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Film: Visual Literacy

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Abstract

People who write about movies have traditionally referred to the conventions of cinematic representation—such things as low-angle shots, fade-outs, or flashbacks—as the "language" of film. Does the ability to understand this language require previous experience? Or, to put this question differently, would a "naive" viewer, someone who had never seen a movie before, be able to make any sense of his or her first encounter with this medium? The term *visual literacy*, popular among media scholars, reflects the widely held belief that the comprehension of cinematic conventions is indeed an acquired skill, comparable to fluency in reading or writing. In contemporary film scholarship, this belief is based largely on an extrapolation from the work of such writers as E. H. Gombrich regarding the cross-cultural variability of pictorial conventions. This body of literature is commonly assumed to have shown that any perceived similarity between pictures and the things they represent is simply the result of viewers' unwitting assimilation of the representational standards of a particular culture or historical period. Consequently, it is argued, the ability to connect a picture to its intended referent must depend on prior familiarity with the conventions employed in that picture. As far as film is concerned, this argument has occasionally been supported by stories about misinterpretations reportedly experienced by early-twentieth-century filmgoers or other inexperienced viewers.

Disciplines
Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Visual Studies

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Visual Literacy

People who write about movies have traditionally referred to the conventions of cinematic representation—such things as low-angle shots, fade-outs, or flashbacks—as the "language" of film. Does the ability to understand this language require previous experience? Or, to put this question differently, would a "naive" viewer, someone who had never seen a movie before, be able to make any sense of his or her first encounter with this medium? The term *visual literacy*, popular among media scholars, reflects the widely held belief that the comprehension of cinematic conventions is indeed an acquired skill, comparable to fluency in reading or writing. In contemporary film scholarship, this belief is based largely on an extrapolation from the work of such writers as E. H. Gombrich regarding the cross-cultural variability of pictorial conventions. This body of literature is commonly assumed to have shown that any perceived similarity between pictures and the things they represent is simply the result of viewers' unwitting assimilation of the representational standards of a particular culture or historical period. Consequently, it is argued, the ability to connect a picture to its intended referent must depend on prior familiarity with the conventions employed in that picture. As far as film is concerned, this argument has occasionally been supported by stories about misinterpretations reportedly experienced by early-twentieth-century filmgoers or other inexperienced viewers.

The assumption that film interpretation requires a "literacy" derived from previous experience with film was, at one time, the clearly dominant view in academic cinema studies. However, in recent years, a contrary position appears to have made some gains in popularity. The central ingredient of this contrary position is the argument that the conventions of visual media can be analogues of informational cues that people use in making sense of unmediated, real-world experience. In the presence of an analogy of this sort, viewers may be able to sense the intended meaning of a convention by drawing on their real-world perceptual skills rather than on any specific knowledge gained from previous encounters with movies or other visual media. According to this view, then, the concept of a medium-specific literacy may be a misleading metaphor for describing the cognitive skills that are brought into play in the interpretation of picture-based media.

The skeptical or contrarian view of visual literacy is sometimes premised on the belief that analogy to real-world informational cues is the characteristic principle of all pictorial representation. The theoretical support and the empirical evidence for this belief vary considerably, however, depending on what aspect of visual media one is talking about. What is true of individual images, whether in a still picture or in the context of a movie, is not necessarily true of the juxtaposition of images in an edited sequence. Moreover, representational principles governing an image's "literal" content—the objects and events depicted in it—may not carry over to such formal features as compositional style, camera angle, or editing rhythm.

Single Images. The relationship between pictorial conventions and the information available in our real visual surroundings has been clarified considerably by research on how the mind deals with visual data. As David Marr and others have pointed out, the perception of pictures is affected critically by the so-called modularity of the mental operations involved in vision. In this context, modularity refers to the mind's ability to derive meaning from a particular element of a visual scene without necessarily taking account of the other elements. For example, the identification of an object's structure and location in space can be achieved independently of the sensing of color—as is demonstrated by cases of pinpoint brain injury affecting the color-processing "module." As a result of the modularity of real-world vision, a broad array of pictorial styles that could be described as artificial and unrealistic may nonetheless be capable of giving us the same kinds of visual information that our minds make use of when we look at real objects and events. Color photographs lack the depth cues associated with binocular vision and motion parallax, but they can convey a sense of depth through occlusion and texture gradients; black-and-white photographs and movies lack information about color, but they can provide detailed accounts of shape; animated cartoons lack many details of shape, but their depictions of objects' structural features can apparently match the informational cues used in real-world object identification.

