

Chapter 3

Film languages

- Culture and language 66
- Film as a signifying practice 72
- The signifying systems 73
- Reading the film 92
- Suggestions for further work 94

The title of this chapter may require explanation. Film is not, of course, a language but it does generate its meanings through systems (cinematography, sound editing, and so on) which work like languages. To understand how this idea might help in our analysis of films, and to understand the limits of this idea, we need to go back to some very basic principles. The first step is to see film as communication. The second step is to place film communication within a wider system for generating meaning – that of the culture itself.

Culture and language

Notoriously difficult to define neatly, culture, as I intend to discuss it here, is a dynamic process which produces the behaviours, the practices, the institutions, and the meanings which constitute our social existence. Culture comprises the processes of making sense of our way of life. Cultural studies theorists, drawing particularly on semiotics, have argued that language is the major mechanism through which culture produces and reproduces social meanings. The definition of language developed in this tradition of thought goes well beyond that of the normal definition of verbal or written language. For semioticians such as Roland Barthes (1973), 'language' includes all those systems from which we can select and combine elements in order to communicate. So dress can be a language: by changing our fashions (selecting and combining our garments and thus the meanings that culture attributes to them) we can change what our clothes 'say' about us and our place within the culture.

Ferdinand de Saussure is commonly held to be the founder of European semiotics. He argued that language is not, as is commonly thought, a system of nomenclature. We do not simply invent names for things as they are encountered or invented; thus the Bible story of Adam naming the objects in Eden cannot be an accurate account of how language works (whatever else it might be). If language simply named things, there would be no difficulty in translating from one language to another. But there is difficulty, because cultures share some concepts and objects but not others. The Eskimos have many words for snow, since it has great significance within their

physical and social worlds; Australian Aboriginal languages have no word for money as the function that money serves does not exist within their original cultures; and every viewer of westerns will know that American Indians were supposed to be unable to comprehend the concept of lying (i.e. their language did not enable them to 'think it' or 'talk it'): hence the formula 'white man speak with forked tongue'. Even cultures which share the same language are not made up of precisely the same components, and so Australians, Americans, and Britons will attribute significance to the components of their worlds in different ways. The language system of a culture carries that culture's system of priorities, its specific set of values, its specific composition of the physical and social world.

What language does is to construct, not label, reality for us. We cannot think without language, so it is difficult to imagine 'thinking' things for which we have no language. We become members of our culture through language, we acquire our sense of personal identity through language, and we internalize the value systems which structure our lives through language. We cannot step 'outside' language in order to produce a set of our own meanings which are totally independent of the cultural system.

Nevertheless, it is possible to use our language to say new things, to articulate new concepts, to incorporate new objects. But we do this through existing terms and meanings, through the existing vocabularies of words and ideas in our language. A new object might be defined by connecting it with existing analogous objects – as is clear in the word 'typewriter' – or new ideas will interpellate themselves by trying to redefine current terms and usage – as feminism has done in its attack on sexist usage. Individual utterances are thus both unique *and* culturally determined. This apparent contradiction is explained by Saussure's useful distinction between the *langue* of the culture (the potential for individual utterances within a language system), and the *parole* (the individual utterance composed by choices from the *langue*). The distinction roughly corresponds to that between language and speech, and it reminds us that, although there are vast possibilities for originality in the *langue*, there are also things we cannot say, meanings that cannot be produced within any one specific language system.

All of the above is as true of film 'languages' as it is of verbal language, although the connection to film may seem a little distant at the moment. The operation of language, however, provides us with a central model of the way culture produces meaning, regardless of the medium of communication.

Language constructs meanings in two ways. The literal, or denotative, meaning of a word is attached to it by usage. It is a dictionary style of meaning where the relation between the word and the object it refers to is relatively fixed. The word 'table' is widely understood to refer to a flat topped object on (usually) four legs upon which we might rest our dinner, books, or a vase, and which has variants such as the coffee table and the dinner table. The denotative meaning is not its only meaning (in fact, it is doubtful that anything is understood purely literally). Words, and the things to which they refer, accrue associations, connotations, and social meanings, as they are used. The word 'politician', for instance, is not a neutral word in most Western cultures. It can be used as a term of abuse or criticism, or even as a sly compliment to someone who is not actually a politician but who manipulates people with sufficient subtlety to invite the comparison. The word can have specifically negative connotations because it can mobilize the negative associations attached to politicians. This second kind of meaning, the connotative, is interpretative and depends upon the user's cultural experience rather than on a dictionary. It is in connotation that we find the social dimension of language.

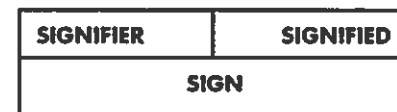
Images, as well as words, carry connotations. A filmed image of a man will have a denotative dimension – it will refer to the mental concept of 'man'. But images are culturally charged: the camera angle employed, his position within the frame, the use of lighting to highlight certain aspects, any effect achieved by colour, tinting, or processing, would all have the potential for social meaning. When we deal with images it is especially apparent that we are not only dealing with the object or the concept they represent, but we are also dealing with *the way in which they are represented*. There is a 'language' for visual representation, too, sets of codes and conventions used by the audience to make sense of what they see. Images reach us as already 'encoded' messages, already represented as

meaningful in particular ways. One of the tasks of film analysis is to discover how this is done, both in particular films and in general.

We need to understand how this language-like system works. Methods which deal only with verbal or written language are not entirely appropriate. So it is useful to employ a system of analysis which began with verbal language but which has broadened out to include those other activities which produce social meaning. The work of all these activities is called 'signification' – the making of significance – and the method is called semiotics. Once we understand the basic premises of semiotics we can apply them to the particular 'signifying practices' of film: the various media and technologies through which film's meanings are produced.

Semiotics sees social meaning as the product of the relationships constructed between 'signs'. The 'sign' is the basic unit of communication, and it can be a photograph, a traffic signal, a word, a sound, an object, a smell, whatever the culture finds significant. In film, we could talk of the signature tune of the shark in *Jaws* or the face of John Travolta as a sign. They signify, respectively, a particular version of 'shark-ness' (those meanings constructed around the shark in *Jaws*) and 'John Travolta-ness' (again, the mental concepts and meanings, both from within and outside a specific film, which are constructed around John Travolta). We can also talk of the way different signifying systems (sound, image) work to combine their signs into a more complicated message; the helicopter attack, musically accompanied by 'The Ride of the Valkyries', in *Apocalypse Now!* is such a case.

