

THE VISUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGE AND ITS ROLE IN DESCRIBING FILM DRAMA

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Abstract

The visual design of a film is integral to how its drama is conveyed and perceived. This article examines the “visual construction” of cinematic imagery and its role in expressing filmic drama, proposing a methodological framework to systematically link visual elements with narrative structure. Drawing on contemporary film theory, cognitive film studies, and visual communication research, the study treats cinematic visuals as a form of language with a distinct grammar and rhythm. It outlines how cinematographers and directors can plan and analyze visual components—such as composition, lighting, colour, movement, and editing rhythm—in tandem with dramatic arcs (exposition, conflict, climax, resolution) to enhance storytelling. The article refines key concepts, including visual language, visual rhythm, and unity of visual design, updating them with recent scholarly insights from *mise-en-scène* theory, semiotic cinematography, predictive processing models of editing, and empirical narrative structure research. A method for visualizing narrative intensity and visual intensity through graphical mapping is presented as a tool for both creative planning and critical analysis. By integrating practitioner-theoretic perspectives with empirical observations of how visual structures affect audience perception and engagement, this work underscores the continued relevance of visual construction in cinema and provides a clearer, modernized framework for filmmakers and scholars to articulate the relationship between a film’s visual form and its dramatic content.

Keywords: Cinematic Image, Visual Language, Visual Storytelling, Visual Rhythm, Film Drama, Cinematography, Narrative Structure, *Mise-En-Scène*, Cognitive Film Theory, Visual Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In cinema, storytelling is achieved not only through script and dialogue but also, and often more powerfully, through the deliberate construction of visual imagery. The central problem addressed in this study is how to harmonize the *form* of cinematic visuals with the *content* of film drama. Filmmakers frequently grapple with the challenge of aligning what is presented on screen—the composition, lighting, colour, movement, and editing of images—with the narrative arc and emotional beats of the story. The aim here is to establish a systematic approach that ensures the visual design of a film effectively communicates the intended dramatic meaning at each stage of its development. In essence, the core question is whether a method can be developed that ties the visual language of cinema to its dramatic structure in a consistent, analyzable, and creatively generative way.

Prior work in film theory has long discussed the notion of cinema as a language. Early theorists drew analogies between film techniques and grammar; certain conventions of shooting and editing have been compared to a linguistic syntax that produces meaning and continuity. While this “film language” metaphor has its limitations, it importantly

highlights that viewers must learn to “read” images much as they read words—a form of visual literacy involving the recognition of how shots, angles, lighting, and cuts convey subtext and story information. The evolution of this concept from a useful metaphor to a more empirically grounded understanding of cognitive processing represents a significant maturation in film theory. Wollen (1997) argues that practitioners such as Eisenstein, Godard, Hitchcock, Kubrick, and Ridley Scott theorize montage alongside *mise-en-scène*, and proposes linking formal film choices to a linguistic Tense-Mode-Aspect (TMA) model to explain narrative temporality and mode [1]. More recent research in visual narrative cognition suggests that sequential images can indeed function with a kind of grammar; Cohn et al. (2014) provide neural evidence for constituent structure in sequential image comprehension, demonstrating that viewers process visual narratives through hierarchical syntactic structures analogous to linguistic parsing [2].

This article builds upon these foundations by proposing a comprehensive framework that systematically connects visual construction to film drama. The framework integrates three core dimensions: (1) a multi-dimensional visual analysis model encompassing composition, lighting, colour, movement, and editing rhythm; (2) a mapping methodology that aligns these visual elements with classical dramatic arcs (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution); and (3) a graphical intensity mapping tool that visualizes the relationship between visual intensity and narrative intensity across a film’s temporal structure. By synthesizing practitioner-theoretic insights with empirical findings from cognitive film studies, this work aims to bridge theoretical understanding with practical application, offering actionable tools grounded in observable effects on audience perception and engagement.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to enhance both creative practice and critical analysis. For filmmakers, the framework provides a systematic planning tool that can inform pre-production decisions about visual design in relation to narrative structure. For scholars and critics, it offers an analytical methodology for examining how visual construction contributes to dramatic meaning-making. For educators, it presents a pedagogical approach that can deepen students’ understanding of the complex interplay between visual form and narrative content. As cinema continues to evolve in an increasingly crowded and sensory-rich media landscape, the ability to articulate and analyze the relationship between visual construction and film drama becomes ever more crucial.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Film as Visual Language

The conceptualization of film as a language has evolved from early metaphorical comparisons to more sophisticated models grounded in cognitive science and semiotics. Wollen (1997) positions film language within a broader practice-theory synthesis, arguing that filmmaker-theorists have long recognized the systematic nature of cinematic expression [1]. His proposal to link formal film choices to a linguistic Tense-Mode-Aspect model provides a framework for understanding how temporal and modal dimensions of

narrative are encoded visually [1]. This linguistic approach finds empirical support in Cohn et al.'s (2014) neuropsychological research, which demonstrates that viewers process visual narratives through hierarchical constituent structures, suggesting that visual sequences possess a grammar-like organization that the brain parses systematically [2].

The notion of visual literacy—the learned ability to “read” cinematic images—is central to understanding film as language. Just as linguistic competence requires knowledge of vocabulary and syntax, cinematic literacy involves recognizing how shots, angles, lighting, and cuts convey meaning beyond their literal content. This literacy is culturally constructed; viewers develop expectations about visual conventions through repeated exposure to cinematic texts. Cutting (2023) argues that film form has evolved to match the visual system and cognitive predilections of audiences, suggesting a co-evolutionary process whereby cinematic conventions align with biological bases of perception and attention [3]. This perspective reframes the language metaphor: rather than an arbitrary symbolic system, cinematic language may represent a culturally refined exploitation of universal perceptual and cognitive mechanisms.

