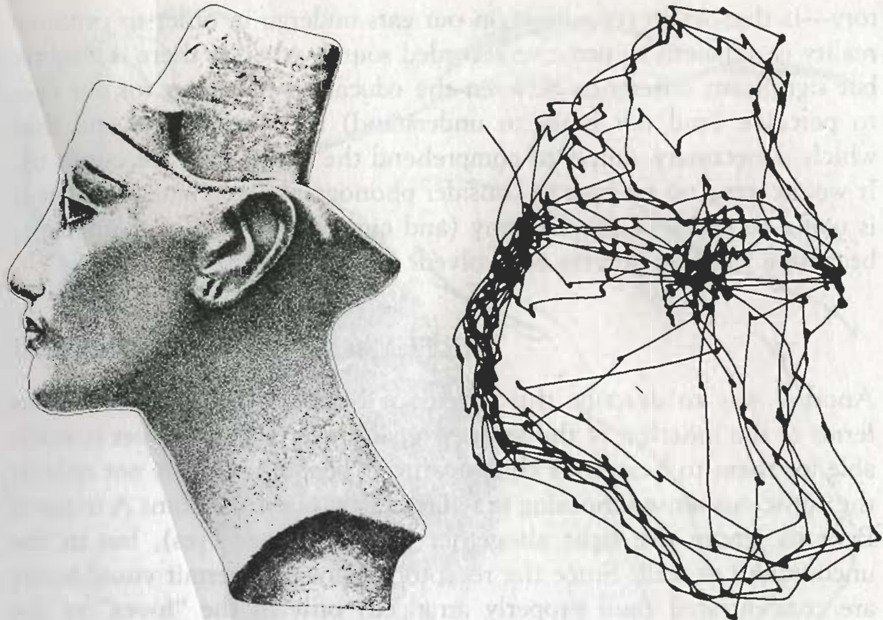


Figure 3-5. SACCADE PATTERNS. At left, a drawing of a bust of Queen Nefertiti; at right, a diagram of the eye movements of a subject viewing the bust. Notice that the eye follows regular patterns rather than randomly surveying the image. The subject clearly concentrates on the face and shows little interest in the neck. The ear also seems to be a focus of attention, probably not because it is inherently interesting, but rather because it is located in a prominent place in this profile. The saccadic patterns are not continuous; the recording clearly shows that the eye jerks quickly from point to point (the "notches" in the continuous line), fixing on specific nodes rather than absorbing general information. The recording was made by Alfred L. Yarbus of the Institute for Problems of Information Transmission, Moscow. (*From "Eye Movements and Visual Perception," by David Noton and Lawrence Stark, June 1971. Copyright © 1971 by Scientific American, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.*)

The irony here is that we know very well that we must learn to read before we can attempt to enjoy or understand literature, but we tend to believe, mistakenly, that anyone can read a film. Anyone can see a film, it's true, even cats. But some people have learned to comprehend visual images—physiologically, ethnographically, and psychologically—with far more sophistication than have others. This evidence confirms the validity of the triangle of perception outlined in Chapter 1, uniting author, work, and observer. The observer is not simply a consumer, but an active—or potentially active—participant in the process.

Film is not a language, but is like a language, and since it is like language, some of the methods that we use to study language might profitably be applied to a study of film. In fact, during the last ten years,

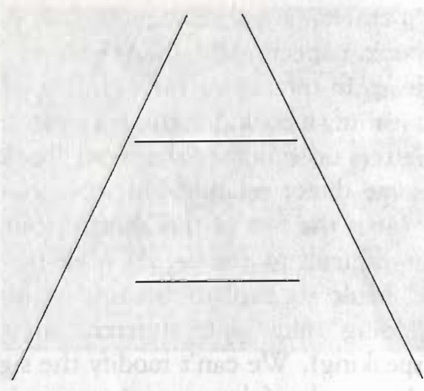


Figure 3-6. THE PONZO ILLUSION. The horizontal lines are of equal length, yet the line at the top appears to be longer than the line at the bottom. The diagonals suggest perspective, so that we interpret the picture in depth and conclude, therefore, that since the "top" line must be "behind" the "bottom" line, further away, it must then be longer.

this approach to film—essentially linguistic—has grown considerably in importance. Since film is not a language, strictly linguistic concepts are misleading. Ever since the beginning of film history, theorists have been fond of comparing film with verbal language (this was partly to justify the serious study of film), but it wasn't until a new, larger category of thought developed in the fifties and early sixties—one that saw written and spoken language as just two among many systems of communication—that the real study of film as a language could proceed. This inclusive category is semiology, the study of systems of signs. Semiologists justified the study of film as language by redefining the concept of written and spoken language. Any system of communication is a "language"; English, French, or Chinese is a "language system." Cinema, therefore, may be a language of a sort, but it is not clearly a language system. As Christian Metz, the well-known film semiologist, pointed out: we understand a film not because we have a knowledge of its system, rather, we achieve an understanding of its system because we understand the film. Put another way, "It is not because the cinema is language that it can tell such fine stories, but rather it has become language because it has told such fine stories" [Metz, *Film Language*, p. 47].

For semiologists, a sign must consist of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The word "word," for example—the collection of letters or sounds—is a signifier; what it represents is something else again—the "signified." In literature, the relationship between signifier and signified is a main locus of art: the poet is building constructions that, on the one hand, are composed of sounds (signifiers) and, on the other, of meanings (signifieds), and the relationship between the two can be fascinating. In fact, much of the pleasure of poetry lies just here: in the dance between sound and meaning.

But in film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical: the sign

of cinema is a short-circuit sign. A picture of a book is much closer to a book, conceptually, than the word "book" is. It's true that we may have to learn in infancy or early childhood to interpret the picture of a book as meaning a book, but this is a great deal easier than learning to interpret the letters or sounds of the word "book" as what it signifies. A picture bears some direct relationship with what it signifies, a word seldom does.*

It is the fact of this short-circuit sign that makes the language of film so difficult to discuss. As Metz put it, in a memorable phrase: "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand." It also makes "doing" film quite different from "doing" English (either writing or speaking). We can't modify the signs of cinema the way we can modify the words of language systems. In cinema, an image of a rose is an image of a rose is an image of a rose—nothing more, nothing less. In English, a rose can be a rose, simply, but it can also be modified or confused with similar words: rose, rosy, rosier, rosiest, rise risen, rows (ruse), arose, roselike, and so forth. The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not.