Theoretically, the sign can be broken down into two parts. The *signifier* is the physical form of the sign: the image, or word, or photograph. The *signified* is the mental concept referred to. Together they form the sign. A photographic image of a tree is a signifier. It becomes a sign when we connect it with its signified – the mental concept of what a tree is. The structure of the sign can be represented diagrammatically like this:



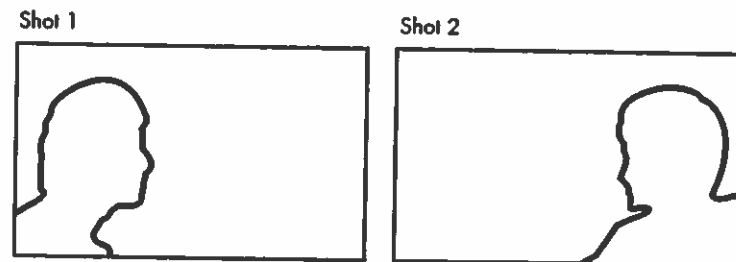
To extend this, let us refer back to our earlier example, of fashion as a language. When we change our garments to change our 'look', what we are doing is changing the signifiers through which we represent ourselves. We change our fashions (signifiers) to change what we mean to others (the signified). Our social identities are signs, too.

Signifiers carry connotations. Semiotics has enquired into advertising to show how the selection of signifiers with positive connotations (water-skiing, relaxing by a pool) is used to transpose these associations on to an accompanying advertised product, such as cigarettes. Signifieds, too, accrue social meanings. You will react to a picture of Bill Clinton in terms of opinions you already hold about his controversial personal life as well as about his political career. Such a picture mobilizes a second, less literal, chain of cultural meanings through the specific signifiers used, and the ideas we already have of Clinton himself.

It is with this second level of meaning that we will be most concerned in this book, because it is where the work of signification takes place in film: in the organizing of representation to make a specific sense for a specific audience. Semiotics offers us access to such activity because it allows us to separate ideas from their representation (at least, theoretically) in order to see how our view of the world or of a film is constructed. It does this by closely analysing a film (or a view of the world) as a 'text', a set of forms, relationships, and meanings. Those wishing to follow semiotic theory a little further can find a good introduction in Fiske (1982), but for the moment a definition of the three terms, 'signifier', 'signified', and 'sign', is all that is necessary to understand the following chapters' application of semiotics to film.

Film narratives have developed their own signifying systems. Film has its own 'codes' – shorthand methods of establishing social or narrative meanings; and its own conventions – sets of rules which audiences agree to observe and which, for example, allow us to overlook the lack of realism in a typical musical sequence. (When a singer is accompanied by an orchestra, we do not expect to find it in the frame just because it is on the soundtrack.) At the level of the signifier, film has developed a rich set of codes and conventions.

When the camera moves to a close-up, this tends to indicate strong emotion or crisis. At the end of love scenes we might see a slow fade or a slow loss of focus, or a modest pan upwards from the lovers' bodies – all coy imitations of the audience averting their eyes but all signifying the continuation and completion of the act. The shot–reverse shot system (see Illustration 8) is a convention for representing conversation. The use of music to signify emotion is conventional, too, as there is no real reason why the orchestra should build up to a crescendo during a clinch. Slow-motion sequences are usually used to aestheticize – to make beautiful and instil significance into their subjects. Slow-motion death scenes were in vogue during the late 1960s and early 1970s in films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969); the aim was not simply to glamorize death but to mythologize these particular deaths – injecting them with added significance and power. Slow-motion love scenes both aestheticize and eroticize. Genres are composed from sets of narrative and representational conventions. To understand them, audiences must, in a sense, bring the set of rules with them into the cinema, in the form of the cultural knowledge of what a western or a musical is. The role of the audience in determining meaning cannot be overestimated.



The spatial relations are reversed in the successive shots, as if to 'extend the boundaries' of the frame to include both parties to the conversation. The alternation of shots tells us they are speaking to each other.

8 The shot–reverse shot system for representing conversation

Film as a signifying practice

Film is not one discrete system of signification, as writing is. Film incorporates the separate technologies and discourses of the camera, lighting, editing, set design, and sound – all contributing to the meaning. No one system for producing meanings operates alone in film. Michael Keaton's performance as Batman is constructed through (at least) the portentous soundtrack, the choice of camera angles (he is consistently shot from below, exaggerating his size and power), the spectacular art direction, the lighting, and the interrelationships between all of these.

It is now time to qualify the analogy I have so far drawn between film and language. Written and spoken languages have a grammar, formally taught and recognized systems which determine the selection and combination of words into utterances, regulating the generation of meanings. There is no such system in film. Film has no equivalent to syntax – no ordering system which would determine how shots should be combined in sequence. Nor is there a parallel between the function of a single shot in a film and that of a word or sentence in written or verbal communication. A single shot can last minutes. In it, dialogue can be uttered, characters' movements and thus relationships can be manipulated, and a physical or historical setting outlined. This may be equivalent to a whole chapter in a novel.

If there is a grammar of film, it is minimal and it works like this. Firstly, each shot is related to those adjacent to it. As we watch a film we often defer our understanding of one shot until we see the next. When we see a character addressing another offscreen, our view of the significance of those words may have to wait until we see the following shot, depicting the person being addressed. Secondly, unlike the grammar of written language which is to a large degree explicitly culturally regulated, relationships between shots in a film have to be constructed through less stable sets of conventions. Much depends not only on the audience's 'competences' (their experience of, or skill at, reading film), but also on the film-maker's ability to construct any relationships which are not governed by convention.

The construction of a relationship between shots can be the first moment in understanding a narrative film. But the process is not as simple as it sounds. Readers will remember that Chapter 2 dealt with a major theoretical argument about exactly how this process worked – through constructing relationships between shots (montage) or through constructing relationships within shots (*mise-en-scène*). We know that these are not mutually exclusive and that both kinds of relationships are constructed by film-makers and interpreted by audiences. Both terms occur later in this chapter, as we move to a survey of the basic signifying practices employed in film production.

The signifying systems

The following survey will not be a full taxonomy (I do not talk about titles or produce a complete list of special effects, for instance), but it will provide a basis for work now and further reading later.

