

The shower sequence in *Psycho* derives its effectiveness from the fracturing and prolonging of the action – a nightmare effect produced by the rapid editing together of numerous angles of perspective on to the murder. Again, in *Psycho*, when the murderer-mother is about to be revealed, the camera tracks in on the back of her chair. When the chair is spun around, revealing her skeleton, a cut is made to a close-up of the skeleton's face. The sudden cut exacerbates the audience's shock.

There are many editing conventions which assist the film-makers and the audience to make sense of the film. I have already mentioned the shot-reverse shot convention. Other conventions include the use of short establishing shots above a new location to place the narrative within a physical context; and the observation of an imaginary line across the film set which the camera never crosses so that the viewer is given a consistent representation of the spatial relations between the actors and their surroundings (this is called the 180° rule). Skilful editors can use the timing of their cuts either to enhance the energy of the action, or to slow it down. Action sequences can take on greater drama and complexity if cuts occur within moments of high action; as a car is about to crash, for instance, we might go to several successive and separate views of the same moment. Alternatively, a cut in a moment of relative stasis can slow down action, retard the narrative, and open up ambiguities. A thoughtful character, considering his or her future, may be shot from several positions in order to expand the moment and instil significance into it.

The speed, pace, or rhythm of editing is important too. Documentary film tends to use fewer edits than narrative film, and social-realist films tend to imitate this in the pacing of their editing. Many feature films pursue an identifiable rhythm throughout their length, and single scenes can be dramatically affected by the pacing and rhythm of the editing. It is easy to demonstrate this through an example. In *Mad Max II (Road Warrior* in the US), there is a chase scene in which the hero, Max's, large tanker truck is pursued by the followers of the villain, Humungus. Max has a shotgun with two bullets and a passenger, the 'feral kid' – a wild, 10-year-old child. During a desperate battle with the arch-enemy Wes, who has climbed on to Max's truck, the shotgun bullets roll out of the broken windshield on to the bonnet. Although Wes is knocked off the truck and

disappears, Max still needs those bullets. He sends the feral kid out on to the bonnet after them while the chase continues at high speed. The musical sound-track dies down to be replaced by the sound of the wind in the child's face, and a heartbeat. At regular but gradually accelerating intervals, there is a series of cuts from the bullets on the truck bonnet back to the child's face. Rhythmically we cut back and forth from the child to the bullets, from the child to the bullets, from the child to the . . . Wes's maniacal face appears over the front of the bonnet, screaming in full close-up, and the return cut to the feral kid has him screaming too: a terrifying moment. The surprise at Wes's appearance is all the greater for the expectations set up by the rhythmic alternations between the shots of the child and the bullets. The combination of the alteration in sound-track and the skill of the editor has achieved this dramatic effect.

This point is important. Film is a complex of systems of signification and its meanings are the product of the combination of these systems. The combination may be achieved through systems either complementing or conflicting with each other. No one system is responsible for the total effect of a film, and all the systems we have just been surveying possess, as we have seen, their own separate sets of conventions, their own ways of representing things.

Reading the film

The complexity of film production makes interpretation, the active reading of a film, essential. We need to, and inevitably do, scan the frame, hypothesize about the narrative development, speculate on its possible meanings, attempt to gain some mastery over the film as it unfolds. The active process of interpretation is essential to film analysis and to the pleasure that film offers.

But films are not autonomous cultural events. We understand films in terms of other films, their worlds in terms of our worlds. 'Intertextuality' is a term used to describe the way any one film text will be understood through our experience, or our awareness, of other film texts. The moment of heroism in *Silverado* when Emmet doffs his bandage and miraculously finds the strength to do battle once more is

clearly parodying the suspension of realism in many previous westerns. To see *Siberado* without the knowledge which it assumes of western movie conventions would mean finding it silly and inexplicably unrealistic.

Films are also produced and seen within a social, cultural context that includes more than other film texts. Film serves a cultural function through its narratives that goes beyond the pleasure of story. To examine this we leave behind the problem of film languages, and approach film through the category of narrative. However, many of the points made in Chapter 7 derive from this account of signification in film, and will further demonstrate the processes surveyed in this chapter.

Suggestions for further work

- 1 This chapter does not present an exhaustive survey of the language-like activities which contribute to signification in film. Further reading should include some other introductory books on film theory and analysis which may give a more detailed account of these practices. Examples of such texts include James Monaco's *How to Read a Film* (1981) and the Sobchacks' *An Introduction to Film* (1980). These are useful texts, but do not approach film in the social manner of this book. Further reading in semiotics might be fruitful, too. A good introduction can be found in Robert Stam *et al.* (eds) *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (1992).
- 2 It is essential for any account of film to be conversant with the basic production practices. Attempts to produce a film of one's own, no matter how primitive, or a visit to a local film production unit, no matter how humble, will be of great assistance to anyone interested in the medium. Try and organize this, individually or as a group.
- 3 Building on the idea that a film is made up of a number of contributing systems, examine a scene from a film of your choice and try to break it down into its constituents. Try to determine just what has been the contribution of each element. Then pro-

pose a change in *one* element – the lighting, for instance – and see how that might change the meaning generated.

- 4 Examine the work of one system within a film – editing, for example. Is there an observable pattern in it? Can you detect any principles behind it? What is the nature of its contribution to the film as a whole?
- 5 What other language-like activities can you think of besides those mentioned in the chapter (dress, gesture, the discourse of film)? Does rock music, for instance, have a set of languages too? How useful do you find this analogy of language in dealing with film as a communicative practice? What are the limits of the analogy?
- 6 A further concept worth examining is Barthes' definition of myth (1973). Cultural meanings cluster, so that one signifier can touch off a group of related mental concepts. The image of the Sydney Opera House touches off a rich repertoire of ideas of the nation current in Australian culture, as well as simply denoting the building itself. Barthes talks of such groups of signifieds as 'myths', not in the sense of their being untrue, but as culture's way of organizing and explaining itself. Myths, as Barthes sees them, are part of our language and are embedded in all representational systems. We will deal with them further in Chapter 6.