

For example, any fan of actor Michael Cera's previous performances as an endearingly awkward adolescent in the film *Superbad* (2007; director Greg Mottola) and television series *Arrested Development* (2003–2006) will watch *Juno* with a built-in affection for Paulie Bleeker, Juno's sort-of boyfriend. This predetermined fondness does more than help us like the movie; it dramatically changes the way we approach a character type (the high-school athlete who impregnates his teenage classmate) that our expectations might otherwise lead us to distrust. Ironically, audience expectations of Cera's sweetness may have contributed to the disappointing box-office performance of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010; director Edgar Wright). Some critics proposed that viewers were uncomfortable seeing Cera play the somewhat vain and self-centered title character.

Viewers who know director Guillermo del Toro's commercial action/horror movies *Mimic* (1997), *Blade II* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), and *Pacific Rim* (2013) might be surprised by the sophisticated political and philosophical metaphor of *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) or *The Devil's Backbone* (2001). Yet all five films feature fantastic and macabre creatures as well as social commentary. An active awareness of an audience's various expectations of del Toro's films would inform an analysis of the elements common to the filmmaker's seemingly schizophrenic body of work. Such an analysis could focus on his visual style in terms of production design, lighting, or special effects, or it might instead examine recurring themes such as oppression, childhood trauma, or the role of the outcast.

As you can see, cinematic invisibility is not necessarily an impediment; once you know enough to acknowledge their existence, these potential blind spots also offer opportunities for insight and analysis. There are many ways to look at movies and many possible types of film analysis. We'll spend the rest of this chapter discussing the most common analytical approaches to movies.

Since this book considers an understanding of how film grammar conveys meaning, mood, and information as the essential foundation for any further study of cinema, we'll turn now to **formal analysis**—that analytical approach primarily concerned with film **form**, or the means by which a subject is expressed. Don't worry if you don't fully understand the function of the techniques discussed; that's what the rest of this book is for.

Formal Analysis

Formal analysis dissects the complex synthesis of cinematography, sound, composition, design, movement, performance, and editing orchestrated by creative artists like screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, editors, sound designers, and art directors as well as the many craftspeople who implement their vision. The movie meaning expressed through form results from narrative information as straightforward as what is said and when a particular scene takes place to more subtle implied meaning, such as mood, tone, significance, and what a character is thinking or feeling.

While the overeager analyst certainly can read too much meaning into a particular visual or audio component, and than the filmmaker intended, you should realize that cinematic storytellers exploit every tool at their disposal, and that, therefore, every element in every frame is there for a reason. It's the analyst's job to carefully consider the narrative intent of the moment, scene, or sequence before attempting any interpretation of the formal elements used to communicate that intended meaning to the spectator.

For example, the simple awareness that *Juno*'s opening shot [1] is the first image of the movie informs us of the moment's most basic and explicit intent: to convey setting (contemporary middle-class suburbia) and time.

LOOKING AT MOVIES
FILM ANALYSIS

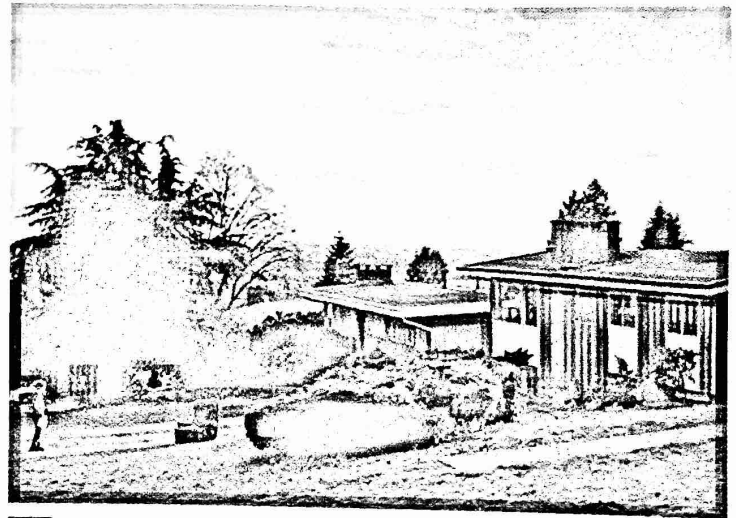
VIDEO

In this tutorial, Dave Monahan analyzes the "waiting room" scene from *Juno* and covers other key concepts of film analysis.

of day (dawn). But only after we have determined that the story opens with its title character overwhelmed by the prospect of her own teenage pregnancy are we prepared to deduce how this implicit meaning (her state of mind) is conveyed by the composition: Juno is at the far left of the frame and is tiny in relationship to the rest of the wide-angle composition. In fact, we may be well into the four-second shot before we even spot her. Her vulnerability is conveyed by the fact that she is dwarfed by her surroundings. Even when the scene cuts to a closer viewpoint [2], she, as the subject of a movie composition, is much smaller in frame than we are used to seeing, especially in the first shots used to introduce a protagonist. She is standing in a front yard contemplating an empty stuffed chair from a safe distance, as if the inanimate object might attack at any moment. Her pose adds to our implicit impression of Juno as alienated or off-balance.