The camera

Probably the most complex set of practices in film production involves the manipulation of the camera itself. The film stock used, the angle of the camera, the depth of its field of focus, the format of screen size (for example, Cinemascope or widescreen), movement, and framing all serve specific functions in particular films, and all require some degree of explanation and attention.

Chapter 1 mentioned the different 'meanings' of colour and black-and-white film during the slow establishment of colour processing as the norm for feature film production. We can generalize from this to point out that different kinds of film stock with their differing chemical attributes and consequent visual effects are enclosed within different sets of conventions. Often black-and-white film stock is used to signify the past: it has been used to simulate the documentary in the Australian film *Newsfront* (1976) and in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), as well as suggest a nostalgic perspective on the past in Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979). At the

moment, black and white is sufficiently unusual to have some power as a special effect; music videos and television commercials from time to time make use of the process to give their texts a high fashion or avant-garde look. Film stock which is particularly fast – that is, it can shoot in conditions where there is little light – tends to be grainy or of poor definition (slightly blurred), and thus reminds us of newsreel or old documentary footage. Most films try not to look like this. The aim now is to capitalize on the vast superiority of film's clarity of definition when compared with that of domestic video tape or broadcast television. Developments in film stock have had a significant impact on cinema history. The celebrated *Citizen Kane* (1941) achieved revolutionary clarity and depth of field (the whole image, from the foreground to the far background, was sharply in focus) by pushing the film stock to its limit and by experimenting with lighting methods. The Australian film revival of the 1970s was assisted by Kodak's development of a new film stock which produced sharp definition in the harsh sunlight as well as in deep shadow.

The positioning of the camera is possibly the most apparent of the practices and technologies which contribute to the making of a film. The use of overhead, helicopter or crane shots can turn film into a performance art, exhilarating in the perspectives it offers the audience. Much of the appeal of Ridley Scott's classic *Thelma and Louise* could be seen to come from the spectacular use of the camera and it can be a major component of the visual style of special effects movies such as *Spiderman*, *Batman Begins*, and *The Matrix*. Less dramatic manipulation of camera angles also has an effect on the experience and meaning of a film. The camera can be directed either squarely or obliquely towards its subject, with rotation of the camera possible along its vertical axis (panning), its horizontal axis (tilting), or its transverse axis (rolling). If a camera is, as it were, looking down on its subject, its position is one of power. In *Citizen Kane*, a confrontation between Kane and his second wife Susan is played in a shot-reverse shot pattern which has Susan (or the camera) looking up to address Kane in one shot and Kane (or the camera) looking down to address Susan in the next shot. Susan is oppressed and diminished by the camera angle while Kane's stature is magnified. In this sequence, the manipulation of camera angles is the major means

by which the audience is informed about the changing relationship between the two characters.

Camera angles can identify a shot with a character's point of view by taking a position which corresponds to that which we imagine the particular character would be occupying: we see what the character would be seeing. In *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), Edward's struggle to get his peas on to his scissors and then to his mouth is shot as if the camera was his mouth. An extreme example of such a point-of-view shot is in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), where the camera adopts the point of view of a character who is about to shoot himself; when the gun fires, the screen goes blank. Point-of-view shots are important for motivation and also for controlling aspects of the audience's identification with the characters. The fact that the audience is under pressure to 'see' from the point of view of the camera has been exploited in varied ways. In the shark film *Jaws*, we are given numerous shots of the victims from the underwater point of view of the shark. The confusion caused by our discomfort with this alignment, and our privileged knowledge of the shark's proximity to the victim, exacerbates the tension and the impression of impotence felt by the audience, and enhances our sense of the vulnerability of the victims. The tactic is widely used in teen slasher films like *Scream* (1996), with the camera frequently adopting the point of view of the attacker as she or he closes in on the unsuspecting victim, usually from behind. The height of the camera and its distance from its subject can also have an effect on the meaning of a shot. A conventional means of narrative closure is to slowly pull the camera back so that the subject disappears into its surroundings. This technique can enhance the ambiguity of emotional response, or invite the audience to project their own emotions on to the scene, or serve as a distancing device. It can do all of these because it signifies the withdrawal of our close attention – the end of the narrative. The end of *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), for instance, deals with the fact that the lovers are now to be separated for ever by, among other things, the long shot of the heroine on the broad expanse of beach producing a gradual process of reflection and closure.

Panning the camera along the horizontal axis imitates the movement of the spectators' eyes as they survey the scene round

them. Very often such a movement is connected with the point of view of a character. The prelude to the gunfight in a western is often a slow pan around the streets to check for hidden gunmen, or to register the cowardly townsfolk's withdrawal, as well as to prolong the suspense and maximize our sense of the hero's isolation and vulnerability.

Rolling the camera gives the illusion of the world, either actually or metaphorically, being tipped on its side. This is sometimes done as a point-of-view shot, to indicate that the character is falling, or drugged, or sick, or otherwise likely to see the world oddly. It is also used in stunt and special-effect photography, and occasionally for comic effect. It can be extremely sinister and unsettling, as in the slight degree of roll in the initial sequences of *The Third Man* (1949) where the first pieces of the puzzle of Harry Lime are introduced, or during the intense dramatic confrontations between Alex and Dan in *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Camera roll most clearly indicates a world out of kilter one way or another.

The apparent movement of the camera, as in a close-up, can be accomplished through the manipulation of particular telephoto lenses, or what is commonly called the zoom lens. The actual forward or lateral movement of the camera apparatus is referred to as tracking or dollying, and it is often used in action sequences or as a point-of-view shot – the gunfighter walking down the empty street, for instance. As a point-of-view shot it can be very effective in enhancing audience identification with a character's experiences. A chase scene through a city street shot in this way can have a physical effect: it reproduces many of the perceptual activities involved in the experience and is thus convincingly 'real'. Alterations in focus have a signifying function. Most films aim at a very deep field of focus in which everything from the foreground to the far background is clear and sharp. Variations from this can have specific objectives. A soft focus on a character or background may pursue a romantic or lyrical effect, and was widely used in the romantic comedies during the 'classic period' of Hollywood; if we look at movies from the 1930s and 1940s we can see how routinely the female romantic lead is shot in such a way. In such situations, then and now, a halo around the star's face, created through the manipulation of focus or lighting, or



9 The glamour shot: Nicole Kidman

by placing vaseline or gauze on the lens, gives an exaggeratedly glamorous and dream-like effect. 'Rack' focus is used to direct the audience's attention from one character to another. This is accomplished by having one face in focus while the other is blurred, and using the switch in focus from one to the other for dramatic or symbolic effect.

