READING MEANING IN FILMS THROUGH MULTIPLE MODES

-Preet HIRADHAR

Overview

- How do filmmakers create meaning through multiple modes in a film?
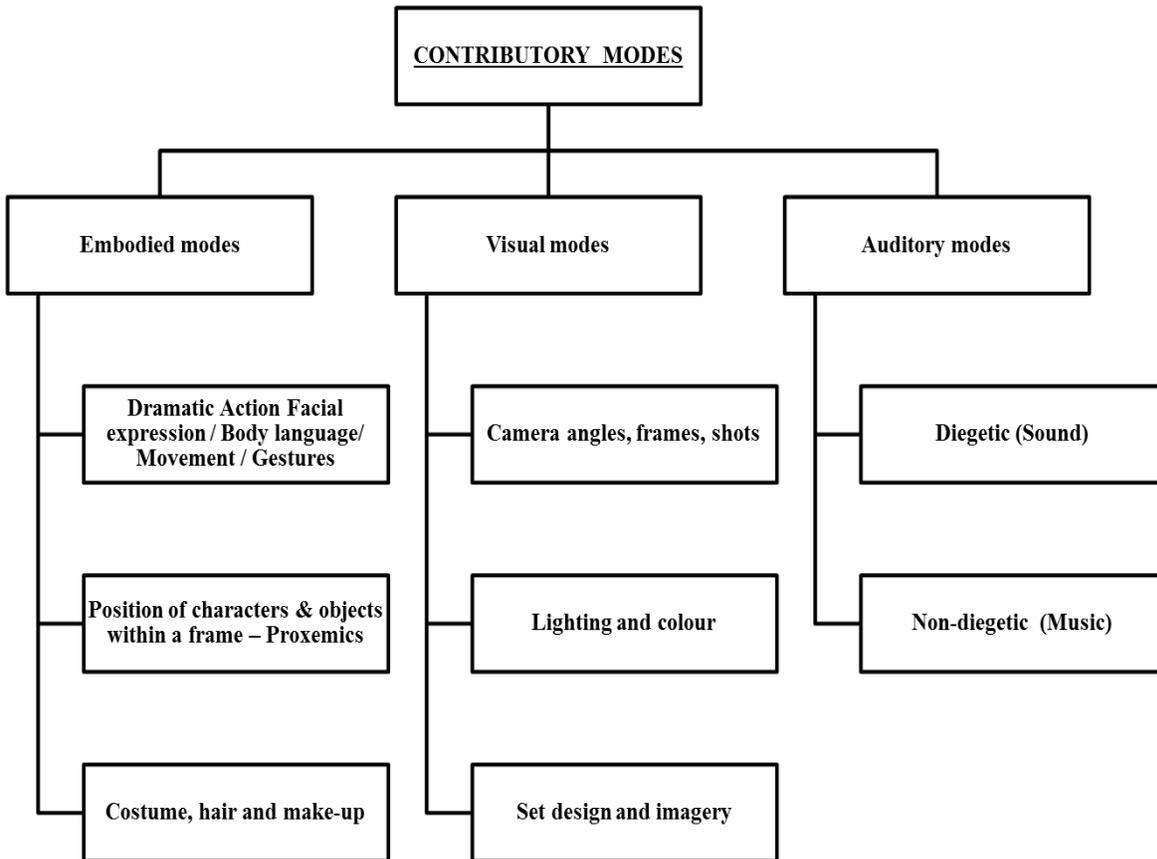- What are the different modes that contribute to the meaning of a scene in a film?

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                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │  CONTRIBUTORY  MODES    │
                        └─────────────────────────┘
                                    │
        ┌───────────────────────────┼───────────────────────────┐
  ┌─────────────┐            ┌─────────────┐            ┌─────────────┐
  │ Embodied    │            │ Visual      │            │ Auditory    │
  │ modes       │            │ modes       │            │ modes       │
  └─────────────┘            └─────────────┘            └─────────────┘
        │                          │                          │
  ┌───────────────────┐     ┌───────────────────┐     ┌───────────────────┐
  │ Dramatic Action   │     │ Camera angles,    │     │ Diegetic (Sound)  │
  │ Facial expression │     │ frames, shots     │     │                   │
  │ / Body language/  │     └───────────────────┘     └───────────────────┘
  │ Movement /        │
  │ Gestures          │
  └───────────────────┘
  ┌───────────────────┐     ┌───────────────────┐     ┌───────────────────┐
  │ Position of       │     │ Lighting and      │     │ Non-diegetic      │
  │ characters &      │     │ colour            │     │ (Music)           │
  │ objects within a  │     └───────────────────┘     └───────────────────┘
  │ frame – Proxemics │
  └───────────────────┘
  ┌───────────────────┐     ┌───────────────────┐
  │ Costume, hair     │     │ Set design and    │
  │ and make-up       │     │ imagery           │
  └───────────────────┘     └───────────────────┘
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Chart adapted from:
Burn, A. (2013).The kineikonic mode: Towards a multimodal approach to moving image media,
NCRM ePrints, UK. Retrieved from: http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3085/