Nevertheless, film is *like* a language. How, then, does it do what is does? Clearly, one person's image of a certain object is not another's. If we both read the words "rose" you may perhaps think of a Peace rose you picked last summer, while I am thinking of the one Laura Westphal gave to me in December 1968. In cinema, however, we both see the same rose, while the filmmaker can choose from an infinite variety of roses and then photograph the one chosen in another infinite variety of ways. The artist's choice in cinema is without limit; the artist's choice in literature is circumscribed, while the reverse is true for the observer. Film does not suggest, in this context: it states. And therein lies its power and the danger it poses to the observer: the reason why it is useful, even vital, to learn to read images well so that the observer can seize some of the power of the medium. The better one reads an image, the more one understands it, the more power one has over it. The reader of a page invents the image, the reader of a film does not, yet both readers must work to interpret the signs they perceive in order to complete the process of intellection. The more work they do, the better the balance between observer and creator in the process; the better the balance, the more vital and resonant the work of art.

*Pictographical languages like Chinese and Japanese might be said to fall somewhere in between film and Western languages as sign systems, but only when they are written, not when they are spoken, and only in limited cases. On the other hand, there are some words—"gulp," for example—that are onomatopoeic and therefore bear a direct relationship to what they signify, but only when they are spoken.

A.

B.

Figure 3-7. A rose is not necessarily a rose. (A) James Rosenquist's roses: *Dusting Off Roses.* 1965. (*Lithograph, printed in color, 30¾" by 21 ¹¹/₁₆". Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Celeste and Armand Bartos Foundation.*) (B) Jean-Luc Godard's rose, from *Pravda* (1969). (*Frame enlargement.*)

The earliest film texts—even many published recently—pursue with shortsighted ardor the crude comparison of film and written/spoken language. The standard theory suggested that the shot was the word of film, the scene its sentence, and the sequence its paragraph. In the sense that these sets of divisions are arranged in ascending order of complexity, the comparison is true enough; but it breaks down under analysis. Assuming for the moment that a word is the smallest convenient unit of meaning, does the shot compare equivalently? Not at all. In the first place, a shot takes time. Within that time span there is a continually various number of images. Does the single image, the frame, then constitute the basic unit of meaning in film? Still the answer is no, since each frame includes a potentially infinite amount of visual information, as does the soundtrack that accompanies it. While we could say that a film shot is something like a sentence, since it makes a statement and is sufficient in itself, the point is that the film does not divide itself into such easily manageable units. While we can define "shot" technically well enough as a single piece of film, what happens if the particular shot is punctuated internally? The camera can move; the scene can change completely in a pan or track. Should we then be talking of one shot or two?

Likewise, scenes, which were defined strictly in French classical

theater as beginning and ending whenever a character entered or left the stage, are more amorphous in film (as they are in theater today). The term scene is useful, no doubt, but not precise. Sequences are certainly longer than scenes, but the "sequence-shot," in which a single shot is coterminous with a sequence, is an important concept and no smaller units within it are sequential.

It would seem that a real science of film would depend on our being able to define the smallest unit of construction. We can do that technically, at least for the image: it is the single frame. But this is certainly not the smallest unit of meaning. The fact is that film, unlike written or spoken language, is not composed of units, as such, but is rather a continuum of meaning. A shot contains as much information as we want to read in it, and whatever units we define within the shot are arbitrary.

Therefore, film presents us with a langauge (of sorts) that:

a) consists of short-circuit signs in which the signifier nearly equals the signified; and

b) depends on a continuous, nondiscrete sytem in which we can't identify a basic unit and which therefore we can't describe quantatively. The result is, as Christain Metz says, that: "An easy art, the cinema is in constant danger of falling victim to this easiness." Film is too intelligible, which is what makes it difficult to analyze. "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand."

DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANING

Films do, however, manage to communicate meaning. They do this essentially in two different manners: denotatively and connotatively. Like written language, but to a greater degree, a film image or sound has a denotative meaning: it is what is and we don't have to strive to recognize it. This factor may seem simplistic, but it should never be underestimated: here lies the great strength of film. There is a substantial difference between a description in words (or even in still photographs) of a person or event, and a cinematic record of the same. Because film can give us such a close approximation of reality, it can communicate a precise knowledge that written or spoken language seldom can. Language systems may be much better equipped to deal with the nonconcrete world of ideas and abstractions (imagine this book, for example, on film: without a complete narration it would be incomprehensible), but they are not nearly so capable of conveying precise information about physical realities.

By its very nature, written/spoken language analyzes. To write the

word "rose" is to generalize and abstract the idea of the rose. The real power of the linguistic languages lies not with their denotative ability but in the connotative aspect of language: the wealth of meaning we can attach to a word that surpasses its denotation. If denotation were the only measure of the power of a language for example, then English—which has a vocabulary of a million or so words and is the largest language in history—would be over three times more powerful than French—which has only 300,000 or so words. But French makes up for its "limited" vocabulary with a noticeably greater use of connotation. Film has connotative abilities as well.

Considering the strongly denotative quality of film sounds and images, it is surprising to discover that these connotative abilities are very much a part of the film language. In fact, many of them stem from film's denotative ability. As we have noted in Chapter 1, film can draw on all the other arts for various effects simply because it can record them. Thus, all the connotative factors of spoken language can be accommodated on a film soundtrack while the connotations of written language can be included in titles (to say nothing of the connotative factors of dance, music, painting, and so forth). Because film is a product of culture, it has resonances that go beyond what the semiologist calls its diegesis (the sum of it denotation). An image of a rose is not simply that when it appears in a film of *Richard III*, for example, because we are aware of the connotations of the white rose and the red as symbols of the houses of York and Lancaster. These are culturally determined connotations.

