

Summary: Style and Film Form

In Part Two, we considered how the parts of a film create its overall *form* and how that form engages the viewer. In this, the third part of the book, we've explored the techniques of the film medium. Just as narrative filmmakers decide how to construct a plot that will shape the viewer's experience, they make choices within each of the areas of technique we've examined—mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound—and then organize those choices. The distinctive patterns of technique we find in a film constitute its **style**.

The Concept of Style



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Two radically different film styles are considered in “Tony and Theo.” For an example of a filmmaker’s distinctive style, see “Alexander Payne’s vividly shot reality.”

From the start of this book, when we examined Michael Mann’s production of *Collateral*, we’ve seen how artistic decisions govern a film’s distinctive style.

The earlier chapters in this part showed how a film’s style is coordinated with its overall form. Buster Keaton’s use of deep space reinforces the comedy of *Our Hospitality*’s plot, and Jean Renoir’s long takes and camera movements create connections and parallels among characters in *Grand Illusion*. John Huston’s choices about continuity editing emphasize certain aspects of the opening of *The Maltese Falcon*, while Sergei Eisenstein’s discontinuity editing provides thematic commentary on the action of *October*. We’ve also analyzed how the opening sequence of *The Conversation* establishes story action and creates ambiguities about who is hearing what. Our smaller examples have pointed to the same conclusion: Patterns of techniques work within the film’s overall form, shaping the effects the movie has on its viewer.

As a start, then, we use the term “style” to talk about particular films. Sometimes, though, critics talk about style in several films by the same filmmaker. We examined how *Our Hospitality* organizes its comic mise-en-scene around long shots; this is part of Buster Keaton’s style in other films, too. It’s not surprising that we extend the term to talk about a filmmaker’s distinctive style across several films. Everyone builds up certain habits in ordinary life, a particular way of dressing or talking or behaving with others, and we often call that his or her personal style.

In art, as in ordinary life, this styling may be done deliberately or without much thought. Either way, it comes down to decisions. Recall a quotation from Chapter 2: “At the point of making the movie,” says Ethan Coen, “it’s just about making individual choices,” and his brother Joel adds: “You make specific choices that you think are appropriate or compelling or interesting for that particular scene. Then, at the end of the day, you put it all together and somebody looks at it and, if there’s some consistency to it, they say, ‘Well, that’s their style.’”

“The choices you make push you in a certain direction, and that becomes what people call style.”

—Chris Doyle, cinematographer,
Chungking Express



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A screenwriter-director explains his choices in “David Koepp: Making the world movie-sized.”

The term “style” has still other meanings. Sometimes we speak of a *group style*—the consistent use of techniques across the work of several filmmakers. We can speak of a German Expressionist style or a Soviet montage style. In Part Six, we consider some significant group styles that have emerged in film history.

CREATIVE DECISIONS

Style and the Filmmaker

Throughout this book we’ve suggested that considering a filmmaker’s creative options can make you a keener viewer. When it comes to style, as with form, creative choices aren’t infinite. The filmmaker is always choosing within limits.

What can limit the choices? For one thing, technology. Before 1928, directors didn’t have the option of using synchronized dialogue, and making films in lifelike color was very difficult and expensive. Even today, when the range of technical choices seems far broader, there are limits. Contemporary filmmakers can’t use the orthochromatic film stock of the silent era, although in some respects it was superior to today’s stocks. As digital grading improved, filmmakers had to abandon the advantages of photochemical grading.

It isn’t only technology that constrains creative choices. So do tastes, fashion, dominant trends, and stylistic norms. D. W. Griffith is acclaimed as a great director, but directors today would be reluctant to let their performers display the sort of acting we find in *Intolerance*. Few directors have the power to make a black-and-white film today, since it’s widely believed that audiences will spurn films that aren’t in full color. Changes in viewers’ tastes eliminate certain options.

Some constraints, as we saw in Chapter 1, stem from the mode of production in which the filmmaker works. The studio mode of production developed a standardized menu of options, such as continuity editing, partly because that makes planning, shooting, and postproduction more efficient. Filmmakers working independently have more freedom to make daring choices about form and style, as is seen in limit cases like Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* but also in unusual films like *Memento* and *Run Lola Run*.

