

The Order of Space

Cinematic Semiotics

(Cinematic Language 101)

Post Production 1 & 2

Semester 2 | Block 5

“Within the framework of **a theory of codes** it is unnecessary to resort to the notion of extension [reference], nor to that of possible worlds; **the codes, insofar as they are accepted by a society, set up a ‘cultural’ world**, which is neither actual nor possible in the ontological sense; its **existence is linked to a cultural order**, which is the way in which a society thinks [and] speaks.

Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics

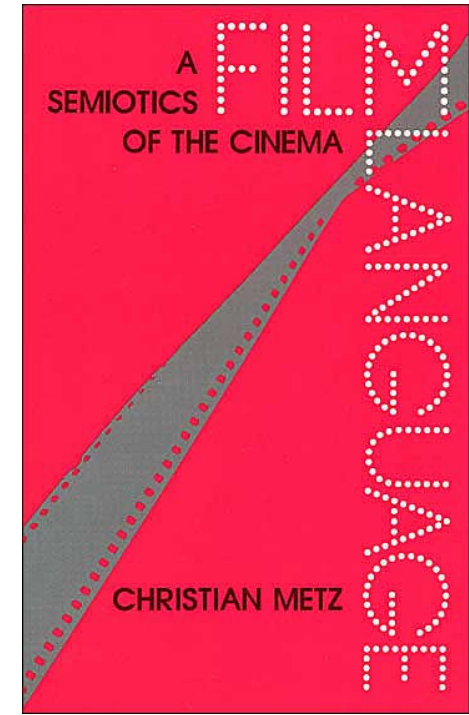
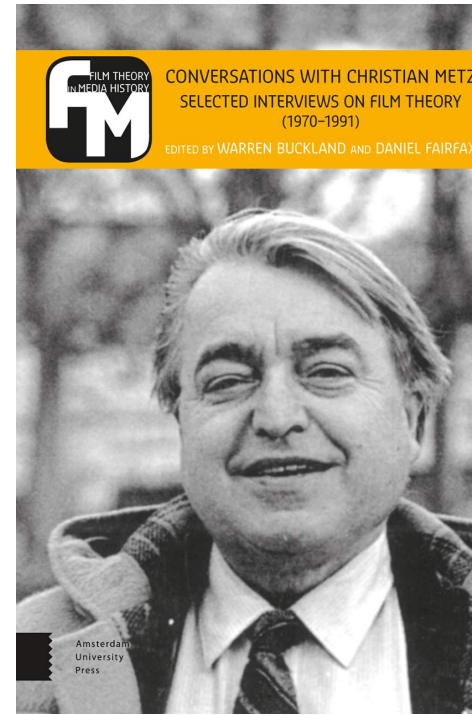
“Cultural meanings are inherent in the symbolic orders and these meanings are independent of, and prior to, the external world, on the one hand, and human subjects, on the other. **Thus, the world only has an objective existence in the symbolic orders that represent it.**

