Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the Four Parameters of Film, and Identification


The Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's announces the following manifesto on behalf of the film medium at the beginning of his silent movie, The Man with a Movie Camera (1929).

"This film is an experiment in cinematic communication of real events without the help of intertitles, without the help of a story, without the help of theatre. This experimental work aims at creating a truly international language of cinema based on its absolute separation from the language of theatre and literature.

— So what IS this international language (or literacy) of film which is independent of theater or literature?

Four Parameters of Film
Adapted from Bordwell and Thompson
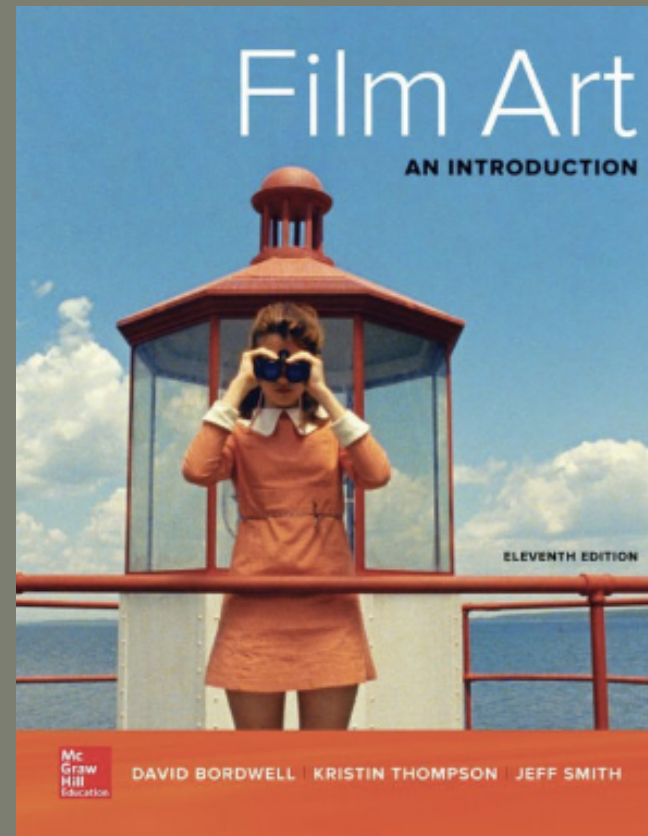
In writing, Plato broke down literacy or narrative into two possibilities: (remember?) Mimesis and Diegesis (Showing or Telling)

In film, Bordwell and Thompson break this unique language of film into FOUR "parameters" or dimensions....

Formal Parameters

- Cinematography
- Editing
- Mise-en-scene
- Sound

= "Narrative"
(vs. "Story" or "Plot")
(= Showing and Telling)
(= Mimesis and Diegesis)

The parameters of film are 4 dimensions of film literacy (ways that films are produced and watched to convey meaning and effect.)

Films are what McCloud called a "sequential" art: "look at this, now look at this, now look at this…."

That makes film (even non-fiction film) NARRATIVE

Cinematography

1. camera movement (panning, tilting, tracking).
2. Camera angle (high, low, medium).

On your handout, I'll ask you to try not only watch the actors and the scenes, but to watch the CAMERA.

— Where is the camera? how is it moving? how long does it stay in one place? how does the visual viewpoint affect the emotional or informational viewpoint?

Cinematography vs. editing! (within the shot—one "piece" of film—vs. between shots)

How does the cinematography enforce our sense of IDENTITY (whom we identify with in the film....)

Cinematography

3. Camera distance (determined in relation to the human body):

XLS
LS
MS
CU
XCU

CU

XLS

XCU

Abbreviations for distance (always in relationship to the human body)

MS = "medium shot" = waist-up shot

Cinematography in *Psycho*

1. Voyeuristic shots

2. Forward tracking shots.
3. Restless camera.

4. Extreme angles

Hitchcock took a big chance with Psycho. He made creative decisions with the script (I won't tell you yet) which made Paramount Pictures unwilling to fully finance the film…. They thought he was doing something risky.

It is part of the mythology of this film that Hitchcock wound up mortgaging his own house to raise money for the film. Whether true or not, he shot Psycho on the cheap …
(he spent $800,000 and it made 20 million)
…using the crew from his weekly television show (Alfred Hitchcock Presents).

So, he did not have a big budget for color film stock, for special effects, etc. He had to make the film effective through craft and technique… through a creative use of the four parameters of film like cinematography….

Psycho has been recognized by generations of filmmakers as a master class in film technique….

5. Camera movement follows the movement of the plot: from surface to depth, daylight to darkness, public to private

Vertov's unique international language, differs from theater because the camera can move... Can sweep the audience along, fly them over a city, peek into a window....

