

LECTURE 3: MEANING MAKING & FILM

FORM, PATTERNS, AND SYMBOLS

COMM 103F

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PART ONE OF THE COURSE (RECAP)

- Films are made collaboratively by people through artistic, technological, and business-based decisions.
- We can study how the art of making films has changed over time including:
 - Various conventions and choices that particular traditions and movements have established and challenged
 - The lineages of films in order to better understand them in cinematic context
 - How audience responses and tastes shift over time

THE 'TRADITION' OF *COLLATERAL*

- Neo Noir
 - Film Noir
 - German Expressionism (1919 - 1926)
- Index Card Responses
 - Lighting (taxi, streets, Annie's office); Color grading, Music (nondiegetic, lulling into false security, tension)
 - Setting of LA
 - Darkness, energy
 - Detached metropolis
 - Its relation to Vincent and his work
 - Themes & Motifs: morality, nihilism, noir inversion, animal imagery, hero/anti-hero



DISCUSSION QUESTION



In small groups of 2-3 people discuss a time where you felt you 'learned'* about life through film:

- How did what you see or experience in the film either represent or reflect what you understood as 'normal,' 'ideal,' 'good,' 'bad,' etc.?

*even if these opinions changed or shifted over time



MEANING MAKING IN VISUAL CULTURE*

- Images are produced according to social and aesthetic conventions
- Levels of meaning
 - *Denotative*: literal or explicit meaning
 - *Connotative*: meanings informed by cultural and historical contexts
 - Roland Barthes (French theorist) → advocated for critical reading
- Roots in **semiotics**
 - Charles Sanders Peirce (late 19th century American logician, scientist, and philosopher)
 - Ferdinand de Saussure (early 20th century Swiss linguist)
 - Both central to theories regarding image analysis: relationship b/t words and things in the world are arbitrary, relative, and not fixed (Saussure) and meaning resides in interpretation and action (Pierce)

LEGACY OF SEMIOTICS: SIGN, SIGNIFIER, SIGNIFIED

Saussure

Sign
The object / thing

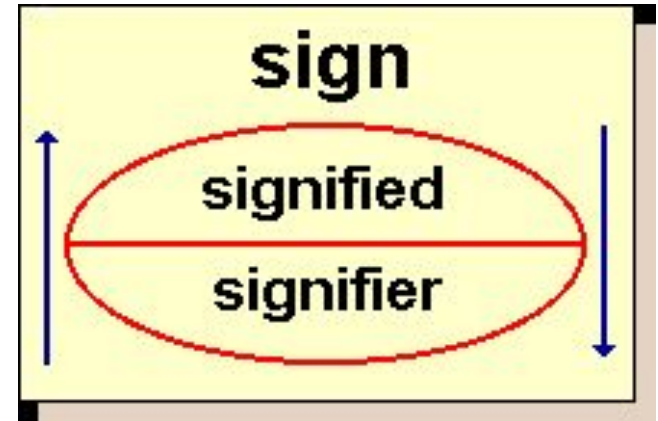


Signifier
The physical existence
(sound, word, image)

Red / Leaf / Round / Apple

Signified
The mental concept

Fruit / Apple / Freshness / Healthy
/ Temptation / Teacher's pet /
Computer



REFLECTION (MIMESIS) AND REPRESENTATION



They might put BANANA in all caps.



- Distinguishing between the idea of reflection (or mimesis), and representation as a construction of the material world can be difficult

1765 still life by Henri-Horace Roland de Porte → just a reflection or mimesis?

René Magritte's 1928-1929 *The Treachery of Images* draws attention to constraints of symbolism

MYTH OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH

- Photography's historical relationship to realism (and roots in positivism)

MYTH

- For Roland Barthes, “the hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal, and given for a whole society” and allow the connotative meaning to appear denotative, literal, and natural (Sturken & Cartwright).

EXPECTATIONS & CONVENTIONS



THE WESTERN MYTH AS AN AMERICAN ORIGIN STORY

- Geography → wide, 'open' spaces
- Freedom and independence
- Rugged 'frontier' spirit, tenacity, grit, and individualism
- Minimal state intervention
- Prominence of straight, white Christian males
- The 'extinction' of Native peoples
- All of these aspects feed into a narrative (despite various contrary facts) that grounds a core and entrenched mythology of 'Americanness' as the **connotative** becomes understood as **denotative**.

