

Audiovisual aesthetics

Take home exam 2018 Answer Sheet

1. Watch the “[house](#)” scene from the 1999 surprise hit *Blair Witch Project* (Sanchez & Myrick). Analyse three stylistic devices employed to produce a particular emotional affect – such as suspense, anxiety, horror, etc. For each of the devices, discuss an alternative manner in which the film could have produced that affect.

Students can pay attention, in detail and always in relationship to other elements, to amongst others:

- The (double) framing, which tends to be narrow and often narrowing in, focusing on dilapidating walls or obstructions, narrow passageways, floorboards, etc;
- The instability of the camera, constantly changing tempo and direction, moving left and right, up and down, alternately following intuitions of the person filming – many of these elements point, of course, to the register of a handheld camera and the materiality and corporeality of the filming process – or external movements and sounds; here there is an obvious tension between the onscreen and the offscreen, one always already implying the other and indeed shifting unpredictably between them;
- The grainy quality of the image, signalling the material presence of the camera – and vulnerability of its carrier – and obscuring the object of its study, inviting – in combination with many of these other elements – a distinctly investigative look;
- The shifts in perspective, moving between povs – of course the choice for views that are emphatically embodied is important;
- The shifts in lens, exchanging an overall deep focus or large depth of field with moments of soft focus and blur;
- The shifts in color palette between monochrome and scenes dominated by dark browns and earthly reds;
- The compositional logic, which by and large is off-kilter, uneven and dispersive, with potential points of recognition seen in fragments and from odd angles (heads cut off midway, tilted door frames, etc) and pressed into corners; the sides often open up (and close) unexpectedly, hinting at the possibility of intrusion and/or escape;
- The darkness, rising from every corner of the image except for its lit canted centre point – a wall, a body;
- The space, chaotic, obstructed, cramped, dark, with windows opening onto to darkness; the geography is entirely unclear, as is the people’s position in the house except for which floor they find themselves on;
- The soundscape, in all its multiplicity: the breathing and footsteps of the filmer, the voices of those nearby, the shrieks of invisible others.

The key is for students to analyse three such devices or rather still combinations of these devices in detail and discuss them in relationship to an emotional response they can be

argued to encourage. For instance, the device of the instability of the camera in relation to the narrow framing and the eternally unfinished composition may be argued to encourage suspense – for whatever it is that is lurking just around the corner; the combination of embodied pov, equating the subject’s limited knowledge with ours, with the lack of spatial orientation similarly encourages suspense – though good students may reflect on the different types of suspense; the narrow frame with focus on walls and lack of map may be said to work towards claustrophobia; the combo of the darkness and soundscape of shrieks creates a generic sense of horror, etc. Students are free to choose three devices that each encourage a similar affective register; or that each encourage an entirely different one.

What matters in discussing alternate devices that might have produces such tensions is that they show they understand choices are just that: choices, each of which are arbitrary though of course more or less likely depending on the genre or topic matter or overall stylistic register; and each of which afford and limit particular possibilities for storytelling and emotion.

It is hoped students draw extensively on the relevant chapters in Bordwell & Thompson, Gibbs and Mulvey.

Each strategy counts roughly between 25 and 30 percent, depending on how well it has been developed. The alternatives make up the remaining 25-10 percent.

2. Watch the [opening scene](#) from Amy Heckerling's 1995 teen film *Clueless*.
 - a. How does the film set up its 'contract' with its viewers? Analyse three strategies the film uses to tell the viewer how it should be watched and what the viewer in turn can and cannot expect. You can think in your analysis of notions such as genre, tone, rhythm, color, mise-en-scene, iconography and worldbuilding, including character development.
 - b. Imagine *Clueless* was not a teen film but a film from another genre. What different choices might it have made in the opening scene to set up its contract? Discussing a genre of your choice, reflect on two possible differences.

Students can choose to discuss in detail:

In the opening gambit:

- The distinct pop musical score, its melodies and temporalisations, its lyrics, and of course its connotations;
- The garish color palette, cartoonish formal language and ditto sound effects of the brief title sequence;
- The eclectic, joyful editing, shot types, camera movement, framing and composition of the opening gambit, emphasising graphic and rhythmic dimensions of editing, moving between panning shots and extreme close-ups, slow tracks and rapid sweeping shots, centralised, triangular compositions and canted, unfinished, open ended compositions; as well as, of course, between focal lengths and display speed, transiting seemingly effortlessly from a soft-focus slowmotion, stop-motion scene set against a dark background to sped up images of a car, etc.
- The selection of scenes on display here, including kids driving in expensive cabrio jeeps in the sun, shopping at tiffany's, nighttime dancing, swimming pool parties, fun and games, hanging out in short skirts (focus on legs) in bars with bankers;

During our first encounter with Cher:

- The voice-over introducing narrator and pov, tonally, in terms of accent (valley) and word-choice (adult), as well as the monologue that unfolds;
 - o Students may well remark on the obvious intertextual reference/loose adaptation of Austen's *Emma* here.
- The tone, self-serious with a huge wink, bordering on pantomime, slapstick or the absurd – such as the maid that runs away when the father walks in;
- The bright, heightened colors;

- The camera angles and movement, which retain their sense of fluidity, capturing Cher and her dad from different angles and sides, concentrating on the characters yet keeping their sense of independence, even when the shot appears to be from pov;
- The reflection of Cher's concern with – and professional understanding of – fashion; as well as with material goods – the jeep – more generally; surface is instantly marked as important;
- The opening up of the expansive, luxurious space of the protagonist's home;
- The explication of the protagonist's distinct relationship with her father – such as her surface concern about his health, the joke about his parents but also the berating she receives at the end, emphasising the playful artificiality of the entire encounter;
- The explication's protagonist's peculiar (teenage) relationship with the external world, including her ability to drive without license, her lack of care for objects she hits with her car, her presumption people are jealous etc. this suggests a character feature as well, of course, as an indication of the ways of the world, in which actions do not necessarily, or aren't necessarily assumed, to have the consequences they would have in reality.
- The immediate inclusion of characters with different ethnicities implies the assumption that capital/wealth is blind, at least in this regard, though of course the central character is white and only secondary characters are African-american;
- Etc.

