Hitchcock manipulates all these codes to achieve a desired effect. It is because they are codes—because they have meaning for us outside the narrow limits of that particular scene: in film, in the other arts, in the general culture—that they affect us. The codes are the medium through which the "message" of the scene is transmitted. The specifically cinematic codes together with a number of shared codes make up the syntax of film.

Mise-en-Scène

Three questions confront the filmmaker: What to shoot? How to shoot it? How to present the shot? The domain of the first two questions is mise-en-scène, that of the last, montage. Mise-en-scène is often regarded as static, montage as dynamic. This is not the case. Because we read the shot, we are actively involved with it. The codes of mise-en-scène are the tools with which the filmmaker alters and modifies our reading of the shot. Since the shot is such a large unit of meaning, it may be useful to separate a discussion of its components into two parts.

The Framed Image

All the codes that operate within the frame, without regard to the chronological axis of film, are shared with the other pictorial arts. The number and range of these codes is great, and they have been developed and refined in painting, sculpture, and photography over the course of thousands of years. Basic texts in the visual arts examine the three determinants of color, line, and form, and certainly each of the visual codes of film fits within one of these rubrics. Rudolf Arnheim, in his highly influential study *Art and Visual Perception,* suggested ten areas of concern: Balance, Shape, Form, Growth, Space, Light, Color, Movement, Tension, and Expression. Clearly, a full exposition of the codes operating in the film frame would be a lengthy undertaking. We can, however, describe briefly the basic aspects of the syntax of the frame. Two aspects of the framed image are most important: the limitations that the frame imposes, and the composition of the image within the frame (and without necessary regard to it).

Since the frame determines the limit of the image, the choice of an aspect ratio suggests the possibilities of composition. With the self-

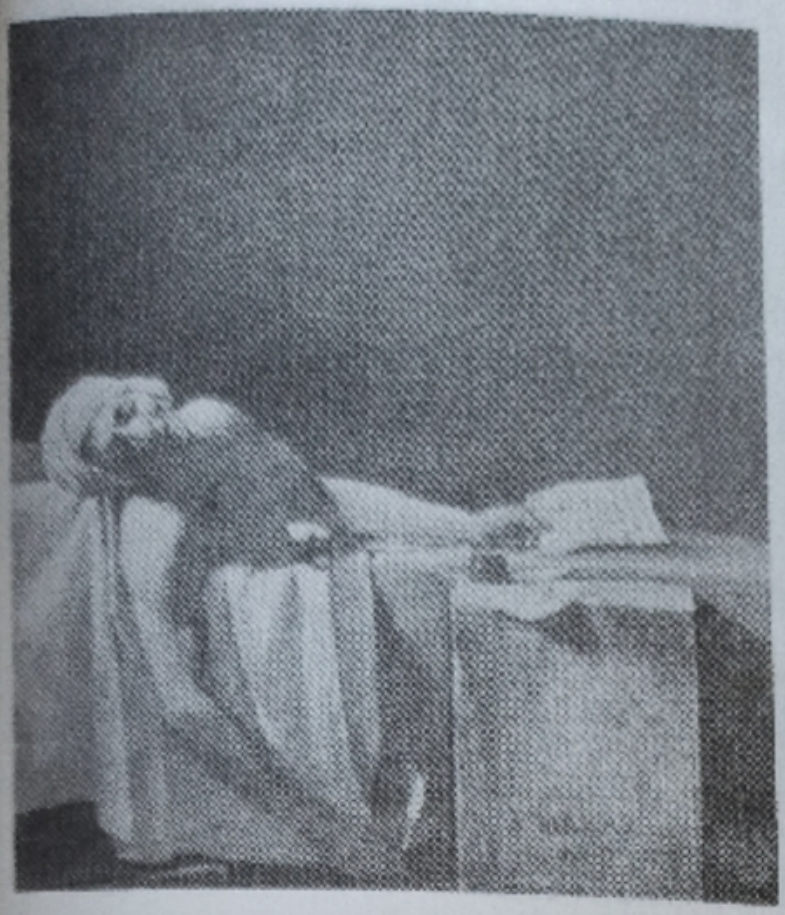

Figure 3-30. The bathtub code extends as far back as Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793), shocking because of its intimate realism. (*Oil on canvas. 65" by 50 1/2". Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.*)

justification that has been endemic to the elusive subject of film esthetics, early theoreticians waxed eloquent over the value of the Academy aperture, the 1.33 ratio. When widescreen ratios became popular in the 1950s, the classical estheticians bemoaned the destruction of the symmetry they perceived in the Academy aperture, but, as we demonstrated in Chapter 2, there was nothing sacred about the ratio of 4:3.

