



The semiotic and cultural description of audiovisual texts

Understanding people's views and visions.

A semiotic and cultural approach of amateur audiovisual productions. Part I.

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Introduction



Area of study

□ General statement:

- ✓ The "**democratization**" and "mass consumption" of the technical means of shooting film and recording sound
 - camcorders, digital cameras, mobile phones, webcams, etc.
- ✓ Mass "**amateur**" recording of all kinds of situations and events in daily life, private life and also social, public life.

□ Examples: shooting/editing

- ✓ of travels, holidays,
- ✓ of family celebrations, commemorations,
- ✓ of people, friends, colleagues,
- ✓ of cultural events (concerts, lectures, ...)

But also:

- ✓ of political events, protest movements, revolts,
- ✓ if moments and situations in professional life, ...



Area of study

All this immense mass of more or less ephemeral audiovisual productions

- ✓ Takes the form of **recording "as is"** ("video in the rough") or of reportages, documentaries, ... **edited and "staged"** according to informal aesthetic codes

- ✓ Is stored as:
 - mere personal **"folders"**,
 - discs (**DVD**),
 - **audiovisual archives**,
 - personal (pseudo-television) **"channels"** on major web sites that aggregate all types of video (such as YouTube ou Daily Motion),
 - video (photo) **blogs**,
 - personal **sites**,
 - ...

- ✓ Constitutes an **important heritage witnessing "to the still raw"present moment in history** as a lived "experience" by all social actors in virtually every region of the world ...



Area of study

- ❑ All this immense production "amateur" is therefore an excellent corpus for us:
 - ✓ to better understand the "cultural models" (representations) that give meaning to contemporary life and contribute to defining the people's identities, visions and values.
- ❑ Finally, thanks to digital technology and the Internet –
 - ✓ we can access this kind of production everywhere in the world
 - ✓ and therefore undertake comparative studies ("intercultural") on the following specific topics:
 - both everyday life of people
 - and their family and personal life
 - or events that punctuate social, political or cultural life.



Area of study

- ❑ Goals of the course...
 - ✓ understand the role and the importance of these audiovisual productions in the construction, circulation and transmission of **models** and **cultural representations**:
 - **knowledge**, beliefs, values, ...
 - **representations**, images, stereotypes, ...
 - ✓ analyze and understand the critical "**gaze**" or visual assessment (in film and photography) of individuals and social groups on the world around them as well as themselves.
 - ✓ analyze and understand "**the grammar**" of audiovisual media (i.e. the techniques for framing images and editing people, objects, situations that are represented in audiovisual documents).



Area of study

- Goals of the course...
 - ✓ Introduce progressively a **theoretical framework** for "reasoned" analysis and the critique of audiovisual productions:
 - The **tools and methods of description** of audiovisual productions (in particular films but also photographs)
 - More specifically: the **semiotics of the audiovisual text**
 - But also: **methods (hermeneutics) of interpretation** of the "meaning" of these audiovisual productions
 - **references** (scientific, philosophic, ...)
 - ✓ Work concretely – and in a detailed manner – on **a variety of examples**: amateur video, reportages, documentaries, photo montages, ...
 - Presentation and discussion of **concrete analyses**;
 - Concrete analyses in the form of "**group work**".



Chapter 1

- Example of an amateur video clip: interpretation and discussion -



Example of an amateur video

- ❑ Here is a 42 second video clip ... (with no indication of the author, or the location of the shoot ...):

- ❑ We'll watch it several times to understand that even such a text seemingly so simple and harmless has a degree of **internal complexity** that makes it apt to meet more or less different **expectations** (**assumed**)

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ [Online access to the amateur video ...](#)



Example of an amateur video

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ What does this video clip show us? A **first quick reading** reveals among other things:
 - ✓ a square surrounded by palaces with an imposing statue in the middle;
 - ✓ people on the site, some moving, others looking, others are collected into small groups, ...
 - ✓ the whole "scene" takes place under a blue summer sky;
 - ✓ a place that seems to attract people – *a tourist site?*
 - ✓ a place whose architectural character shows us that this is not a contemporary place but an *historical site*;
 - ✓ a place whose architecture shows that it can not be a working-class location but *one identified with an elite* or possibly a *place of collective cultural reference*, a *place of power*;
 - ✓ ...