Filmmakers know that making one decision doesn’t end the matter. One choice leads to further choices—and constraints. If you shoot a conversation in the intensified continuity technique, giving each speaker a tight single shot, you’ll probably have to cut more often. You need to remind the audience of the other characters who are present, even if they don’t speak. If you choose to play a scene in a long take, your actors’ performances must be more carefully timed and executed than if you build the scene out of lots of cuts. Choosing to shoot in 3D enforces a new set of constraints. With a distant convergence point (p. 180), a character in the foreground can’t be partly cut off by the left or right frameline, because then the audience sees a bisected body floating out at them. Every choice creates new problems to be solved.

As a result of pressures like these, a filmmaker tends to rely on similar techniques across the film. After certain choices have been made in one scene, it’s easier to replicate them in another. But there are more positive reasons why directors embrace certain possibilities and rule out others. Most directors feel comfortable with a particular stylistic option because it suits the stories they’re telling. Antonioni’s complex staging techniques in *L’Avventura* are appropriate for characters whose feelings fluctuate unpredictably from moment to moment (4.124, 4.125). The filmmaker’s personality plays a role too. Some directors prefer straightforward, efficient technique, while others, like Alfred Hitchcock and James Cameron, enjoy setting themselves technical problems. And some filmmakers want to find new possibilities in the techniques that appeal to them. Eisenstein plunged into editing because he believed he could force it to do things it had never done before.

Decision Making: Techniques Working Together

Because one choice creates further choices later, filmmakers tend to think out their decisions fairly carefully. Many, for instance, watch for ways to create parallels among situations and characters. Piotr Sobociński, cinematographer for Krzysztof Kieslowski, says that in *Three Colors: Red*, a crane shot down to a fashion show was designed to recall an earlier camera movement, when the camera craned down as a book fell into the street. Similarly, in filming *Viva Zapata!* Elia Kazan tracked in on Zapata, who is ignoring the fact that a crowd of peasants is marching with him. “We had to go close on that shot and dolly [i.e., track] because what I wanted to show was his expression or lack of expression. We later contrasted that with a similar dolly shot on the police chief beginning to notice what was happening. The point was to contrast those two attitudes.”

Films setting up narrative or thematic contrasts may recruit several techniques to reinforce them. Jacques Tati’s *Mon Oncle* opposes the charm and community spirit of old Parisian neighborhoods to the sterile, enclosed homes that replace them. M. Hulot lives in a ramshackle apartment building on a quiet little square. The Arpel family—Hulot’s sister, brother-in-law, and nephew—have just moved into an ultramodern house full of high-tech gadgets and chic but uncomfortable furniture. Scenes in Hulot’s neighborhood tend to be accompanied by jaunty music. In this locale, the camera stays outside his apartment, stressing the interactions of the many people living and working around the square (8.1). By contrast, the Arpel scenes contain no music. Instead, we hear the tapping of shoes on stone floors and the clicks and whirs of the absurd appliances. There are frequent shots inside the house, and the street is almost invisible behind the family’s security wall (8.2).

Many filmmakers let stylistic elements cooperate to differentiate locales or story lines. In *Inception*, a complicated science fiction plot takes its characters into four layers of dreams within dreams. Each dream level involves a distinct fantasy world, and about midway through the film, the action starts shifting abruptly among these levels. Yet settings, costumes, lighting, color schemes, weather, and other aspects of the mise-en-scene allow us to keep track of which level each shot occurs in (8.3–8.6). Cinematographer Wally Pfister said of the different levels, “We wanted to have the color palette change quite a bit when we go from one location to another. . . . You immediately know where you are, even if we cut to a tighter shot or to something that is slightly out of context. It’s a choice that helps tell the story.” Steven Soderbergh’s *Traffic* uses color contrasts to help spectators follow the three plotlines as he crosscuts them. There are washed-out, yellow images for the scenes in Mexico, blue-cast scenes for the story of a newly appointed drug czar and his addicted daughter, and a more conventional range of colors for scenes involving the wealthy wife of an arrested drug smuggler.