2.2 Mise-en-Scène Theory and Visual Construction

Mise-en-scène—the arrangement of everything that appears before the camera—constitutes the primary domain of visual construction in cinema. Pravylo (2023) defines mise-en-scène as a decision set that translates screenplay and character into a filmic world, emphasizing its integration with narrative to generate meaning [4]. This definition underscores that mise-en-scène is not merely decorative but fundamentally narrative in function; staging, costume, spatial design, and other elements modulate how story information is conveyed and interpreted [4].

Comparative directorial studies demonstrate how mise-en-scène choices reflect distinct authorial approaches to visual storytelling. Yilmaz (2023) applies mise-en-scène critique to a completed feature film, showing how shot length, camera movement, colour and lighting, costume and make-up collectively cohere with dramatic beats to convert a screenplay into a strong filmic instance [5]. This case-study approach reveals that effective mise-en-scène requires systematic alignment of all visual elements with narrative structure; inconsistencies or misalignments can undermine dramatic coherence [5].

Markham (2023) situates mise-en-scène alongside composition and shot selection, stressing selection criteria such as function, coverage, and rhythm, and the role of establishing and master shots in sustaining scene integrity and narrative continuity [6]. His framework emphasizes that shot selection is not arbitrary but guided by narrative function—each shot must serve a specific purpose in advancing story, revealing character, or establishing spatial relationships [6]. This functional approach to mise-en-scène provides a bridge between aesthetic choices and narrative requirements, suggesting that visual construction can be systematically planned and evaluated in relation to dramatic objectives.

2.3 Cinematography as Semiotic Toolkit

Cinematography extends *mise-en-scène* through the specific techniques of image capture—composition, lighting, colour, and camera movement—each functioning as a semiotic device that encodes meaning and emotion. Wu (2024) employs semiotic theory to demonstrate how lighting, shadow, and colour operate as metaphors that deepen narrative themes and shape emotional experience [7]. This semiotic perspective positions cinematographic choices as a language of metaphors, where formal photographic elements yield thematic resonance rather than mere visual decoration [7].

Composition and framing constitute the spatial dimension of cinematographic semiotics. Markham (2023) catalogues frame construction techniques—proportions, lines, ikones, subject selection, shot size, frames-within-frames, and short-siding—as deliberate devices to articulate point of view and spatial tension [6]. These compositional strategies guide viewer attention, establish hierarchies of narrative importance, and create visual relationships that parallel or counterpoint narrative relationships [6].

Colour functions as a particularly potent dramaturgical device. Poznin (2021) outlines colour's multiple functions in film: marking chronotope (time-space), signaling subjective perception, conveying symbolic meaning, and producing psychophysiological impact on viewers [8]. His analysis demonstrates that colour choices can operate simultaneously on multiple levels—denotative (representing realistic lighting conditions), connotative (suggesting mood or emotion), and symbolic (encoding thematic meanings) [8]. Simioana (2014) extends this analysis by examining chromatic patterns across entire films, arguing that specific colour strategies contribute to meditative and emotional responses in viewers [9]. These studies collectively establish that colour is not merely aesthetic but fundamentally narrative and affective in function.

Camera movement introduces temporal and kinetic dimensions to cinematographic expression. Kuhn (2013) theorizes hand-camera effects as a typology of functions in audiovisual narration, linking stylistic hand-camera features to narrational roles such as immediacy, subjectivity, and disorientation [10]. His framework demonstrates that camera movement choices encode narrative information about perspective, temporality, and affective tone; a handheld shot may signal subjective experience or documentary realism, while a smooth tracking shot may suggest omniscient narration or formal elegance [10]. This functional typology provides filmmakers and analysts with a vocabulary for discussing how movement contributes to narrative meaning.

2.4 Visual Rhythm and Editing Theory

Editing and visual rhythm constitute the temporal dimension of visual construction, shaping how viewers experience narrative time and pacing. Wollen (1997) links montage thinking to *mise-en-scène*, positioning editing choices within broader narrative tense and aspectual concerns [1]. This integration suggests that editing is not merely a technical process of joining shots but a narrative strategy for controlling temporal flow and emphasis [1].

Empirical research has identified systematic patterns in editing practices across popular cinema. Cutting (2016) analyzes normative patterns—shot durations, transitions, shot motion, luminance, and shot scale distributions—that correlate with four-act film structures (setup, complication, development, climax) [11]. His findings reveal that editing rhythm is not arbitrary but systematically shaped to support narrative structure; shot durations tend to decrease toward climactic moments, creating acceleration and intensification, while transitions and motion patterns vary predictably across narrative phases [11]. These statistical regularities suggest that editing conventions have evolved to exploit perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that facilitate narrative comprehension and emotional engagement.

Wang et al. (2007) propose an aesthetic intensity curve that integrates visual and aural cues to extract narrative structure computationally [12]. Their model operationalizes how visual rhythm signals story phases, providing a quantitative method for analyzing the relationship between formal features and narrative progression [12]. This computational approach validates the intuition that visual intensity—measured through factors such as shot frequency, motion, colour saturation, and luminance contrast—correlates with narrative intensity, rising toward climactic moments and falling during expository or resolution phases [12].

Recent cognitive research has begun to explain *why* editing patterns affect viewers as they do. Drew and Soto-Faraco (2023) propose a predictive processing account where edit discontinuities generate prediction error modulated by shot predictability and narrative depth [13]. Their neural and behavioral evidence suggests that viewers continuously generate predictions about upcoming visual information; edits that violate these predictions produce measurable cognitive responses that can enhance engagement or create disorientation, depending on narrative context [13]. May et al. (2003) demonstrate that filmmakers exploit object collocation across cuts to guide gaze and preserve continuity, with eye-movement patterns validating specific cut classes [14]. These studies establish that editing rhythm operates through perceptual mechanisms—leveraging viewer prediction, attention, and eye movement—to produce fluency, tension, or surprise in service of narrative goals [13], [14].