Simon Clarke, The Foundations of Structuralism

**FILM IS DIFFICULT TO
EXPLAIN BECAUSE IT IS
EASY TO UNDERSTAND**

Christian Metz

Film Theorist





Laura Mulvey

Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema

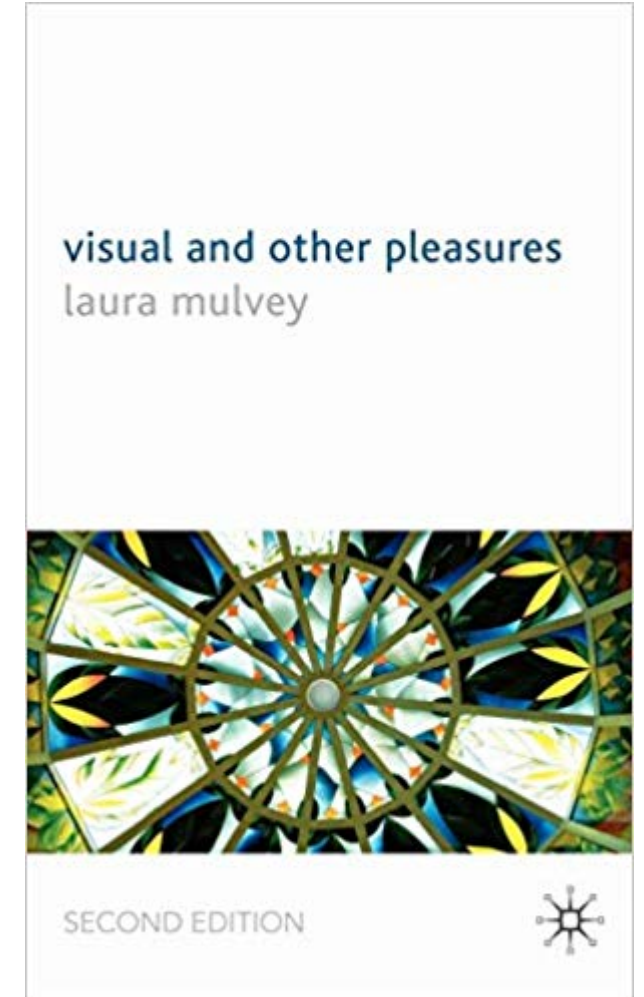
The Gaze | How the Camera Sees

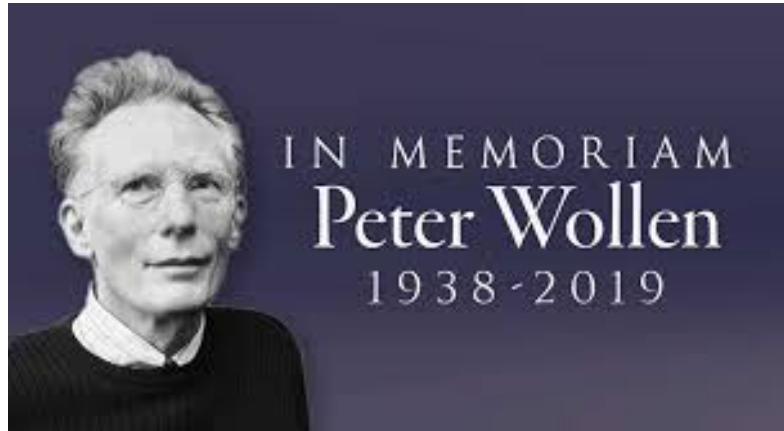
The idea of the female gaze is most definitely not to take the place of the male gaze but rather to break down the barriers caused by this male dominant culture. The aim is to destroy all gazes and emanate pure equality from the film industry. It attempts to remove **intersectionality** and change the way in which the world views these minorities.



The Male Gaze

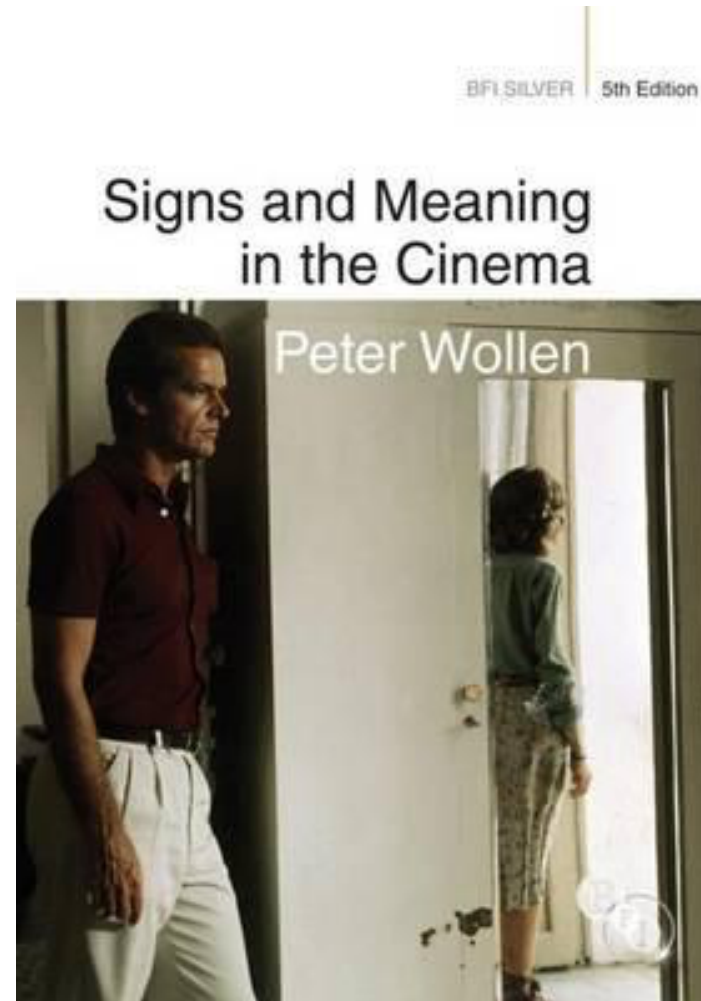
The male gaze is the way in which the visual arts and literature depict the world and women from a masculine point of view, presenting women as objects of male pleasure





The Maven of British Film Theory

From his classic book **Signs and Meanings in the Cinema** to his filmmaking collaborations with **Michelangelo Antonioni** and **Laura Mulvey**, Peter Wollen was the single most influential film theorist in the English language, and éminence grise of British film culture.



