FROM SPACE
TO TIME

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MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM VISUAL ART TO VIDEO + MOTION

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1. Approaches to video

The objective camera

In early film, a stationary camera showed events unfolding on a proscenium stage far away (see ▶ **THOMAS EDISON'S** film tests). Today, this kind of dispassionate camera work is found in footage produced by security cameras, spy cameras and satellites. It has become a sign for objectivity.

In mainstream cinema, directors use the objective camera to tell us that something is *really happening*. In films like Fight Club (1999) and Angels and Demons (2009), security camera footage is used to emphasize important plot reveals. The objective camera shots at the beginning of ▶ **THE PURGE** (2013) give recorded violence a documentary feel, adding to its terror. The objective camera is characterized by several features—it is usually a stationary, extremely wide shot, it allows the audience to decide what to look at, and subject matter may sometimes be occluded.

- Actual security camera footage of a ▶ **ROBBERY** and a ▶ **FIGHT**.

The elemental camera

The elemental camera is attuned to the natural elements around us. Wind, water and fire bring movement and life to a shot and are rich with cultural and metaphorical associations. In fact, elemental forces have become an important part of some genres such as the use of wind-blown tumbleweeds in Westerns (see ▶ **GUN FEVER**, 1958).

Fire creates a swirling abstract backdrop in ▶ **IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS** (2006) adding a ritualistic quality to the scene. Water, mist and rain are important to the mise-en-scene of many films. Imagine Casabalanca (1942) without its fog-shrouded airport, for example. Water also serves as a medium of suspension for visual effects. The mysterious clouds in Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) and the cosmic formations in ▶ **THE FOUNTAIN** (2006) were created in cloud tanks— tanks of water with added particulate matter or liquid shot at high speed.

- Wind adds tension to this fight scene in ▶ **HARAKIRI** (1962).

- In ▶ **INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM** (1984) feathers help to visualize mid-flight turbulence.

- Clint Eastwood makes a extraordinarily dramatic entrance in ▶ **A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS** (1964), thanks to wind and backlit dust.

- The leaves in this shot from ▶ **MIC MACS** (2010) not only make the shot livelier, but draw focus to the action.

- Revealing the importance of the elements in filmmaking, Chris Marker's documentary ▶ **AK** (1985) shows director Akira Kurosawa holding up hundreds of extras and crew members to wait for the wind.

Less often, the camera itself is made subject to the elements. Shots have been made by suspending a camera from a balloon sent into the upper atmosphere, or dropping the camera into water. Inexpensive cameras make these kinds of approaches more practical if no more predictable.

The interpretive camera

The interpretive camera does two things—it shows us what's important and it discloses emotional content. Unlike an objective camera, the interpretive camera moves close to the subject to isolate a gesture, to examine an artifact or to help us see an actor's expression. The camera guides our view, inviting us to see.

The interpretive camera asks us to feel a particular way about the subject matter often binding us emotionally with the protagonist of the story. Camera angles convey attitude. If shot from below, an actor can look imposing. If shot from above, a character can look vulnerable and inconsequential These guidelines are not rules, but are a starting point for thinking through a sequence.

- In ▶ **GOODFELLAS** (1990), Martin Scorsese uses a low angle shot to emphasize the power and ferocity of Henry's father. Notice that Henry's father fills the frame emphasizing his dominance.

- This high angle shot from the action movie spoof ▶ **TEAM AMERICA** (2004) helps to convey a sense of heartbreak and despair.

Framing—the way a character is situated within the frame—also conveys emotional content. A performer can look lost and isolated when surrounded by vast negative space (see this shot from ▶ **PLANES** (2013), or this assault sequence from ▶ **THX 1138**, (1971). But the meaning of a shot depends on many things. For example, in this training sequence from ▶ **ROCKY IV** (1985), Rocky (Sylvester Stallone) is a tiny speck in the film frame. Yet the vast scale difference between mountain and man visually portrays the character's readiness to take on the world (and cold-war nemesis Drago).

