



FILM EDUCATION JOURNAL

ISSN 2515-7086 (Online)

Journal homepage:  
<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/film-education-journal>

---

## Moving beyond the 'shot-type list' towards the 'Meaning Model': Placing meaning at the centre of film education

Marc Barrett

### How to cite this article

Barrett, M. (2020) 'Moving beyond the "shot-type list" towards the "Meaning Model": Placing meaning at the centre of film education'. *Film Education Journal*, 3 (2), 218–30. Online. <https://doi.org/10.14324/FEJ.03.2.08>

Submission date: 21 February 2019

Acceptance date: 12 May 2020

Publication date: 26 November 2020

### Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

### Copyright

© 2020 Barrett. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### Open access

The *Film Education Journal* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

---

# Moving beyond the 'shot-type list' towards the 'Meaning Model': Placing meaning at the centre of film education

Marc Barrett\* – *Australian Council for Educational Research, Australia*

## Abstract

In 1990 Kress and Van Leeuwen's *Reading Images* began a conversation based upon the practice of teaching image-orientated texts in Australian classrooms. Since then, however, little of this important conversation has been translated into meaningful pedagogical change for the teaching of kineikonic (moving image) texts in Australia. From state-run primary schools to national postgraduate film education institutions, the primary tool used to initiate students into the potential to create meaning through film – the shot-type list – has remained relatively unchanged. This article proposes an updated pedagogical tool – identified as the 'Meaning Model' – which draws from contemporary discourses around how films make meaning in seeking to bring understandings of the kineikonic mode into the classroom, in a practical and accessible way.

**Keywords:** kineikonic, pedagogy, Kress, Van Leeuwen, shot type

## Introduction

In 1990, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen published *Reading Images*, aspiring to 'take a fresh look at the question of visual literacy' in talking and thinking 'seriously about what is actually communicated by means of images' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1990: 3). Through their endeavours Kress and Van Leeuwen led a generation of literacy academics in Australia in an exploration of 'the interpersonal grammar of images' (ibid.: 28), contributing to the development of a systematic and decodable process of 'reading' visual texts, based to a large degree upon the codes of social semiotics. Although not explicitly incorporating discussions of filmic meaning, Kress and Van Leeuwen's 1990 publication was a catalyst for other literacy academics in Australia, such as Kathy Mills (2011) and Len Unsworth (2008), to think about *filmic* texts within a social semiotic framework. Attempts to unearth a filmic 'language' have, of course, been explored and debated within film studies since the work of Russian Formalists such as Sergei Eisenstein nearly a century ago. The emphasis for Kress and Van Leeuwen, however, was not on the establishment of a new theoretical paradigm on 'the language of images', but rather the formation of educational approaches through which educators and students could have the means to fully understand the images to which they were increasingly being exposed.

Nearly thirty years on, however, most school textbooks in Australia pertaining to film education have tended not to integrate the insights provided by Kress and Van Leeuwen. Rather than incorporating semiotic perspectives upon filmic texts and presenting film as a language-like system that can be used to construct meaning, film

education resources, including those from some of Australia's most highly regarded film education institutions, still describe shot types in somewhat mechanical terms, as if tacking different 'shots' together – long shots, mid-shots and a close-up or two – allows students to make an object called a 'film', akin to constructing a piece of furniture. Meaning, it is assumed in these texts, comes from whatever is happening *within* the frame and, with few exceptions, is rendered as separate from the filmic medium itself.


This article proposes a way for educators, and those working to prepare their resources, to place meaning at the centre of film education, both in terms of how students seek to create their own filmic texts and in terms of comprehending them. It takes a social semiotic view of the primary tool in film education – the shot-type list – and suggests a way of supplanting and ameliorating this dominant, perfunctory approach to the medium of film in Australian educational settings. Overall, the aim of this article is similar to that of Kress and Van Leeuwen in 1990: to enable students to 'fully participate in social communication' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1990: 116) by providing a means to bridge the gap between the 'specialist understandings' of filmic texts possessed by academics, and the 'universal understandings' (ibid.: 118) of mainstream consumers and creators. Such a move seems essential at a point in history when students' lives are increasingly governed by image-based information (Kress, 2003). This article seeks to make a contribution to film education discourses both in Australia and beyond by proposing an approach to talking about film in an educational setting, referred to as the 'Meaning Model'.

