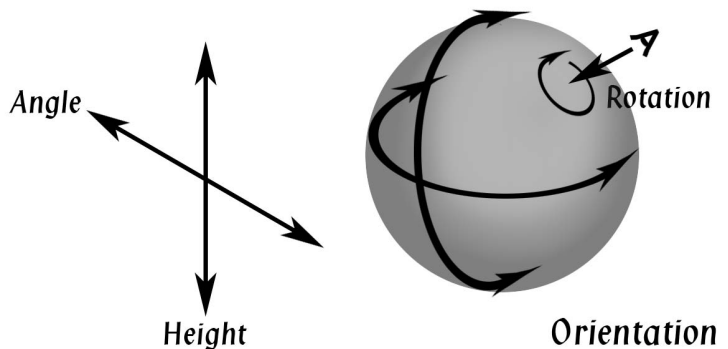


Figure 2. Possible camera positions could be anywhere on the surface of the orientation bubble around the subject.

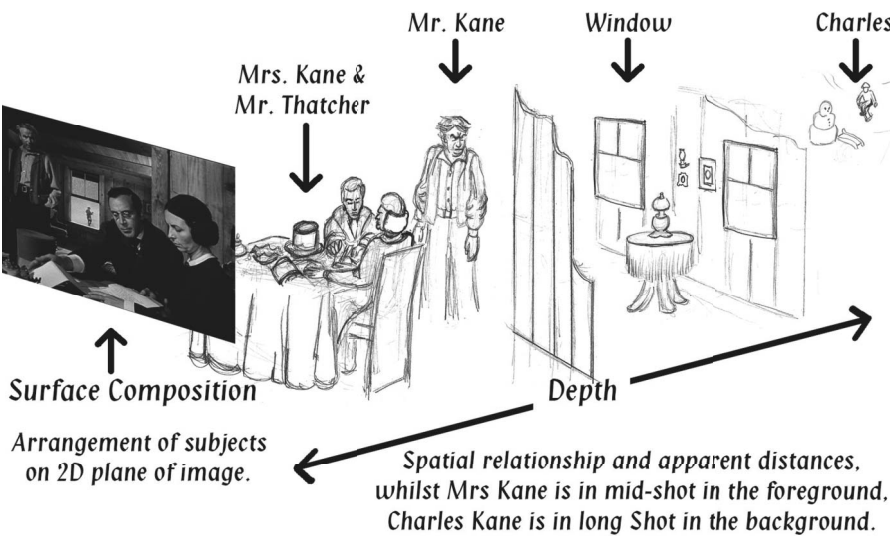
of the two-dimensional surface of a screen. As noted above, Arnheim actually lists four separate uses of depth, Lindgren separates the distance from camera to subject from notions of perspective, which he discusses in terms of lens focal length (1963, 128–129). Nilsen also discusses perspective in relation to the technical notion of focal length under “the optical design of the image” (1937, 55). Most theorists launch into a detailed technical explanation of the variety of focal length lenses available when discussing perspective. Although the cinematographer’s choice of lens is an important factor in the creation of the image, I would view it as a technical aspect and process, which creates certain effects, and this functional effect is evident in terms of apparent distance and the two elements I have included, surface composition and depth perspective. Many writers discuss the technical processes involved in the practical realization and creation of cinematographic images, and often classify or categorize elements according to these processes. It is my intention to examine the moving image exclusive of technical processes. In the digital age, images and their individual elements can be created in a number of ways, including practically, virtually, or a combination of these, so I aim to produce a taxonomy that highlights elements of a cinematographic image regardless of how they were created.

Surface Composition

I make a distinction between depth and surface composition. Surface composition refers to the arrangement of objects, shapes, and spaces on the two-dimensional surface of the image (Figure 3).

Arnheim discusses “decorative surface patterns” in relation to the “lessening of depth perspective” (1957, 130), and Aumont et al. discuss the two-

Figure 3. The use of Depth Perspective and Surface Composition in the Boarding House scene from Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941).



dimensional quality of the cinematographic image, quoting Arnheim (1992, 10). Bordwell and Thompson refer to “the flat screen space” with respect to surface composition (1990, 143). Although the majority of theorists discuss composition broadly they do not separate issues of surface composition from other aspects of composition, for example, depth. The reason I have made a distinction between surface composition and depth is that these two elements can be used independently, for example with the Boarding House shot from *Citizen Kane*, imagine if the camera had been placed five feet to the left. Mr. Kane (Harry Shannon) would be central in the frame, and Charles (Buddy Swan) in the window would be on the left of frame.

This would significantly alter the meaning emblemized by their original placement. Mrs. Kane (Agnes Moorehead) and Thatcher (George Coulouris) are in opposition to Mr. Kane, and are therefore literally on opposite sides of the frame. The subject of their argument, Charles, is placed between them, an emblematic obstacle. With the reconfigured surface composition resulting from the proposed alternative orientation of the viewer, Charles would be sidelined on the left and Mr. Kane’s placement would not be as significant. In both alternatives the depth relationships, and emblematic meanings embedded in them, remains the same, for example, Charles being the smallest and therefore weakest character and Mrs. Kane’s dominance of the foreground indicates her control of the proceedings.

