GLOSSARY OF

FILM CODES
& CONVENTIONS

NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS

While film has its own set of distinct conventions, it is also built upon the same narrative conventions that are the foundation of novels and other written pieces of fiction. These are then shaped through the language of film.

SETTING

Time setting: This is literally the time in which a story is set: it can refer to the time of day or season, or a time in history, such as the Second World War.

Place setting: This is where a story is set: it might be a general geographical location, such as a particular country or planet, or a more specific locational setting, such as a school, courtroom or family kitchen.

PLOT & STRUCTURE

Plot: what happens, to whom. A typical plot will contain all the elements of orientation, complication, rising tension, climax, falling tension and resolution- although the amount of time spent on each segment differs for each genre and each story.

Point of View: the perspective through which a story is told. It can be First Person perspective, Second Person perspective or Third Person Perspective, or a combination of these.

Sequencing: the order in which the events of the story are related to the readers/viewers is important in terms of the effect it has on audiences. It can be done in a linear sequence, circular, using flashbacks etc.

CHARACTERS

Characterisation: the appearance, behaviour and dialogue that establishes the personality of the characters.

Representation: the personality of the characters is often used to characterise whole social groups, which can be based on class, gender, age, sexuality, profession, political persuasion etc. They can also be used to represent important concepts such as love/hate or success/failure; or narrative concepts such as hero/villain, parent/child and so on.

THEMES & MESSAGES

Themes: central subjects that the film is about, which can be summed up into a few words. For example, *the meaning of life* is an example of a theme.

Messages: what the text says about these subjects, which can only be explained in full sentences. For example, "*human existence is essentially meaningless*" is an example of a message.

SYMBOLIC CODES

Symbolic codes involve all the elements in the film that we can infer symbolic meaning from, including lighting, colour, costumes and props.

SETTING

Setting: the visual background of time and place. Settings provide the backdrop for the development of the plot and the characters, changing the meaning we can infer from them.

COLOUR & LIGHTING

Colour: the colours used in the setting of a film can create a particular mood or atmosphere. Moreover, colours are also often seen to have specific symbolic meanings:

Bright colours often indicate the vitality associated with living, the beauty of nature, an enchanting world or a fast-paced society.

Dark colours often convey gloomy/melancholic settings or events, the decay of the natural world or the forces of evil.

Lighting: like colour, the intensity and direction of light sources can focus our attention on major themes, symbolise a character's state of mind or create a certain mood or atmosphere.

COSTUMES/MAKE-UP

Costume is very important for establishing context and revealing the style of the characters- it transports the viewer into the world of the film and shows differences between characters.

BODY LANGUAGE

Body language is a form of non-verbal communication, which consists of body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements. In film, body language tells the audience about the personalities of individual characters as well as showing the relationships and power dynamics *between* characters.

SYMBOLS & MOTIFS

Symbols are objects, places or other things that represent abstract themes or ideas in the film.

Motifs form part of a distinctive idea represented through recurring symbols, e.g. religious motifs such as crosses.

WRITTEN CODES

Written codes include everything connected with any written text or print in film such as titles, credits, captions and letters.

When considering the meaning constructed through written codes, consider: why has the filmmaker chosen to show something through on-screen text, rather than through visual or aural means?

TITLES/CREDITS

The **title** of a film is often included as part of the opening credits (which also introduce the important members of the production), although over recent years it has become more popular to open films with the title only.

SUBTITLES

Subtitles are displayed at the bottom of a movie or television screen, translating or transcribing the dialogue or narrative.

CAPTIONS

Captions are titles, short explanations, or descriptions accompanying different shots or scenes in the film.

AUDIO CODES

Sound forms a significant part of the film's mood by setting the tone of the scene.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue: the words spoken by the characters in the film make up the dialogue ("the human voice"). This helps develop the plot and characters in the film.

VOICE-OVER/NARRATION

First-person narration: where one of the film's characters provides commentary on the story from their own perspective, thus providing insight into that character's thoughts.

Omniscient narration: where an impartial, unseen narrator provides commentary on the story.

MUSIC

Music Score: a specific reference to the film's music. These can be written specifically for the film (original scores) or they can be taken from another source (adapted scores).

Compilation score: refers to a film's music, which consists of a combination of different musical sources. Compilation scores are usually employed when directors want to use popular music in their film.

Words to describe the music of a film: melancholic, ominous, euphoric, lively, tranquil, frenetic, poignant

SOUND EFFECTS

Sound effects include all the sounds that are not music or dialogue.

Examples of sound effects include: a ticking clock (can create a sense of urgency or time running out) explosions, crashes and gunshots (which all underscore themes of violence).