## The existing tool


In Australia, from elementary school classrooms through to postgraduate film schools, shot-type lists (an example of which is presented in Figure 1) are one of the first reference tools for new students of filmmaking. Invariably, the shot-type list consists of simple images of a human subject, representing what a camera would see of its human subject, alongside a brief, accompanying description, which typically tends to label the shot type and reiterates what is already seen in the image. In this respect the shot-type list in Figure 1 is somewhat atypical in that, among the descriptions of what is in the frame for each shot type, there is also a reference in the Long Shot section to when this shot type might be used ('at the start of a scene'). Crucially, the question of 'why' a shot type might be used is rarely addressed in this sort of shot-type list. Indeed, in Figure 1, there are only two points at which some suggestion of a shot's psychological impact on an audience is referred to: the sections entitled High Angle and Low Angle. Here, the list describes how the angle of the camera's perspective on a human subject gives or takes away perceived power from the subject. Describing high and low angles of the camera in this way is fairly typical of shot-type resources and, at the very least, leaves the door slightly ajar for further discussions as to how the camera's perspective on a subject impacts how that subject is interpreted by an audience, an opening that the Meaning Model will go on to explore in greater depth.

It is easy to see how a shot-type list of this sort might assist students in their learning. Such a list provides a common metalanguage, enabling students to refer to approximate visual concepts, so that they themselves may begin to either analyse a film or attempt to construct their own. At the same time, with few exceptions, any suggestion of meaning that may be implied in each of these shot types largely remains absent. Using a shot-type list, then, arguably points students towards the belief that the meaning in film is derived almost entirely from the content of the images, sidestepping the influence of the medium through which it is communicated. Subsequently, there


**Shot Types For Film Makers**




**Extreme close up (XCU)** - A shot that focuses on a particular detail.



**Close Up (CU)** - A shot that is taken at close range to a subject. If the subject was a person's face a shot framed as a close up would contain just the subject's head and shoulders.



**Mid shot (MS)** - A shot of head, shoulders and midriff.



**Long Shot (LS)** - A camera shot that takes in a panoramic view of the set or an outside scene. This shot can include the view of a whole person from head to foot. A Long Shot is often used at the start of a scene as an 'establishing shot'.

**Other shot types**

**High Angle:** a shot taken from above the subject, making it seem small and powerless

**Low Angle:** a shot taken from below the subject, making it seem large and powerful

**Pan / Tilt:** a moving camera shot from a fixed position

**Track:** a moving camera shot that follows the subject as it moves

Figure 1: A typical shot list for educational purposes

may then be a risk that filmmaking students become inclined to think of the camera as a means of 'covering' action, rather than communicating relationships or ideas.

Here Kress and Van Leeuwen's ideal of teaching 'what is actually communicated by means of images' (1990: 3) does not seem to be present at all, a considerable oversight if film education is taken to be focused upon how ideas are communicated through the *medium* of film.

In *Reading Images*, Kress and Van Leeuwen applied the ideas of social semiotics to all forms of *static* visual communication, from toddlers' drawings to school textbooks. Much progress has been made by scholars since the publication of this book in 1990 that has advanced understanding of how social semiotics applies to filmic texts (see Kress, 2003; Van Leeuwen, 2005; Bateman and Schmidt, 2012; Burn, 2013; among others).

When seeking to develop or strengthen existing pedagogical strategies to film, social semiotics continues to provide the means to separate out the many codes at work within a filmic text, so that these codes can be placed under scrutiny. Filmic texts combine many systems of meaning (image composition, dialogue, performance and gesture, sound design, lighting, costumes and so forth) into what Burn (2013: 8) has described as 'a fugue', an interweaving of different modes of meaning-making, working both with and against each other towards a common theme. Acknowledging this, Burn and Parker (2003) used the notion of a 'kineikonic mode' to place filmic texts within a semiotic frame of reference and to emphasize the uniquely filmic interplay of different modes in which the moving image is central. I argue, then, that the task for film educators is to demystify the kineikonic mode and dismantle this 'weave', so that students might begin to both understand and control its various threads.

In beginning to focus attention upon the semiotic modes most suitable for the task of reframing a typical 'shot list', it is useful to first consider Halliday's three metafunctions of text organization: (1) representational or ideational; (2) interactive or interpersonal; and (3) compositional or textual (Halliday, 1978, 1994). Halliday's work helps here to formulate an understanding of the functional plane on which any semiotic mode is contextualized, which, in turn, helps to determine the pedagogical focus of our approach herewith. The meaning systems, or semiotic modes, operating within the kineikonic mode, function simultaneously on these three different levels. A meaning system first represents an idea or an aspect of the objective world in a specific way (the representational metafunction), while, second, establishing a relationship between the represented participants in the text (what Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990: 17) defined as 'all entities represented') and the viewer or audience (the interactive metafunction) and, third, coordinating with other modes to establish the value and salience of the information being communicated by each mode (the compositional metafunction). I argue that an understanding of all three metafunctions is important for all film students given the manner in which these aspects allow students to perceive semiotic modes within a kineikonic object or text according to their functional context, helping then to broaden the scope of a student's understanding and analysis. Given my focus here is on redefining a starting point for film students in response to the standard 'shot-type list', I will focus particularly upon the interactive or interpersonal metafunction as these modes are most relevant to this discussion.