Lighting Elements

Quality of Light, Contrast Ratio, Direction

These three elements come directly from Russell, although she uses the term “intensity” rather than “quality” (1981). Lindgren also mentions three characteristics of lighting: direction, intensity and degree of diffusion (1963, 125). Lindgren uses “intensity” as a term for both contrast and quality at different times in his text, so in principle his three characteristics align with Russell’s. For me, intensity is an inappropriate term as I consider it to relate to the power and brightness of the light source, which in practice is balanced or controlled with the use of the aperture of the camera lens. Quality is the hardness or softness of the light, degree of diffusion, evident in formation of shadows and differentiation between areas of light and shade. Contrast is the overall balance of light and dark areas in the image. Direction is simply the direction in which the light appears to be traveling.

In their chapter *Aspects of Mise-en-Scène*, Bordwell and Thompson discuss lighting, and isolate four major features: quality, direction, source, and color (1990, 133–137). Their discussion of “source” implies the number of lights on the set used to achieve the illumination of the subject. They explicitly talk about key lights and fill lights, but this process affects contrast, which they discuss as part of “the range of tonalities” (1990, 156) in the photographic image, and

again my concern is not technical processes. Spottiswoode (1950) and Aumont et al. (1992) do not discuss light in any detail.

Color

Color has only fairly recently been discussed in any detail (Brown et al. 2012; Coates 2010; Higgins 2007; Peacock 2010; Vacche and Price 2006), as the early theorists were working when black and white films were the norm. However, color plays a complex role in a contemporary audience's experience of a cinematographic image and the texts referenced deal with this topic in much more detail than I could in this article. I define three cognitive uses of color in the cinematographic image, for realism, psychological effects, and cultural associations, in my article "The Democracy of Colour" (Cowan 2015). As with other elements of the image some theorists attempt to give a predefined meaning to certain colors, but these are not appropriate in every case. Meaning is often determined by contextual use.

Temporal Elements

Finally, we have to consider the distinguishing feature of moving images, that is, their temporal quality, and the fact that shots may change their formation over their duration.

Modifications in Characteristics

Modifications in characteristics can occur during a shot, most writers refer to "pull-focus" or "rack-focus," which shifts shallow, sharp, selective focus from one area of a surface composition to another. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014) and *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017) use varying (virtual) frame-lines to represent meaning. Often filmmakers use different textural qualities within individual films, notably Oliver Stone, in films such as *JFK* (1991) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). A common use of varying textures is to represent "home movie footage" within the context of an individual film.

Modifications in Spatial Elements

Any movement within the frame, or of the camera itself, will result in shifts in the spatial elements, and may affect light elements. Most of the writers I am considering talk about subject movement and/or camera movement, although the majority focus on camera movement. In terms of time and *mise-en-scène*, Bordwell and Thompson refer only to subject movement (1990, 145–146), and in their discussion of figure expression and movement they primarily talk about acting styles, rather than how subject movement can embody meaning (1990, 137–140).

Subject movement and camera movement can be applied in many complex ways. It is the analysts' task to decipher their contextual use in individual films.

Modification in Light Elements

It is also possible that cinematographers will use independent lighting effects that will also actively change the light elements over the duration of a single shot. None of the quoted writers seem to have considered this. In *A Single Man* (Tom Ford, 2009), the color saturation of the image is often altered during a single shot to reflect George's (Colin Firth) mood. In *Liebestraum* (Mike Figgis, 1991), Nick's (Kevin Anderson) taxi ride to Jane's (Pamela Gidley) birthday party is represented by moving and pulsating lights, together with lights of different colors that come and go from different directions, which represent the variety of locations that the taxi is passing. There is also a moment in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols, 1966) when George's (Richard Burton) apparently unstable state of mind is represented by a swinging light bulb as he collects a supposed rifle from a cupboard.

Conclusion

Carroll's functional theory promotes an important shift from privileging narrative (content) as a starting point for the analysis of individual films, to the primary consideration of form in our understanding of the purpose of moving images. This allows us to value aesthetic features of moving images not merely as stylistic quirks, but as fundamental components in the communication of concepts and ideas. I have attempted to define specific elements of a moving image that might be utilized to embody or emblemize these concepts or ideas.

My final table of functional elements of the moving image thus consists of four main categories, with fourteen elements overall. The elements that I have outlined provide a precise, objective tool to analyze any moving image. Each element could be used to imply meaning in the way it is exploited aesthetically.

Carroll's functional theory promotes an important shift from privileging narrative (content) as a starting point for the analysis of individual films, to the primary consideration of form in our understanding of the purpose of moving images.