2.5 Cognitive Film Theory and Audience Response

Cognitive film theory situates audience experience within perceptual, predictive, and multisensory frameworks, examining how formal cinematic elements elicit emotions, guide attention, and facilitate narrative comprehension. Antunes and Grabowski (2015) present a multisensory cognitive model emphasizing how camerawork, editing, light, and colour combine with perception to produce a holistic film experience [15]. Their model positions the viewer as an active processor who integrates multiple sensory streams—visual, auditory, and sometimes haptic—into a coherent narrative understanding [15]. This multisensory perspective underscores that visual construction does not operate in isolation but interacts with sound, music, and dialogue to shape overall experience.

Empirical methods for measuring emotional engagement have proliferated in recent years. Cañas-Bajo (2020) reviews approaches to studying emotional film experience, including physiological measures (heart rate, skin conductance, EEG), behavioral measures (facial expression analysis), and user-experience methods (self-report, interviews) [16].

His review highlights that non-narrative formal factors—music, colour, camerawork—can reliably elicit affective responses, validating the claim that visual construction directly influences emotional experience [16]. These measurement methods provide tools for empirically testing hypotheses about how specific visual choices affect viewers, moving film analysis beyond subjective interpretation toward testable predictions.

Cutting's (2023) précis of *Movies on Our Minds* synthesizes evolutionary and cognitive perspectives, arguing that film form has evolved to match the visual system and cognitive predilections of audiences [3]. He proposes that cinematic conventions—continuity editing, shot-reverse-shot patterns, point-of-view structures—exploit universal features of human perception and cognition, such as attentional biases, motion sensitivity, and social cognition mechanisms [3]. This evolutionary perspective suggests that effective visual construction aligns with biological constraints and affordances, making certain visual strategies more “natural” or cognitively fluent than others [3].

Together, these cognitive approaches provide a scientific foundation for understanding how visual construction affects audiences. They validate practitioner intuitions about what “works” visually by identifying the perceptual and cognitive mechanisms through which visual choices produce their effects. For the present framework, cognitive film theory offers both explanatory power—accounting for *why* certain visual strategies are effective—and methodological tools for empirically testing and refining visual construction practices.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework synthesizes four complementary approaches to understanding the relationship between visual construction and film drama: Wollen's practice-theory synthesis and linguistic model, Cutting's empirical four-act narrative structure, Wang et al.'s aesthetic intensity curve, and the *mise-en-scène* critique methodologies of Pravylo and Yilmaz. Together, these approaches provide a multi-layered foundation for analyzing and creating systematic connections between visual form and dramatic content.

3.1 Practice-Theory Synthesis: Wollen's Linguistic Model

Wollen (1997) advocates for integrating filmmaker practice with theoretical analysis, arguing that many significant film theorists—Eisenstein, Godard, Hitchcock, Kubrick—were also practitioners whose creative work embodied theoretical insights [1]. This practice-theory synthesis recognizes that filmmaking is itself a form of research, generating knowledge about visual storytelling through creative experimentation [1].

Wollen's proposal to link formal film choices to a linguistic Tense-Mode-Aspect (TMA) model offers a systematic framework for analyzing how cinema encodes temporal and modal dimensions of narrative [1].

The TMA model distinguishes three dimensions of narrative expression: - **Tense**: temporal location of events (past, present, future) and temporal relationships (simultaneity, sequence, flashback, flashforward) - **Mode**: epistemic status of events (actual, possible, imagined, remembered, dreamed) - **Aspect**: temporal structure of events (completed, ongoing, habitual, iterative)

Wollen argues that montage and mise-en-scène choices encode these dimensions visually [1]. For example, a dissolve transition may signal temporal ellipsis (tense), while a desaturated colour palette may indicate memory or imagination (mode), and a static long take may convey durational aspect [1].

This linguistic framework provides a vocabulary for discussing how visual construction conveys narrative information beyond dialogue and action, enabling systematic analysis of temporal and modal complexity in visual storytelling.

3.2 Empirical Narrative Structure: Cutting's Four-Act Model

Cutting (2016) offers an empirically grounded model of narrative structure based on statistical analysis of 160 popular films [11]. His four-act model—setup, complication, development, climax—correlates with measurable stylistic dimensions including shot duration, shot scale, motion, luminance, and transition types [11].

This empirical approach validates classical dramaturgical models (such as Freytag's pyramid) while providing quantitative benchmarks for how visual construction typically varies across narrative phases [11]. McKee's (1997) foundational work on story structure and the principles of screenwriting provides the practitioner-side complement to Cutting's empirical model, establishing the industry-standard understanding of how structure, character, and dramatic beats interrelate [17].

Key findings from Cutting's analysis include: - **Shot duration** decreases systematically from setup through climax, creating acceleration and intensification - **Shot scale** varies predictably, with more close-ups during emotionally intense moments - **Motion** increases toward climactic sequences, enhancing kinetic energy - **Luminance** patterns correlate with narrative tone, with darker imagery often associated with conflict and complication - **Transition types** (cuts, dissolves, fades) distribute non-randomly across acts, with dissolves more common during temporal transitions in setup and resolution phases

Cutting's model demonstrates that visual construction is not arbitrary but systematically structured to support narrative progression [11]. For the present framework, his empirical findings provide normative benchmarks against which specific films can be compared and from which creative variations can be deliberately planned.

3.3 Aesthetic Intensity Curve: Wang et al.'s Computational Approach

Wang et al. (2007) propose a computational model that fuses visual and aural cues into an aesthetic intensity curve for extracting narrative structure [12]. Their approach operationalizes visual intensity through measurable features: - **Visual motion energy:** magnitude and frequency of movement within frames - **Shot frequency:** rate of editing (cuts per minute) - **Colour saturation:** intensity and purity of colours - **Luminance contrast:** range between darkest and lightest areas - **Aural intensity:** volume, frequency range, and rhythmic complexity of soundtrack

By aggregating these features into a single intensity curve, Wang et al. demonstrate that narrative structure can be computationally extracted from formal features [12]. Peaks in the intensity curve correspond to climactic moments, while valleys correspond to expository or transitional sequences [12].