If we consider how a film is constructed: a decision is made to place a camera in a certain position in order to record the activities of represented participants within a narrative construct (I use the term 'narrative' loosely, in order to leave the door open to documentary and other forms of filmmaking). The perspective of the camera is changed, again and again, sometimes within the same 'shot' or period of recording, and a narrative emerges. What is depicted can change from shot to shot or within each shot. What stays constant, however, and does not change in the kineikonic text, regardless of how conscious its makers are of the implications, is the mediated and singular nature of the medium's perspective. Every shot is the result of a decision, made by the filmmakers, which depict the film's participants in a certain relationship to one another and to the audience. Here the term 'participants' can include both the

subjects and objects depicted on screen – animate or inanimate – as well as the viewer and filmmaker, whom Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990: 40) distinguish as ‘Interactive Participants’.

The perspective innate within any shot in a given film can be seen to be constant; not the orientation of the perspective, for this will change throughout a kineikonic text, but rather the fact that a perspective remains present, depicting a relationship between all participants, selected by filmmakers/mediators, for a viewer to consider. Further, because the camera’s perspective mimics human perception, it carries with it psychosocial implications for an audience (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1990: 44–5). I argue then that this inescapable psychosocial impact of film’s perspective is, therefore, a highly beneficial platform on which to first establish meaning in kineikonic texts.

Burn (2013) has acknowledged the centrality of the meaning established by the camera’s perspective in kineikonic texts. He sorts the many semiotic modes operating within such texts into two hierarchically defined categories: ‘orchestrating’ modes (the spatial and temporal modes typically realized through camera positioning and editing, respectively), and ‘contributory’ modes (lighting, costume, objects, set design and so forth). The orchestrating modes function continuously within the kineikonic text and could be considered to constitute some of their defining characteristics, while the contributory modes serve to complement, affect or nuance the orchestrating modes and the meanings they create. Contributory modes may or may not be operating at any given point in the text and their influence may well vary greatly throughout.

It can subsequently be argued that an entry point for students in understanding the meaning-making systems at work within kineikonic texts would be a characteristic of one of these orchestrating modes. An understanding of the temporal mode (that which is realized by the passage of depicted time while viewing and manipulated by the editing process) is of particular importance for any student of film. The control and understanding of the passage of time as depicted in kineikonic texts through various methods is arguably one of the filmmaker’s primary forms of expression, and is one of Burn’s omnipresent ‘orchestrating’ modes. (Given the focus in this article is on attempting to replace the standard shot-type list, however, I consider here the temporal mode only in relation to its effects upon the spatial mode.)

As a first reference point for film students in developing their understanding of kineikonic texts, one can begin with the single frame, as in the shot-type list of Figure 1. While the single frames of a shot represent the relationship established between the viewer and the text, they do not reflect the full experience of the viewer, which *always* incorporates the temporal mode. The still frame still operates at an interpersonal metafunctional level, however, as identified by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990), and so communicates in a static manner the basic relationships then considered in motion once the temporal mode is included in the analysis. In other words, one can say that the single frame communicates what ‘is’ in the spatial mode, which in turn is transformed into a communication about ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ within the temporal mode.

The spatial mode realized through the positioning of the camera will thus be the focus of the Meaning Model, the teaching tool proposed within this article, designed to serve as a point of departure for students beginning to interpret and use filmic texts.

In order to address the aforementioned shortcomings of contemporary shot-type lists, one can usefully divide the broader notion of camera perspective into two separate semiotic modes: *proximity* and *angle*. Each of these aspects of camera perspective utilizes information alluded to in shot-type lists while building into them the concept of semiotic meaning, as I will go on to explore.



## Proximity

Edward Hall (1966: 110–20) has written about the distinct psychological differences arising from the social distances within face-to-face communications. These understandings were subsequently applied by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990: 44) to the interpretation of photography of human subjects in *Reading Images*. The distances between participants within the still frames of a filmic text can be interpreted in the same way. Looking again at Figure 1, we can see that the images representing each shot type change in line with how far the implied camera is from the depicted human subject. This changing distance between camera and subject we will refer to as the camera's *proximity* to the subject.

Hall divides his social distances according to socially determined levels of intimacy. First, there is the 'close personal distance', where one participant could conceivably embrace the other. In a social setting, this distance is reserved for people who have an intimate relationship with one another. One could describe this distance in filmmaking terms as equivalent to what is usually described as a 'close-up'. Here one could go further to equate the even closer personal distance that tends to be ascribed to the 'extreme close-up' to an even greater level of intimacy. The extreme close-up – or extremely close and intimate perspective of another human being – is usually reserved only for people with whom we are physically intimate (such as partner) and thus carries with it this socially determined emotional context.