The composition of images within the physical boundaries of the shot, the frame, requires close attention, and the function of the frame in either enclosing or opening out space around the images on the screen is also important. Figures and other elements can be moved around within the frame to great effect. As Charles Foster Kane moves towards Susan in their argument at Xanadu, his shadow falls over her, signifying domination. In another scene in *Citizen Kane*, Kane is defeated but the audience gradually apprehends the strength of his resistance as he moves from the background to the centre of the foreground, dominating those on either side of him. At times, the frame takes part in, rather than simply containing, the narrative. In the opening sequence of *The Searchers* (1956), the titles and credits give way to an apparently black screen over which appears the title 'Texas, 1868'. Then the image changes as a door opens to reveal that the black screen was a dark interior, the homestead, and through its door we look out on to the desert. The juxtaposition of an image of the wilderness with the enclosed domestic world of the homestead initiates a chain of contrasts which are thematically and structurally central to the film.

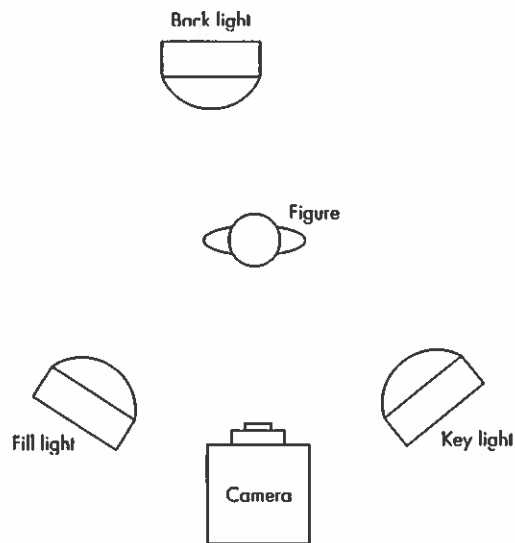
Lighting

It could be said that there are two main objectives to film lighting; the first is expressive – setting a mood, giving the film a 'look' (as in the Merchant-Ivory haziness of *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999) or the techno-futurist sheen of *The Matrix* (1999)) or contributing to narrative details such as character or motivation. In *The Searchers*, again, there is a moment when John Wayne's Ethan Edwards turns to the camera and reveals the degree of his obsessions: the shadow of his hat has obscured his face, with the exception of one shaft of light reflecting from his eye. The effect is sinister and

alarming. A whole film can be lit in an expressive way: the gloomy darkness of Ridley Scott's classic *Blade Runner* (1982) is an index of its moral and spiritual decay and the uncertainties which dog its plot line (which characters are the replicants?). The blue-grey of gleaming technology and electric light is the dominant tone, alleviated only by the sickly pink of flesh tones and the bright red of lipstick. When the hero and heroine escape into the open country the sudden rush of natural colours is important in overwhelming the audience's understandable scepticism about their future. This film owes a lot to expressionist films shot in black and white (such as *Metropolis*), as well as to the Sam Spade *films noir* of the 1940s, where a similar chiaroscuro lighting was used as an index of hidden, dark motives at work within the characters. The mode has been picked up for use in more recent *films noir* such as *LA Confidential* (1997), as well as becoming the house style for television's *Law and Order* franchise.

Realism is lighting's second objective. This is by far the most common and least apparent aim of film lighting. If it is successful, the figures are lit so naturally and unobtrusively that the audience do not notice lighting as a separate technology.

The basic equipment used to light sound stages or film sets includes a main light (the key light), which is usually set slightly to one side of the camera and directed at the figure to be lit; the fill lights, which remove the shadows caused by the key light and mould the figure being lit in order to add detail and realism; and the back light which defines the figure's outline and separates him or her from the background, thus enhancing the illusion of a three-dimensional image. In conventional high-key lighting, we view a brightly lit scene with few shadow areas, as the fill lights mop up any shadows left by the key light. Much expressive lighting, however, aims at exploiting shadows, and at lighting only part of the screen to give a sense of ambiguity or threat. This is called low-key lighting: it makes much less use of fill lights, and thus has sharp, deep shadows. Low-key lighting will often move the key light from its conventional position to one side of the figure so that only half the face is visible, or it will increase the angle so that the face is lit from below and acquires a distorted, threatening aspect.



10 A conventional three-point set-up for high-key lighting

In general, high-key lighting is realist, while low-key lighting is expressive. These are conventions, which work only because we let them. But they are important constituents of the meaning of a shot and in many cases of an entire film. It is worth noting how lighting picks out and emphasizes elements within the frame, and how this appears to be a natural means of directing the audience's attention to one feature of the frame while obscuring others. This is particularly so during long takes, where a character can move in and out of shadow, into dominant or dominated positions, simply by moving from one regime of lighting to another.

Sound

Surprisingly little attention has been given to the role of sound in the cinema. Dialogue can seem less important to us than the image, and in many cases seems to be used to 'fix' the meaning of the image rather than to motivate the image itself. Yet, as the quality of sound recording and its reproduction in the cinema have improved,

researchers are slowly turning towards developing a better understanding of sound's contribution to the signifying system. At the most obvious level, the movie soundtrack enhances realism by reproducing the sounds one would normally associate with the actions and events depicted visually; this is referred to as 'diegetic' sound (that is, sound that is motivated by actions or events contained within the narrative). We expect to hear the sound of breaking glass when we see a window smash on screen, and we expect the words uttered by the actors to synchronize with the movement of their lips. The cinema's illusion of realism has become quite dependent upon the diegetic use of sound. Other kinds of sound can serve narrative functions, of course; music, for example, in the musical genre can mark key narrative moments or even advance plot lines. More generally, music is routinely used as means of providing accompaniment to a film's dramatic or narrative high points, and it was in fact the first form of sound to be introduced into the cinema.

However, sound has many other, more subtle and contingent, signifying functions. It can be used as a transitional device, linking sequences together. *Citizen Kane* often concludes a speech begun in one scene after the visuals have taken us on to the following scene. The overlapping sound binds what is an episodic and disjointed narrative together. David Lean has used sound cleverly to accomplish the transition from one location to the next: in *A Passage to India* (1984) he uses the sound of a medical instrument being thrown into a steel bowl as the cue for a cut to the coupling of two train carriages. The sounds of the clashing metal bind together as one sound which welds the two shots together. Music plays an increasingly important contextual role in soundtracks today. It can be used as an important component of the construction of the world of the film, as a source of atmosphere, or as a reference point to the relevant subcultures in a teen film like *Mean Girls* (2004) or the more adult fare of *Jackie Brown* (1997). Unlike the realist, diegetic use of sound, however, music in films is usually non-realistic (and non-diegetic) in that we rarely see its source in the frame or even within the world of the film.