Example of an amateur video

References, links

1) [The amateur video](#)

2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

□ But even a cursory reading gives us an idea of:

1 – The conditions of production of the video:

- ✓ The images are not stabilized (it's a handheld shoot, with not technical assistance such as a tripod, ...);
- ✓ There is only one source of light, i.e. the natural daylight of a very sunny day;
- ✓ Some images appear to be overexposed and somewhat out of focus;
- ✓ There is no background music;
- ✓ There's no voiceover commentary;
- ✓ Finally, there are no credits at the beginning or end.



Example of an amateur video

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

2 – the genre of the video.

It seems obvious that this is an **amateur film created for personal consumption**:

- ✓ Uses simple and 'spontaneous' techniques of visual framing and camera movements.
- ✓ No work on the soundtrack.
- ✓ No significant control of a "**dramatic narrative**" in the succession of images or of a "**plot development**".
- ✓ A holiday movie? A souvenir?
- ✓ A film expressing / communicating an emotion?
- ✓ A nearly "raw" film "that may be intended to be part of a more significant "documentary movie collection"(i.e. a personal collection, "**personal archives** "...)?



Chapter 2

- Visual shots and themes -



Visual shots and themes

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

❑ More detailed analysis:

1 – The clip is composed of eight distinct shots:

(cf. [analytical help in Word](#) for a more detailed analysis)

- ✓ 4 shots show the external facades of several palaces (shot 1, shot 2, shot 3, shot 4)
- ✓ Two shots show us two statues (plan 5 and shot 8) with a huge one in the middle of the square (plan 5)
- ✓ Un shot shows a large lateral staircase (plan 7)
- ✓ Finally one shot shows a detail of the square, i.e. a passageway (plan 6)

❑ What does this tell us?

- ✓ The selection of shots that compositant this clip suggest:
 - Priority is given to architecture (external facades, staircase, statues, the square, ...) and to the place itself "without respect to context".



Visual shots and themes

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ A visual shot is characterized by an:
 - ✓ **Eidetic aspect**: people, objects, movements... represented
 - ✓ **Plastic aspect**: chromatic (color), topographic (organization of the visual frame of a plan)

- ❑ The objects, situations represented visually ... form the **themes**, i.e. **places of knowledge**:
 - ✓ **First level of themes (iconic)** according to capacity for visual recognition of the viewer ...
 - housing estates, facades, statues, squares, stairs, blue sky, groups of buildings, people moving, birds, ...
 - ✓ **Second level of themes (figurative)** : depending on the **level of knowledge** of the viewer (the interpreter)
 - historic location, touristic site, architectural composition of the Renaissance, a place of power, highly symbolic site in terms of the of the city or country's history ...



Visual shots and themes

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ The distinction between iconic themes and figurative themes:
 - ✓ Sometimes difficult to establish, to recognize
- ❑ "Iconic" themes: generally the lexicon, the visual vocabulary of the spectator or a community of spectators (analogy with the vocabulary applying to natural languages)
- ❑ **Figurative theme**: the visualization of knowledge (historical, social, professional, ... personal, private, ...)
- ❑ Other important thematic dimension:
 - ✓ "Abstract "themes such as the **emotional** themes (the emotions, feelings, ...), **moral, aesthetic** or **intellectual** (epistemic)
 - ✓ Dimension to explain "**why**" the person is shooting (to show, to talk, ...) concerning any object in a given situation, etc.. (personal, cultural **motivation** ...)
- ❑ **Example**: *The front facade of one of the palaces in the film...*
 - ✓ Aesthetic Testimony? Testimony of those in power? Testimony of "official history"?...



Visual shots and themes

References, links

1) [The amateur video](#)

2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ Finally, a distinction between
 - ✓ the **episodic**, the anecdotic
 - ✓ and the "culturally relevant", the **noetic** (the intellectual, ideological or again axiological dimension).

- ❑ The distinction partially identical with that between
 1. the level of **iconic** themes (the **episodic**, anecdotic)
 2. and the level of **figurative** and **proprioceptive** themes (the **noetic**).

- ❑ **Example:** this particular "architectural ensemble« (in our video)
 - ✓ A "remarkable "object, something to visit and film;
 - ✓ A remarkable Renaissance palace;
 - ✓ An monument crucial to the history of a country and art in general;
 - ✓ The image of a perfect aesthetic ideal;
 - ✓ The image of the supreme power of a State;
 - ✓ The site of a few sublime private moments ...