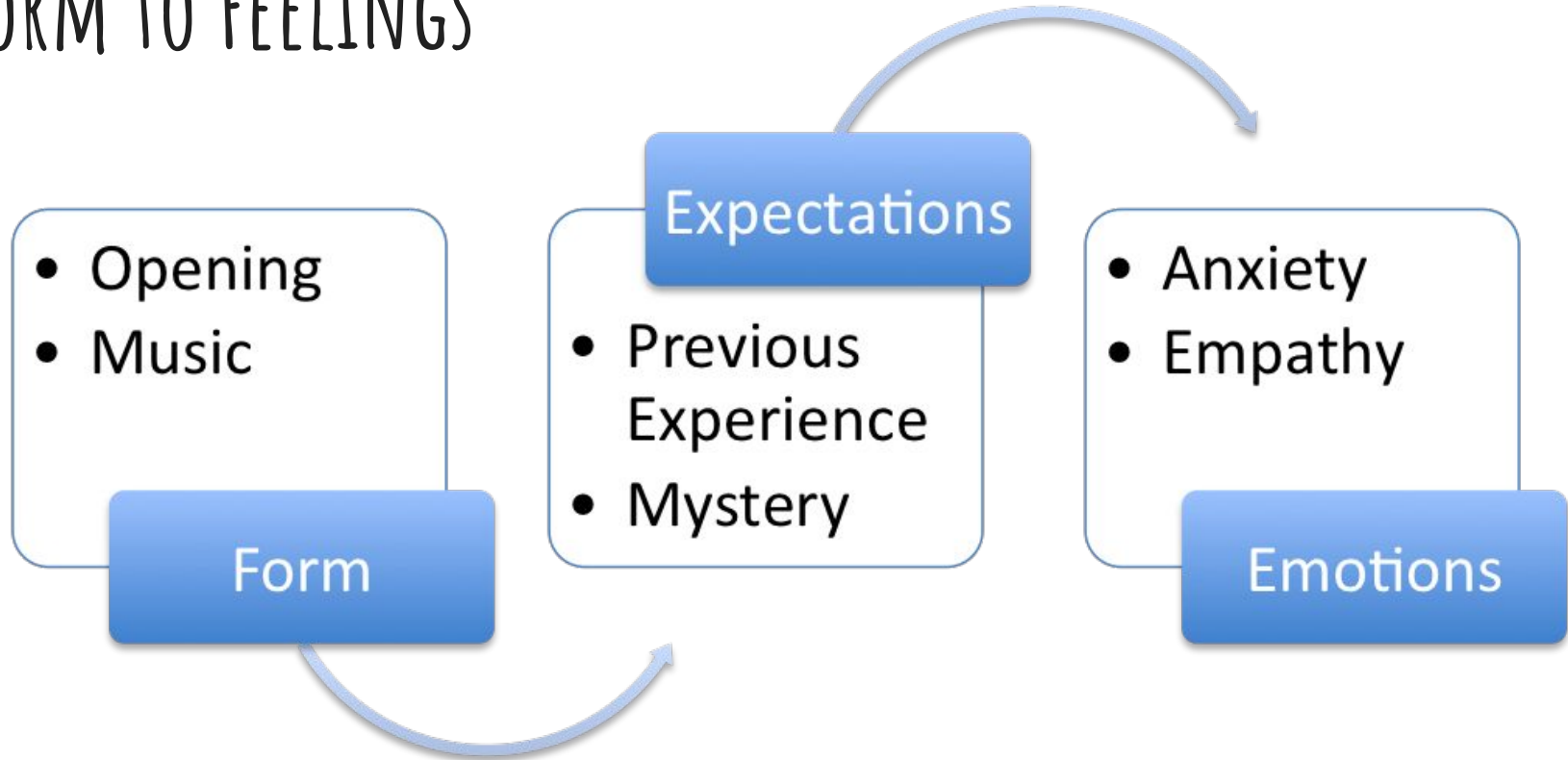
FILM FORM: STRATEGIC PATTERNS

Form → “The overall system of relationships among the parts of a film.”

Bordwell et al.

Patterns shape the
viewer's response and
establish expectations

FORM TO FEELINGS



FILM MEANING ACTIVITY

1. **Referential Meaning** → Allusion to particular items of knowledge outside the film that the viewer is expected to recognize.
2. **Explicit Meaning** → Significance presented overtly, usually in language and often near the film's beginning or end.
3. **Implicit Meaning** → Significance left tacit, for the viewer to discover upon analysis or reflection.
4. **Symptomatic Meaning** → Significance that the film divulges, often against its will, by virtue of its historical or social context, revealing a larger set of values or a social **ideology**.

In groups of 3-4, and according to class instructions, collaboratively decide upon a referential, explicit, implicit, or symptomatic meaning of *Collateral* (2004).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Visual culture has a long standing relationship with meaning-making
- Films, as part of visual culture, also make meaning and are not random compilations but strategic choices
- Filmmakers design experiences for audiences by shaping a film's form (or the overall relations of all of a film's parts)
- This content takes on particular functions that elicit particular expectations, feelings, and eventually broader meanings
- When these overall relationships are clearly (or at least effectively) woven, a film can be said to have **unity**.



- *Westworld* (2016 -)
- HBO
- Drama, Mystery, Sci-Fi
- 1 hr 8 mins
- Director: Jonathan Nolan
(writer *The Dark Knight*)
- Writer: Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy (*Burn Notice*)
- Starring: Evan Rachel Wood,
Thandie Newton Jeffrey Wright
- Budget:
- Domestic Box Office: --
- Set at the intersection of the near future and the reimagined past, explore a world in which every human appetite can be indulged without consequence.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER...

- What narrative patterns emerge while viewing the episode?
- What tropes of the classical Western does the film uphold and/or challenge?
- How does the episode treat broader themes relating to consciousness, morality, story, myth, meaning-making, knowledge production, humanity, reality, technology and/or cultural memory?
- How does the episode address the ‘cultural work’ of story?
- How did the fact that this film is part of a multi-episode narrative arc as opposed to a standalone film impact your viewing experience?