Editing

1. Shot pace and length.
2. One shot = one unspliced piece of film
3. Most common pattern is shot/reverse shot.
4. Transitions between shots: cut, dissolve, FTB, shock cut.
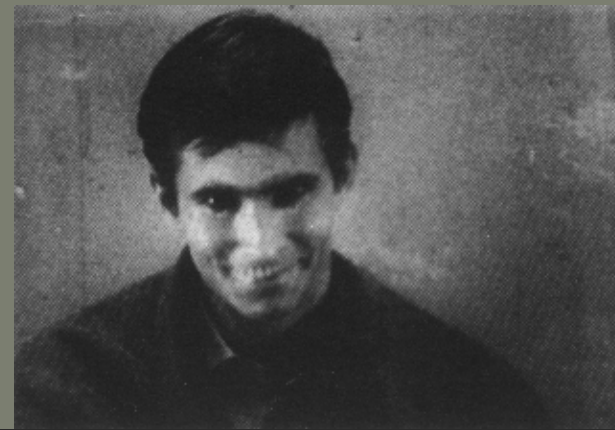
2nd Parameter of Film: what happens between shots….
Editing involves issues of pace, transitions and closure… This is where McCloud's Chapter 3 becomes relevant:
Moment too Moment, Action to Action, Subject to Subject, Scene to Scene, Aspect to Aspect, and Non-Sequetur (70-72)

Editing in *Psycho*

1. Increasing shot pace = increasing tension.

2. Sense of violence is created through speed and juxtaposition of shots.

Editing is not a dry, mechanical necessity but one of the essential creative devices of this language (or literacy) of film or video.

The famous shower scene: one minute of the movie took 1 week to film, 78 different set ups of camera and set, though only 51 shots were used in the film. 51 shots in one minute is a furious pace....

There is a myth that there are no actual shots of the knife touching flesh, which is almost true (there's one, though it's so brief you might not even catch it the first time....

Mise-en-Scene

1. Lighting and the juxtaposition of light and shadow

2. Costume

3. Setting and décor

4. Position or action of figures

Third Parameters: In French, Mike-en-Scene translates to "Things in the Scene"
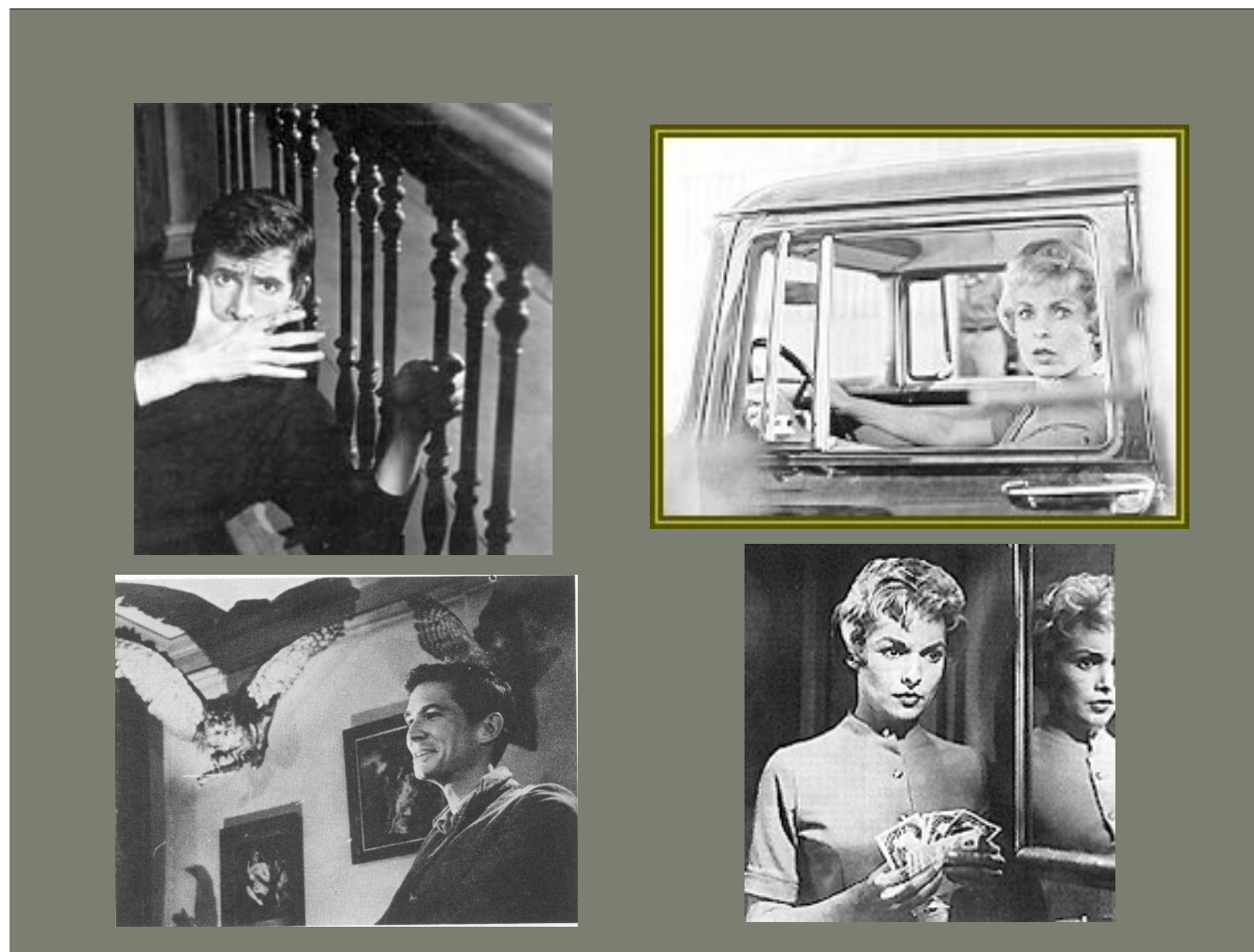
Mise-En-Scene

Mise-en-scene relates to
- Cinematography: how things in the scene come together visually depends on where the camera is, how it moves, (hardware store after hours…)
- Editing: what happens before and after this shot? Are shots like this repeated to turn this momentary effect into a repeated theme or "motif"?