In addition to these influences from the general culture, film has its own specific connotative ability. We know (even if we don't often remind ourselves of it consciously) that a filmmaker has made specific choices: the rose is filmed from a certain angle, the camera moves or does not move, the color is bright or dull, the rose is fresh or fading, the thorns apparent or hidden, the background clear (so that the rose is seen in context) or vague (so that it is isolated), the shot held for a long time or briefly, and so on. These are specific aids to cinematic connotation, and although we can approximate their effect in literature, we cannot accomplish it with cinematic precision or efficiency. A picture is, on occasion, worth a thousand words, as the adage has it. When our sense of the connotation of a specific shot depends on its having been chosen from a range of other possible shots, then we can say that this is, using the langauge of semiology, a *paradigmatic* connotation. That is, the connotative sense we comprehend stems from the shot being compared, not necessarily consciously, with its unrealized companions in the paradigm, or general model, of this type of shot. A

low-angle shot of a rose, for example, conveys a sense that the flower is for some reason dominant, overpowering, because we consciously or unconsciously compare it with, say, an overhead shot of a rose, which would diminish its importance.

Conversely, when the significance of the rose depends not on the shot compared with other potential shots, but rather on the shot compared with actual shots that precede or follow it, then we can speak of its *syntagmatic* connotation; that is, the meaning adheres to it because it is compared with other shots that we do see. These two different kinds of connotation have their equivalents in literature. A word alone on the page has no particular connotation, only denotation. We know what it means, we also know potentially what it connotes, but we can't supply the particular connotation the author of the word has in mind until we see it in context. Then we know what particular connotative value it has because we judge its meaning by conscious or unconscious comparison of it with (a) all the words like it that might fit in this context but were not chosen, and (b) the words that precede or follow it. (See p. 341.)

These two axes of meaning—the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic—have real value as tools for understanding what film means. In fact, as an art, film depends almost entirely upon these two sets of choices. After a filmmaker has decided what to shoot, the two obsessive questions are how to shoot it (what choices to make: the paradigmatic) and how to present the shot (how to edit it: the syntagmatic). In literature, in contrast, the first question (how to say it) is paramount, while the second (how to present what is said) is quite secondary. Semiotics, so far, has concentrated on the syntagmatic aspect of film, for a very simple reason: it is here that film is most clearly different from other arts, so that the syntagmatic category (editing, montage) is in a sense the most "cinematic."

Film draws on the other arts for much of its connotative power as well as generating its own, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically. But there is also another source of connotative sense. Cinema is not strictly a medium of intercommunication. One seldom holds dialogues in film. Whereas spoken and written languages are used for intercommunication, film, like the nonrepresentational arts in general (as well as language when it is used for artistic purposes), is a one-way communication. As a result, even the most utilitarian of films is artistic in some respect. Film speaks in neologisms. "When a 'language' does not already exist," Metz writes, "one must be something of an artist to speak it, however poorly. For to speak it is partly to invent it, whereas to speak the language of everyday is simply to use it." So connotations

attach to even the simplest statements in film. There is an old joke that illustrates the point: two philosophers meet; one says "Good Morning!" The other smiles in recognition, then walks on frowning and thinking to himself: "I wonder what he meant by that?" The question is a joke when spoken language is the subject; it is however, a perfectly legitimate question to ask of any statement in film.

Is there any way we can further differentiate the various modes of denotation and connotation in film? Borrowing a "trichotomy" from the philosopher C.S. Peirce, Peter Wollen, in his highly influential book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969), suggested that cinematic signs are of three orders:

- The Icon: a sign in which the signifier represents the signified mainly by its similarity to it, its likeness;
- The Index: which measures a quality not because it is identical to it but because it has an inherent relationship to it;
- The Symbol: an arbitrary sign in which the signifier has neither a direct or an indexical relationship to the signified, but rather represents it through convention.

Although Wollen doesn't fit them into the denotative/connotative categories, Icon, Index, and Symbol can be seen as mainly denotative. Portraits are Icons, of course, but so are diagrams in the Peirce/Wollen system. Indexes are more difficult to define. Quoting Peirce, Wollen suggests two sorts of Indexes, one technical—medical symptoms are Indexes of health, clocks and sundials are Indexes of time—and one metaphorical: a rolling gait should indicate that a man is a sailor. (This is the one point where the Peirce/Wollen categories verge on the connotative.) Symbols, the third category, are more easily defined. The way Pierce and Wollen use it, the word has a rather broad definition: words are Symbols (since the signifier represents the signified through convention rather than resemblance).

These three categories are not mutually exclusive. Especially in photographic images, the Iconic factor is almost always a strong one. As we have noted, a thing is itself even if it is also an Index or a Symbol. General semiological theory, especially as it is put forth in Christian Metz's writings, covers the first and last categories—Icon and Symbol—fairly well already. The Icon is the short-circuit sign that is so characteristic of cinema; the Symbol is the arbitrary or conventional sign that is the basis of spoken and written language. It is the second category—the Index—that is most intriguing in Peirce and Wollen's system: it seems to be a third means, halfway between the cinematic Icon and the literary Symbol, in which cinema can convey meaning. It is not an

Figure 3-8. ICON. Liv Ullmann in Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face* (1975). This image is what it is.

arbitrary sign, but neither is it identical. It suggests a third type of denotation that points directly toward connotation, and may in fact not be understandable without the dimension of connotation.

The Index seems to be one very useful way in which cinema can deal directly with ideas, since it gives us concrete representations or measurements of them. How can we convey the idea of hotness cinematically for instance? In written language it's very easy, but on film? The image of a thermometer quickly comes to mind. Clearly that is an Index of temperature. But there are more subtle Indexes, as well: sweat is an Index, as are shimmering atmospheric waves and hot colors. It's a truism of film esthetics that metaphors are difficult in cinema. Comparing love with roses works well enough in literature, but its cinematic equivalent poses problems: the rose, the secondary element of the metaphor, is too equivalent in cinema, too much present. As a result, cinematic metaphors based on the literary model tend to be crude and static and forced. The Indexical sign may offer a way out of this dilemma. It is here that film discovers its own, unique metaphorical power, which it owes to the flexibility of the frame, its ability to say many things at once.

Figure 3-9. INDEX. Liv Ullmann in Bergman's *Shame* (1968). The offer of money—the roll of cash on the pillow—is an index of prostitution and, hence, of Eva's shame.

The concept of the Index also leads us to some interesting ideas about connotation. It must be clear from the above discussion that the line between denotation and connotation is not clearly defined: there is a continuum. In film, as in written and spoken language, connotations if they becme strong enough are eventually accepted as denotative meanings. As it happens, much of the connotative power of film depends on devices that are Indexical; that is, they are not arbitrary signs, but neither are they identical.