The mind's ability to derive meaning from the correspondence between individual pictorial elements and real-world informational cues, even when other cues are missing, is arguably the essence of analogical representation. In other words, the efficacy of analogy as a substitute for a specifically pictorial literacy may be said to depend on the modularity of real-world vision. This conception of picture perception is in accord with a substantial body of experimental research, including the pioneering work of Julian E. Hochberg and, more recently, John M. Kennedy's studies on the ability of congenitally blind people to identify pictured objects on the basis of raised outline drawings. A full

interpretation of the empirical evidence on picture perception must, however, await a more complete understanding of exactly how the various real-world visual cues operate.

Editing: Single Location/Time Frame. The presence of editing in a movie creates a radical discontinuity in the flow of visual information displayed to the viewer. The relationship between this discontinuity and anything that the viewer might experience in real-world vision will depend crucially on whether the editing occurs within a single location and time frame. When the camera stays within the confines of one time and place, what the viewer typically sees on the screen is a succession of partial views of that place and the action occurring within it. In order to derive a sense of coherent objects and events in a continuous space, the viewer must perform the mental task of stitching these partial views together into one whole. Strictly speaking, there is no real-world visual experience that matches precisely the kind of visual sequence with which a viewer is confronted in this kind of situation, unless the camera is positioned in a single spot and the successive views are achieved only through panning or tilting interrupted by cuts. Since the latter possibility is exceedingly rare, one could conclude in principle that analogy to real-world vision does not seem to furnish an adequate basis for the interpretation of editing of this general type.

This conclusion is not supported, however, by the findings of experimental research on inexperienced viewers' interpretations of narrative editing. These findings come from a set of studies by Renée Hobbs and other investigators. Working in a Kenyan village whose inhabitants had had no previous exposure to movies, Hobbs and her colleagues tested the villagers' comprehension of videotaped stories based on the local culture and produced in two different versions, one with editing, the other without. The unedited versions of the videos were shot in one long take in which camera movement was used to follow a continuous action. In the edited versions, the same action was interrupted by conventional, Hollywood-style cutting. The villagers' comprehension of both versions was good, and, more to the point, there were no significant differences in level of comprehension between the two versions. It is conceivable, then, that editing in a single location and time frame is actually an adequate analogue of real-world informational cues, despite its superficial divergence from the possibilities of real-world perception. It is certainly true that in the process of real-world vision our minds have to create a coherent whole out of information collected by the eyes through a process of jumping around from one momentary view to another. Still, these momentary views are all produced from a single vantage point, whereas the typical edited sequence in a movie is not. Furthermore, the brain's piecing together of successive real-world views is not yet understood well enough to provide a theoretical explanation for any assumption of an analogical connection between that process and movie editing.

These considerations leave open the alternative conclusion that the empirical findings in this area are due to some other factor, including the possibility that contextual knowledge related to the movies' familiar subject matter allows viewers to override any difficulties encountered in making sense of the editing.

Editing across Locations or Time Frames. When an editing transition breaks the continuity of time or space—as is the case in such situations as scene changes, flashbacks, montage sequences, or most kinds of non-narrative editing—there can be no question of an analogy to real-world visual experience. Instead, film theorists have sometimes argued that transitions of this sort replicate the conceptual juxtapositions that occur in other modes of communication, most notably language. Such affinities between movies and other modes undoubtedly do exist, although the direction of influence is often unclear. There is also some reason to believe that familiarity with verbal narrative conventions can take the place of visual literacy as a basis for the comprehension of scene-change editing. Hobbs's research in Kenya investigated viewers' interpretations of a movie with space-time transitions. Despite the fact that one of the transitions was a flashback, these inexperienced viewers were able to give fluent accounts of the story presented in the movie. Similarly, in a journalistic report of an Amazonian tribe's first encounters with Hollywood movies, *New Yorker* writer John Colapinto has noted that audience members had no trouble following the action in the 2005 version of *King Kong*, despite the complexity and rapid pace of its editing. As indicated earlier, however, it is possible that these findings reflect viewers' abilities to use contextual information as a guide for their interpretations, as opposed to decoding the meaning of individual editing transitions by analogy to specific verbal devices.