An example of how choices of cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scene depend on each other an work together:
Orson Wells' Touch of Evil (1958 example of film noire). — What do you notice about the editing in this title sequence, and how does this choice of editing affect the choices of cinematography?

Mise en scene and editing and cinematography add up to statements made in this language beyond language that Vertov declared in his manifesto.

Sound

1. Music

2. Dialogue

3. Sound effects

4. Noises (silence)

Last Parameter…

Sound in *Psycho*

1. Dialogue: often overheard

2. Music: very distorted. Noises, screaming used to heighten suspense

3. Sounds / Sound FX: rain, footsteps, doors opening and closing

4. Silence: 1/3 of Psycho is without dialogue

Sounds are part of a plan or design:
hear it once, it might be an accident or coincidence.

The same patterns, styles, sounds repeated over and over make a statement.

Plot Structure

1. Phoenix, Arizona
2. Flight from Phoenix
3. Bates Motel
4. Arbogast's Investigation
5. Sam and Lila's Investigation
6. Explanations

- Movement from light to darkness, surface to depth, public to private, city to country, sanity to insanity, romance to Gothic.

In the film the viewer is moving from one theme to its "other," closing in on an essential mystery or secret….

Symbols/Themes Achieved Through the Four Parameters:

1. Birds / Fear of Birds (Ornithophobia)

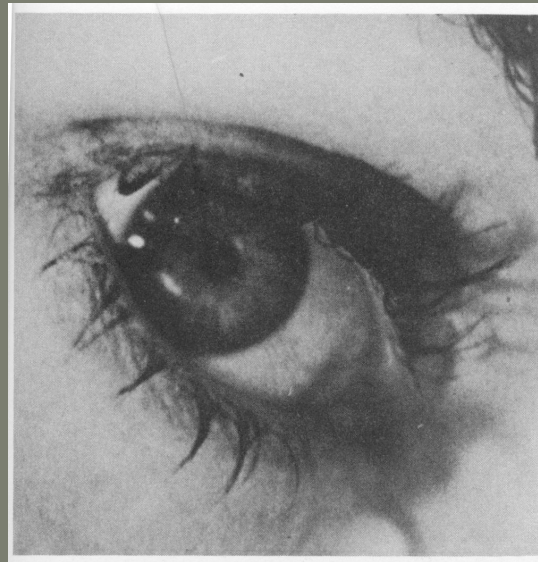Themes or motifs (things repeated)

Visual themes:

2. Family "Troubles"; Matriphobia

3. Secrets

4. Voyeurism/ Watching

Hitchcock's active camera implicates audience in the voyeurism

Identification: when you peek at someone, you identify with the voyeur

5. Entrapment / Claustrophobia:
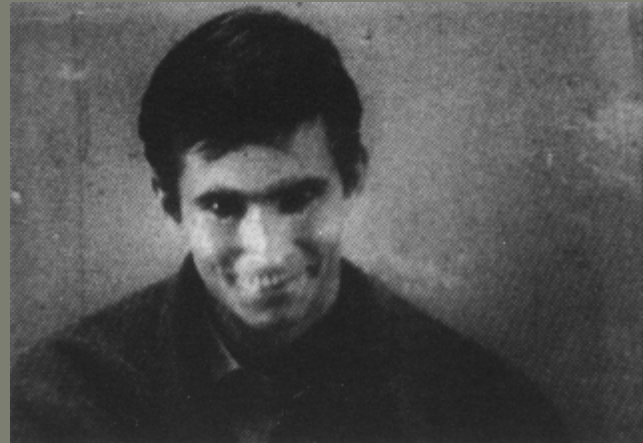### "We're all in our private cages…"

Parallelism between these shots (many minutes apart in the film) make connections among characters: Hitchcock is not making statements about individual characters' situation but about the world of the film….

6. Duality & Doppelganger Effects

How are cinematography, editing, mise-en-scene, and sound used to create and direct the audience's process of

Identification

The investment of screen time with a character creates an emotional investment with that character, whether we agree with or "like" the character at all.

This phenomenon is an aspect of the problem that Cobley talked about with Romper Stomper and skinheads....

"Psycho" = Crisis of Identity

In what ways does the viewer of Hitchcock's Psycho suffer through a "crisis of identity" (in the sense of who and what "we" identify with) during the course of the film? How does Hitchcock conduct us through a process of going "psycho"—and back again?