Our command of the film's explicit details alerts us to another function of the scene: to introduce the recurring **theme** (or **motif**) of the empty chair that frames—and in some ways defines—the story. In this opening scene, accompanied by Juno's voice-over explanation, "It started with a chair," the empty, displaced object represents Juno's status and emotional state and foreshadows the unconventional setting for the sexual act that got her into this mess. By the story's conclusion, when Juno announces, "It ended with a chair," the motif—in the form of an adoptive mother's rocking chair—has been transformed, like Juno herself, to embody hope and potential.

All that meaning was packed into two shots spanning about 12 seconds of screen time. Let's see what we can learn from a formal analysis of a more extended sequence from the same film: Juno's visit to the Women Now clinic. To do so, we'll first want to consider what information the filmmaker needs this scene to communicate for viewers to understand and appreciate this pivotal piece of the movie's story in relation to the rest of the narrative. As we delve into material that deals with *Juno's* sensitive subject matter, keep in mind that you don't have to agree with the meaning or values projected by the object of your analysis; you can learn even from a movie you dislike. Personal values and beliefs will undoubtedly influence your analysis of any movie. And personal views provide a legitimate perspective, as long as we recognize and acknowledge how they may color our interpretation.



1



2

Throughout *Juno's* previous 18 minutes, all information concerning its protagonist's attitude toward her condition has explicitly enforced our expectation that she will end her unplanned pregnancy with an abortion. She pantomimes suicide once she's forced to admit her condition; she calmly discusses abortion facilities with her friend Leah; she displays no ambivalence when scheduling the procedure. As she approaches the clinic, Juno's nonchalant reaction to the comically morose pro-life demonstrator Su-Chin reinforces our expectations. Juno treats Su-Chin's assertion that the fetus has fingernails as more of an interesting bit of trivia than a concept worthy of serious consideration.

The subsequent waiting-room sequence is about Juno making an unexpected decision that propels the story in an entirely new direction. A formal analysis will tell us how the filmmakers orchestrated multiple formal elements, including sound, composition, moving camera,



1



3



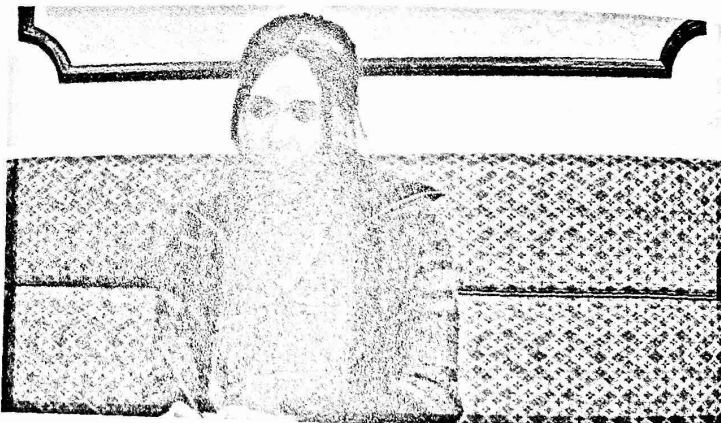
5



2



4



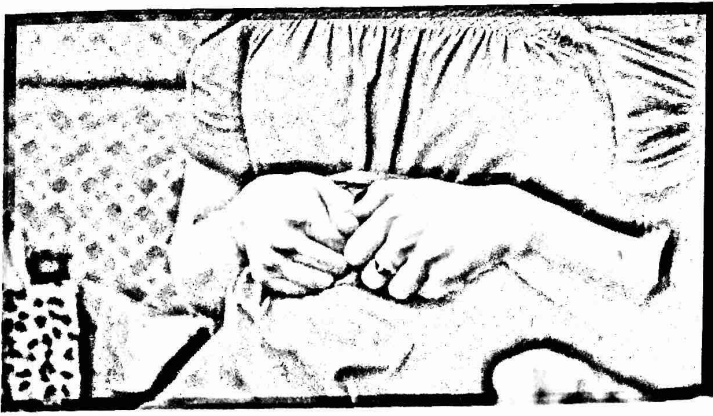
6

and editing, to convey in 13 shots and 30 seconds of screen time how the seemingly insignificant fingernail factoid infiltrates Juno's thoughts and ultimately drives her from the clinic. By the time you have completed your course (and have read the book), you should be prepared to apply this same sort of formal analysis to any scene you choose.