Two terms from literary studies, closely associated with each other, serve to describe the main manner in which film conveys connotative meaning. A metonymy is a figure of speech in which an associated detail or notion is used to invoke an idea or represent an object. Etymologically, the word means "substitute naming" (from the Greek *meta,* involving transfer, and *onoma* name). Thus, in literature we can speak of the king (and the idea of kingship) as "the crown." A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole or the whole for the part. An automobile can be referred to as a "motor" or a "set of wheels"; a policeman is "the law."

Both of these forms recur constantly in cinema. The indexes of heat

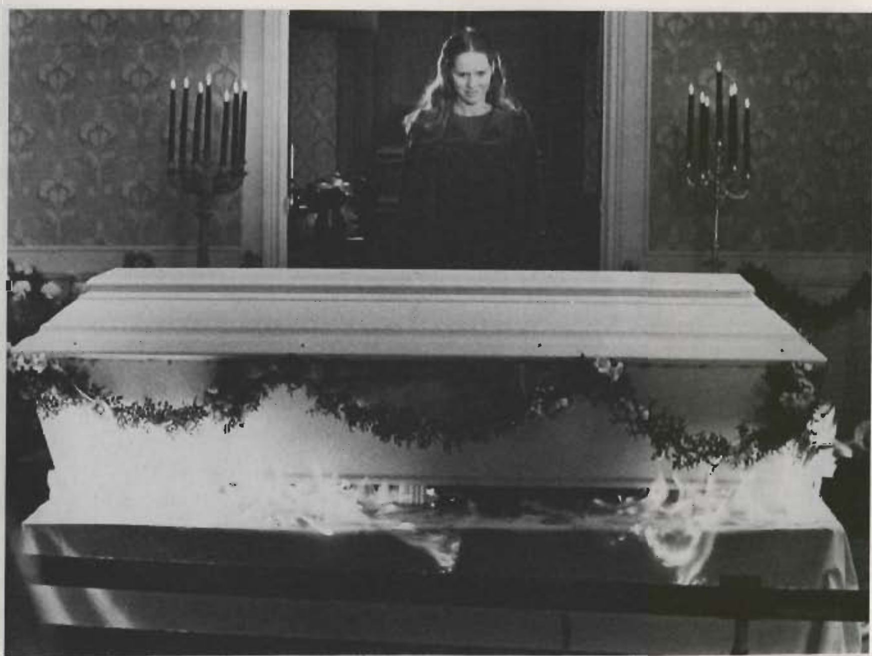


Figure 3-10. SYMBOL. Bergman often uses coffins and corpses as symbols in his films. Here, Ullmann again in *Face to Face*. . .

mentioned above are clearly metonymical: associated details invoke an abstract idea. Many of the old clichés of Hollywood are synecdochic (close shots of marching feet to represent an army) and metonymic (the falling calendar pages, the driving wheels of the railroad engine). Indeed, because metonymical devices yield themselves so well to cinematic exploitation, cinema can be more efficient in this regard than literature can. Associated details can be compressed within the limits of the frame to present a statement of extraordinary richness. Metonymy is a kind of cinematic shorthand.

Just as, in general, our sense of cinema's connotations depends on understood comparisons of the image with images that were not chosen (paradigmatic) and images that came before and after (syntagmatic), so our sense of the cultural connotations depend upon understood comparisons of the part with the whole (synecdoche) and associated details with ideas (metonymy). Cinema is an art and a medium of extensions and indexes. Much of its meaning comes not from what we see (or hear) but from what we don't see or, more accurately, from an ongoing process of comparison of what we see with what we don't see. This is

Figure 3-11. . . .and Max von Sydow in *Hour of the Wolf* (1966).

ironic, considering that cinema at first glance seems to be an art that is all too evident, one that is often criticized for "leaving nothing to the imagination."

Quite the contrary is true. In a film of strict denotation, images and sounds are quite easily and directly understood. But very few films are strictly denotative; they can't help but be connotative, "for to speak [film] is partly to invent it." The observer who adamantly resists, of course can choose to ignore the connotative power of film, but the observer who has learned to read film has available a multitude of connotations. Alfred Hitchcock, for example, has made a number of very popular films during the past half-century. We could ascribe his critical and popular success to the subjects of his films—certainly the thriller strikes a deep responsive chord in audiences—but then how do we account for the failed thrillers of his imitators? In truth, the drama of film, its attraction, lies not so much in what is shot (that's the drama of the subject), but in how it is shot and how it is presented. And as thousands of commentators have attested, Hitchcock was the master par excellence of these two critical tasks. The drama of filmmaking in large part lies in the brainwork of these closely associated sets of deci-

Figure 3-12. METONYMY. In *Red Desert* (1964), Michelangelo Antonioni developed a precise metonymics of color. Throughout most of the film, Giuliana (Monica Vitti) is oppressed psychologically and politically by a gray and deathly urban industrial environment. When she manages to break away from its grip on several occasions, Antonioni signals her temporary independence (and possible return to health) with bright colors, which is a detail associated with health and happiness not only in this film but in general culture as well. In this scene, Giuliana attempts to open her own shop. The gray walls are punctuated with splotches of brilliant color (the attempt at freedom), but the shapes themselves are violent, disorganized, frightening (the relapse into neurosis). In all, complicated set of metonymies.

Figure 3-13. METONYMY. In Claude Chabrol's *Leda* (1959), André Jocelyn portrays a schizophrenic character. The image in the cracked mirror is a simple, logical metonymy.

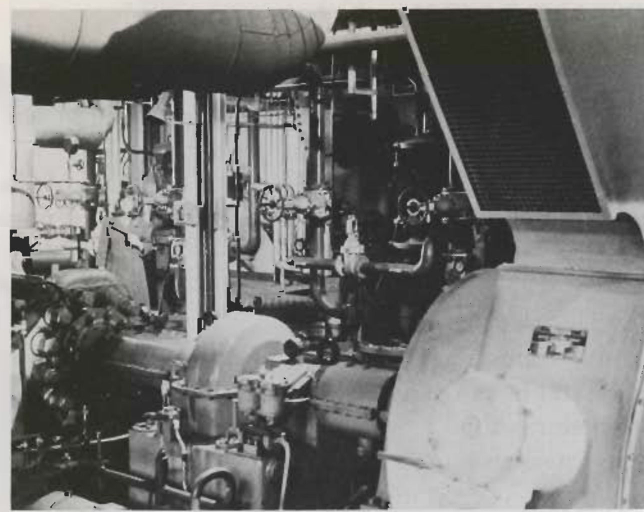


Figure 3-14. SYNECDOCHE. Giuliana in *Red Desert*, again, this time surrounded and nearly overwhelmed by industrial machinery, a "part" that stands for the "whole" of her urban society. It isn't this factory, these particular machines, that oppress her, but the larger reality they represent.