Tilda Swinton in Peter Wollen's "Friendship's Death"



Peter Wollen's **Signs and Meaning in the Cinema** remains one of the most influential books on the art of film yet written.

Show Don't Tell

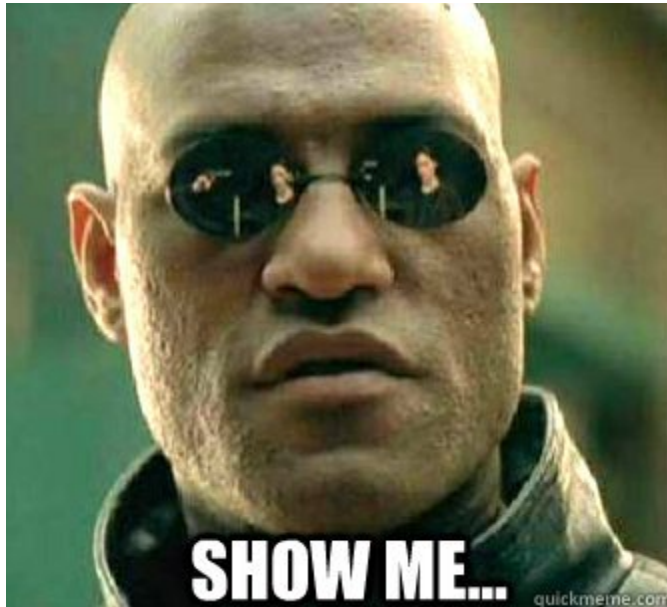


“Don’t tell me the
moon is shining;
show me the glint
of light on
broken glass.”

Anton Chekhov

Show Don't Tell

**Cinematic Semiotics
symbolic storyworlds**



Understanding Cinema | Semiotics vs. Narrative

Films are reliant on signs and symbols to create an unconscious reconfiguration of background knowledge and cultural understandings in the viewer.

The narrative of a film remains only on the consciousness of the viewer, which can only change a person's perspective so much.

Signs and symbols seep into the subconscious of a viewer, which works to **decode the symbolic images** presented in the **language of the film**, reshaping a person's cultural understanding and perception of the world entirely.

The formal style of the film produces emotion in the viewer that continues on with them even after the film has finished.

thinking of cinema as language | narrative and the symbolic

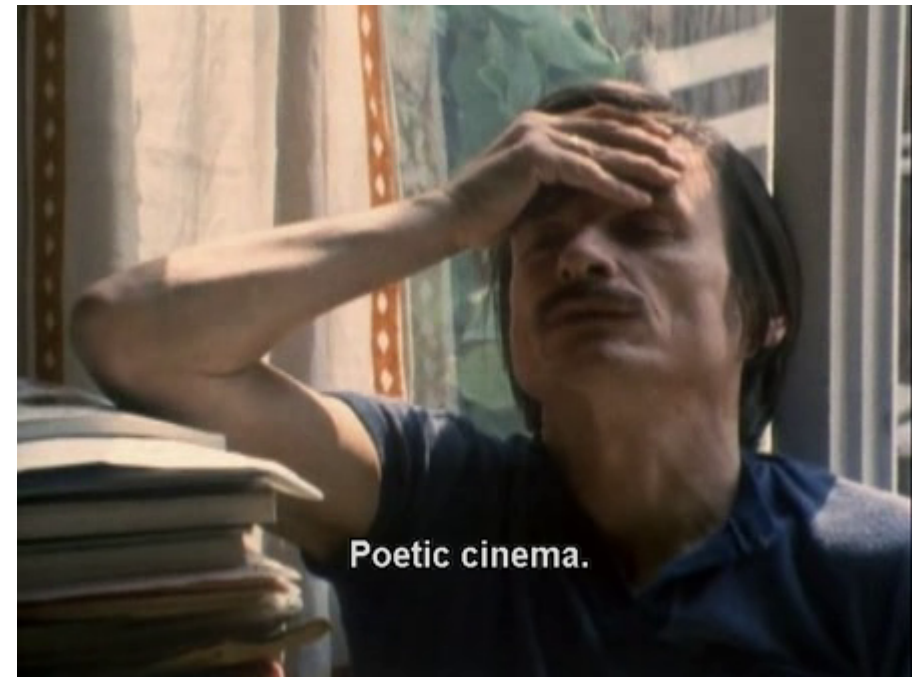
Prose (narrative) Cinema

- both fiction and non-fiction narrative cinema
- story and plot
- screenplay, dialogue
- linear and non-linear temporality