The waiting-room sequence's opening shot [1] **dollies in** (the camera moves slowly toward the subject), which gradually enlarges Juno in frame, increasing her visual significance as she fills out the clinic admittance form on the clipboard in her hand [2]. The shot reestablishes her casual acceptance of the impending procedure, pro-

viding context for the events to come. Its relatively long 10-second **duration** sets up a relaxed rhythm that will shift later along with her state of mind. As the camera reaches its closest point, a loud sound invades the low hum of the previously hushed waiting room.

This obtrusive drumming sound motivates a somewhat startling cut to a new shot that plunges our viewpoint right up into Juno's face [3]. The sudden spatial shift gives the moment resonance and conveys Juno's thought process as she instantly shifts her concentration from the admittance form to this strange new sound. She turns her head in search of the sound's source, and the camera adjusts to adopt her **point of view** of a mother



7



8



9



10

and daughter sitting beside her [4]. The mother's fingernails drumming on her own clipboard is revealed as the source of the tapping sound. The sound's abnormally loud level signals the audience that we're not hearing at a natural volume level—we've begun to experience Juno's psychological perceptions. The little girl's stare into Juno's (and our) eyes helps to establish the association between the fingernail sound and Juno's latent guilt.

The sequence cuts back to the already troubled-looking Juno [5]. The juxtaposition connects her anxious expression to both the drumming mother and the little girl's gaze. The camera creeps in on her again. This time, the resulting enlargement initiates our intuitive association of this gradual intensification with a character's moment of realization. Within half a second, another noise joins the mix, and Juno's head turns in response [6].

The juxtaposition marks the next shot as Juno's point of view, but it is much too close to be her literal point of view. Like the unusually loud sound, the unrealistically close viewpoint of a woman picking her thumbnail reflects not an actual spatial relationship but the sight's significance to Juno [7]. When we cut back to Juno about a second later, the camera continues to close in on her,

and her gaze shifts again to follow yet another sound as it joins the rising clamor [8].

A new shot of another set of hands, again from a close-up, psychological point of view, shows a woman applying fingernail polish [9]. What would normally be a silent action emits a distinct, abrasive sound.

When we cut back to Juno half a second later, she is much larger in the frame than the last few times we saw her [10]. This break in pattern conveys a sudden intensification; this is really starting to get to her. Editing often establishes patterns and rhythms, only to break them for dramatic impact. Our appreciation of Juno's situation is enhanced by the way editing connects her reactions to the altered sights and sounds around her, as well as by her implied isolation—she appears to be the only one who notices the increasingly boisterous symphony of fingernails. Of course, Juno's not entirely alone—the audience is with her. At this point in the sequence, we have begun to associate the waiting-room fingernails with Su-Chin's attempt to humanize Juno's condition.

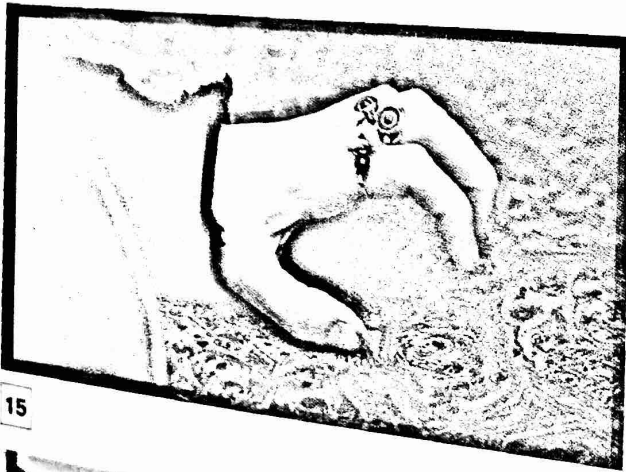
Juno's head jerks as yet another, even more invasive sound enters the fray [11]. We cut to another close-up point-of-view shot, this time of a young man scratching his arm [12]. At this point, another pattern is broken,