Students should be expected to consider three such devices in terms of the expectations they set up and cancel out. For instance, the eclectic, fun opening gambit initiates a mode of storytelling that allows for contradiction and plurality, just as the slapstick gag concerning the father's relationship to the housekeeper suggests a lightness of touch when it comes to potentially very real and tragic socio-economic relations.

For b. students can consider some of these choices in terms, for instance, of horror, relying on the camera work, color palette or soundscape of Blair Witch Project.

Overall a. amounts for roughly 75 percent (25 per strategy), b for 25.

3. Watch the pilot episode of the popular television drama series *Suits* (available on netflix or [here](#)). How is masculinity represented? Analyse three representational strategies. From you experience, how does this representation compare to televisional accounts of working women?

Please note that the pilot episode streaming on Netflix differs ever so slightly from the one streamed on dailymotion that we included for the few students that may not have access to netflix. The obvious and unproblematic difference is that the Netflix version includes both parts of the pilot, whereas the dailymotion video includes only the first part. The latter, however, appears to have been sped up on occasion and includes one or twp additional cuts and ellipses, overall shortening the episode's timespan. This shouldn't generally affect the analysis, as the show sets out its rules early on and is consistent throughout, but in case students make explicit mention of it, is worth taking into account or bring up with the course leaders – Tim and Guro.

Students have to discuss in detail three strategies of masculinity. Below are listed some general tendencies (there are many others), but what matters in the exam is less the correct answer than the thorough analysis and argumentation that lead to that answer. The latter includes plot development – including, pace Bordwell and Thompson and the second lecture, the assumptions that that plot requires in order to be able to develop at all – as well as choices in editing, cinematography and mise-en-scene.

- Masculinity in the series is measured, it would appear from the pilot, almost exclusively in terms of work or rather still white collar work which earns a lot of money – they wear expensive suits (crisp, neat), most of the environments are clean, straight and vertical glass and steel or alternatively baroque, invoking new money and old money all at once.
- Masculinity is measured through competition – ie Harvey outwitting his opponents at the poker table, Harvey outsmarting his client, Harvey trash talking Louis, Mike easing his way past the bar to win a bet, Harvey and Mike showing off to one another their skills when they first meet. Indeed, this sense of competition – and the objectification of stakes of everything – extends even to women: early on, Harvey wins over a woman who didn't initially want to go out with him, only to subsequently discard her without batting an eyelash – on, as it were, to the next prize, or at least we have to assume as much given her non-return in the remainder of the episode.

- Masculinity is measured by way of confidence, even if that confidence isn't founded in certainty, ie Harvey lying to his client, Harvey certain he will "close the deal" with the waitress, etc; Mike bragging about just how smart he is on multiple occasions without, seemingly, a hint of irony or self-reflection (central framing, mid angle shot tilting upwards, close-up, smooth face, soft lighting, reverse shots of others agreeing/approving)
- Masculinity is measured in terms of language, often bullish, sexualised language – ie in the opening gambit, "your balls are in my fist", jokes about other men's sexual and romantic inadequacies;
- Masculinity is measured through looks – the repeated emphasis on the quality of suits, shaving, hair, etc.
- Masculinity is measured not just in terms of work or even success at work, but a particular attitude towards this work. Indeed, to give an example of just how students could go about making such a case, they could discuss any or some of the following tropes in the opening. The opening sequence sets apart 'lesser man' Louis from 'alpha ape' Harvey, in terms of plot development as well as stylistically. Louis is seen initially as a man of the crowd, frustratedly and doubtfully standing amidst – in the background - infighting colleagues, whereas Harvey's first appearance is through a close-up en face; Louis is traced and then tracked pacing the hallways scratching his balding head, whilst Harvey directs the camera in the room he plays poker, his remarks and glances steering our gaze; Louis is shown to be secondary and passive as he stands in Jessica's room, seen framed between two window panes, shoulders down, twitchy, soft-spoken, and, most importantly, from Jessica's pov; Harvey overpowers everyone in the room with his bravado, his face never without the possibility of a smile – the eyelines every so slightly wrinkled, the corners of the mouth upwards; Louis is silenced by a look whereas Harvey has a clever and winning reply to every remark directed at him to unsettle him; as Louis leaves, the lens changes focus and loses him, whereas it remains sharp at the time of Harvey's departure, who indeed walks towards us; and of course, Louis takes work very serious indeed, whereas Harvey has the naughty schoolboy's attitude of caring just about enough when it matters – and excelling because of pure, natural genius, the lawmaker's Don Draper.
- Generally, men that are successful according to standards such as the above, are framing centrally, the composition more than once even or symmetrical, with objects of similar size and at similar distances balancing out the image, the hair is trimmed and gelled, the faces smooth with even three point lighting; and, as if it were a caricature of Mulvey's male gaze, they drive the scene, are assertive and overcome the world as obstacle – which includes women.