Figure 3-15. SYNECDOCHE. Juliet Berto in Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) has constructed a theoretical barricade of Chairman Mao's "Little Red Books," parts that stand for the whole of Marxist/Leninist/Maoist ideology with which the group of "gauchistes" to which she belongs protect themselves, and *from* which they intend to launch an attack on bourgeois society.

The terms "synecdoche" and "metonymy"—like "Icon," "Index," and "Symbol"—are, of course, imprecise. They are theoretical constructs that may be useful as aids to analysis; thay are not strict definitions. This particular synecdoche, for example, might very well be better classified as a metonymy in which the little red books are associated details rather than parts standing for the whole. (The decision itself has ideological overtones!) Likewise, although this image seems easiest to classify as Indexical, there are certainly elements of the Iconic and Symbolic in it.

sions. "Literate" filmgoers appreciate Hitchcock's superb cinematic intelligence on a conscious level, illiterate filmgoers on an unconscious level, but the intelligence has its effect, nevertheless.

One more element remains to be added to the lexicon of film semiology: the trope. In literary theory, a trope is a "turn of phrase" or a "change of sense"—in other words, a logical twist that gives the elements of a sign—the signifier and the signified—a new relationship to each other. The trope is therefore the connecting element between denotation and connotation. When a rose is a rose is a rose it isn't anything else, and its meaning as a sign is strictly denotative. But when a rose is something else, a "turning" has been made and the sign is opened up to new meanings. The map of film semiology we have described so far has been static. The concept of the trope allows us to view it dynamically, as actions rather than facts.

As we have noted in earlier chapters, one of the great sources of power in film is that it can reproduce the tropes of most of the other arts. There is also a set of tropes that it has made its own. We have described the way they operate in general in the first half of this chapter. Given an image of a rose, we at first have only its Iconic or Symbolic denotative meaning, which is static. But when we begin to expand the possibilities through tropes of comparison, the image comes alive: as a connotative Index, in terms of the paradigm of possible shots, in the syntagmatic context of its assocaitions in the film, as it is used metaphorically as a metonymy or a synecdoche.

There are undoubtedly other categories of film semiology yet to be discovered, analyzed, propogated. In no sense is the system shown in the chart on pp. 144–45 meant to be either exhaustive or immutable. Semiology is most definitely not a science in the sense that physics or biology is a science. But it is a logical, often illuminating system that helps to describe how film does what it does. Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand. The semiotics of film is easy to explain because it is difficult to understand. Somewhere between lies the genius of film.

SYNTAX

Film has no grammar. There are, however, some vaguely defined rules of usage in cinematic language, and the syntax of film—its systematic arrangement—orders these rules and indicates relationships between them. As with written and spoken languages, it is important to remem-

Figure 3-16 TROPE. An ant-covered hand from Dali and Buñuel's surrealist classic *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). Another very complex image, not easily analyzed. Iconic, Indexical, and Symbolic values are all present: the image is striking for its own sake; it is a measure of the infestation of the soul of the owner of the hand; it is certainly symbolic of a more general malaise, as well. It is metonymic, because the ants are an "associated detail"; it is also synecdochic, because the hand is a part that stands for the whole. Finally, the source of the image seems to be a trope: a verbal pun on the French idiom, "avoir des fourmis dans les mains," "to have ants in the hand," an expression equivalent to the English "my hand is asleep." By illustrating the turn of phrase literally, Dali and Buñuel extended the trope so that a common experience is turned into a striking sign of decay. (I am indebted to David Bombyk for this analysis. MOMA/FSA.)

ber that the syntax of film is a result of its usage, not a determinant of it. There is nothing preordained about film syntax. Rather, it evolved naturally as certain devices were found in practice to be both workable and useful. Like the syntax of written and spoken language, the syntax of film is an organic development, descriptive rather than prescriptive, and it has changed considerably over the years. The Hollywood Gram-

Figure 3-17. METONYMIC GESTURE. Max von Sydow in Ingmar Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* (1967). . .

mar described below may sound laughable now, but during the thirties, forties, and early fifties it was an accurate model of the way Hollywood films were constructed.

In written/spoken languge systems, syntax deals only with what we might call the linear aspect of construction: that is, the ways in which words are put together in a chain to form phrases and sentences, what in film we call the syntagmatic category. In film, however, syntax can also include spatial composition, for which there is no parallel in language systems like English and French—we can't say or write several things at the same time.

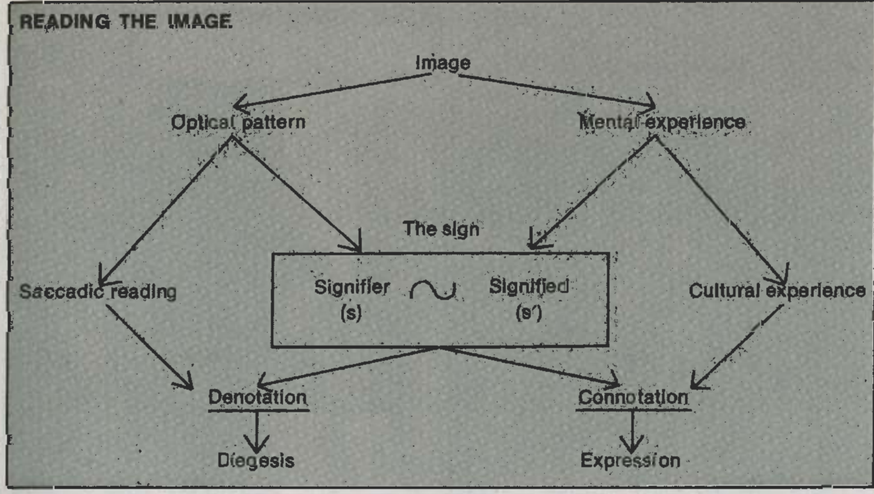
So film syntax must include both development in time and development in space. In film criticism, generally, the modification of space is referred to as mise en scène. The French phrase literally means "putting in the scene." The modification of time is called montage (from the French for "putting together"). As we shall see in Chapter 4, the tension between these twin concepts of mise en scène and montage has been the engine of film esthetics ever since Lumière and Méliès first explored the practical possibilities of each at the turn of the century.