Simon Frith (1986: 65) argues that the reality music 'describes/ refers to is a different sort of reality than that described/referred to by visual images'. He says music amplifies the mood or atmosphere,

and also tries to convey the 'emotional significance' of a scene: the 'true "real" feelings of the characters involved in it'. He calls this the 'emotional reality' of film music, and its aim is to deepen the sense of the film's realism, to give it an emotional texture otherwise lacking. It is this kind of contribution that Ry Cooder's music makes to *Paris, Texas* (1984), for instance. Further, Frith sees film music as assisting in the construction of the reality of time and place, the world of the film. He uses the example of the music in *Zorba the Greek* (1964), which is responsible for much of that film's successful construction of 'Greekness'; we could point to a similar function for the music in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002).

A further aspect of music's signifying function within film is its capacity to invoke whole areas of cultural experience. The cultural background audiences bring to such films as *8 Mile* (2002) or *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is crucial to their response to what they see and hear. That cultural background specifies a range of musical, as well as cinematic, contexts that privilege certain kinds of meanings and pleasures; audiences recognizing the references to these meanings and pleasures are thus inscribed into the world of the film. In these days of Dolby stereo and music-packed soundtracks, the careful construction of the music track plays an important function in pulling the major segment of the audience, teenagers, into the cinema in the first place, as well as producing identification and enjoyment once they go inside. The close relationship between the world of the music video clip (so often resembling a feature film on fast-forward in its rapid montage of narrative images) and that of the teen movie is evidence of how much of the same popular cultural space is occupied by music and film. These days, soundtracks are compiled with the soundtrack CD, as well as the film narrative, in mind. A new category of person has appeared in Hollywood, the soundtrack producer, whose job is to pack the soundtrack with the right mix of contemporary popular music for the film's target demographic.

Theme songs offered at crucial moments can dominate the competition between signifying systems. Whitney Houston's performance of *I Will Always Love You* is probably the most memorable element of *The Bodyguard* (1992), but it is probably hard to recall quite which scene it accompanies. The nostalgia that permeates *The*

Big Chill (1983) is saved from becoming cloying and sentimental by the continuous vitality of the music track. Certain instruments, too, become temporarily identified with particular effects: the synthesizer soundtrack enhances the strangeness of *Blade Runner* and the same technique was used in television's *Miami Vice*.

Frith's final point is probably his most important. Music and images have a lot in common as media of communication: they are not understood in a direct, linear way by the audience, but irrationally, emotionally, individually. Lévi-Strauss (1966) says that the meaning of music cannot be determined by those playing it, only by those listening to it. Barthes (1977) notes that it is impossible to describe music without adjectives – that is, it must be understood in terms of its subjective effect rather than through a dictionary of meanings. Correspondingly, its effect can be profoundly personal. Film music, like the image, can have physical effects: it sends shivers down the spine or makes one tap one's feet. It has been said that film music 'feels for us', by telling us when a powerful moment is happening and indicating just what we should feel about it through the mood of the music. Simon Frith describes this phenomenon more accurately and less contemptuously:

one function of film music is to reveal our emotions as *the audience*. . . . Film scores are thus important in representing *community* (via martial or nationalistic music, for example) in both film and audience. The important point here is that as spectators we are drawn to identify not with the film characters themselves but with their emotions, which are signalled pre-eminently by music which can offer us emotional experience *directly*. Music is central to the way in which the pleasure of cinema is simultaneously individualised and shared.

(Frith 1986: 68–9)

So the convention of music swelling at the point of a romantic clinch is not manipulation but recourse to even more direct means of communicating with the audience.

It is important, however, that we do not fall into what has become a familiar trap of regarding the use of sound in the cinema

as reducible to the music soundtrack. Today, sound of all varieties has become one of the key visceral pleasures in the cinema experience, and it also plays a more active narrative role than was previously the case. Gianluca Sergi (2002) argues that in contemporary cinema, since what he describes as the beginning of the 'Dolby era' (the mid-1970s, when the first economically viable stereophonic sound system was developed for the cinema), sound has become a more aggressive component of the movies' signifying system. Sergi argues that contemporary film sound demands to be considered more carefully for its contribution to the meanings and pleasures of cinema. Importantly, he reminds us that sound is not just a music score; rather it includes diegetic and non-diegetic effects, music, dialogue, and (significantly) silence.

Sergi points to a number of changes in the production of sound over the last thirty years that have significantly changed how sound contributes to the feature film. The introduction of stereophonic and thus multilayered sound allowed producers to build the movie soundtrack with dozens of tracks, layered into a complex architecture. Among the consequences of this was the capacity for this multilayered sound to be projected into the cinema from a number of different directions; Sergi suggests that this has allowed sound to be strongly foregrounded at certain points in the cinema experience – as when we hear the spaceship coming from behind us before we see it on the screen. Sound budgets have increased, more sound personnel are employed, and the reproduction of sound within the cinema has improved to the point where there is minimal distortion even at high volume. These developments have allowed more emphasis on enabling audiences to 'feel' as well as hear the sounds, as in the basso rumbling announcing the arrival of that spaceship at the back of the cinema or in the ricocheting bullets spraying around Batman and bouncing around the cinema space. Further, and rather than merely providing ancillary support to the realism of the image, today's soundtracks can provide us with the sound of something we may not even see – Sergi's examples include the crushing of bone or vigorous sexual activity – and thus provide information and generate responses in their own right.

Mise-en-scène

Among the confusing aspects of film theory is the use of *mise-en-scène* as a term to describe a theory about film grammar, a shooting and production style, and – as in this section – a shorthand term for 'everything that is in the frame' of a shot. We have already talked about the way in which the camera contributes to the *mise-en-scène*. In this section I want to emphasize the importance of those other aspects of the image: set design, costumes, the arrangement and movement of figures, the spatial relations (who is obscured, who looks dominant, and so on), and the placement of objects which have become important within the narrative (the murderer's gun, the secret letter, the reflection in the mirror).