The distance just beyond grasping distance, or the point at which two people could conceivably touch fingers if they held out their arms towards each other, is considered by Hall as 'personal distance', the comfortable distance at which two people in typical social settings tend to relate to one another. This distance is associated with interest and focus, but only moderate levels of intimacy; a distance one is likely to be from a friend while sat chatting at a coffee table or next to someone on a couch while watching the TV. 'Personal distance' is friendly, conversational and socially engaged. In normative filmmaking parlance we would refer to this distance between the camera and a human subject as a 'mid-shot'.

If one now extends the distance further to around the point where one is able to view a whole person's body peripherally, in a single gaze, this is what Hall refers to as the 'social distance'. This is the distance at which we tend to stand in more formal situations, while still engaged in social exchange. According to Hall, this is the distance at which most business is conducted in Western culture: respectful, responsive and engaged, but lacking any real intimacy. It is, Hall argues, the distance one might stand from a colleague while talking at a conference gathering or when meeting someone of superior standing, like one's boss. In filmmaking classrooms, this distance between the camera and a human subject would be called a 'long shot' or 'wide shot'.

Extending the distance even further still, we move finally to 'public distance', the distance at which we are no longer personally engaged with an individual, and at which we view an image of a person more in relation to their environment, rather than how they are engaged with us personally. This is a distance at which we see a person more objectively, within their surroundings, observing what they interact with and how they respond. Here, the subject's interaction and relationship to others (either objects or people) is more salient than their relationship with us, the audience. This distance, if applied to the distance between a film camera and its human subject, would normally be referred to as an 'extreme long shot' or 'extreme wide shot'.

The interpretations of these distances are, of course, culturally determined and differ immensely depending upon the audience viewing them. Despite such cultural divergences, however, some variation of these distinctions often seems to be at play

when any visual representation of a human being is created, leading one to speculate as to whether, as human beings, we are increasingly hard-wired to view these images of each other in this way.

Subsequently one might argue that, when applied to a human subject, describing shot types simply in regard to what is seen in the frame risks seeming somewhat perfunctory. The image that results when a camera records a human subject from a particular distance can rather be seen to carry with it the sub-text of a level of intimacy that arguably has a degree of sociocultural influence upon almost every audience member within Western cultural contexts at the very least. A close-up, therefore, is not simply 'a shot in which we see the head and the top of the shoulders', as described in most textbooks, but an image that conveys a close, personal association with the person represented. This establishes a frame of emotional reference for an audience to view a human subject, which exists whether or not we are actually familiar with the character depicted.

The varying levels of intimacy we experience as an audience, when we view an image of a human subject from different distances, have a varying sociocultural impact upon how we then interpret the subject. High levels of intimacy, associated with very close-up images, concentrate our attention more on the emotional aspect of the character's experience at that moment, as it does when we are personally very close to another human being. Being further away from an individual, from a distance associated with the long or wide shot, tends to detach us from our instinctive emotional response because it is akin to an observational distance, and we can thus often become more objective, even judgemental, about what we perceive. It is conceivable then that as human beings we tend to view the proximity of the camera to its human subject not as a series of discrete, unconnected units, as described in many shot-type lists, but rather on a continuum, from very close, personal, intimate and emotional, to very far, impersonal, objective or judgemental and observational. The proximity of the camera to its human subject is therefore not limited to four or five different options as in Figure 1, but rather is open to a vast range of nuance, with slight differences or changes in this proximity equating to nuanced differences and changes in how the subject is considered by the audience. Of course, how an audience responds to these different levels of intimacy may depend entirely on who is being depicted in this way, what they are doing and what we know of them, but arguably a level of intimacy is present and applicable regardless of our emotional response to it.

In order to represent the psychosocial meaning of the camera's perspective I will here use aspects of written language, as Kress and Van Leeuwen did in 1990. Here it is important to note that such written articulations are a *representation*, not a *translation*, meant only to give an alternative form to the concepts discussed herewith, rather than suggesting that there is a concrete correlation between the meanings established by the two very different mediums of image and the written word.

If one were then to attempt to articulate such conceptions of proximity within the kineikonic mode using written language, a summarization of the different levels of intimacy possible in an image of a human subject might look something like this:

**Table 1: Relative distance of camera to human subject**

Further away	Closer
Descriptive language associated with an <i>external</i> landscape.	Descriptive language associated with an <i>internal</i> landscape.
'She does ...'	'She feels ...'
Shot asks audience to: observe/think/judge	Shot asks audience to: feel/empathize/relate



The interpretations of a camera's proximity to its human subject described in Table 1 are subject to many variations of degree. The more extreme the shot is, either closer or further away, the more extreme the descriptive language may become if represented by the printed word: for example, while a simple close-up of a character's positive reaction to an event might be translated as 'she feels good', an extremely close-up view of the same reaction under the same circumstances might be translated as 'she feels ecstatic!' Likewise, the reactions of the same character viewed from a distance from which an audience can see her entire body might be translated as 'she is smiling because of what just happened'. At a further, even less personal distance, we might translate the same event (if unaware of context) simply as 'this place makes her smile'.