Over the years, theories of mise en scène have tended to be closely

Figure 3-18. . . . and in the same director's *Shame* (1968). Gesture is one of the most communicative facets of film signification. "Kinesics," or "body language," is basically an Indexical, metonymic system of meaning. Here, von Sydow's pose conveys the same basic meaning in each film: the hand covers the face, shields it from the outside world: the knees are pulled up close almost in the fetal position, to protect the body; the ego has shrunk into a protective shell, a sense further emphasized in the shot from *Shame* by the framed box of the wooden stairway von Sydow is sitting on. Texture supports gesture in both shots: both backgrounds—one exterior, one interior—are rough, barren, uninviting. The differences between the shots are equally as meaningful as the similarities. In *Hour of the Wolf,* von Sydow's character is relatively more open, relaxed: so is the pose. In *Shame,* the character (at this point in the narrative) is mortified: a sense emphasized by both the tighter pose and the more distanced composition of the shot.

associated with film realism, while montage has been seen as essentially expressionistic, yet this pairing is deceptive. Certainly it would seem that mise en scène would indicate a high regard for the subject in front of the camera, while montage would give the filmmaker more control over the manipulation of the subject, but despite these natural tendencies, montage can be the more realistic of the two alternatives, and mise en scène on occasion of the more expressionistic

Take, for example, the problem of choosing between a pan from one subject to another and a cut. Most people would agree that the cut is more manipulative, that it interrupts and remodels reality, and that therefore the pan is the more realistic of the two alternatives, since it



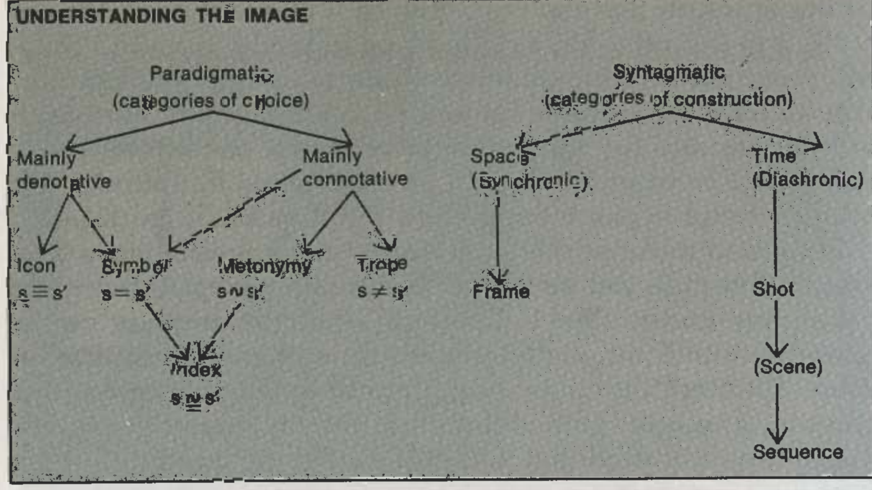
READING THE IMAGE: The image is experienced as both an optical and mental phenomenon. The optical pattern is read saccadically; the mental experience is the result of the sum of cultural determinants, and is formed by it. Both optical and mental intellection combine in the concept of the sign, where signifier (s) is related to signified (s'). The signifier is more optical than mental; the signified more mental then optical. All three levels of reading—saccadic, semiological, and cultural—then combine with each other in various ways to produce meaning, either essentially denotative or essentially connotative.

preserves the integrity of the space. Yet, in fact, the reverse is true if we judge panning and cutting from the point of view of the observer.

When we redirect our attention from one subject to another we seldom actually pan. Psychologically, the cut is the truer approximation of our natural perception. First one subject has our attention, then the other; we are seldom interested in the intervening space, yet the cinematic pan draws our attention to just that.*

It was André Bazin who, more than anyone, developed the connections between mise en scène and realism on the one hand, and montage and expressionism on the other. At about the same time, in the middle

*It has been suggested that the zip pan, in which the camera moves so quickly that the image in between the original subject and its successor is blurred, would be the most verisimilitudinous handling of the problem. But even this alternative draws attention to itself, which is precisely what does not happen in normal perception. Perhaps the perfect analogue with reality would be the direct cut in which the two shots were separated by a single black frame (or better yet, a neutral gray frame), which would duplicate the time (approximately 1/20 of a second) each saccadic movement of the eye takes!



UNDERSTANDING THE IMAGE: We understand an image not only for itself, but in context: in relation to categories of choice (paradigmatic) and in relation to categories of construction (syntagmatic). The categories of choice are variously denotative or connotative, and each variety, none of whose boundaries are sharply defined, is characterized by the relationship between signifier and signified. In the Iconic image, signifier is identical with signified. In Symbols the signifier is equal to the signified, but not identical. In metonymies and synecdoches, signifier is similar in some way to signified, while in tropes, the signifier is not equal to (distinctly different from) the signified. Here the relationship is considerably more tenuous. In Indexes, signifier and signified are congruent.

Syntagmatic relationship (categories of construction) operate either in space or in time: synchronic phenomena happen at the same time, or without regard to time, while diachronic phenomena happen across time, or within it. (Here, the words "synchronic" and "diachronic" carry their simplest meanings. They are also used with more specific definitions generally in semiology and linguistics, in which case synchronic linguistics is descriptive, while diachronic linguistics is historical.)

Finally, it must be noted that many of the concepts expressed in this chart are true for sounds as well as images, although usually to a considerably lesser extent. While it is true that we do not read sounds saccadically, we nevertheless focus psychologically on particular sounds within the total auditory experience just as we "block out" unwanted or useless noise. While sound must seem, in general, far more denotative and Iconic than image, it is nevertheless possible to apply the concepts of Symbol, Index, metonymy, synecdoche, and trope, if the necessary changes are made.

fifties, Jean-Luc Godard was working out a synthesis of the twin notions of mise en scène and montage that was considerably more sophisticated than Bazin's binary opposition. For Godard, mise en scène and montage were divested of ethical and esthetic connotations: montage simply did in time what mise en scène does in space. Both are principles of organization, and to say that mise en scène (space) is more "realistic" than montage (time) is illogical. In his essay "Montage, mon beau souci" (1956) Godard redefined montage as an integral part of mise en scène.