We learn much, unconsciously, from the *mise-en-scène*. When we recognize the interior of a dwelling as middle class, bookish, and slightly old-fashioned, we are reading the signs of the décor in order to give them a set of social meanings. The film's construction of a social world is authenticated through the details of the *mise-en-scène*. Further, the narrative is advanced through the arrangement of elements within the frame; characters can reveal themselves to us without revealing themselves to other characters, and thus complicate and develop the story. The practice of watching a murder thriller involves the scanning of the frame to pick up the clues in the *mise-en-scène*. *Psycho* (1960) exploits this by offering us red herrings in the form of point-of-view shots which suggest that Norman's mother is still alive.

In films of epic proportions such as *Gladiator*, the plethora of information contained within the frame can itself be spectacular. The *mise-en-scène* in such cases is not necessarily only narratively significant, but is rather a performance of cinema, a celebration of its ability to trap so much of the world in its frame. The Coliseum sequences in *Gladiator* are spectacular for the comprehensiveness of the illusion they create – of the size of the crowd, of the details of the stadium and the ancient city. These shots display themselves for our pleasure, celebrating the scale of the images, the density of their detail, the impossibility of comprehending them fully during their brief time on the screen. Many historical films work like this, using

their *mise-en-scène* to celebrate the power of the medium to recreate the real so overwhelmingly and thus, presumably, so authentically.

This is a large topic and one in which there are many subdivisions. Yet it is probably better to discuss the importance of *mise-en-scène* through an example, and I do this in Chapter 7 in a discussion of the opening sequences of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the signifying function of the star, but it would be remiss not to mention it here. The star has a function outside a particular film which is only partly incorporated into that film. Actors do not just represent characters, becoming invisible themselves. Rather, characters become visible through actors and it is always important to understand those specific meanings of individual performers which become part of the characterization. Stars can be sufficiently meaningful as to require the bare minimum of 'character' in the narrative; they are watched for their own sake, not for their representation of a scripted character. The bodies of particular female stars have been important draw-cards for male audiences; few, perhaps, went to see Marilyn Monroe movies solely for her characterizations. It is possible that this is less common today, or at least, the phenomenon may be less gendered; the female audience's response to Brad Pitt's shirtless appearance in *Thelma and Louise* or in *Fight Club* (1999) comes to mind here. Even for 'character' actors, such as Meryl Streep, however, the audience still comes to see Meryl Streep perform (that is, do what Meryl Streep does) rather than to see Meryl Streep submerge herself. Finally, the star's face is part of the *mise-en-scène*. The spectacle of the face of a Jack Nicholson, a Cate Blanchett, or a Hugh Grant is a cinematic event in itself for particular film audiences, and one could be forgiven for thinking occasionally that characterization was only a pretext for bringing this spectacle to the screen.

Editing

Here we move back towards the realm of montage, the construction of the relationship between shots. We should not underestimate the importance of editing. The famous Kuleshov experiments present a

powerful case for its centrality. These experiments juxtaposed a single shot of an actor with a plate of soup, then a woman in a coffin, and then a girl smiling. The audiences seeing the three sequences identified the actor's expression (which never changed) as hunger, sadness, and affection, respectively. Despite this demonstration of its power, montage is not so widely used now. It occurs most frequently as a means of representing a mood – cuts to shots of the sea, mountains, or crowded city streets – or for narrative 'ellipsis' – where sections of the narrative need rapid summarizing rather than full dramatization. In some cases the two functions are combined. In *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the period between the gang's escape from the US and its arrival in South America is summarized in a series of stills depicting the group's enjoyment of the pleasures of New York City. This fills a gap in the narrative and evokes a care-free mood which is abruptly terminated by their arrival in primitive Bolivia.

As realism became the dominant mode of feature film production, editing was required to contribute to the illusion that the film was unfolding naturally, without the intervention of the film-maker. Now editing is more or less invisible, seamlessly connecting shots so as to give the illusion of continuity of time and space. There are exceptions to this – action sequences, highly dramatic moments – but in general the craft of the editor in realist films is to remain invisible and knit the shots together according to realist aesthetics. The search for realism, in fact, has produced occasional avant-garde films which do not use editing at all; some of the late Andy Warhol's films eschewed editing in order to let the cameras record reality without any mediation. Some directors claim to 'edit in the camera', that is, to shoot scenes sequentially and cut the action at the appropriate moment for the transition to the next shot. This is both difficult and unusual.

There is a multitude of editing techniques. We have already mentioned two major ones – the fade-out and the dissolve. There is also 'the wipe', in which one image replaces another preceded by a demarcation line moving across the screen. The most frequent method these days is the simple cut from one shot to the next. As with most simple techniques, it requires great skill to do this well.

Various transition devices can be used or invented to soften the cut and make it less sudden or disorientating: overlapping sound from one shot to the next; the use of motivations in the first shot which take us to the next (such as an action shot where the viewer wants to see its conclusion). Most realist films avoid sudden cuts unless they are to be exploited for dramatic effect. A sudden cut produces surprise, horror, and disruption, so it tends to be saved for moments when such an effect is required. The shower sequence in *Psycho* derives its effectiveness from the fracturing and prolonging of the action – a nightmare effect produced by the rapid editing together of numerous angles of perspective on the murder. Again, in *Psycho*, when the murderer-mother is about to be revealed, the camera tracks in on the back of her chair. When the chair is spun around, revealing her skeleton, a cut is made to a close-up of the skeleton's face. The sudden cut exacerbates the audience's shock.

There are many editing conventions which assist the filmmakers and the audience to make sense of the film. I have already mentioned the shot–reverse shot convention. Other conventions include the use of short establishing shots above a new location to place the narrative within a physical context; and the observation of an imaginary line across the film set which the camera never crosses so that the viewer is given a consistent representation of the spatial relations between the actors and their surroundings (this is called the 180° rule). Skilful editors can use the timing of their cuts either to enhance the energy of the action, or to slow it down. Action sequences can take on greater drama and complexity if cuts occur within moments of high action; as a car is about to crash, for instance, we might go to several successive and separate views of the same moment. Alternatively, a cut in a moment of relative stasis can slow down action, retard the narrative, and open up ambiguities. A thoughtful character, considering his or her future, may be shot from several positions in order to expand the moment and instil significance into it.