11



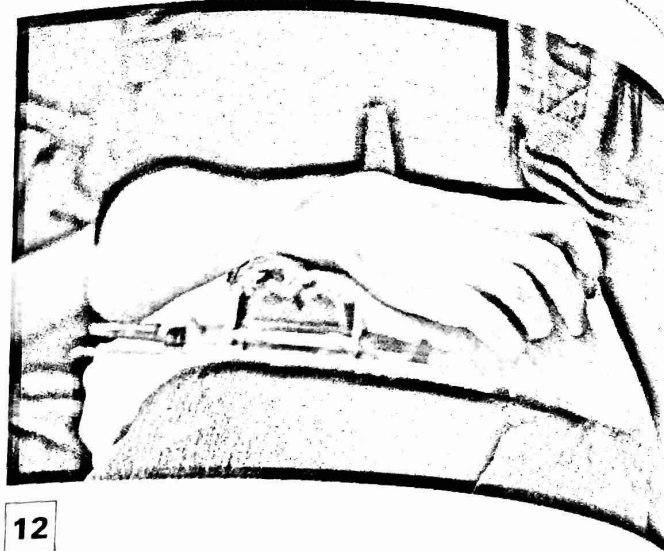
13



15



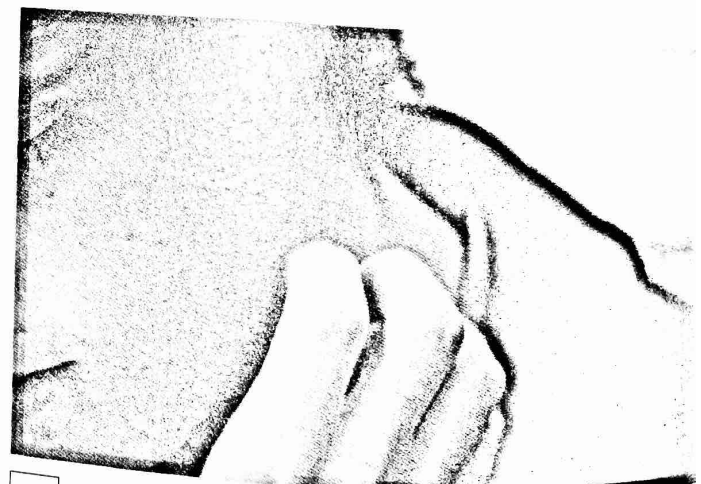
17



12



14



16



18



19



20

initiating the scene's formal and dramatic climax. Up until now, the sequence alternated between shots of Juno and shots of the fingernails as they caught her attention. Each juxtaposition caused us to identify with both Juno's reaction and her point of view. But now, the sequence shifts gears; instead of the expected switch back to Juno, we are subjected to an accelerating succession of fingernail shots, each one shorter and louder than the last. A woman bites her fingernails [13]; another files her nails [14]; a woman's hand drums her fingernails nervously [15]; a man scratches his neck [16]. With every new shot, another noise is added to the sound mix.

This pattern is itself broken in several ways by the scene's final shot. We've grown accustomed to seeing Juno look around every time we see her, but this time, she stares blankly ahead, immersed in thought [17]. A cacophony of fingernail sounds rings in her (and our) ears as the camera glides toward her for 3½ very long seconds—a duration six times longer than any of the previous nine shots. These pattern shifts signal the scene's climax, which is further emphasized by the moving camera's enlargement of Juno's figure [18], a visual action that cinematic language has trained viewers to associate with a subject's moment of realization or decision.

But the shot doesn't show us Juno acting on that decision. We don't see her cover her ears, throw down her clipboard, or jump up from the waiting-room banquet. Instead, we are ripped prematurely from this final waiting-room image and plunged into a shot that drops us into a different space and at least several moments ahead in time—back to Su-Chin chanting in the parking lot [19]. This jarring spatial, temporal, and visual shift helps us feel Juno's own instability at this crucial narrative moment. Before we can get our bearings, the camera has pivoted right to reveal Juno bursting out of

the clinic door in the background [20]. She races past Su-Chin without a word. She does not have to say anything. Cinematic language—film form—has already told us what she decided and why.

Anyone watching this scene would sense the narrative and emotional meaning revealed by this analysis, but only a viewer actively analyzing the film form used to construct it can fully comprehend how the sophisticated machinery of cinematic language shapes and conveys that meaning. Formal analysis is fundamental to all approaches to understanding and engaging cinema—whether you're making, studying, or simply appreciating movies—which is why the elements and grammar of film form are the primary focus of *Looking at Movies*.

Alternative Approaches to Analysis

Although we'll be looking at movies primarily to learn the forms they take and the nuts and bolts they are constructed from, any serious student of film should be aware that there are many other legitimate frameworks for analysis. These alternative approaches analyze movies more as cultural artifacts than as traditional works of art. They search beneath a movie's form and content to expose implicit and hidden meanings that inform our understanding of cinema's function within popular culture as well as the influence of popular culture on the movies.

The preceding formal analysis demonstrated how *Juno* used cinematic language to convey meaning and tell a story. Given the right interpretive scrutiny, our case study film may also speak eloquently about social conditions and attitudes. For example, considering that the protagonist is the daughter of an air-conditioner repairman and a manicurist, and that the couple she selects to adopt her baby are white-collar professionals