Formal Elements of Art: Analyzing the Dreamy Nature of Film

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Formal Elements of Art: Analyzing the Dreamy Nature of Film

In the broadest of terms, art can be anything that does not come from nature but is created by humans. All of humankind’s inventions can technically be considered art, and yet are not. There is a fine line between works of art and other crafts. An obvious example would be works that depict reality or contribute to it; these are generally not considered artful, by virtue of being designed with a specific function in mind. With the advent of photography – and later, film – critics were quick to dismiss framed depictions of real life as not artful because they were mere mechanical reproductions (Arnheim 8). The logical question then becomes what exactly does a photorealistic medium require to be considered art?

The first critical debates about the film medium revolved around this question. While there exists no defined metric to measure artistic merit, it is generally agreed that film artists must use the camera to transform, not merely record, reality. With that in mind, a clearer vision of film art comes to light. Would footage from a security camera be considered artful? Most would say no, as it is a direct depiction of reality and serves the function of surveillance. News packages and most documentaries would also not be considered artful, as they portray reality in a manner that is meant primarily to provide information rather than express an artistic message. It would seem as if the obvious – and perhaps only – candidate left would be films of fiction.

But again, would all films of fiction be considered art by virtue of being fictitious? This essay will focus primarily on the form a film takes as opposed to its content, though both are essential in evaluating art. Films that manipulate their perceived realities have the most transformative elements, and can therefore be considered artful according to Rudolf Arnheim in his seminal work, Film as Art. Arnheim vouches for film’s artistic legitimacy on the grounds that it can take a realistic account of reality and distort it in ways not possible in the real world. Christopher Nolan’s 2010 blockbuster Inception is a particularly good example of how film can manipulate reality. Inception is a heist film that takes place in the shared dreamscape of Dominic...
Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his associates. Nolan’s film presents formal elements that are divorced from reality, and thus can be considered artful.

The reduced depth of field the camera offers is one example of how film can differentiate itself from reality. An average pair of good working human eyes are able to see all things in focus. Cameras, on the other hand, do not generally see all things clearly. Due to either technological shortcomings or choice, cameras have the ability to focus on one object in a frame and blur out everything else. This ability can be applied by the film director to focus the audience’s attention on one particular object in the frame, thus guiding their attention (Arnheim 49). At the end of Inception, Cobb exits the airport with Miles. For a brief moment within the shot, the two of them are the only people in focus, walking among countless others, none of whom are entirely visible. They do not matter, and to reinforce this idea, Nolan opted to show them out of focus. Manipulating the camera’s focus is a subtle tool the filmmaker possesses to manipulate reality.

The filmmaker also has the ability to juxtapose two seemingly unrelated images in order to create meaning. This technique is called montage editing, and can be characterized as “the crosscutting of events that are disassociated from each other” (Arnheim 88) to create a new meaning. An example can be seen in the beginning of Inception, when Cobb is washed up on a beach and looks up to see his son, James, building a sand castle. This sequence is made up of two shots: one of Cobb and one of James. The shot of James starts with him in focus, becomes blurry, then returns to sharp focus. Given Cobb’s distressed state laying on the beach, the audience is left to infer that Cobb is seeing his child come into and out of focus. Juxtaposing the two shots gives the audience the impression that Cobb is looking at James. In reality, Cobb would need to have James in his direct line of sight to see him. Montage editing is a tool that can be
used to bypass the limitations of reality and allow the audience to see what a character sees directly.

Even elements of motion are malleable in the film medium. The filmmaker has the choice to speed up or slow down a particular segment to underscore its meaning. Often, slow motion is utilized to show events that happen so rapidly that the human eye simply cannot process it in real time (Arnheim 116). Near the beginning of *Inception*, a car exploding is shown in great detail. Mid-explosion, the fire erupting dramatically slows down. The scene would not be nearly as vivid had it not been slowed down long enough for the observer to analyze it. Viewing things in slow motion allows for the observer to notice things that would go unnoticed when presented in real time.

The process of transitioning from scene to scene is inherently unnatural to a human being. A person goes through time and space linearly. Sometimes, when a scene cuts to another point in time and space, the effect can be jarring to the observer and can take them out of the experience (Arnheim 23). To “avoid sudden appearances,” some filmmakers have resorted to fading in and out between scenes to ease their audience into the scene transition (Arnheim 118). One such example in *Inception* happens between the scenes where Cobb and company enter the next level of dreams (while physically in a hotel room) and find themselves in a snowy landscape. Nolan inserts a flash of white between the two scenes, and as it fades out, the tundra scene is revealed. The white flash eases the transition into a new reality, and in real life, wouldn’t be necessary because settings in reality change in accordance to the linear nature of time and space.

By far, one of the biggest appeals to the film medium is the ability for the filmmaker to operate outside the confines of the space-time continuum. The film artist is
allowed to show events happening simultaneously in time or at differing points; “one scene may be immediately followed by another that takes place at a totally different time” (Arnheim 21). Nolan presents not just two but four separate timelines in Inception. The action cuts between Yusuf (Dileep Rao), who is driving a van while being chased; Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who is wiring an elevator without gravity; Eames (Tom Hardy), who is fighting off enemies at a wintry fortress; and Cobb, who is confronting his ex-wife Mal (Marion Cotillard) in unstructured dream space. All of these events paradoxically take place simultaneously and at separate times, yet are experienced by the observer as taking place in one fluid span. Assuming that all of these events could happen in real life, one would have to witness all of these events play out in their natural length of time, which in this case, would be impossible because all four of these events take place simultaneously. Film holds a power over the space-time continuum that cannot be experienced in real life.

Not all films can be called artful, as some filmmakers opt to ground their works in reality. Art exists where reality cannot. Only when a film manipulates reality to achieve its goals can it also be considered art. Arnheim stated that the “artistic resources” of a film lie in its ability to contrast its own reality with the physical world’s reality (Arnheim 9). As such, the new reality of film offers the artist the opportunity to guide an audience’s experiences, whether it be showing them what to focus on, letting them stand proxy for a character and see what they see, or manipulating the fabric of space and time itself. The further a film separates itself from reality, the more artful it can be.
Works Cited