- For a different take on the interpretive camera, see experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage's ▷ **CAT'S CRADLE** (1959). Brakhage's short film shows an everyday interaction with friends and a pet cat. Using mostly close ups, Brakhage transforms the experience into mosaic-like fragments that have the spontaneous quality of vision coming into being.

- The interpretive camera may follow a performer as in this excerpt from ▷ **HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER** (1990). This can be accomplished using a fluid head tripod or by handholding the camera. The idea is to follow the important action as unobtrusively as possible.

- The interpretive camera fragments reality around a subjective viewpoint. This behind-the-scenes video shows the filming of a shot in ▷ **FROM DUSK TO DAWN** (1996). Notice that the reflectors move along with George Clooney and Quentin Tarantino to keep their faces lit. In this case, the subjective experience of the film viewer is more important than maintaining consistent world representation. What the ▷ **SHOT** looked like in the actual film.

- In Closely Watched Films (2004), film scholar Marylin Fabe notes that in the Odessa steps sequence in ▷ **BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN** (1925), reality is fragmented around the subjective

view of the camera. In various shots, the shadows of the soldiers and the mother carrying her dead son always fall toward one another adding to the conflict. The result is dramatic, but impossible in the real world.

For our purposes, remember four primary shots. A *full shot* shows a subject from head to toe. A *medium shot* shows a subject from head to waist. A *close up* shows the face and an *extreme close up* shows part of a face (or the subject matter) such as the eyes.

The surreal camera

In the classic surrealist film ▶ **BLOOD OF A POET** (1930), Jean Cocteau uses a variety of techniques to create a sense of dream-like irrationality. In one part of the film, Cocteau manipulates time—a figure is shot and falls in slow motion then rises only to fall again. Later, in a sequence that occurs in a hallway, perhaps a metaphor for the interior world, Cocteau tilts his sets and camera to enable his actors to achieve strange, non-gravitational effects. This is the implication—in the realm of the unconscious, the laws of physics no longer hold sway.

For the better part of the twentieth century, the dutch angle (tilted camera) was used to evoke sur-reality and altered states of consciousness. The Twilight Zone episode ▶ **THIRD FROM THE SUN** (1960) uses dutch angles, side lighting and a 17.5 mm wide angle lens to evoke a utopian suburbia gone awry. The Third Man (1949) and other noir films use dutch angles to express skewed or alienated takes on reality.

Weightlessness, too, is used to achieve surrealist effects. In Salvador Dali's ▶ **DREAM OF VENUS** installation for the 1939 World's Fair, viewers peered through glass windows to see women in costume swimming in front of Dali's paintings. The image recalls the Victorian era's conception of the ocean as a "topography of the unconscious." In a reverse-take on this idea, Terry Gilliam filmed a dry-for wet underwater dream sequence in ▶ **TIDELAND** (2005). Child actress Jodelle Ferland pantomimed swimming rapidly while suspended by wires in air in front of a camera shooting at a high frame rate. When shown at normal speed, it looks like Ferland is swimming through a room. The peculiar effect emphasizes the dream-like quality of the scene. Surrealism suggests these uses of the camera: slow motion effects, approaches that give a shot or the subject matter a floating quality, and unconventional camera angles and techniques to suggest an altered reality.

- Note the floating effects in the dream sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's ▶ **SPELLBOUND** (1945). This sequence was directed by art director William Cameron Menzies. The set was designed by Salvador Dali.

- The producers of ▶ **DREDD** (2012) shot sequences at 3000 fps (frames per second) to simulate the effects of a narcotic haze. An iPhone 6 shoots slow motion at 240 fps.

The machine camera

It is taken for granted that professional filmmaking involves machinery for moving the camera—tripods, dollies, tracks and cranes. What makes the machine camera notable is the way that its movement withdraws from our awareness. When we see a smooth dolly or crane move on screen, we do not think of machines. Instead, the effect becomes backgrounded and implies a professionalism and control expressed as a mastery of technology.