The speed, pace, or rhythm of editing is important too. Documentary film tends to use fewer edits than narrative film, and social realist films tend to imitate this in the pacing of their editing. Many feature films pursue an identifiable rhythm throughout their

length, and single scenes can be dramatically affected by the pacing and rhythm of the editing. It is easy to demonstrate this through an example. In *Mad Max II* (1981; *Road Warrior* in the US), there is a chase scene in which Max's large tanker truck is pursued by the followers of the villain, Humungus. Max has a shotgun with two bullets and a passenger, the 'feral kid' – a wild 10-year-old child. During a desperate battle with the arch-enemy Wes, who has climbed on to Max's truck, the shotgun bullets roll out of the broken windshield onto the bonnet. Although Wes is knocked off the truck and disappears, Max still needs those bullets. He sends the feral kid out onto the bonnet after them while the chase continues at high speed. The music soundtrack dies down to be replaced by the sound of the wind in the child's face, and a heartbeat. At regular but gradually accelerating intervals, there is a series of cuts from the bullets on the truck's bonnet back to the child's face. Rhythmically we cut back and forth from the child to the bullets, from the child to the bullets, from the child to the . . . Wes's maniacal face appears over the front of the bonnet, screaming in full close-up, and the return cut to the feral kid has him screaming too: a terrifying moment. The surprise at Wes's appearance is all the greater for the expectations set up by the rhythmic alternations between the shots of the child and the bullets. The combination of the alteration in soundtrack and the skill of the editor has achieved this dramatic effect.

This point is important. Film is a complex of systems of signification and its meanings are the product of the combination of these systems. The combination may be achieved through systems either complementing or conflicting with each other. No one system is responsible for the total effect of a film, and all the systems we have just been surveying possess, as we have seen, their own separate sets of conventions, their own ways of representing things.

Special effects

When the first edition of this book was written in 1988, special effects were regarded relatively instrumentally; that is, they were subordinated to the narrative and seen as merely technical contributors

to the finished film. That is no longer the case, and the primary reason for this is the development of new technologies – especially those involved in computer-generated special effects. This, as readers will no doubt realize, is relatively recent. Michele Pierson (2002: 77) tells us that the first completely computer-generated sequence in a feature film was in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Kan* (1982), the first completely computer-generated character was in *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985), the first morph occurred in *Willow* (1988), and the first computer-generated main character was in *Terminator 2* (1991). Since then, CGI has been used extensively within the *mise-en-scène* in (for example) *Titanic*, *Forrest Gump*, *Gladiator*, and the *Matrix* movies, as well as in the production of character, such as the extraordinary hybrid CGI/humanoid Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

Much of the writing about special effects which has responded to the development of CGI, and in particular to its widespread take-up by Hollywood as a way of attracting audiences to blockbuster projects, has made the point, in one way or another, that there are at least two kinds of functions for special effects in the movies. One is to simulate the appearance of something that actually exists (or once existed) in the natural world or in photographic or cinematic representations of that world but which is not easily available to the film-maker. Typically, this would cover the use of CGI to create the crowds in *Gladiator* or the passengers sliding down the vertical deck as the *Titanic* sinks or the complex alien worlds in *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Pierson refers to this as a ‘simulationist’ tactic and it deploys special effects to produce what Stephen Prince (2002) calls ‘perceptual realism’ – something we are prepared to accept as real in the context of the narrative. Before the development of CGI, this would have covered the bulk of all special effects used in the modern feature film.

The second function is to exploit the spectacle of the effect as an end in itself. At one level, audiences appreciate the spectacle on the screen as a discrete pleasure. This appreciation might have an aesthetic dimension, as in the case of what Pierson calls the ‘techno-futurist’ aesthetic motivating the audience’s fascination with the role played by CGI in such sci-fi fantasy productions as *The Matrix*

Reloaded (2003), for instance. This appreciation may also be the result of, simply, the audience’s demand for novelty. Pierson reminds us that this impulse has always been among the pleasures cinema can provide – in what she describes as ‘the search for wonder’, cinema audiences have always sought the magical and the spectacular. What we are now witnessing as a ‘distinct form of cinema spectacle’ in the present day can actually be traced back to Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions’ in the silent era – a performance of the ‘wizardry of the movies themselves’ (Pierson 2002: 107).

Pierson argues that the different functions served by special effects also reflect different kinds of audience relations to the film narrative. That is, there will be points even in quite conventional films where the spectacular display of movie wizardry will be the focus of attention and a source of pleasure in its own right. The morphing of the terminator in *Terminator 2* is one such moment. The pleasures of gaining mastery over the narrative are suspended, Pierson suggests, in response to an aesthetic interest in the cinema effect. She also argues that we can locate ‘effects sequences’ in many blockbuster films where the attention is primarily directed to the display of new kinds of effects, and suggests that in particular many of the sci-fi films made in the early 1990s (when such effects were becoming available) ‘exhibit this self-conscious show-casing of a new type of effects imagery’ (2002: 125).

As we have seen, Geoff King (2000) has taken issue with the view that the narrative is displaced or suspended by such ‘effects sequences’, but there are others who argue that it is important to accept the different kinds of relations between the audience and the text that come into play when such spectacular deployments of special effects technologies occur. Angela Ndaljian (2000) argues that the current use of CGI in the feature film constitutes a convergence of theatre, film, and computer graphics in order to create ‘an illusory magical environment in which audiences act and spectate at the same time’ – that is, they are both in the world of the narrative and outside it, appreciating the quality of its spectacular visual realization.