Poetic (symbolic) Cinema

- a more symbolic approach to cinema
- stream of consciousness/unconscious
- non-linear temporality
- open image





Solaris (1972) | Andrei Tarkovsky



Get Out (2017) Jordan Peele

Show Don't Tell

Cinematic Semiotics symbolic storyworlds



The Symbiotic Relationship Between Semiotics and Cinema

Understanding Cinema | Semiotics vs. Narrative

Although narrative plays an important role in the conscious storytelling of a film, the codes and signs crafted by the filmmaker through symbolic imagery and formal qualities transcend beyond the film itself, leaving the viewer with an emotional and unconscious relationship with the underlying themes long after the film has ended.

Some philosophers have poses **arguments against the use of semiotics** and instead have argued that the **macro-narrative is more important in film.**

An **argument against semiotics** in a film is the misreading of the codes and symbols by an uninformed audience. Unlike a narrative, which is much more objective, symbols can be misinterpreted and misunderstood by viewers, creating a reading of the film that is separate from its philosophical intentions.

A **narrative is less ambiguous** and more clear when conveying the film's message to an audience.

Show Don't Tell

Cinematic Semiotics symbolic storyworlds



Beyond the Black Rainbow (2010) | Panos Cosmatos

Understanding Cinema | Semiotics vs. Narrative

The **macro-narrative** allows the viewer to “figure out” the themes and meaning for **themselves**, rather than having the viewer become frustrated because they don’t understand what the symbols represent.

An understanding of the **macro-narrative** could be more beneficial for the viewer to consciously “understand” a film, but the **unconscious emotions and full-bodied experience created by the style of the film can have a longer lasting effect** on the reconfiguration of the subconscious of the viewer.

Signs and symbols also propagate a passive viewer because it is so reliant on the **unconscious** experience.

A passive viewer is not aware of how the film is restructuring their background knowledge and cultural understanding; they are just aware that the film has had some profound impact on them.

MEDIA CODES AND CONVENTIONS

SYMBOLIC CODES	TECHNICAL CODES	WRITTEN CODES	CONVENTIONS
SETTING	CAMERAWORK	PRINTED LANGUAGE	FORM CONVENTIONS
MISE EN SCENE	EDITING	SPOKEN LANGUAGE	STORY CONVENTIONS
ACTING	AUDIO		GENRE CONVENTIONS
COLOUR	LIGHTING		

Media codes and conventions are like the building blocks of all the media around us. **Media codes generally have an agreed meaning, or connotation, to their audience.** There are three types of media codes, **symbolic codes, technical codes and written codes.** Conventions are expected ways in which codes are organised in a product.

codes and symbols

generic elements of Nordic Noir

Recurring situations

Murder and attempted murder/ Terrorist plot/ Countdown to destruction/ Examining CCTV footage
Police car chase/ Photofit/ Timely rescue
Car search/ Clear the building / Confronting the suspect
Detective stands alone

Elements of narrative

Investigative narrative
Clear disruption of equilibrium
Closure of some narrative strands with some resolution
Surreal elements
Driven by binary opposites e.g. cops v criminals, personal v professional

Style

Chiaroscuro lighting – effect of duality or bars (imprisonment). Low key.
Closed frames - entrapment
Desaturated/grey/khaki colour palette – bleak
Windows and reflections – themes of appearance v reality

Iconography

Police uniforms, cars, flashing lights and sirens, technology- PCs/mobile phones/ evidence bags / clues (e.g. lapel pin)/ handcuffs/ poison / gun / alibis – dates, times/jargon
Forensics – gloves, microscopes, hypodermic

Settings

Iconic bridge/incident room/police station (s)/ hospital/prison/IV room
Snow/bleak landscape/leafless trees
Laboratory

Themes

Family – domestic v professional
Power of the past
Justice v vengeance
Moral dilemmas
Reflection of contemporary issues – eco-terrorism
Appearance v reality

Stock characters

Plain clothes detectives
Unlikely partnership
Anti-social detective (female)
Boss(es)

workshop

creative strategies

thinking about language and symbols

the relation between text and image