This model provides a quantitative method for visualizing the relationship between formal construction and narrative progression, validating the intuition that visual and aural intensity track dramatic intensity.

For the present framework, Wang et al.'s aesthetic intensity curve offers both an analytical tool—for measuring how existing films modulate intensity—and a planning tool—for designing intensity profiles that align with intended dramatic arcs [12]. The computational nature of the model also enables systematic comparison across films and genres, revealing conventions and innovations in how visual construction supports narrative structure.

3.4 Mise-en-Scène Critique Methodology: Pravylo and Yilmaz

Pravylo (2023) and Yilmaz (2023) provide methodological exemplars for mise-en-scène critique that integrate formal description, semiotic interpretation, and alignment of visual choices with narrative beats [4], [5]. Their approaches demonstrate how systematic analysis of staging, composition, lighting, colour, costume, and performance can reveal how visual construction generates narrative meaning.

Pravylo's (2023) methodology emphasizes: - **Formal description:** detailed cataloguing of mise-en-scène elements in each shot or sequence - **Functional analysis:** identifying how each element serves narrative purposes (establishing setting, revealing character, advancing plot, creating mood) - **Semiotic interpretation:** analyzing symbolic and metaphorical meanings encoded in visual choices - **Comparative evaluation:** assessing how effectively visual construction supports dramatic objectives [4]

Yilmaz's (2023) case-study approach applies this methodology to a complete feature film, demonstrating how shot length, camera movement, colour and lighting, costume and make-up cohere with dramatic beats [5]. His analysis reveals that effective visual construction requires not only appropriate choices for individual shots but also systematic coherence across sequences and acts, creating visual unity that reinforces narrative unity [5].

Together, Pravylo and Yilmaz provide a practical methodology for analyzing and evaluating visual construction in relation to film drama [4], [5]. Their approach bridges formalist description and interpretive analysis, offering a model for both critical scholarship and creative planning. For the present framework, their *mise-en-scène* critique methodology informs the analytical procedures outlined in the Methodology section, particularly the systematic mapping of visual elements to dramatic functions.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Analytical Framework Overview

The analytical framework proposed here integrates the theoretical perspectives outlined above into a systematic methodology for linking visual construction to film drama. The framework operates at three levels:

- 1) **Micro-level:** analysis of individual shots and their visual properties (composition, lighting, colour, movement)
- 2) **Meso-level:** analysis of sequences and scenes, examining how visual elements cohere and vary to support dramatic progression within narrative units
- 3) **Macro-level:** analysis of the entire film, mapping visual intensity patterns against narrative structure to assess overall coherence and effectiveness

This multi-level approach recognizes that visual construction operates simultaneously at different temporal scales. A single shot may employ specific compositional strategies to direct attention or convey emotion; a sequence may modulate lighting and colour to signal a shift in mood or narrative mode; and the film as a whole may exhibit systematic patterns of visual intensity that correlate with dramatic arcs. Effective visual construction requires coherence across all three levels, ensuring that micro-level choices aggregate into meso-level patterns that support macro-level narrative structure.

The framework is designed to serve dual purposes: as an analytical tool for scholars and critics examining existing films, and as a planning tool for filmmakers designing visual construction during pre-production. In analytical mode, the framework provides systematic procedures for describing, measuring, and interpreting visual choices in relation to narrative function. In planning mode, it offers a structured approach to making visual decisions that align with intended dramatic effects, enabling filmmakers to design visual construction as deliberately as they design narrative structure.

4.2 Multi-Dimensional Visual Analysis Model

The multi-dimensional visual analysis model identifies five primary dimensions of visual construction, each contributing distinct narrative and affective functions: fig (4)

1) Composition and Framing

Composition encompasses the spatial arrangement of elements within the frame, including: - **Frame proportions and aspect ratio:** establishing visual field and spatial relationships - **Lines and vectors:** directing viewer attention and creating dynamic

tension - **Subject placement and rule of thirds**: establishing visual balance or deliberate imbalance - **Shot scale** (extreme long shot to extreme close-up): controlling intimacy and information density - **Angle** (high, low, eye-level, Dutch): encoding power relationships and subjective states - **Frames-within-frames**: creating visual layering and emphasizing spatial relationships - **Short-siding and look space**: manipulating spatial tension and anticipation

Drawing on Markham (2023), compositional choices are analyzed according to their narrative function: establishing spatial relationships, directing attention to narratively significant elements, revealing or concealing information, and encoding subjective perspective [6]. Each compositional strategy is evaluated for how effectively it serves these functions within specific narrative contexts.

2) Lighting

Lighting encompasses the quality, direction, intensity, and colour temperature of illumination, including: - **Lighting quality**: hard (high contrast, defined shadows) vs. soft (low contrast, diffused shadows) - **Lighting direction**: key, fill, back, and practical light sources - **Lighting ratio**: contrast between illuminated and shadowed areas - **Colour temperature**: warm (orange/red) vs. cool (blue) lighting - **Motivated vs. unmotivated lighting**: diegetic justification of light sources - **Chiaroscuro and low-key lighting**: dramatic use of shadow and contrast

Following Wu (2024) and Poznin (2021), lighting is analyzed as a semiotic device that operates metaphorically to encode mood, theme, and character psychology [7], [8]. High-contrast lighting may signal moral ambiguity or psychological conflict, while soft, even lighting may suggest innocence or transparency. Lighting choices are evaluated for their contribution to dramatic tone and thematic resonance.