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Key concepts

1) Embodied modes:

a. Dramatic Action/ Performance: Facial expression / Body language / Movement / Gestures

The dramatic action or performance in film includes an actor's facial expressions and body language. With film's ability to create a close-up of an actor's face, for example, there is a much wider and subtler range of emotions and feelings that can be conveyed and expressed through the medium by means of performance. Eyes give particularly important signals when trying to read someone's expression. Likewise movement and the way in which actors hold and move their bodies shows how they are thinking and feeling.

b. Proxemics: Position of characters and objects within a frame or the spatial relationships among characters within the mise-en-scene, and the apparent distance of the camera from the subject photographed

The positioning and movement of characters within a frame is also very significant for both characterisation and narrative within a film. A filmmaker can successfully draw an audience's attention to an important character merely through placing them in the foreground of the frame. Likewise placing a moving body in a stationary background or vice versa has the same effect. Positioning can also be used to indicate relationships between people; for example, creating physical distance between two characters in a frame can indicate emotional distance that they might be experiencing at that point in the film.

c. Costume, hair, and make-up

Costume (the clothes that characters wear) in narrative cinema is used to signify character, or advertise particular fashions, or to make clear distinctions between characters.
Costume and make-up play a large part in mise-en-scene because they can give you a very immediate sense not only of a character's personality but also of their status in the film and how they function within the world around them. They also give you an instant idea of what period a film is set in and the culture it is centred around.

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2) Visual modes:

a. Camera angles, frames, and shots

-   Camera Angle - the camera's angle of view relative to the subject being photographed

1. High Angle - -"looks" down on the subject - the Angle of Destiny is a decidedly high angle shot that suggests an omniscience, a moment of great contemplation of decision-- often held for an   extended period of time

2. Low Angle- -the camera "looks" up at the subject -often used to give the figure a dominate and powerful presence; the audience is made to feel submissive

3. Flat Angle/Straight-on angle - the camera is at eye level and on the same plane as the subject

Figure Source:
-   *Liebelt, W. (1996). The language of film: terminology, interpretation questions and lists for   working   with   films   in   English   class.   Retrieved from: http://www.schuleplus.de/Englisch/films/filmanalysis-language.htm*

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- Shot Type - refers to the positioning and distance between the camera and its subject. The main types of shot include: Long, Medium, and Close shots.

Each of these shots vary in degree and can be described as below:

1. Extreme Long Shot -a panoramic view of an exterior location, photographed from a great distance,   often as far as a quarter-mile away; often used to frame landscapes or bird's-eye views of cities -the human figure is barely visible or not visible at all

2. Long shot - figures are more prominent, but the background still dominates; the image roughly corresponds to the audience's view of the area within the proscenium arch in live theatre.
    The Long Shot or the Extreme Long Shot are often used as Establishing Shots, ones that orient the audience to location and surroundings, showing   the spatial relations among the important figures

3. Medium Long Shot - a balance between figure and background; the figure is usually framed from about the knees up

4. Medium shot - the figure is framed from about the waist up

5. Medium close-up - the figure is framed from the chest up

6. Close-up -a detailed shot usually showing just the head or a small, significant object - used largely to isolate a character from the setting and from all other characters so that the audience will pay attention only to that character. The camera is very close to the object; with human subjects, the face and its expressions are shown. The slightest nuance of expression in an actor's face is shown and can become significant.

7. extreme close-up -singles out a portion of the body or isolates a detail - often used for symbolic purposes to reinforce the significance of an object - may also be used to intensify an emotion--an extreme close-up of an actor generally only includes his/her eyes or mouth

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b. Lighting and colour:

- Lighting can create atmosphere and mood as well as signify meaning, e.g. in the horror genre, light and shade are codes of meaning. Cinematographers use light and shade to direct the audience's attention to a particular part of the filmic space. Lighting can often be used as a characteristic of the style of a whole film or over a number of scenes.

