

Reading the Opening Sequence

A film starts: anything is possible. The initial cues are always particularly important. They present formal and thematic points of departure, suggesting the directions that the film will pursue, providing, as it were, a preview of coming attractions. What are the "signals" provided by the first sequence of a film, the "signs" that point ahead?

--location: how does the first shot establish a place? Do we see stock footage? Is there depth of field? What is the relation between foreground and background?

--human figures: What role does human interest play in this space, if any? In what focal length do we view people? What is the relation between characters--are there constellations? What is the social status of the characters? Class, gender, or racial differences? Which character(s) does the camera emphasize? Types of dress, speech, gesture, and behavior? Pay attention to the space around characters, the décor and setting which tell us where and how they live.

--movement of characters: does the camera follow a particular figure? What kinds of movement prevail (jerky, smooth, slow)?

--perspective: Whose look is at work? Are looks exchanged? Is a distinct point of view identified or does an impersonal observer seem to be guiding the camera's choices? Or does the camera favor a certain character's perspective? Is there an identifiable narrator or narrative presence?

--composition:

--position of characters in frame (in foreground/background; center/ off-center; near top/bottom of frame; close to edges; cut off; partial view; only certain fragments of a body, face, etc.)?

--view of character (unobstructed, hidden, profile, silhouette, linked visually to another or object)?

--do décor and/or setting establish a mood or provide a commentary?

--relationship of character to landscape? Does s/he control the space by virtue of his/her position or does the space visually overwhelm human presence?

--dominant contrasts (light/dark, distant/close, big/small, etc.)?

--use of frame: open (frame is a fluid space, allowing relative freedom of movement) or closed (frame is a distinct limit, a self- enclosed and structured miniature world).

--lighting:

--natural or studio? flat or shadowy? From where does the light come and on what/whom does it concentrate?

--camera movement and placement:

--outside-inside, from above or below;

--stasis (long or short takes?);

--angle (high or low, straight-on or oblique?).

--editing:

--do images and sounds flow together?

--are there leaps/jerks between images and sounds?

--does the juxtaposition of images and sounds suggest relations between characters?

--sound/dialogue/silence:

--what is the relationship between the words we hear and the images we see? Do certain characters speak differently? Who speaks the first words and what do they signify?

--bear in mind the creative use of the following: dialogue, music, and sound effects. Does sound have an on- or offscreen source? Is

it diegetic or nondiegetic? Does silence play a crucial role?