3) Colour

Colour encompasses hue, saturation, and value, functioning on multiple levels: - **Colour palette**: dominant hues and their relationships (complementary, analogous, monochromatic) - **Colour temperature**: warm vs. cool overall tonality - **Saturation**: intensity and purity of colours - **Colour contrast**: relationships between foreground and background colours - **Colour symbolism**: cultural and contextual meanings of specific hues - **Colour continuity and variation**: patterns of colour use across sequences and acts

Drawing on Poznin (2021) and Simioana (2014), colour is analyzed for its dramaturgical functions: marking chronotope (time-space), signaling subjective perception, conveying symbolic meaning, and producing psychophysiological impact [8], [9]. Colour choices are evaluated for how they support narrative progression, character development, and thematic expression.

4) Camera Movement

Camera movement encompasses all forms of camera motion, including: - **Static shots**: fixed camera position - **Pan and tilt**: horizontal and vertical rotation on fixed axis -

Tracking and dolly: lateral or forward/backward camera movement - **Crane and boom:** vertical camera movement - **Handheld and Steadicam:** mobile camera with varying degrees of stability - **Zoom:** optical change in focal length (technically lens movement rather than camera movement)

Following Kuhn (2013), camera movement is analyzed according to its narrational functions: establishing spatial relationships, following action, revealing information, encoding subjective perspective, and creating kinetic energy [10].

Handheld camera may signal immediacy, subjectivity, or documentary realism, while smooth tracking may suggest omniscient narration or formal elegance. Movement choices are evaluated for their contribution to narrative perspective and affective tone.

5) Editing Rhythm

Editing rhythm encompasses temporal patterns of shot duration and transition, including:
- **Shot duration:** length of individual shots, measured in seconds or frames - **Cutting rate:** frequency of edits, measured in cuts per minute or average shot length - **Transition types:** cuts, dissolves, fades, wipes, and other transition effects - **Temporal relationships:** continuity editing, ellipsis, expansion, simultaneity - **Rhythmic patterns:** acceleration, deceleration, regularity, syncopation - **Match types:** graphic match, match on action, eyeline match, sound bridge

Drawing on Cutting (2016), Wang et al. (2007), and Drew and Soto-Faraco (2023), editing rhythm is analyzed for how it shapes temporal experience, guides attention, and modulates intensity [11], [12], [13].

Accelerating cutting rates typically increase intensity and urgency, while decelerating rates create contemplation or resolution. Editing choices are evaluated for their contribution to narrative pacing, cognitive processing, and emotional engagement.

4.3 Mapping Visual Elements to Dramatic Arcs

The mapping methodology systematically aligns the five visual dimensions with classical dramatic structure, fig (1) based on Freytag's pyramid and Cutting's four-act model [11]. Kardari et al. (2023) demonstrate the continued utility of Freytag's exposition–rising action–climax–falling action–denouement taxonomy as a viable coding schema for film plot analysis at the scene level, validating its use here as a structural scaffold [18]. The dramatic arc is divided into five phases:

1) Exposition - Narrative function: Establishing setting, characters, initial situation, and dramatic question - **Visual strategies:** - **Composition:** establishing shots, wide framing to show spatial relationships, balanced compositions suggesting stability - **Lighting:** even, naturalistic lighting establishing baseline visual tone - **Colour:** introduction of colour palette that will be developed throughout the film - **Movement:** measured, exploratory camera movement establishing spatial geography - **Editing:** longer shot durations, slower cutting rate allowing viewer orientation

2) Rising Action / Complication - Narrative function: Introducing conflict, complications, obstacles; escalating stakes - **Visual strategies:** - Composition: tighter framing, increased use of close-ups, compositional tension through imbalance or diagonal lines - Lighting: increasing contrast, introduction of shadows, motivated lighting that emphasizes conflict - Colour: intensification of saturation, introduction of contrasting colours, colour shifts signaling mood changes - Movement: more dynamic camera movement, following action, handheld for immediacy - Editing: decreasing shot durations, increasing cutting rate, more frequent transitions

3) Climax - Narrative function: Peak of dramatic tension, decisive confrontation or revelation, turning point - **Visual strategies:** - Composition: extreme framing (very close or very wide), dynamic angles, maximal compositional tension - Lighting: high contrast, dramatic chiaroscuro, or conversely, stark overexposure; lighting that emphasizes emotional intensity - Colour: peak saturation or stark desaturation, maximal colour contrast, symbolic colour deployment - Movement: most dynamic camera movement, rapid or extreme movements, or conversely, sudden stillness for emphasis - Editing: shortest shot durations, highest cutting rate, rapid transitions, or conversely, extended takes for sustained intensity

4) Falling Action - Narrative function: Immediate consequences of climax, resolution of immediate conflicts, transition toward closure - **Visual strategies:** - Composition: return to more balanced compositions, medium framing, reduced compositional tension - Lighting: softening of contrast, return toward more even lighting, suggesting resolution - Colour: moderation of saturation, return toward baseline palette or shift to resolution palette - Movement: calmer camera movement, return to measured pacing - Editing: lengthening shot durations, decreasing cutting rate, smoother transitions

5) Resolution / Denouement - Narrative function: Final outcomes, new equilibrium, thematic summation, emotional closure - **Visual strategies:** - Composition: wide framing showing new spatial relationships, balanced compositions suggesting stability or new order - Lighting: soft, even lighting suggesting peace or acceptance, or symbolic lighting encoding thematic meaning - Colour: unified palette suggesting coherence, or symbolic colour choices encoding thematic resolution - Movement: minimal or contemplative camera movement, static shots allowing reflection - Editing: longest shot durations, slowest cutting rate, dissolves or fades suggesting temporal closure

This mapping provides normative guidelines rather than prescriptive rules. Effective visual construction may deliberately violate these norms for specific dramatic effects—for example, using slow cutting during an action climax to create suspense, or maintaining high visual intensity during resolution to suggest unresolved tension. The mapping serves as a baseline against which creative variations can be measured and evaluated for their dramatic effectiveness.