In general, then, the commonly held belief that film interpretation requires a specifically cinematic literacy does not appear to mesh with available research findings, and this seems true not only of individual images but also of editing. On the other hand, the theoretical basis for these findings is by no means secure. While the argument for an analogy to real-world perception is relatively clear as far as single images are concerned, it is less so in the case of editing within a single location and time frame, and irrelevant in the case of other kinds of editing. It should be emphasized, though, that these observations apply mainly to that aspect of interpretation that is concerned with identifying the "literal" content of a movie: the characters, actions, and places depicted in it. Arguments against the need for visual literacy have been much less concerned with the connotations of a movie's stylistic characteristics, perhaps because it is taken for granted that analogical connections to real-world experience cannot occur in the case of such features. Yet, evidence indicative of such connections is not hard to come by. For example, in an experiment on the gender

connotations of visual form, Aletha C. Huston and others found that young children were able to assign gender to advertisements purely on the basis of such stylistic features as editing rhythm, equating staccato editing with masculinity and smooth editing with femininity. Unless the children's performance was simply a result of learned associations between these editing styles and gender connotations, these findings suggest that the children may have had an implicit sense of an analogical connection between the editing and traditional images of gender characteristics. Such a connection could also be seen as a canonical example of perceptual modularity: in these children's interpretations the temporal quality of action or behavior appears to have carried meaning in and of itself, independently of the entities embodying that quality. It should not be difficult to imagine other stylistic features—shapes, colors, camera movements, and the like—that could function similarly for viewers, whether with regard to gender or in other areas of meaning.

[*See also* Imagery; *and* Psychology of Art.]

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Film and Documentary

The documentary film or video is often distinguished from its poorer relation—the information or instructional film—by its fusion of "dramatic" or "creative" elements with the presentation of information. This creative or dramatic requirement has traditionally served to distinguish the documentary from the nonfiction film, the latter designation more broadly covering all films not fictional. Thus, Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), a documentary, is elevated above the U.S. Army instructional film, *How to Make Your Bed,* in part as a result of differences in artistic merit.

When British filmmaker and producer John Grierson called documentary "the creative treatment of actuality," he initiated an ongoing discussion of its purposes and forms. In fact, the two poles his succinct phrase suggests—first, presenting information and recording actual scenes and sounds ("treatment of actuality"), and second, rhetoric and aesthetics ("creative treatment")—often exist in uneasy alliance. The simultaneous need to record/reveal/inform *and* to create has long been central to discussions of documentary film. Recent developments in digital technologies are also important for any consideration of contemporary documentary.

Popular notions of the documentary downplay the poetic role of the filmmaker. One schema for documentary, derived from television journalism, considers it to be objective. Here "objective" refers to requirements for balance, fairness, and restraint in representation. According to this characterization, prototypical documentaries are journalistic and include, for example, episodes of *CBS Reports, 48 Hours, 60 Minutes,* or *Frontline.* Critics of journalistic documentary find its claim of objectivity to be deceptive; objectivity, they say, is impossible, since no filmmaker can escape perspective or point of view. For these critics, objectivity in television journalism is a conventional practice that masks subtle biases and perspectives. Such criticisms fail, however, to consider *perspective-relative,* as opposed to absolute, objectivity. Although every documentary has a perspective or point of view, one film may still be more or less objective than another, depending on its treatment of a subject. All else being equal, the documentary portraying alternative points of view A, B, and C on a controversial subject is more objective than one portraying only A, though neither documentary may be objective in an absolute sense. Neither does the presence of point of view cancel requirements for good evidence. Recognizing that all