Chapter 3

- Editing visuals shots: the « montage » -



Editing/Montage

References, links

1) [The amateur video](#)

2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

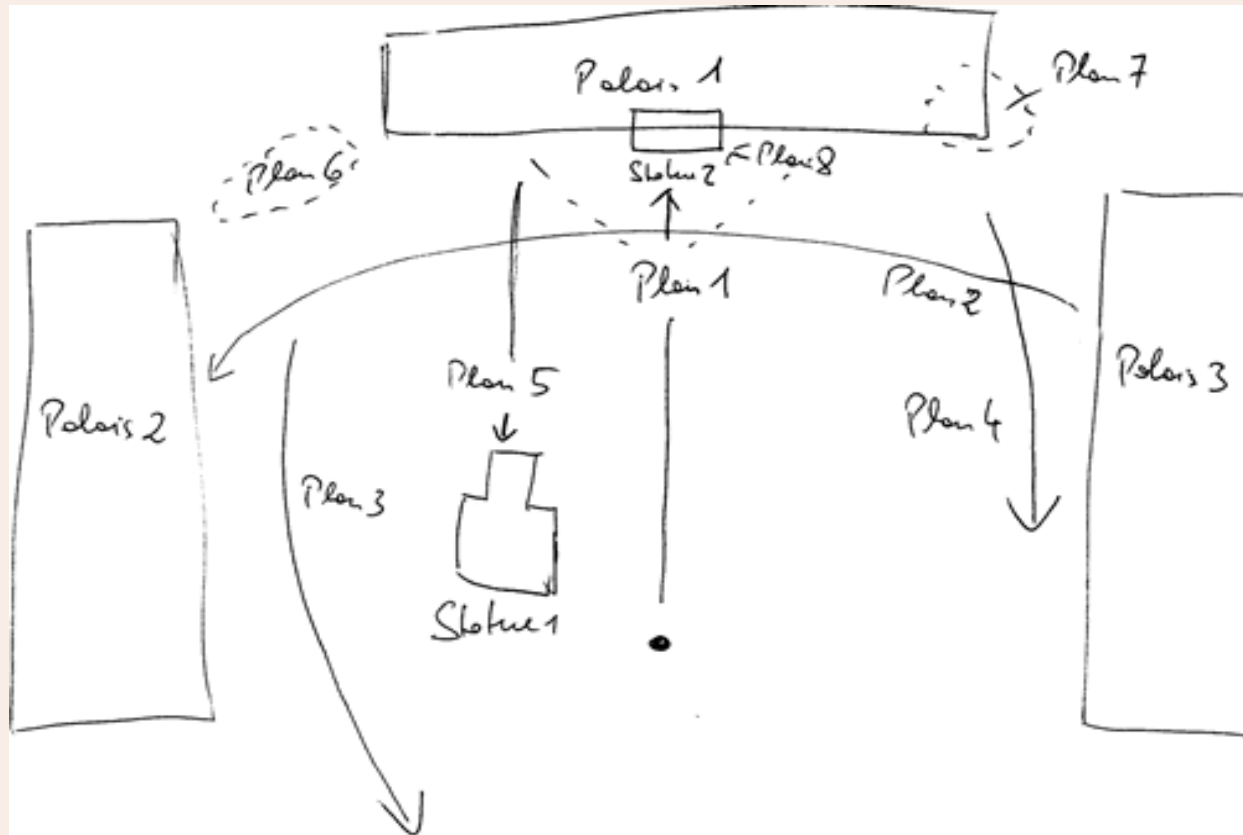
2 – **Montage of the eight shots**: defines the narrative structure of the text, its linked development from the beginning to the end.

- ❑ Thus, the **succession of the eight shots** is the result of the author's choice and this choice is materialized during the edit/montage.
- ❑ The "logic" of the edit/montage can appear to be more or less natural and "obvious":
 - ✓ An edit aligned on **movement** in space,
 - ✓ An edit aligned on **visual panning** of area,
 - ✓ An edit that follows the **chronology** of the events,
 - ✓ An edit organized around the **causality** of the events,
 - ✓ An edit organized around the **structure** of an object (a facade, ...).
- ❑ But, the edit/montage can also express very different concepts or forms, ones that are sometimes extremely rich in their concatenation (particularly in fiction films ...):
 - ✓ In the form of **drama**,
 - ✓ In the form of **of a puzzle**,
 - ✓ In the form of **of an inquest or investigation**,
- ❑ The determinant element = **the plot**.