Admittedly there is likely to be a grey area in the middle of the two types of proximity indicated in Table 1 ('closer' and 'further away') that touches on both the subject's internal space *and* their external behaviour in equal amounts. This is arguably one of the significant affordances of viewing shot types on a continuum in realizing that proximity of the camera to its subject may hit a kind of instinctive 'sweet spot' where multiple messages may be conveyed to an audience simultaneously.

## Angle

Camera perspective is, of course, not limited solely to how *close* it can be to its subject. A camera's relative height in relation to its human subjects also conveys sociocultural meaning in relation to a subject's relative power. As mentioned, most film students will be familiar with the idea that low or high angles represent their subjects to an audience as either having more or less power. However, it is important here to underline that this notion of relative power is present not only in high or low angles but in every angle and every depiction of human subjects. Even characters depicted at eye level to the audience are perceived as having *no* difference in power, in the context in which they are depicted, and instead are depicted as equal to the audience, which can serve to create a sense of empathy (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1990: 40).

As we have seen in regard to camera proximity, the extent to which high or low angles give or take away power from a human subject increases and decreases with greater differences in the relative height of the camera. For instance, a person viewed from slightly lower than eye level will be perceived by the audience as having slightly more power, relative to the viewer, in a given narrative context. They may be worthy of admiration or fear but only to a small degree. If the same subject in the same context is seen from a much lower angle then they are interpreted as having significantly increased levels of power, inducing a greater degree of fear or admiration.

Represented through the written word, the degree to which power is given or taken away could be tabulated in this way:

**Table 2: Relative height of camera to human subject**

High angle (from above eye level)	Low angle (from beneath eye level)
Adjectival language associated with <i>low relative power</i> .	Adjectival language associated with <i>high relative power</i> .
Camera is slightly higher: 'She is weak.' Camera is significantly higher: 'She is pathetic.'	Camera is slightly lower: 'She is impressive.' Camera is significantly lower: 'She is phenomenal!'
Shot asks audience to: pity/disapprove	Shot asks audience to: admire/fear

Understanding that the relative height of a camera subsequently has an impact on an audience that can be scaled and measured (as shown in Table 2) helps students to more precisely interpret the films they see and to construct more nuanced filmic texts themselves. Translating the high and low angles into written parallels in this manner can help articulate the versatility and expressiveness of the medium for students.

## Moving perspectives – Incorporating the temporal mode

Alongside the central role camera perspective can play in establishing a meaningful platform for understanding and constructing kineikonic texts, one of the most fundamental aspects of film as a medium, in terms of its ability to communicate complex ideas, is that this camera perspective can *move*. Recalling Burn (2013), this moving perspective is a realization of a kineikonic text's temporal orchestrating mode, one that, within a single shot, can embody a notion of change.

During the recording of a shot, a film camera can move to or from the shot's subject (changing its proximity to the subject during a recording), or it can alter its relative height in regard to its subject, or both. Either way, the impact of this change on the audience is fundamentally the same – the audience perceives changes in levels of intimacy and levels of relative power over the time of the shot. For example, a shot starting at a comfortable, social distance (a traditional medium shot) and ending in a close intimate shot of the human subject's face (a close-up) tends to indicate that over the time of the shot the audience is asked to feel *increasing* amounts of empathy for the character. This notion – of changing and compounding meaning with the moving camera – is fairly straightforward, once the initial concept of inherent meaning of the camera's perspective is understood. Here, the meaning generated by the moving camera, in the temporal mode, can mostly be extrapolated from a student's knowledge of the meaning of static shots, in the spatial mode.

Some exceptions are worth mentioning. First, there is the 'tracking shot', in which the camera's relative location to the subject does *not* change but the background (or environment) does. In this type of camera movement our understanding of proximity is less relevant than our understanding of environmental context. When a camera tracks with a subject who does not change relative position in the frame, the relationship that is significant for an audience tends to become that of the character's relationship to their background. Here, a moving background may indicate to an audience that a character's narrative situation is in a state of flux. Just as it does for the effect of proximity and angle upon camera perspective as discussed, how fast the background moves (how obscure it becomes) can serve to increase or decrease how much flux or turmoil a character's situation is perceived as having. Again, viewing this shot type within a spectrum of meaning (in this case from slower to faster background changes) allows for significant nuance in understanding, adding considerably to the range of expression available to those building meaning with film.