The question is not which ratio is "proper" but rather which codes yield themselves to exploitation in which ratios? Before the mid-fifties, it seems, interiors and dialogue dominated American and foreign screens. After the introduction of the widescreen formats in the 1950s, exteriors, location shooting, and action sequences grew in importance. This is a crude generalization, but there is some useful truth to it. It's not important whether there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the two historical developments, only that wide screens permitted more efficient exploitation of action and landscape codes.

CinemaScope and Panavision width ratios (2.33 and above) do make it more difficult, as the old Hollywood estheticians had suggested, to photograph intimate conversations. Whereas the classic two-shot of the

Figure 3-34. ... the widescreen two-shot. Jean-Claude Brialy and Anna Karina in Jean-Luc Godard's *A Woman is a Woman* (1961). The still life on the table is carefully composed, both to fill the middle space of the frame and to connect the characters.

movement in the frame. If the camera tends to follow the subject faithfully, the form tends to be closed; if, on the other hand, the filmmaker allows—even encourages—the subject to leave the frame and reenter, the form is obviously open. The relationship between the movement within the frame and the movement of the camera is one of the more sophisticated codes, and specifically cinematic.

Hollywood's classic syntax was identified in part by a relatively tightly closed form. The masters of the Hollywood style of the thirties and forties tried never to allow the subject to leave the frame (it was considered daring even if the subject did not occupy the center of the 1.33 frame). In the sixties and seventies, filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni were equally faithful to the open widescreen form because it emphasizes the spaces between people.

Most elements of compositional syntax do not depend strictly on the frame for their definition. If the image faded at the edges like a vignette (which itself is one of the minor devices of the framing code), such codes as intrinsic interest, proximity, depth perception, angle of

Figure 3-35. Michelangelo Antonioni was well known for his sensitivity to architectural metaphor. This naturally masked shot from *Eclipse* (1962) both isolates Alain Delon and Monica Vitti and calls attention to the comparison to be made between Vitti and the portrait on the wall behind her.

approach, and lighting would work just as well as they do in frames with sharply defined limits.

The filmmaker, like most pictorial artists, composes in three dimensions. This doesn't mean necessarily that he is trying to convey three-dimensional (or stereoscopic) information. It means that there are three sets of compositional codes: One concerns the plane of the image (most important, naturally, since the image is, after all, two-dimensional). One deals with the geography of the space photographed (its plane is parallel with the ground and the horizon). The third involves the plane of depth perception, perpendicular to both the frame plane and the geographical plane. Figure 3-40 visualizes these three planes of composition.

Naturally, these planes interlock. No filmmaker analyzes precisely how each single plane influences the composition, but decisions are made that focus attention on pairs of planes. Clearly, the plane of the frame must be dominant, since that is the only plane that actually exists on the screen. Composition for this plane, however, is often influenced by factors in the geographical plane since, unless we are dealing with animation, a photographer or cinematographer must compose *for* the frame plane *in* the geographical plane. Likewise, the geographical plane and the plane of depth perception are coordinated, since much of our ability to perceive

Figure 3-36. Antonioni was obsessed with widescreen composition. This shot from *Red Desert* demonstrates his architectural formalism. *(Frame enlargement.)*

depth in two-dimensional representations as well as three-dimensional reality depends on phenomena in the geographical plane. In fact, perception of depth depends on many important factors other than binocular stereoscopic vision, which is why film presents such a strong illusion of three-dimensional space and why stereoscopic film techniques are relatively useless.*

Figure 3-41 illustrates some of the most important psychological factors strongly influencing depth perception. Overlapping takes place in the frame plane, but the three others—convergence, relative size, and density gradient—depend on the geographical plane. We've already discussed in Chapter 2 how various lens types affect depth perception (and linear distortion as well). A photographer modifies, suppresses, or reinforces the effects of lens types through composition of the image within the frame.