Setting up a scene is as much an organizing of time as of space. The aim of this is to discover in film a psychological reality that transcends physical, plastic reality. There are two corollaries to Godard's synthesis: first, mise en scène can therefore be every bit as expressionistic as montage when a filmmaker uses it to distort reality; second, psychological reality (as opposed to verisimilitude) may be better served by a strategy that allows montage to play a central role. (See Chapter 5, pp. 328–38.)

In addition to the psychological complexities that enter into a comparison of montage and mise en scène, there is a perceptual factor that complicates matters. We have already noted that montage can be mimicked within the shot. Likewise, montage can mimic mise en scène. Hitchcock's notorious shower murder sequence in *Psycho* is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. Seventy separate shots in less than a minute of screen time are fused together psychologically into a continuous experience: a frightening and graphic knife attack. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts (see Figure 3-20).

CODES

The structure of cinema is defined by the codes in which it operates and the codes that operate within it. Codes are critical constructions—systems of logical relationship—derived after the fact of film. They are not pre-existent laws that the filmmaker consciously observes. A great variety of codes combine to form the medium in which film expresses meaning. There are culturally derived codes—those that exist outside film and that filmmakers simply reproduce (the way people eat, for example). There are a number of codes that cinema shares with the other arts (for instance, gesture, which is a code of theater as well as film). And there are those codes that are unique to cinema. (Montage is the prime example.) The culturally derived codes and the shared artistic codes are vitally important to cinema, naturally, but it is the unique codes, those that form the specific syntax of film, which most concern us here. Possibly "unique" is not a completely accurate adjective. As you will see, not even the most specifically cinematic codes, those of montage, are truly unique to cinema. Certainly, cinema emphasizes them and utilizes them more than other arts do, yet something like montage has always existed in the novel. Any storyteller is capable of switching scenes in midstream. "Meanwhile, back at the ranch," is clearly not an invention of cinema. More important, for more than three-quarters of a century film art has had its own strong influence on the older arts. Not only did something like montage exist prior to 1900 in prose narrative, but since that time novelists, increasingly influenced by film, have learned gradually to make their narratives even more like

Figure 3-19. Mise en scène or montage? A crucial scene in Bergman's *Face to Face*, this was shot from a hallway giving a "split screen" view of two rooms. Instead of cutting from the action in one to the action in the other, Bergman presented both simultaneously while keeping the action in each separate. The cross-cutting dialectic of montage is thus made an integral element of mise en scène. (*Frame enlargement.*)

cinema. The point is, simply, that codes are a critical convenience—nothing more—and it would be wrong to give them so much weight that we were more concerned with the precise definition of the code than with the perception of the film.

Taking the shower scene in *Psycho* once again as an example, let's derive the codes operating there. It is a simple scene (only two characters—one of whom is barely seen—and two actions—taking a shower and murdering) and it is of short duration, yet all three types of codes are evident. The culturally derived codes have to do with taking showers and murdering people. The shower is, in Western culture, an activity that has elements of privacy, sexuality, purgation, relaxation, openness, and regeneration. In other words, Hitchcock could not have chosen a more ironic place to emphasize the elements of violation and sexuality in the assault. Murder, on the other hand, fascinates us because of motives. Yet the dimly perceived murderer of *Psycho* has no discernible motive. The act seems gratuitous, almost absurd—which makes it even more striking. Historically, Jack the Ripper may come to

mind, and this redoubles our sense of the sexual foundation of the murder.

Since this particular scene is so highly cinematic and so short, shared codes are relatively minor here. Acting codes hardly play a part, for instance, since the shots are so brief there isn't time to act in them, only to mime a simple expression. The diagonals that are so important in establishing the sense of disorientation and dynamism are shared with the other pictorial arts. The harsh contrasts and backlighting that obscure the murderer are shared with photography. The musical code of Bernard Herrmann's accompaniment also exists outside film, of course. In addition, we can trace the development of the use of the culturally derived codes in cinema and allied arts: Hitchcock's murder scene might be contrasted with the murder of Marat in his bath (in history, in the painting by Jacques-Louis David, and in the play by Peter Weiss), the bathtub murder scene in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955), or that in *The Last of Sheila* (1973), written by Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkins (who played in *Psycho*), or the direct homages to *Psycho* in Mike Hodges's *Terminal Man* (1974) or Brian DePalma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980).

As we have already noted, the specifically cinematic codes in Hitchcock's one-minute tour de force are exceptionally strong. In fact, it's hard to see how the montage of the sequence could be duplicated in any other art. The rapid cutting of the scene may indeed by a unique cinematic code.

Hitchcock manipulates all these codes to achieve a desired effect. It is because they are codes—because they have meaning for us outside the narrow limits of that particular scene: in film, in the other arts, in the general culture—that they affect us. The codes are the medium through which the "message" of the scene is transmitted. The specifically cinematic codes together with a number of shared codes make up the syntax of film.

MISE EN SCÈNE

Three questions confront the filmmaker: what to shoot, how to shoot it, how to present the shot. The province of the first two questions is mise en scène, that of the last, montage. Mise en scène is often regarded as static, montage as dynamic. This is not the case. Because we read the shot, we are actively involved with it. The codes of mise en scène are the tools with which the filmmaker alters and modifies our reading of the shot. Since the shot is such a large unit of meaning, it may be useful to separate a discussion of its components into two parts.

The Framed Image

All the codes that operate within the frame, without regard to the chronological axis of film, are shared with the other pictorial arts. The number and range of these codes is great and they have been developed and refined in painting, sculpture, and photography over the course of thousands of years. Basic texts in the visual arts examine the three determinants of color, line, and form, and certainly each of the visual codes of film fits within one of these rubrics. Rudolf Arnheim, in his highly influential study *Art and Visual Perception,* suggests ten areas of concern: Balance, Shape, Form, Growth, Space, Light, Color, Movement, Tension, and Expression. Clearly, a full exposition of the codes operating in the film frame would be a lengthy undertaking. We can, however, describe briefly the basic aspects of the syntax of the frame. Two aspects of the framed image are important: the limitations that the frame imposes, and the composition of the image within the frame (and without necessary regard to it).