Editing/Montage

❑ Concerning this clip, the edit is rather typical of its genre:

✓ Edit/montage = visual scan + focus on characteristic details



(Drawing showing the "logic" of the edit of eight shots that make up the amateur video being analysed)

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)



Chapter 4

- **Creating the image ("mise en image ») of objects, situations during the shoot -**



“Mise en image”

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ 3 - "Mise en image" (Creating the image)
- ❑ Creating the image is a complex operation that aims at **visually reproducing** (ou **producing**) an object or a situation.
- ❑ It can be analysed using the **five following procedures**:
 1. The **camera position** (point of view) in relation to the object being filmed:
 - Neutral position, high angle, low angle ...
 2. **Camera mouvement**:
 - Static position of camera, pan, tracking shot
 3. The **framing** of the object through a variety of different shots:
 - Establishing shot, long shot, medium shot, close-up, ...
 4. The **zoom** or **optical tracking**:
 5. **In or out of the visual field**:



“Mise en image”

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ *Mise en image* of the eight visual shots (of our amateur video):
- ❑ Cf. [Analytical help](#) for more detailed analysis.
- ❑ *Mise en image* and **representation** of an objet during a shoot:
 - ✓ representation of the "**whole thing**"(of a front facade , ...);
 - ✓ representation of the **context** (of its **rootedness**, of its **identity through a sense of belonging**) of an edifice or a statue in the form of a double opposition:
 - The "**constructed/unconstructed**"(i.e. architecture vs blue sky) and "**closed/open**"(square surrounded by buildings vs urban open space);
 - ✓ representation of **imposing objects** (stairs, facade from a low angle)
 - ✓ representation of the **static, of the perennial** (exemplified by **architectural structures**) vs the **ephemeral, the mobile** (represented by the **human element**, i.e. people in the square appearing in every shot but never becoming the subject in this amateur video).



“Mise en image”

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
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Some broader implications:

- ✓ The "mise en image" is clearly an “active” process of **constructing a visual representation** of the object or situation filmed;
- ✓ The construction of such visual depiction is based, among other things on the **technical procedures** already listed as well as other factors such as time management (temporality), the author’s prior **knowledge** and **values** , the intended audience etc..;
- ✓ The *mise en image* expresses the **view** of the author on the pro-filmic reality (i.e. **his interpretation**);
- ✓ The author’s view can be (and most often is) very **conventional** ... and then can be confused with the very object represented;
- ✓ So: **be careful** not to confuse the author’s view (his construction of reality) with pro-filmic reality;
- ✓ Reference: "**anthropology of the point of view**"; "**deconstruction** of the point of view"(according to Barthes or Derrida).



“Mise en image”

References, links

1) [The amateur video](#)

2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ 4 -"The filmic discourse": -
 - ❑ There is an author (**emitter**) who wishes to **communicate** to a **receiver** his **point of view** (i.e. his vision or interpretation) concerning a pro-filmic situation;
 - ❑ The **audiovisual text** (filmique, photographique, textuel, ...) (film, photography, text, ...) contains and embodies this wish in the form of a discourse –
 - ✓ The **contents** of the discourse (themes, sujets, stories, ...)
 - ✓ The **expression** of the discourse (shots, visual elements, images).
 - ❑ How to **analyse**, understand the discourse ? Building on:
 - ✓ The **shots** and the **objects represented**,
 - ✓ The **procedures of *mise en image*** of the objects/situations,
 - ✓ The **edit/montage of the shots**,
 - ✓ **Prior knowledge** : of the field, of audiovisual discourse, ...



“Mise en image”

References, links

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- ❑ On a very basic (and intuitive) level, the analysis, understanding of a discourse (film) should answer the following five questions:
 - ✓ Who are the **participants** involved (author, recipient)?
 - ✓ What is the **context** (framework of production, of exploitation, frame of reference ...)?
 - ✓ What is the **genre of the discourse**?
 - ✓ **What is it about** and what is its **purpose**?
 - ✓ **How does it develop** its point?



“Mise en image”

References, links

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- ❑ Special point: **Sujet** or **purpose** --
 - ✓ also known as the **discursive theme** (as distinct from iconic, figurative and "proprioception" themes, ...):
 - ✓ Theme that expresses the **intention** of the author's discourse;
 - The intention may be **more or less conscious**, premeditated or, on the contrary, **unconscious**, uncontrolled ...
 - The **analysed intention** (i.e. as a subject of discourse) is always an **interpretation**, i.e. l'intention as it is understood by the recipient
- Finally, the **author interpreting** his intention supplies one interpretation among others.