Here are some other examples of how the codes of the compositional planes interact:

Proximity and proportion are important subcodes. Stage actors are

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* If so-called 3-D film techniques simply added the one remaining factor to depth perception, there would be no problem with them. The difficulty is that they actually distort our perception of depth, since they don't allow us to focus on a single plane, as we do naturally, and since they tend to produce disturbing pseudostereoscopic and pseudoscopic stereoscopic images.

forever mindful of them. Obviously, the closer the subject, the more important it seems. As a result, an actor in the theater is always in danger of being "upstaged" by other members of the company. In film, of course, the director has complete control over position, and reverse angles help to redress the balance.

Figure 3-42, a classic shot from *Citizen Kane* (1941), gives us a more sophisticated example of the significance of proximity and proportion. Kane enters the room at the rear; his wife is in bed in the midground; a bottle of sleeping medicine looms large in the foreground. The three are connected by their placement in the frame. Reverse the order and the medicine bottle would disappear into the background of the shot.

One of the aspects of composition that differentiates Baroque from late Renaissance painting is the shift from the "square" orientation of the geographic plane to the oblique. There were several reasons for this—one was the quest for greater verisimilitude: the oblique composition emphasized the space of the painting, whereas the symmetrical Renaissance compositional standard emphasized its design. The net effect, however, was to increase the psychological drama of the design: geographical obliques translate into the plane of the frame as diagonals, which are read as inherently more active than horizontals and verticals. Here, as in the earlier examples, there is a relationship between compositional factors in separate planes.

Eventually the geographic and depth planes "feed" information to the plane of the frame. This is truer in painting and photography, which don't have the ability film does to move physically into the pictorial space, but it is still generally true in cinema as well. The frame plane is the only "real" plane. Most elements of composition, therefore, realize themselves in this plane.

The empty frame, contrary to expectations, is not a tabula rasa. Even before the image appears, we invest the potential space of the frame with certain qualities, ones which have been measured scientifically: our natural tendency to read depth into the two-dimensional design, for instance. Latent expectations determine intrinsic interest. Figures 3-43 and 3-44 demonstrate this. In 3-43, both verticals are precisely the same length, yet the left-hand line looks much longer. This is because we read the angles at top and bottom as representative of corners, the left

receding, the right intruding. If both lines *seem* to be equal, we then calculate that the line on the left must be longer, since it is "farther away." In Figure 3-44, which stairway ascends and which descends? The "correct"

Figure 3-37. This shot from Jean Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932) isolates the forlorn figure of Boudu, about to jump into the Seine, by vignetting the image. The masking has a literal function as well: Boudu (Michel Simon) is seen through a telescope in this shot. (*L'Avant-Scène. Frame enlargement.*)

answers are that *A* ascends and *B* descends. The trick is in the verbs, of course, since stairs always go both up and down. But since Westerners tend to read from left to right, we see stair *A* ascending and stair *B* descending.

So, even before the image appears, the frame is invested with meaning. The bottom is more "important" than the top, left comes before right, the bottom is stable, the top unstable: diagonals from bottom left to top right go "up" from stability to instability. Horizontals will also be given more weight than verticals: confronted with horizontal and vertical lines of equal length, we tend to read the horizontal as longer, a phenomenon emphasized by the dimensions of the frame.

When the image does appear, form, line, and color are impressed with these latent values in the frame. Form, line, and color also have their own inherent values of weight and direction. If sharp Lines exist in the design of the image, we tend to read along them from left to right. An object with a "light" inherent significance (Mrs. Kane's medicine bottle) can be given "heavy" significance through shape.