Since the frame determines the limit of the image, the choice of an aspect ratio suggests the possibilities of composition. With the self-justification that has been endemic to the elusive subject of film esthetics, early theoreticians waxed eloquent over the value of the Academy aperture, the 1.33 ratio. When widescreen ratios became popular in the 1950s, the classical estheticians bemoaned the destruction of the symmetry they perceived in the Academy aperture, but, as we demonstrated in the last chapter, there was nothing sacred about the ratio of 4:3.

The point is not which ratio is "proper" but rather which codes yield themselves to exploitation in which ratios? Before the mid-fifties, it seems, interiors and dialogue dominated American and foreign screens. After the introduction of the widescreen formats, exteriors, location shooting, and action sequences grew in importance. This is a crude generalization, but there is some useful truth to it. It's not important whether there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the two historical developments, only that wide screens permitted more efficient exploitation of action and landscape codes.

Cinemascope and Panavision width ratios (2.33 and above) do make it more difficult, as the Hollywood estheticians had suggested, to photograph intimate conversations. Whereas the classic two-shot of the 1.33 screen size tended to focus attention on speaker and listener, the very wide anamorphic ratios cannot avoid also photographing either the space between them or beside them and therefore calling attention to their relationship to the space surrounding them. This is neither "better" nor "worse" ideally; it simply changes the code of the two-shot.

The filmmaker can also change the dimensions of the frame during

Figure 3-20. THE BATHTUB/SHOWER CODE. Hitchcock's spellbinding shower murder in *Psycho* (1959) has become notorious over the years for its vertiginous editing, yet the bathroom murder was not a new idea. (*From* Psycho. © *1974. Ed. by Richard J. Anobile. Frame enlargement.*)

Figure 3-21. Several years earlier. Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Diabolique* had shocked audiences with an altogether quieter but no less eerie murder scene. (Paul Meurisse is the victim.) (*Walter Daran. Time/Life Picture Agency.* © *Time, Inc. Frame enlargement.*)

Figure 3-22. *Psycho's* star, Anthony Perkins, cowrote the script for Herbert Ross's *The Last of Sheila.* Joan Hackett attempts suicide in an elegant shipboard bath.

Figure 3-23. Murder isn't the only activity that takes place in tubs. In Godard's poetic masterpiece *Pierrot le fou* (1965), Jean-Paul Belmondo relaxes in a tub as he shares some thoughts on the painter Velázquez with his daughter. (*l'Avant-Scène. Frame enlargement.*)

Figure 3-24. In Jean-Charles Tacchella's *Cousin, cousine* (1975), Marie-France Pisier finds the empty tub a pleasant place to think.

the course of the film by masking, either artificially or naturally through composition. This has been an important aspect of the syntax of frame shape ever since D. W. Griffith first explored its possibilities.

Just as important as the actual frame size, although less easily perceived, is the filmmaker's attitude toward the limit of the frame. If the image of the frame is self-sufficient, then we can speak of it as a "closed form." Conversely, if the filmmaker has composed the shot in such a way that we are always subliminally aware of the area outside the frame, then the form is considered to be "open." Open and closed forms are closely associated with the elements of movement in the frame. If the camera tends to follow the subject faithfully, the form tends to be closed; if, on the other hand, the filmmaker allows—even encourages—the subject to leave the frame and reenter, the form is obviously open. The relationship between the movement within the frame and movement of the camera is one of the more sophisticated codes, and specifically cinematic. Hollywood's classic syntax was identified in part by a relatively tightly closed form. The masters of the Hollywood style of the

Figure 3-25. Gian Maria Volonté finds some surcease from exile in a remote Italian village in an old-fashioned tub. Irene Papas assists. (Francesco Rosi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli.*)

thirties and forties tried never to allow the subject to leave the frame (it was considered daring even if the subject did not occupy the center of the 1.33 frame). Recently, filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni have been equally faithful to the open widescreen form because it emphasizes the spaces between people.

Most elements of compositional syntax do not depend strictly on the frame for their definition. If the image faded at the edges like a vignette (which itself is one of the minor techniques of the framing code), such codes as intrinsic interest, proximity, depth perception, angle of approach, and lighting would work just as well as they do in frames with sharply defined limits.

The filmmaker, like most pictorial artists, composes in three dimensions. This doesn't mean necessarily that he is trying to convey three-dimensional (or stereoscopic) information. It means that there are three sets of compositional codes: one concerns the plane of the image (most important, naturally, since the image is, after all, two-dimensional); one deals with the geography of the space photographed (its plane is parallel with the ground and the horizon); the third involves the plane of depth perception, perpendicular to both the frame plane and the geographical plane. Figure 3-33 visualizes these three planes of composition.

Naturally, these planes interlock. No filmmaker analyzes precisely how each single plane influences the composition, but decisions are made that focus attention on pairs of planes. Clearly, the plane of the frame must be dominant, since that is the only plane that actually exists

Figure 3-26. In the late seventies, the bath became a focus of contemporary California life with the rise in popularity of the hot tub. Stacey Nolkin takes a call in *Serial* (1980).

on the screen. Composition for this plane, however, is often influenced by factors in the geographical plane since, unless we are dealing with animation, a photographer or cinematographer must compose for the frame plane in the geographical plane. Likewise, the geographical plane and the plane of depth perception are coordinated, since much of our ability to perceive depth in two-dimensional representations as well as three-dimensional reality depends upon phenomena in the geographical plane. In fact, perception of depth depends on many important factors other than binocular stereoscopic vision, which is why film presents such a strong illusion of three-dimensional space and why stereoscopic film techniques are relatively useless.*

Figure 3-34 illustrates some of the most important psychological factors strongly influencing depth perception. Overlapping takes place in the frame plane, but the three others—convergence, relative size, and density gradient—depend on the geographical plane. We've already discussed in Chapter 2 how various lens types affect depth perception (and linear distortion, as well). A photographer modifies, suppresses, or reinforces the effects of lens types through composition of the image within the frame.

*If so-called 3-D film techniques simply added the one remaining factor to depth perception, there would be no problem with them. The difficulty is that they actually distort our perception of depth considerably, since they don't allow us to focus on a single plane as we do naturally and since they tend to produce disturbing pseudostereoscopic and pseudoscopic stereoscopic images (see Glossary).