When we see techniques lining up and working together this way, it’s likely that the patterning has been created more or less consciously by the filmmaker. Perhaps it wasn’t done through elaborate storyboarding or deep thought. Often, as the Coens’ remarks suggest, a director may shoot one scene fairly spontaneously, then realize that another scene could parallel it through lighting or music or some other technique. That is, the filmmaker may discover significant patterns while making the film. The task then becomes to find ways to enhance those patterns in ways that will give the audience a particular experience.



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We trace the stylistic and formal development of a major contemporary filmmaker in “The sarcastic laments of Béla Tarr.” On the styles of two art film directors of the previous generation, see “Bergman, Antonioni, and the stubborn stylists.”



8.1



8.2

8.1–8.2 Old style community, modern domestic fortress. In *Mon Oncle*, Mr. Hulot chats with a neighbor while others pass (8.1). The Arpels’ inconveniently laid-out garden has a metal security door that blots out their view of the street (8.2).



8.3



8.4



8.5



8.6

8.3–8.6 Differentiating dreams. *Inception*'s first dream level takes place mostly outdoors in a city, with a white, gray, and black color scheme tinged with blue. In this dream, it's raining (8.3). The second dream's action occurs inside a hotel. The characters wear business clothes, and the corridors and bathrooms have warm brown and orange tones (8.4). The next level involves a large gray fortress and white costumes, set against a snowy mountain landscape (8.5). Finally, "Limbo" places the characters in deserted cities and bare seascapes, where high-contrast sunshine creates both glare and deep shadows (8.6).

Watching and Listening: Style and the Viewer

During a film, the filmmakers' stylistic choices register on us at every moment. We don't take them in passively; we're alert to them, even though we may not be aware of how sensitive we are.

For example, we tend to have expectations about style. If we see two characters in a long shot, we expect a cut-in to a closer view. If the actor seems about to leave the frame, we expect the camera to pan or track to keep the person in the shot. If a character speaks, we expect to hear diegetic sound that is faithful to its source. Like other kinds of expectations, stylistic ones derive from both our experience of the world generally (people talk; they don't chirp) and our experience of film and other media. The specific film's style can confirm our expectations, or modify them or challenge them.

The conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema and of specific genres provide a firm basis for reinforcing our prior assumptions. But other films ask us to revise our expectations somewhat. *Our Hospitality* accustoms us to deep-space manipulations of figures and objects, while *Grand Illusion* makes us expect that camera movements will link characters. Still other films make highly unusual technical choices, and to follow them we must construct new stylistic expectations. The editing discontinuities in *October* and the distorted sound track in *The Conversation* in effect teach us how to understand the film's distinctive style.

In other words, a director directs not only the cast and crew. A director also directs us, directs our attention, and thus shapes our reaction. The filmmaker's technical decisions affect what we perceive and how we respond.

Analyzing Style

In watching a narrative film, we usually don't notice style; we're too busy following the story. Suppose, though, we want to notice stylistic patterning—to enhance our appreciation, or to understand how we might also create films. How can we study style?

One suggestion is apparent: *Look and listen carefully*. But what should we watch and listen for? The last four chapters have made plenty of suggestions. We've also urged you: *Think like a filmmaker*. That mindset can coax you into considering the functions of what you're seeing and hearing. In addition, you can try picking a single scene and concentrating on how techniques blend to create particular effects. We'll do that shortly.

First let's consider four general questions we can ask in trying to understand a film's style.

1. What Is the Film's Overall Form?

A good starting point is to think about how the film is put together as a whole. If it's a narrative film, it will draw on all the principles discussed in Chapter 3. (Not all films tell stories. We'll discuss other types of form in Chapter 10.) Typically, we'll confront a plot that cues us to construct a story. The film will manipulate causality, time, and space. It will probably give characters some goals, motives, thoughts, and feelings, all of which need to be conveyed to the viewer through form and style. The film will use its opening (abrupt or gradual) to introduce a situation. It will have a distinct pattern of development—a search, a journey, an escalating conflict. Characters will change, situations will become emotionally weighted, and parallels will emerge. The film's narration will manipulate what we know and how and when we learn of it, to guide us toward specific responses. And it may play games with conventions by rearranging scenes in time, manipulating degrees of subjectivity, or otherwise challenging us to create a story out of the plot's presentation. Whatever the film's overall form, once you have a grasp on it, you'll find it easier to understand how style works, and works on us.