“Mise en image”

References, links

- 1) [The amateur video](#)
- 2) [Analytical help for more detailed description of amateur video](#)

- ❑ The subject, the purpose of our sample video?
- ❑ The *mise en image* of objects, situations, ... in our amateur video suggests priorities, "hierarchies" that are clear enough to suggest that:
 - ✓ the priority of the **architectural** dimension compared to that of the people in the square and what they are doing, the shining sun (none of these elements ever become the actual subject matter in our example);
 - ✓ priority is given to the **whole** (vs., for example, details, figures, ...);
 - ✓ priority is given to the "**monumental**"(the perennial ...);
 - ✓ the constant presence of the **mighty**, the **awesome**.
- ❑ **Implied discourse/purpose:**
 - ✓ Show the square in question in terms of its **aesthetic** dimension and its "ahistorical" superiority...



Chapter 5

-Some more general remarks -



More general discussion

- The discussion of this first example has shown us several important things:

1 – Distinction between **different levels of viewing and interpreting**:

- ✓ The “quick” impressionist reading limited to “what you see”:
 - Pre-critical reading,
 - Reading non-specialist
 - Reading as an act of one’s everyday life,
 - ...
- ✓ Systematic, methodical reading and interpretation, based on knowledge of the organization and processing of a text.



More general
discussion

2 – Reading/interprétation ("what you see" in a movie ...)

- ✓ This is a **selection** (conscious or unconscious) of "things" that interest us, that challenge us, ...
 - and that on the basis of our **own culture** (individual or social, i.e. as a member of a social group, community, etc..)
 - and our interests, needs, desires, or: **expectations**.
- ✓ Saying: "we see in an image what we want to see"...
- ✓ See the phenomenon of "**cultural bias**" or "cognitive bias"
- ✓ See also the theory of **cognitive dissonance** (Leon Feistinger)
- ✓ Special cases: readings – fantasies ...



**More general
discussion**

3 –Two important distinctions:

A) First distinction:

- 1/ The **outside the text**, the "pro-filmic" situation
 - ✓ The outside world, "reality" itself (social, historical, cultural)
- 2) the **text** itself –
 - ✓ The (**diegetic**) universe of the text
= The pro-filmic situation that is represented, "crafted" within and by the text (and according to the intention of the author).

B) Different types of "pro-filmic situations " (to be discussed later)

- ✓ **Pro-filmic situations "as is"**
- ✓ **Modified pro-filmic situations change (by the presence of the camera)**
- ✓ **"Staged"pro-filmic situations (for film).**



**More general
discussion**

4 – Complexity of the "textual work" based on various kinds of knowledge and know-how.

- ❑ So far we have encountered:
 - ✓ The activity of the **selection** of scenes (objects, situations, ...) belonging to a pro-filmic situation
 - ✓ The procedures of **mise en image of scenes** (objets, situations, ...) that have been selected
 - ✓ The **editing/montage of shots**: the "linearization" of shots following a certain narrative logic



**More general
discussion**

5 – The **variable nature of the concept (and of the "reality") of the text.**
This varies depending on the context in which it appears:

- ✓ The **text produced by an author** (a community of writers) following a certain intention
- ✓ The **text transmitted through technical means** and received by the addressee, its "public"
- ✓ The **text revisited** (reread, interpreted, ...) by its reader
- ✓ The **text transmitted** by the reader / author with other readers (who, again, etc. etc.)



More general discussion

- ✓ The **text stored** as an object of collection (heritage, ...);
- ✓ The **text as a virtuality**: draft, outline, pre-existing elements, ...;
- ✓ The **actual text** (as it appears to me as the product of an author, as an annotation, as a stored product, ...);
- ✓ The **potential text**: the text as a construct that potentially could have been / will be achieved in a very different way (different selections, different shots, different edits, ...).



Chapter 6

- For further training and preparation... -



Viewing

- ❑ Viewing at home of another sample of amateur video showing the visit of a Chinese temple by a group of Taiwanese tourists – video created in 2006 by a writer named "wongmingyou" who has his own video channel on YouTube .
 - ✓ Access to [the video clip](#);
 - ✓ [Access to the "wongminyou"](#) channel on YouTube