Elements of the Moving Image Table

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| (A) Characteristics | (1) Frame-Line |
| | (2) Focus |
| | (3) Texture |
| | (4) Duration of the Shot |
| (B) Spatial | (5) Orientation (Angle, Height, Rotation, and Apparent Distance) |
| | (6) Depth Perspective |

- (7) Surface Composition
 - (C) Light
 - (8) Quality of Light (e.g. Hard or Soft)
 - (9) Contrast Ratio
 - (10) Direction
 - (11) Color (e.g. Realistic, Psychological, Cultural)
 - (D) Temporal
 - (12) Modification in Characteristics
 - (13) Modification in Spatial Elements
 - (14) Modification in Light Elements
-

Philip Cowan has worked as a freelance cinematographer. He began teaching in 1994 as a guest lecturer at various institutions, becoming a permanent member of staff at University of South Wales (formerly University of Wales Newport) in 2005. He completed his PhD in 2016. Since joining academia, he has published a number of articles on film authorship and cinematography, as well as presenting papers at various conferences around the world. His article “The Democracy of Colour” with the film *The Sleeping Mat Ballad* (Margaret Constantas, 2015) won a BAFTSS Best Practice/Research Portfolio award in 2016.

References

- Arnheim, Rudolf. 1957. *Film as Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. (1954) 1974. *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Revised ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Astruc, Alexander. (1948) 2009. “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Style.” In *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham with Ginette Vincendeau, 31–38, London: BFI.
- Aumont, Jacques, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet. 1992. *Aesthetics of Film*. Trans. and revised by Richard Neupert. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ballinger, Alexander. 2004. *New Cinematographers*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Bazin, André. (1948) 1997. “William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing.” In *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Bert Cardullo, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, 1–18. London: Routledge.
- Bordwell, David. 1997. *On the History of Film Style*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bordwell, David. 2005. *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bordwell, David, and Kirsten Thompson. 1990. *Film Art: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.
- Brown, Simon, Sarah Street, and Liz Watkins, eds. 2012. *Color and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive*. London: Routledge.
- Carroll, Noël. 2003. “Film Form: An Argument for a Functional Theory of Style in the Individual Film.” In *Engaging the Moving Image*, 127–146. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Carroll, Noël. 2006. “The Moving Image: Form and Fact: Responses to Tom Wartenberg and Andrew Light.” In *Film and Philosophy* 10: 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.5840/filmphil20061013>.
- Coates, Paul. 2010. *Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
-

- Coëgnarts, Maarten, and Peter Kravanja. 2015. "Embodied Visual Meaning in Film." In *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, ed. Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja, 63–80. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press.
- Cousins, Mark. 2011. *The Story of Film*. London: Pavilion Books.
- Cowan, Philip. 2015. "The Democracy of Colour." *Journal of Media Practice* 16 (2): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2015.1041806>.
- Cowan, Philip. 2017. "Analyzing Stylistic Patterning in Film to Establish the Cinematographer as a Coauthor: A Case Study of Gregg Toland." *Projections* 11 (1): 16–37. <https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2017.110103>.
- Deleuze, Giles. 1986. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. London: Athlone Press.
- Donaldson, Lucy Fife. 2014. *Texture in Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Durnat, Raymond. 1967. *Films and Feelings*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ettegui, Peter. 1998. *Screencraft: Cinematography*. Crans-Pres-Céligny: RotoVision SA.
- Fauer, Jon. 2008. *Cinematographer Style: The Complete Interviews, Volume 1*. Hollywood: The American Society of Cinematographers.
- Fauer, Jon. 2009. *Cinematographer Style: The Complete Interviews, Volume 2*. Hollywood: The American Society of Cinematographers.
- Goodridge, Mike, and Tim Grierson. 2012. *FilmCraft: Cinematography*. Lewes: Ilex Press Ltd.
- Guerra, Michele. 2015. "Modes of Action at the Movies, or Re-thinking Film Style from an Embodied Perspective." In *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, ed. Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja, 139–154. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press.
- Higgins, Steve. 2007. *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Kael, Pauline. (1963) 2008. "Circles and Squares." In *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry K. Grant, 46–54. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Keating, Patrick. 2014. *Cinematography*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Klevan, Andrew. 2018. *Aesthetic Evaluation and Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Lindgren, Ernest. 1963. *The Art of Film*, 2nd ed. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Nilsen, Vladimir. 1937. *The Cinema as a Graphic Art*. Trans. Stephen Garry. London: Newnes Ltd.
- van Oosterhout, Richard, Maarten van Rossem, and Peter Verstraten, eds. 2012. *Shooting Time: Cinematographers on Cinematography*. Rotterdam: PostEditions.
- Peacock, Steven. 2010. *Colour*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Russell, Sharon A. 1981. *Semiotics and Lighting: A Study of Six Modern French Cameramen*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.
- Schaefer, Dennis, and Larry Salvato. 1984. *Masters of Light: Conversations with Contemporary Cinematographers*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Smith, Murray. 2001. "Film." In *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, 463–475. London: Routledge.
- Spottiswoode, Raymond. 1950. *A Grammar of the Film*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Vacche, Angela Dalle, and Brian Price, eds. 2006. *Color: The Film Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wartenberg, Thomas. 2006. "Understanding Film Form: A Critique of Carroll's Functional Account." *Film and Philosophy* 10: 163–172. <https://doi.org/10.5840/filmphil20061012>.

© 2020. This work is published under

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> (the “License”).

Notwithstanding the ProQuest Terms and Conditions, you may use this content
in accordance with the terms of the License.