4.4 Graphical Intensity Mapping Tool

The graphical intensity mapping tool visualizes the relationship between visual intensity and narrative intensity across a film's temporal structure. fig (2) The tool consists of a two-dimensional graph with time on the x-axis and intensity on the y-axis, plotting two curves:

1) Narrative Intensity Curve

Represents the dramatic intensity of the story at each point in the film - Derived from analysis of plot events, character conflicts, stakes, and emotional content - Typically follows the shape of Freytag's pyramid, rising from exposition through climax and falling toward resolution - Can be plotted based on screenplay analysis, scene-by-scene dramatic evaluation, or computational text analysis

2) Visual Intensity Curve

Represents the aggregate intensity of visual construction at each point in the film - Derived from quantitative measurement of the five visual dimensions: - Composition: shot scale (closer = higher intensity), angle extremity, compositional complexity - Lighting: contrast ratio, chiaroscuro intensity - Colour: saturation level, colour contrast - Movement: camera motion speed and complexity, subject motion - Editing: cutting rate (faster = higher intensity), transition abruptness - Calculated using a weighted composite index adapted from Wang et al. (2007) [12] - Can be computed automatically from video analysis or manually coded from viewing

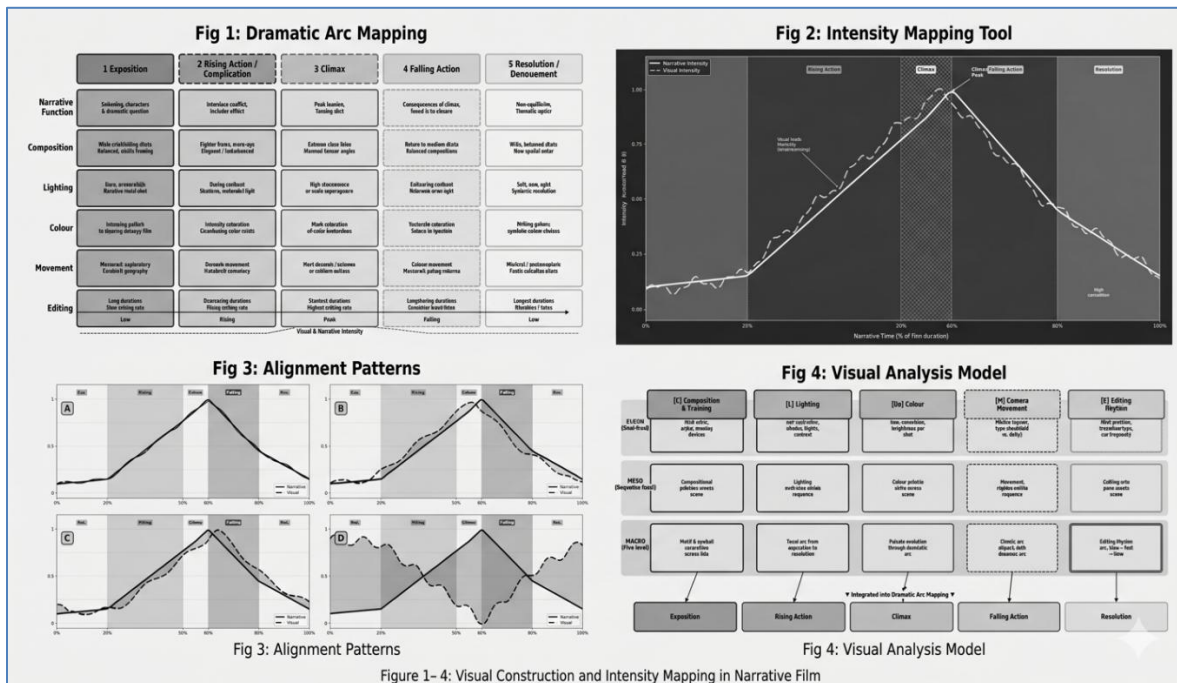
Interpretation and Application

The relationship between the two curves reveals the degree of alignment between visual construction and narrative structure: fig (3)

- **High correlation:** visual intensity tracks narrative intensity closely, suggesting strong visual-narrative coherence
- **Visual leading narrative:** visual intensity rises before narrative intensity, creating anticipation or foreshadowing
- **Visual lagging narrative:** visual intensity rises after narrative intensity, creating delayed impact or reflection
- **Divergence:** visual and narrative intensity move in opposite directions, creating counterpoint or irony

For analytical purposes, the tool enables systematic comparison of how different films, directors, or genres employ visual construction to support narrative. For planning purposes, the tool allows filmmakers to design visual intensity profiles during pre-production, ensuring that visual construction aligns with intended dramatic effects. The tool can be used iteratively: plotting an initial intensity profile based on screenplay, refining it during pre-production planning, and evaluating the final film against the planned profile. The graphical intensity mapping tool operationalizes the core argument of this article: that visual construction can be systematically linked to film drama through measurable,

analyzable relationships. By making these relationships visible and quantifiable, the tool bridges intuitive creative practice with empirical analysis, enabling both artistic refinement and scholarly investigation of how cinema’s visual language serves its dramatic purposes.



5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Composition and Framing in Dramatic Function

Compositional choices serve as the spatial foundation of visual construction, establishing relationships between characters, objects, and environments that parallel or counterpoint narrative relationships. Markham’s (2023) framework emphasizes that shot selection and framing are guided by narrative function—each compositional choice must serve specific purposes in advancing story, revealing character, or establishing spatial relationships [6]. This functional approach validates the systematic mapping of composition to dramatic phases outlined in the methodology.