2. What Are the Main Techniques Being Used?

Here your analysis can draw on our survey of technical possibilities in Chapters 4–7. You can look for things like color, lighting, framing, cutting, and sound. Once you notice them, you can identify them as creative options: not just music, but nondiegetic music; not just framing, but low-angle framing.

Noting and naming are only the beginning. You should try to identify *salient* techniques. What techniques does the film most rely on? The jerky forward zoom in *Wavelength* and the rapid, discontinuous editing of *October* stand out because they play a central role in the overall effect of each film.

In addition, what is salient depends partly on your interests. If a film's style strikes you as typical of a broader approach to filmmaking, you may focus on how the technique conforms to stylistic expectations. The 180-degree editing of *The Maltese Falcon* isn't obvious or emphasized, but adherence to rules of classical continuity is one characteristic of the film's style. Our purpose in Chapter 6 was to show that the film is typical in this respect.

If you want to explore more unusual stylistic devices, you can concentrate on more original, even puzzling choices. Eisenstein's editing in *October* is unusual, representing choices that few filmmakers would make. It was the originality of these options that we chose to stress in Chapter 6. From the standpoint of originality, costume in *October* isn't as salient a stylistic feature as editing because it isn't as original. Your decision about what techniques are salient will be influenced partly by what the film emphasizes, and partly by what you're interested in knowing more about.

3. What Patterns Are Formed by the Techniques?

Once you've identified salient techniques, you can notice how they are organized. Techniques will be repeated and varied, developed and paralleled, across the whole film or within a single segment. Chapters 4–7 have shown how this occurs in some films.

You can zero in on stylistic patterns in two ways. One way is to reflect on your responses. If a scene begins with a track-in, do you expect that it will end with



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We discuss *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* and some aspects of Steven Spielberg's editing and use of light in "Reflections in a crystal eye."



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Some unusual examples of sound/image patterning are analyzed in "Play it again, Joan."

8.7–8.10 Patterns of camera distance and angle. During the initial conversation in *The Silence of the Lambs*, shooting in depth emphasizes the distance between Clarice and Lecter, and each one looks slightly to the right or left (8.7, 8.8). As their conversations become more intense and intimate, the camera positions move closer to each character and shift subtly toward the axis of action until each person is looking directly into the lens (8.9, 8.10).



8.7



8.8



8.9



8.10

a track-out? If you see a character looking left, do you assume that someone or something is offscreen and will be revealed in the next shot? If you feel a mounting excitement in an action scene, is that traceable to a quickening tempo in the music or to accelerating editing?

A second strategy is to look for stylistic patterns that reinforce the unfolding narrative. As we've seen throughout this part of the book, filmmakers often deliberately design the film's style to create parallels or underscore developments in the drama. Shifting color schemes reflect three stages of the plot's development in *Women in Love* (4.42–4.44). A repetition of a key line of dialogue in *The Conversation* creates mystery and leads to conflicting interpretations (p. 301).

Even within a shorter span, style can create a subtle sense of narrative progression. A scene usually has a dramatic pattern of encounter, conflict, and outcome, and the style often reflects this, with the cutting becoming more marked and the shots coming closer to the characters as the scene progresses. We saw this happening in our *Maltese Falcon* scene (6.54–6.74). In *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example, the scenes between Clarice Starling and Hannibal Lecter tend to begin with conventional shot/reverse-shot conversations but become more intimate and psychologically revealing (**8.7–8.10**). In a later chapter, we'll see how style can also reinforce the organization of nonnarrative films.

Occasionally, stylistic patterning doesn't accord neatly with the overall structure of the film. Style can claim our attention in its own right. We saw this happen in such experimental films as *Serene Velocity* and *Wavelength*. It can happen in more straightforward narratives, too. In 6.144 and 6.145, a cut from a washline to a living room acts as a transition between scenes. But the cut is of interest for other reasons, too, since we don't expect a narrative film to treat objects as flat patches of color to be matched across shots. This sort of attention to graphic play is more common in abstract form.