1. key light - The **key light** is the main source of illumination, but if used alone it will leaves shadows.

2. fill light - Another light is therefore required to fill in these areas of darkness and to soften the shadows the key light has cast. This has become known as the **fill light**, a secondary light source of slightly less intensity than the key light which is placed at eye level.

3. back light - Yet even this combination of key and fill light is must be supplemented further if a director is seeking to create a sense of depth. The third light source that provides the necessary depth is known as the **back light**, as it is placed above and behind the subject. Used on its own, the back light alone would create a silhouette of the subject. But the triple combination of key, fill and back lights, separates the subject from its environment and creates a feeling of depth.

- Lighting techniques can be divided into high key or low key categories.

1. A low-contrast ratio of key and fill light will result in an image of almost uniform brightness. This is termed **high-key lighting**. This is a standard, conventional lighting scheme employed in Hollywood genres such as the musical and the comedy.

2. A high-contrast ratio of key and fill light will result in **low-key lighting**, producing dark shadows and a night time effect, faces will often be bleached white against a black background. Genres such as horror and film noir employ low-key lighting for its atmospheric shadows and intense contrast of light and darkness.

c. Setting (through set design) and imagery

- Settings used in films are rarely just backgrounds but are integral to creating atmosphere and building narrative within a film. The film maker may either select an already existing locale or may choose to construct the setting through set design. In some cases a particular location or building can even be regarded as a character within the film itself. The overall design of the setting can significantly shaper how we understand the action of the story.

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3) Auditory modes:

a.   Diegetic sound - the sound that has a source in the world of the story, such as dialogue spoken by characters, sounds made by objects, or music coming from a source grounded in the narrative.

The diegesis is the 'world of the film': if something is on the screen (including sounds from objects within the mise-en-scene) it is 'in the diegesis' or said to be 'diegetic'. Sound that is a part of the action is diegetic, e.g. wind noise, screeching cars, music from a hi-fi, etc; sound that is added to create mood or atmosphere is non-diegetic. Diegetic sounds may, of course, also be dubbed after filming, or may be exaggerated for effect (e.g. loud footsteps, whistling wind, etc.).

b.   Non-diegetic sound - the sound coming from a source outside the world of the story, usually part of the score or soundtrack.

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Suggested questions for discussion (In pairs or groups)

1.   Identify the various embodied modes used within the scene. How do these modes contribute to the film's narrative? Setting (Where is the film set?) Discussion - How does the set contribute to the finale of the scene?

2.   Identify the camera angles and shots used in both the scenes and discuss the meaning conveyed by these angles/shots

3.   What the sounds do you hear in the clip? Why do you think that the filmmakers chose to include these sounds? What atmosphere do these sounds give? At what points does the background music blend into or overtake the diegetic sound? How do these sounds contribute to the mood of the scene?

4.   Sample activity sheet for students:

Scene	Action	Description of sound	Diegetic/Non diegetic	Atmosphere created by sound	Music – type and atmosphere
1.	Shot 1 of A				
2.	Shot 2 with B				
3.	Shot 3 of C followed by D				

5.   Can you identify one scene that is particularly remarkable for its use of either
-   mise-en-scene (setting, costume/make-up, performance and lighting)
-   camera technique (framing, shooting angle, movement, etc)
-   sound (including music)
   Explain how and why.

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Useful textbooks for teachers

- Boggs, Joseph M. and Petrie, Dennis W (2004). *The Art of Watching Films, Sixth Edition*. New York, NY. McGraw Hill.
  (University-level textbook with invaluable resources for teachers who are looking to educate themselves about the art and language of film)

- Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kristin (2001). *Film Art: An Introduction*, *Tenth Edition*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
  (University-level textbook that focuses primarily on the art of the visual, sumptuously illustrated with a plethora of stills from movies past and present)

- Prince, Stephen (2001). *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film, Second Edition*. Toronto, ON: Allyn and Bacon.

  (Comprehensive and well-laid out textbook devoted exclusively to Film Studies)

Useful web resources for teachers

- https://teachfilmstudy.com/
- http://film-english.com/film-glossary/
- http://www.intofilm.org/schools-resources