One primary feature of the machine camera is smooth motion. Like a metaphor for the modern idea of progress, the machine camera moves on tracks over natural obstacles or soars into the sky perched on a crane. The machine camera moves with mass; it becomes a symbol of machine-age strength. Videographer Scott Billups writes—

Film cameras are generally bulky, heavy affairs. When they move, it is generally with a plodding massiveness that belies their inertia. Video camcorders on the other hand are light, flimsy affairs that we can fling around with mindless abandon… For handheld shots go get yourself a ten pound weight at the local sporting goods store, or better yet get someone to machine something cool for you and hook that little flimsy camcorder to it and leave it there. It will give your shots a massiveness and inertial quality that is nearly impossible with a camcorder.

In real world shooting, the computer has become another means by which mechanically-mediated shots are created. Image stabilization smooths out motion using algorithmic techniques. In software like After Effects and Final Cut, stabilization works well if there is not a great deal of camera movement. However, trying to stabilize extremely shaky camera movement can create odd effects in which a shot may look smooth but still retain motion blur artifacts.

- The machine camera in a ► **GAP** commercial and ► **REQUIEM FOR A DREAM** (2000).

The gestural camera

Unlike the machine camera, the hand-held gestural camera foregrounds the presence of the camera operator. This kind of camera work emphasizes the visceral impact of a reality that is unfolding in front of us *right now.* The gestural camera intensifies excitement by incorporating the movement of the camera operator's body into the shot.

The ► **BLAIR WITCH PROJECT** (1999) helped to popularize hand held camera work and remains a good example of gestural camera performance. In a shot in which Heather is holding the camera while desperately looking for Josh, we can see the camera flinch every time she calls his name. The camera movement emotionally connects us to Heather's despair. The Mars landing sequence in ► **ROVING MARS** (2003) is an excellent example of simulated gestural camera work in an all-CG sequence. In several shots, we sense the camera operator struggling to keep the spacecraft in frame; the effect is exciting, natural and well-performed. Further, there are subtle evocations of the camera

operator's interactions with the equipment. In one shot, we see the camera zoom in as if the camera operator has given the zoom ring a quick twist. We gain a sense of the equipment and the operator's hand at work. Today, the twist zoom has become a part of the shaky cam vocabulary for immediacy.

- The gestural camera has become a staple of action sequences. Note the twist zoom, awkwardly-framed hand held pan, and camera shake, in this sequence from ▶ **PLANES** (2013).

One problem in all-digital shows is that performance concerns are sometimes neglected. In ▶ **STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS** (2002), there is a virtual hand held shot in which the camera operator zooms in at the precise moment necessary to capture the hero space craft coming into frame. Sometimes this kind of blocking is effective but in this case, especially as an all-CG shot, the effect is like watching an actor telegraph a line. The shot reminds us that what we're seeing is not live but perfectly choreographed in software.

In ▶ **STEALTH** (2005), another problematic all-digital effects shot has a virtual camera seemingly struggle to keep planes in frame as they shoot across the sky. However, the camera work is far too

wobbly to come off as convincing; it is too broadly performed. A real camera operator doesn't shoot like she is trying to create camera shake; she shoots like she is trying to avoid it. In this case, a good camera performance would look like a camera operator struggling to maintain perfect control despite an inability to do so, an effect pulled off by other shots in the film.

The gestural camera foregrounds the camera operator's performance and creates a sense of events coming into being. Well-performed gestural camera is like acting. It requires a sense of being in the moment, not telegraphing cues, and responding to events as if they are happening for the first time.

- The camera's presence in a shot is taken to a theatrical extreme: a prehistoric
  sea scorpion cracks the camera lens with a whip of its tail. From the BBC series
  ▶ **BEFORE THE DINOSAURS** (2005).

ASSIGNMENT

For each of the approaches (e..g, objective, interpretive) create 2 shots that explore the approach in an interesting way. You should have a total of 12 shots (2 x 6 approaches).

Due Dates: TBA

If you have any question please email me: omid@csun.edu