The other kind of moving perspective mentioned in a typical shot list is the pan or tilt. When a camera pans or tilts across a scene, whatever the content of that scene, the details or individual features of the subject are revealed at a deliberate pace. The camera's measured reveal here tends to serve the purpose of exploring a setting or object(s), accumulating knowledge for an audience slowly in order to create an eventual understanding, often leading to a final revelation – *what* something is; *how big* the thing is; *how small* it is; *how messy* it is and so forth. The revelation may not be profound (or indeed particularly 'revelatory'), but in each case a degree of anticipation is created by the regulated reveal of information within the frame. One might perhaps then compound the pan and tilt into a

single moving shot type – 'the reveal' – in order to teach film students about the different ways in which 'a reveal' can be filmed – vertically, diagonally or horizontally.

It is worth mentioning here that a camera's perspective does not of course *have* to move. Even if the perspective of the camera does not move within a single shot, however, the temporal orchestrating mode is ever present: the passage of time is still being represented by the camera and experienced by an audience engaged in the temporal act of viewing. Therefore, even if camera perspective does not change during a shot, nor that of any represented participant within the frame, there is still something moving: the passage of time, and this – in and of itself – holds meaning. Mills (2008) categorizes this unique aspect of kineikonic texts as the 'spatiotemporal element', a broad category of semiotic modes operating largely at the level of Halliday's representational metafunction.

Throughout this article I have deliberately referred to human subjects as the focus of filmic images, given the direct references made to the images frequently seen as shot-type exemplars in a typical shot-list resource. This raises the question as to whether similar theories about the correlation between human intimacy and distance can be used to describe a shot where an inanimate object rather than a human being is the subject of a filmic image, as is often the case. Is it reasonable to talk about giving power and taking it away when the subject of a shot is inanimate and thus incognisant of human power dynamics? If we consider the manner in which, for example, a high angle shot is chosen to symbolize to an audience what a filmmaker believes is the power inherent in what is represented, the meaning of this symbol is socially determined, but lies within the medium rather than what is depicted. It therefore stands to reason that the same understandings of how a film camera's relative height affects meaning apply regardless of whether the subject of the shot is human or inanimate.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the shortcomings of the standard shot-type list, one of the principal tools currently utilized by film students when beginning to learn about film both in Australia and the wider world. Alongside this, I have looked to broaden understandings of how aspects of a camera's perspective (its proximity to its subject and its relative height) contain implicit meanings for an audience, dependent on certain sociocultural understandings, regardless of the content within the frame. My aim, overall, has been to compound these two strands of enquiry in proposing a teaching and learning resource that places semiotic meaning at the core of its approach and, subsequently, at the centre of the pedagogy that accompanies it.

If, alongside most semioticians, we consider film to be a complex meaning-making system, it would seem clear that resources which simply outline what shot types look like are arguably missing a crucial ingredient. This would seem akin to telling a student learning a new language that all sorts of words exist in this language, but not explaining what any of them mean. The subsequent risk is that such an approach to film education will teach students to piece together an object devoid of conscious meaning, rather than composing a text replete with deliberately communicated ideas and relationships. In order to create an accessible teaching and learning resource that fully incorporates the implied meaning inherent in all kineikonic texts, we need, for practical reasons, to define and limit its scope. Here it is thus worth acknowledging two further caveats. First, there is more to the camera's perspective that is relevant to discussions of filmic meaning than just 'proximity' and 'angle'. While the role of the background has briefly been mentioned in establishing contextual relationships, many other aspects of camera perspective also contribute to meaning, such as depth of field