During exposition, wide establishing shots and balanced compositions create visual stability that mirrors narrative stability, allowing viewers to orient themselves spatially and socially within the story world. As conflict emerges during rising action, compositional strategies shift toward tighter framing and increased use of close-ups, directing attention to character reactions and emotional states. Markham notes that frames-within-frames and short-siding can create spatial tension and anticipation, techniques particularly effective during complication phases when narrative tension is building [6]. At climactic moments, compositional extremes—very close framing that isolates characters in emotional intensity, or very wide framing that emphasizes isolation or scale—create visual correlates to narrative intensity. The use of dynamic angles (high, low, Dutch) encodes

power relationships and subjective states, making visible the psychological and social dynamics that drive dramatic conflict. Pravylo (2023) demonstrates that these compositional choices across theatre and cinema emphasize plot events and underlying themes, shaping audience sensory experience in ways that reinforce narrative meaning [4].

The return to balanced, medium framing during falling action and resolution creates visual closure that parallels narrative closure. Wide shots that re-establish spatial relationships in their new configuration—after characters have been transformed by dramatic events—provide visual confirmation of narrative resolution. This systematic modulation of composition across dramatic phases creates a visual rhythm that supports and reinforces narrative rhythm, demonstrating the coherence between visual form and dramatic content.

5.2 Lighting and Colour as Dramaturgical Devices

Lighting and colour function as particularly potent dramaturgical devices, operating simultaneously on denotative, connotative, and symbolic levels. Wu's (2024) semiotic analysis demonstrates that lighting and shadow operate as metaphors that deepen narrative themes and shape emotional experience [7]. This metaphorical function extends beyond simple mood-setting to encode complex thematic meanings; chiaroscuro lighting may represent moral ambiguity, psychological conflict, or the coexistence of good and evil within characters or situations [7].

Poznin (2021) outlines colour's multiple dramaturgical functions: marking chronotope (time-space), signaling subjective perception, conveying symbolic meaning, and producing psychophysiological impact on viewers [8]. These functions operate across different temporal scales. At the micro-level, colour choices within individual shots can direct attention (through colour contrast) or encode emotional tone (through colour temperature and saturation). At the meso-level, colour patterns across sequences can signal shifts in narrative mode—desaturation may indicate memory or fantasy, while heightened saturation may signal subjective emotional intensity [8].

At the macro-level, colour palettes can evolve across dramatic phases to reinforce narrative progression. A film may begin with muted, naturalistic colours during exposition, intensify saturation and contrast during rising action and climax, and return to softer, more unified colours during resolution. Simioana's (2014) analysis of chromatic patterns demonstrates that such systematic colour strategies contribute to meditative and emotional responses in viewers, validating the claim that colour is fundamentally narrative and affective in function [9].

The psychophysiological impact of colour and lighting documented by Poznin (2021) provides a biological foundation for their dramaturgical effectiveness [8]. Warm colours (reds, oranges, yellows) tend to increase arousal and energy, while cool colours (blues, greens) tend to decrease arousal and create calm. High-contrast lighting increases visual tension and alertness, while soft, even lighting creates relaxation. These physiological responses can be strategically deployed to support dramatic objectives: increasing

arousal during conflict and climax, decreasing arousal during resolution. This alignment of visual construction with biological response mechanisms exemplifies Cutting's (2023) argument that effective film form exploits universal features of human perception and cognition [3].

5.3 Camera Movement and Subjective Narration

Camera movement introduces temporal and kinetic dimensions to visual construction, encoding narrative information about perspective, temporality, and affective tone. Kuhn's (2013) typology of hand-camera functions demonstrates that movement choices are not merely technical but fundamentally narrational, linking stylistic features to specific narrative roles [10]. Handheld camera may signal subjective experience, placing viewers within a character's perceptual field and creating identification through shared visual instability. Conversely, smooth tracking or crane movements may suggest omniscient narration, providing perspectives unavailable to characters and emphasizing formal design over subjective experience [10].

The relationship between camera movement and dramatic phase follows predictable patterns that support narrative progression. During exposition, measured, exploratory camera movements establish spatial geography, allowing viewers to understand the physical and social layout of the story world. As conflict emerges, camera movement becomes more dynamic, following action and creating kinetic energy that mirrors narrative energy. Handheld camera may be introduced during complication phases to create immediacy and urgency, exploiting the association between visual instability and psychological or physical tension.

At climactic moments, camera movement reaches maximum dynamism—rapid pans, aggressive tracking, or extreme crane movements that create visual intensity matching narrative intensity. Alternatively, sudden stillness can be deployed for emphasis, creating contrast with preceding movement and focusing attention on decisive moments. This strategic modulation of movement intensity demonstrates the systematic relationship between kinetic visual construction and dramatic structure.

During falling action and resolution, camera movement typically calms, returning to measured pacing or static shots that allow reflection and contemplation. This deceleration of visual kinetics parallels the deceleration of narrative action, creating coherence between visual form and dramatic content. The systematic variation of camera movement across dramatic phases exemplifies how visual construction can be deliberately designed to support narrative progression.

5.4 Editing Rhythm and Predictive Processing

Editing rhythm constitutes the temporal dimension of visual construction, shaping how viewers experience narrative time and pacing. Cutting's (2016) empirical analysis demonstrates that editing patterns correlate systematically with narrative structure: shot durations decrease from setup through climax, creating acceleration and intensification that supports dramatic progression [11]. This statistical regularity across popular cinema

suggests that editing conventions have evolved to exploit perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that facilitate narrative comprehension and emotional engagement [11].

Wang et al.'s (2007) aesthetic intensity curve operationalizes this relationship, demonstrating that shot frequency (cutting rate) is a primary contributor to visual intensity [12]. Faster cutting increases visual intensity, creating urgency and excitement, while slower cutting decreases intensity, creating contemplation or calm [12]. This relationship between cutting rate and intensity provides a quantitative foundation for the graphical intensity mapping tool proposed in the methodology, enabling systematic measurement and comparison of editing rhythm across films.