Figure 3-42. Dorothy Comingore (in shadow), Orson Welles, and Joseph Cotten in Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). It is not the material of the shot but its design that tells the story. (*Sight and Sound.*)

And color, of course, adds an entirely new dimension. Hitchcock begins *Marnie* (1964) with a close shot of his heroine's bright yellow pocketbook. The other color values of the scene are neutral. The sense is of the pocketbook carrying the woman rather than vice versa, just the effect Hitchcock wants, considering that the yellow bulge contains the money Marnie had just stolen and that her life, as we later see, is dominated by her kleptomania. Before we learn any of this narratively, we "know" it. (*Marnie* is also an excellent example of other types of color dominance, since the subject of the film is color symbolism: Marnie suffers from rosophobia.)

Elements of form, line, and color all carry their own intrinsic interests, significant weights that counteract, reinforce, counterpoint, or balance each other in complex systems, each read against our latent expectations of the frame and with the senses of composition in depth and planar design combined.

Multiple images (split screen) and superimpositions (double exposures, et cetera), although they are seldom used, can multiply the intrinsic weights by factors of two, three, four, or more. Texture, although it is not often mentioned when speaking of film esthetics, is also

important, not only in terms of the inherent texture of the subject b
also in terms of the texture—or grain—of the image. One illustrati
will suffice: we have learned to associate graininess with enlargemen

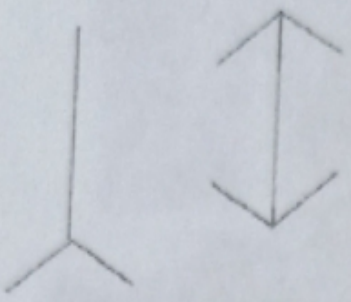

Figure 3-43.
THE MULLER-LYER ILLUSION. Both vertic
are the same length, yet the left-hand line loo
much longer. We read the angles at top and bott
as corners, the left receding, the right intrudin
If both lines seem to be equal, we think the li
on the left must be longer, since it is "further awa

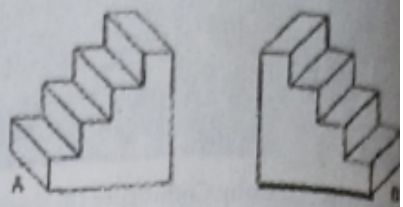

Figure 3-44.
UPSTAIRS/DOWNSTAIRS ILLUSION.
Which stairway ascends and which
descends? Since Westerners tend to read
from left to right, we see stair A ascending
and stair B descending.

and with documentary. The filmmaker therefore has this code at hi
command. A grainy image signifies a "truthful" one. The grain o
enlargement and its significance as a barrier to comprehension provide
the basic metaphor of Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-up*.

Perhaps the most important tool the filmmaker can use to modif
the meanings of form, line, and color, and their intrinsic interests, i
lighting. In the days when filmstock was relatively insensitive (before th
1960s), artificial lighting was a requisite, and filmmakers made a virtu
of necessity, as always. The German Expressionists of the twentie
borrowed the code of chiaroscuro from painting to dramatic effect—i
allowed them to emphasize design over verisimilitude. The classica
Hollywood cinematographic style wanted a more natural effect and so
developed a system of balanced "key" lights and "fill" lights (see Figure
3-50) that provided thorough but not overt illumination and therefore
presented a minimal barrier between observer and subject. At its best
this sophisticated system was capable of some extraordinary, subtle
effects, yet it was inherently unrealistic; we seldom observe natural scenes
that have both the very high light level and the carefully balanced fill that
mark the Hollywood style (and that is perpetuated today in both
theatrical and television productions).

The development of fast filmstocks permitted a new latitude in the code of lighting, and today most cinematographers work for verisimilitude rather than classic Hollywood balance.

Needless to say, all the lighting codes that operate in photography operate in film as well. Full front lighting washes out a subject; overhead lighting dominates it; lighting from below makes it lugubrious; highlighting can call attention to details (hair and eyes most often); backlighting can either dominate a subject or highlight it; sidelighting is capable of dramatic chiaroscuro effect.

Aspect ratio; open and closed form; frame, geographic, and depth planes; depth perception; proximity and proportion: intrinsic interest of color, form, and line; weight and direction; latent expectation; oblique versus symmetric composition; texture; and lighting. These are the major codes operating within the static film frame. In terms of the diachronic shot, however, we have just begun.

The Diachronic Shot