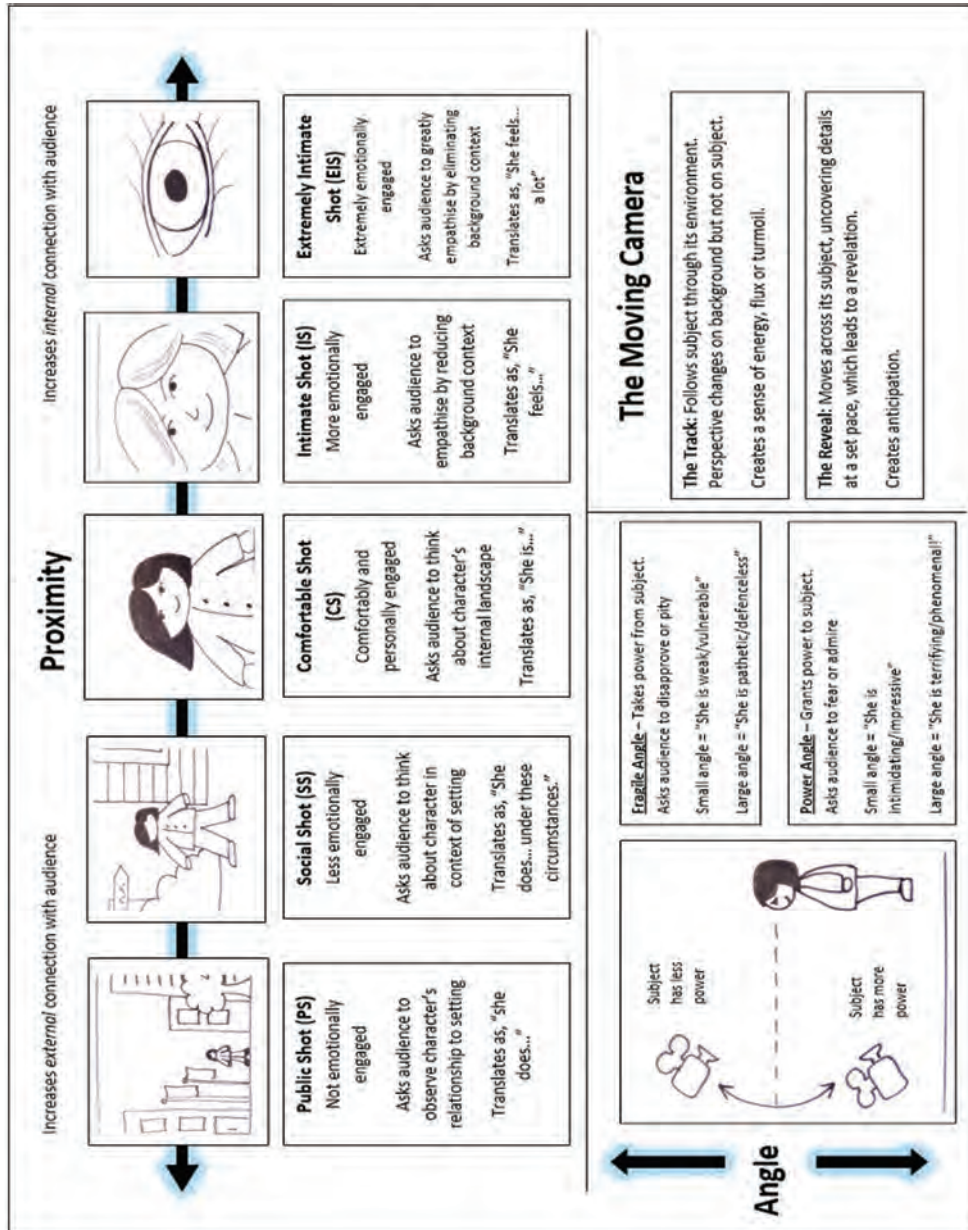


Figure 2: Example shot list incorporating semiotic understandings

and whether a camera is fixed on a tripod or handheld. Second, the proposed resource – like its author – can only articulate Western cultural understandings of cinema: social semiotics, by its very nature, is dependent upon the culture in which symbols are interpreted. The codification of a socially derived symbolic system such as film is thus as variable as the cultures and societies that view and construct it.

Nevertheless, the Meaning Model resource proposed herewith presents camera perspective as the central platform upon which all other meaning is subsequently constructed within cinema through other modes of meaning-making (recalling Burn's (2013) discussion of 'contributory' modes). I argue that the choice of shot, and the meaning associated with it, should be the first consideration for makers of kineikonic texts and central to those interpreting it. The choice of shot arguably then guides the meaning built upon it, by the contributory modes, such as sound, script and performance, *mise en scène*, lighting and narrative context and so on. While these other modes of meaning generation can compound the meaning established by the camera's perspective (layering and refining it, not only to help concretize meaning but also, in some cases, to subvert the implied meaning of the camera's perspective), in each case these additional modes are reliant on the fundamental perspective given to them by the camera. While these contributory modes can comment, add caveats and extra dimensions, they are – I argue – unable to make meaning themselves without reference to a camera perspective that is always present and always meaningful.

Figure 2 represents one way in which these insights might be applied to a shot-list resource for film students. Here, proximity and angle, the two central aspects of the camera perspective discussed in this article, are foregrounded so that film students are reminded to consider each of these semiotic modes with every shot decision and when reviewing every scene. Perhaps the most significant difference between Figure 2 and the typical shot list in Figure 1 is the way each shot type has been described. From the images accompanying the shot descriptions we can see what each of the shots actually looks like. The accompanying text for each shot summarizes its meaning in three ways: its typical level of emotional or cerebral engagement for an audience, a brief explanation as to how each shot engages an audience, and a guide to how each shot may be represented using the written word. The double-ended arrows that sit alongside the headings for the two camera aspects ('Proximity' and 'Angle') seek to remind students that the exemplar images exist along a spectrum and that slight changes in either direction result in slight changes to the meaning of those images. Another significant proposal articulated within the Meaning Model is a change of name for the shot types in a manner that centralizes their meaning, rather than a name that revolves around what is seen in the frame ('close-up' or 'wide shot'). Thus an extreme close-up (XCU) is referred to as an extremely intimate shot (EIS), whereas a high angle shot is referred to by the impact it has on power dynamics between audience and character, the power shot.