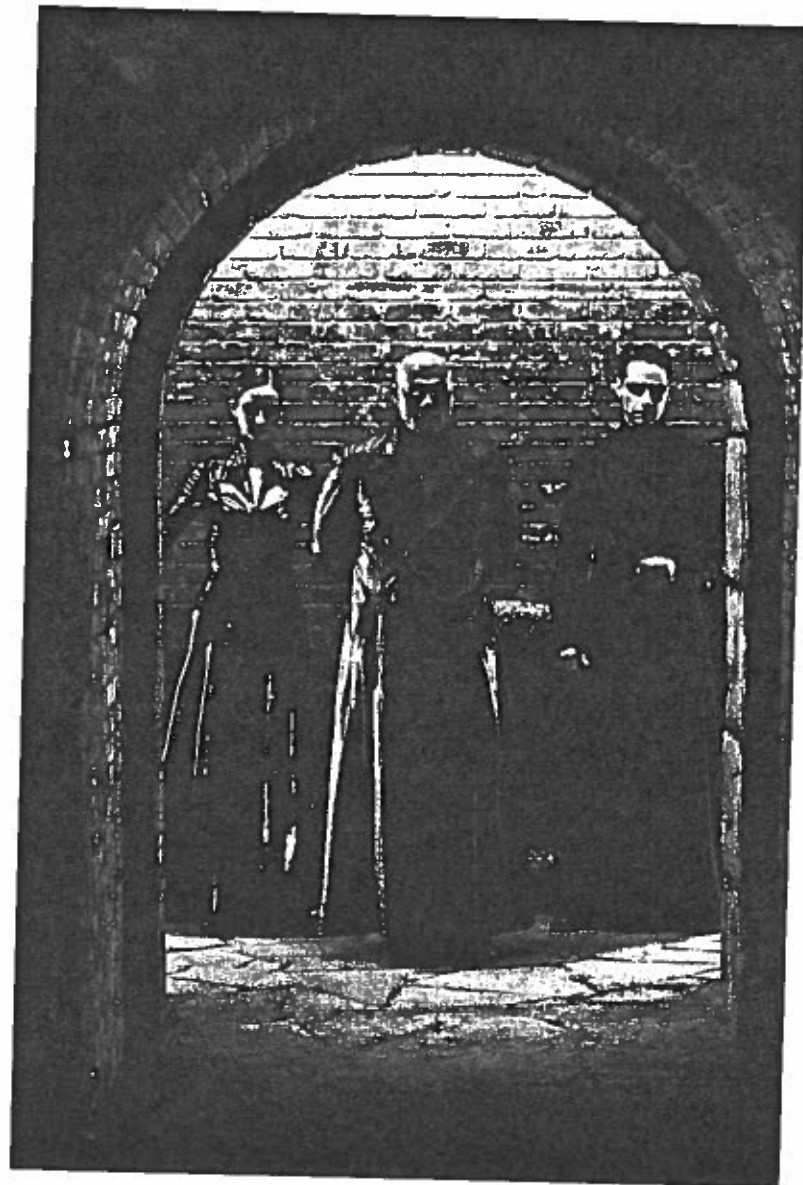
Certainly, such an account would seem to accord with the industrial determinants which have recently facilitated the

deployment of these new technologies. The rise of the special-effects spectacular has been motivated by the need for the film industry to compete with other visual media such as television. Television may have the capacity to match film in its delivery of the pleasures of narrative but is far less competitive in its capacity to provide the pleasures of spectacle. The contemporary redevelopment of the cinema as a site of spectacle – widescreen formats, improved sound reproduction, and so on – is also part of this competitive strategy. Interestingly, too, the focus upon spectacle has helped to multiply the formats through which film can be re-purposed and exploited – theme-park rides, computer games, and so on – as well as to assist in translating the film across language and cultural boundaries (King 2000: 21–2). So the return to the cinema spectacle has its roots both in the fundamental nature of the appeal of the cinematic experience and in the contemporary political economy of the media industries.

Reading the film

The complexity of film production makes interpretation, the active reading of a film, essential. We need to, and inevitably do, scan the frame, hypothesize about the narrative development, speculate on its possible meanings, attempt to gain some mastery over the film as it unfolds. The active process of interpretation is essential to film analysis and to the pleasure that film offers.

But films are not autonomous cultural events. We understand films in terms of other films, their worlds in terms of our worlds. ‘Intertextuality’ is a term used to describe the way any one film text will be understood through our experience, or our awareness, of other film texts. The construction of heroic endurance around Bruce Willis’s character in the *Die Hard* films is of course completely implausible without our understanding of the cinematic convention that allows heroes to miraculously discover reserves of strength no matter how battered or injured they may seem. The films remind us of the relevance of this convention by slightly parodying it at various points. Willis is particularly skilled at performing parody and



11 The techno-futurist aesthetic: *The Matrix Reloaded*

heroism at the same time, something he has been called upon to do in a wide range of roles beginning with his early TV performances in *Moonlighting*. Rather than reducing our enjoyment, such a strategy sets up a knowing, ironic complicity between the audience and the narrative that enables us to take conscious pleasure in its acknowledged excesses. Similarly, our toleration for the slasher/horror film plot line that seems to compel all likely female victims of serial killers to take showers and leave the door open is at least partly generated by our acceptance that in order to experience the pleasure of being shocked we need to suspend our disbelief.

Films are also produced and seen within a social, cultural context that includes more than other film texts. Film serves a cultural function through its narratives that goes beyond the pleasure of story. To examine this we leave behind the problem of film languages and approach film through the category of narrative. However, many of the points made in Chapter 7 derive from this account of signification in film and will further demonstrate the processes surveyed in this chapter.

Suggestions for further work

- 1 This chapter does not present an exhaustive survey of the language-like activities which contribute to signification in film. Further reading should include some other introductory books on film theory and analysis which may give a more detailed account of these practices. Examples of such texts include James Monaco's *How to Read a Film* (1981), the Sobchacks's *An Introduction to Film* (1980), and any of the many editions of Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (1986). These are all useful texts, but do not approach film in the social manner of this book. Further reading in semiotics might be fruitful, too. A good introduction can be found in Robert Stam *et al.* (eds) *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (1992).
- 2 It is essential for any account of film to be conversant with the basic production practices. Attempts to produce a film of one's

own, no matter how primitive, or a visit made to a local film production unit, no matter how humble, will be of great assistance to anyone interested in the medium. Try to organize this, individually or as a group.

- 3 Building on the idea that a film is made up of a number of contributing systems, examine a scene from a film of your choice and try to break it down into its constituents. Try to determine just what has been the contribution of each element. Then propose a change in *one* element – the lighting, for instance – and see how that might change the meaning generated.
- 4 Examine the work of one system within a film of your choice – editing, for example. Is there an observable pattern in it? Can you detect any principles behind it? What is the nature of its contribution to the film as a whole?
- 5 What other language-like activities can you think of besides those mentioned in the chapter (dress, gesture, the discourse of film)? Does rock music, too, for instance, have a set of languages? How useful do you find this analogy of language in dealing with film as a communicative practice? What are the limits of the analogy?
- 6 Can you isolate a 'special-effects sequence' in a film you have seen recently and discuss the kinds of response it generates – whether it is received primarily as spectacle, whether it is fully integrated into the arc of the narrative, or whether it is a mixture of both?