In this passage from Ozu's *Ohayo*, a stylistic choice becomes salient because it goes beyond its narrative function. Even here, though, stylistic patterns continue to call on the viewer's expectations and to draw the spectator into a dynamic process. Anyone who notices the graphic match on red objects in *Ohayo* will most likely be intrigued at such an unconventional way of editing. And, if stylistic patterns do swerve off on their own, we still need a sense of the film's narrative organization to show how and when that happens.



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In "Alignment, allegiance, and murder," we consider how staging, camera position, and cutting blend to create a play of point-of-view in a scene.

4. What Functions Do the Techniques and Patterns Fulfill?

Now we look for the role that style plays in the film's overall form. Does the use of music or noise alter our attitude toward a character? Does the composition of the shot tend to make us concentrate on a particular detail (4.153, the shot of Anne's face in *Day of Wrath*)? Does the use of camera movement hold off story information to create suspense, as in the opening of *Touch of Evil* (pp. 213–215)? Does the use of discontinuous editing cue us to create thematic comparisons, as in the sequence we analyzed in *October* (pp. 259–262)?

A direct route to noticing function is to notice the *effects* of the film on our viewing experience. Style may enhance *emotional* aspects of the film. Rapid cutting in *The Birds* triggers shock, while the solo piano score in *The Conversation* underlines Harry's melancholy and loneliness. The sadness of Elsa's life with her daughter in *Grand Illusion* is conveyed by the tracking shot to the table that is "too large," especially when we compare that shot with Rauffenstein's conscription of a chapel for his quarters (5.183–5.193). Style is intimately tied to the emotions that the film expresses and that it can engender in the viewer.

Style also shapes *meaning*. Eisenstein clearly wants us to take away a message from the *October* sequence: The Provisional Government is dictatorial, oppressing both the families at home and the soldiers on the front. We should, however, avoid reading isolated elements atomistically, taking them out of context. As we noted on p. 190, a high angle does not automatically mean "defeat," just as a low angle does not automatically mean "power." Thematic interpretation can be sensitive to contexts—the particular scene, the whole film, the patterns of techniques, and the overall effects.

Meaning is only one type of effect, and there is no reason to expect that every stylistic feature will yield thematic significance. One part of a director's job is to direct our attention, and so style will often function simply *perceptually*—to get us to notice things, to emphasize one thing over another, to clarify, intensify, or complicate our understanding of the action. One shot in *Red Beard* makes the woman patient seem close to the young doctor, but another corrects that impression (5.39, 5.40). Here, as often happens, film style is readjusting the story information we're getting, guiding our uptake moment by moment.

One way to sharpen our sense of the functions of specific techniques is to *imagine alternatives* and reflect on what differences would result. Suppose the director had made a different technical choice. How would this create a different effect?

Our Hospitality creates its gags by putting two elements into the same shot and letting us observe the comic juxtaposition. Suppose Keaton had instead isolated each element in a single shot and then linked the two elements by editing. The basic information might be the same, but our response would be different. Instead of a simultaneous presentation that lets our attention shuttle to and fro, we would have a more step-by-step pattern of building up the gags and paying them off. Or, suppose that John Huston had handled the opening scene of *The Maltese Falcon* as a single take with camera movement. How would he then have drawn our attention to Brigid O'Shaughnessy's and Sam Spade's facial reactions, and how would this have affected our expectations? By focusing on effects and imagining alternatives to the technical choices that were made, the analyst can gain a sharp sense of the particular functions of style in the given film.

The rest of this chapter provides three illustrations of how we can analyze film style. First we concentrate on a single scene, from Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*. (See "A Closer Look.") This will show you how all the techniques we've surveyed can work together to create a specific attitude toward a character and a phase of story action. Even though we focus on one scene, our analysis has to take other scenes, and the film's overall narrative form, into account.



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For a discussion of how various techniques of film style can function to call our attention to items of narrative importance, see "Gradation of emphasis, starring Glenn Ford."

“There's no scene in any movie that 50 different directors couldn't have done 50 different ways.”

—Paul Mazursky, director



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Subtle stylistic echoes enrich *The Prestige*, as we show in "Niceties: How classical filmmaking can be at once simple and precise."



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For another example of Hitchcock's style, see "Sir Alfred simply must have his set pieces."