Rather than intended necessarily to further debates as to the centrality of perspective in meaning-making for visual mediums like film, the Meaning Model seeks to sit comfortably among practical discussions on how to position semiotic meaning at the centre of film education in schools. Here it is worth further acknowledging, however, that this article is only able to serve as a starting point for further pedagogical discussion. There are many other shot types and other aspects of the medium (editing, composition and many other complementary modes, for instance) that there is not space to consider here. Rather, it is hoped that such a resource may serve in some small way to guide the development of further teaching materials for film students that render explicit the full range of filmic expression that becomes possible when one centralizes the meaning of camera perspective and places it within a social semiotic context.



I hope that, in some respect, such endeavours may even help to unify the 'fragmented and non-cohesive' (Chambers, 2018: 1) educational endeavours seen in national film education programmes around the world to date. Perhaps too, such efforts may also serve to support Alain Bergala's (2016) quest to differentiate film education from the generalized umbrella of 'media studies' as the modal relationships of kineikonic texts are quite distinct from other multimodal forms.

Thirty years since Kress and Van Leeuwen introduced Australian academics to the language of images, the study of film is increasingly becoming a central pillar in our understanding of twenty-first-century literacy (Brooks *et al.*, 2012). This requires us to continue formulating accessible ways through which to bring some of these ideas to classrooms in which they can have the greatest positive impact for our future. In this respect I hope the Meaning Model proposed herewith may help assist a new generation of film-literate students in Australia in making the transition from filmmakers to film 'authors' and from film viewers to film 'readers'.

## Notes on the contributor

**Marc Barrett** is a filmmaker, educator and a literacy test developer for the Australian Council for Educational Research, with a specialization in the use of filmic texts for broad educational purposes. He has presented at several international conferences relating to film in education, written articles for the magazines *Screen Education* and *Teacher* (in Australia) and run teacher training workshops on the use of film in classrooms across Australia.

## References

- Bateman, J. and Schmidt, K.-H. (2012) *Multimodal Film Analysis: How films mean*. London: Routledge.
- Bergala, A. (2016) *The Cinema Hypothesis: Teaching cinema in the classroom and beyond* (FilmuseumSynemaPublikationen 28). Trans. Whittle, M. Vienna: Austrian Film Museum.
- Brooks, R., Cooper, A. and Penke, L. (2012) *Film: 21st century literacy: Teaching using film – statistical evidence*. London: BFI (British Film Institute). Online. [www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/film-21st-century-literacy-teaching-using-film-statistical-evidence.pdf](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/film-21st-century-literacy-teaching-using-film-statistical-evidence.pdf) (accessed 5 August 2020).
- Burn, A. (2013). 'The kineikonic mode: Towards a multimodal approach to moving image media'. In Jewitt, C. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis: Second edition*. London: Routledge, 373–84.
- Burn, A. and Parker, D. (2003) *Analysing Media Texts*. London: Continuum.
- Chambers, J. (2018) 'Towards an open cinema: Revisiting Alain Bergala's *The Cinema Hypothesis* within a global field of film education'. *Film Education Journal*, 1 (1): 35–50. <https://doi.org/10.18546/FEJ.01.1.04>.
- Kress, G. (2003) *Literacy in the New Media Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Kress, G. and Van Leeuwen, T. (1990) *Reading Images*. 1st ed. Burwood, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Hall, E. (1966) *The Hidden Dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Halliday, M. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. (1994) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Mills, K. (2008) 'The kineikonic mode: A multimodal analysis of students' claymation movies'. Paper presented at 5th International Systemic Functional Linguistics Association Conference: Voices Around the World, Macquarie University, Sydney, 21–25 July. Online. [www.researchgate.net/publication/279534740\\_The\\_kineikonic\\_mode\\_a\\_multimodal\\_analysis\\_of\\_students'\\_claymation\\_movies](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/279534740_The_kineikonic_mode_a_multimodal_analysis_of_students'_claymation_movies) (accessed 5 August 2020).
- Mills, K. (2011) *The Multiliteracies Classroom* (New Perspectives on Language and Education). UK: Multilingual Matters. Online. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/38715/> (accessed 5 August 2020).
- Unsworth, L. (ed.) (2008) *Multimodal Semiotics: Functional analysis in contexts of education*. New York: Continuum.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005) *Introducing Social Semiotics*. New York: Routledge.