SILENCE

Equally important to the use of sound in a film is the **absence of sound**: silence can be used to emphasise the significance of a moment (by contrasting with sound or music), build tension or create a feeling of unease, loneliness or isolation.

TECHNICAL CODES

Technical codes include filming techniques and methods such as shot types, camera angle and movement, and editing.

LIGHTING

Lighting in film production has three main purposes: capturing objects with sufficient clarity and detail, directing the viewer's attention, and creating mood/atmosphere.

High-key lighting: this is bright, even lighting with few shadows. Because nothing is hidden by darkness, it provides visual detail and tends to work against visual suspense (because we can see everything).

Low-key lighting: this is subdued, uneven lighting with noticeable shadows, which creates a feeling of confinement and can be used for building atmosphere and suspense.

Spotlighting: where a strong light is focused on one element of the scene, directing the viewer's gaze to the object or person and making it the centre of attention.

Backlighting: where a major light source is placed behind the subject, producing a silhouette.

Side lighting: this emphasises the contours and texture of a subject, making its features more pronounced and creating deep shadows on the unlit side of the subject.

CAMERA ANGLES

The camera angle is the angle from which the audience views a person, place or object on screen.

Eye-level: in eye-level shots, the camera views actors or scenes from a "neutral" position that is roughly level with the height of the actors.

High angle: in high angle shots, the camera looks *down* onto the scene- this is thought to make the subject appear smaller or vulnerable.

Low angle: in low angle shots, the camera looks *up* at a character or object- this is thought to make them/it appear powerful or significant.

Wide angle: wide angle shots use a lens with a short focal length, which provides a distorted but extensive view of a wide area.

Bird's-eye: in the bird's-eye shot, the camera looks directly down on the scene from above, so that characters and objects are seen as if on a map (i.e. creating a sense of distance).

Canted: a canted camera angle (or "dutch" angle) is where the camera is tilted on the side, so as to make the scene appear unbalanced (often to show the disorientation of a character).

Point-of-view: a shot taken from the perspective of a character, showing the audience what that character would see.

CAMERA DISTANCE

The camera distance is the amount of space that is seen in one shot or frame.

Extreme long shot: a shot that contains a large amount of landscape. It is often used for presenting scenery or at the beginning of a scene or film to establish the setting.

Long shot: a shot that projects the subject at a distance- typically the viewing length that would show a person in full-length on screen.

Mid-shot/medium shot: a shot taken at a moderate distance, which would roughly show a person from the waist up. This distance is useful for showing conversations or actions.

Close-up: a shot that is roughly the viewing distance that would show a human face filling the screen, thus bringing the viewer close to the character or object.

Extreme close-up: a shot that closes in on one part of an object so that it fills the whole screen (e.g. an eye, a door handle, a word on a page etc.).

CAMERA MOVEMENT

Panning shot: the pan is a *horizontal* swivelling movement of the camera, like turning your head from side to side while viewing the horizon.

Whip pan: a panning shot whereby the camera is moved very quickly to briefly produce a set of horizontal blurred lines.

Dolly shot: "dollying" means moving the camera forward or backward to get closer to a subject or move away from it, so that the audience's viewpoint floats toward or away from the action.

Tracking shot: tracking is a straight line sideways movement of the camera, most often used to keep a moving object in the shot (e.g. following alongside a character as they walk down the highway).

Tilting shot: the tilt is a vertical movement from low angle to high angle, or the reverse (e.g. a shot that begins at a characters shoes and end up on their face).

Zoom: the zoom is not technically a camera movement but it can create the impression of movement by moving toward or away from the action.

Slam zoom: a zoom shot achieved at high speed.

EDITING (montage)

The use of cutting and sequencing to make connections between shots, suggest a point of view, or vary the pace of a film.

Cutting/Sequencing:

Cross-cutting: the switching back and forth between different camera shots to show that different events are occurring at the same time.

Jump cut: the abrupt shifting of time or place used to compress the action or to make unexpected connections between events or ideas.

Fast-cutting: the use of brief, rapid shots in a sequence.

Juxtaposition: where images are placed side by side for contrast, or to imply a correlation between them that would not otherwise be apparent.

Transitions:

Fade: where the shot fades into or out of blackness, usually to indicate the end of a scene or to suggest the passage of time.

Dissolve: where one frame fades out and is gradually replaced by another so that at the midpoint, both frames can be seen.

Straight cut: where one shot transitions abruptly from one to another, without any effects.

Wipe: where a line moves across the screen, removing one shot while it reveals another.