Recent cognitive research explains the mechanisms through which editing affects viewers. Drew and Soto-Faraco's (2023) predictive processing account proposes that viewers continuously generate predictions about upcoming visual information; edits that violate these predictions produce measurable cognitive responses [13]. This framework suggests that editing rhythm operates through prediction and prediction error: predictable edits (such as continuity cuts that maintain spatial and temporal coherence) produce fluency and ease of comprehension, while unpredictable edits (such as jump cuts or discontinuous transitions) produce cognitive disruption that can enhance engagement or create disorientation [13].

May et al.'s (2003) research on object collocation across cuts demonstrates that filmmakers systematically exploit these predictive mechanisms [14]. By placing objects in similar screen positions across cuts, filmmakers guide viewer gaze and preserve continuity, reducing prediction error and facilitating smooth comprehension [14]. Conversely, violating collocation expectations can create deliberate disruption for dramatic effect. This strategic manipulation of viewer prediction through editing choices exemplifies how visual construction exploits cognitive mechanisms to serve narrative purposes.

The systematic variation of editing rhythm across dramatic phases—slower cutting during exposition, accelerating through rising action, fastest at climax, decelerating through falling action and resolution—creates a temporal structure that reinforces narrative structure. This alignment of editing rhythm with dramatic arc demonstrates the coherence between visual form and dramatic content, validating the core argument that visual construction can be systematically linked to film drama.

5.5 Visual Unity and Coherence Across Narrative Phases

Visual unity—the coherence of visual construction across a film's duration—emerges from systematic relationships among the five visual dimensions and their alignment with narrative structure. Yilmaz's (2023) case-study analysis demonstrates that effective visual construction requires not only appropriate choices for individual shots but also systematic coherence across sequences and acts [5]. This coherence operates at multiple levels: within individual visual dimensions (consistent colour palettes, lighting styles, compositional strategies), across visual dimensions (lighting and colour working together to create unified mood), and between visual construction and narrative structure

(visual intensity tracking dramatic intensity) [5]. The concept of visual unity does not imply visual monotony; rather, it suggests that variations in visual construction are motivated by narrative function rather than arbitrary. A film may employ a consistent visual style during exposition, systematically intensify that style during rising action and climax, and return to a modified version of the baseline style during resolution. This pattern of consistency-variation-return creates visual coherence that parallels narrative coherence, reinforcing the sense of a unified dramatic experience.

Wollen's (1997) practice-theory synthesis emphasizes that visual unity emerges from the integration of montage and *mise-en-scène* [1]. Editing choices must cohere with staging, composition, lighting, and colour choices to create a unified visual language. Discontinuities or misalignments—such as rapid cutting combined with static staging, or high-contrast lighting combined with muted colours—can create visual incoherence that undermines narrative clarity and emotional impact [1]. The graphical intensity mapping tool provides a method for assessing visual unity by visualizing the relationship between visual intensity and narrative intensity across a film's temporal structure. High correlation between the two curves suggests strong visual-narrative coherence, while divergence may indicate either deliberate counterpoint (for specific dramatic effects) or unintentional misalignment (suggesting opportunities for revision). This quantitative approach to assessing visual unity complements qualitative analysis, providing filmmakers and scholars with tools for systematically evaluating how effectively visual construction supports dramatic objectives.

Cognitive film theory provides a foundation for understanding why visual unity matters. Cutting (2023) argues that film form has evolved to match cognitive predilections, suggesting that visual coherence facilitates cognitive processing and narrative comprehension [3]. Antunes and Grabowski's (2015) multisensory cognitive model emphasizes that viewers integrate multiple sensory streams into coherent narrative understanding [15]. Visual incoherence—inconsistent or unmotivated variations in visual construction—increases cognitive load and may disrupt narrative comprehension, while visual unity reduces cognitive load and facilitates immersion in the story world [15].

This cognitive perspective validates the emphasis on visual unity in the present framework. By systematically aligning visual construction with narrative structure and maintaining coherence across visual dimensions, filmmakers create visual languages that are cognitively fluent, facilitating viewer engagement and emotional response. This alignment of visual form with cognitive processing exemplifies the synthesis of artistic practice and scientific understanding that characterizes contemporary film theory.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY

The framework proposed in this article has significant implications for both filmmaking practice and film education. For practitioners, the multi-dimensional visual analysis model and graphical intensity mapping tool provide systematic methods for planning visual construction during pre-production. Rather than relying solely on intuition or convention,

filmmakers can deliberately design visual intensity profiles that align with intended dramatic effects, using the five visual dimensions as controllable parameters.

The methodology supports iterative refinement: filmmakers can plot initial intensity profiles based on screenplay analysis, refine them during pre-production planning (storyboarding, shot listing, location scouting), adjust them during production based on practical constraints and creative discoveries, and evaluate the final film against the planned profile during post-production. This iterative process makes visible the relationships between visual choices and dramatic effects, enabling more deliberate and effective visual storytelling. For film education, the framework offers a pedagogical approach that deepens students' understanding of the complex interplay between visual form and narrative content. Traditional film education often treats visual construction and narrative structure as separate domains, with cinematography and editing taught independently from screenwriting and dramaturgy. The present framework integrates these domains, demonstrating that visual construction is fundamentally narrative in function and must be understood in relation to dramatic structure.

Pedagogical applications might include: - **Analytical exercises:** students analyze existing films using the multi-dimensional visual analysis model, mapping visual elements to dramatic phases and creating graphical intensity profiles - **Planning exercises:** students design visual construction for hypothetical films, creating storyboards and intensity profiles that systematically align visual choices with dramatic objectives - **Comparative studies:** students compare how different films, directors, or genres employ visual construction to support narrative, identifying conventions and innovations - **Production projects:** students apply the framework to their own filmmaking, using the methodology to plan and evaluate visual construction in relation to dramatic structure

These pedagogical applications develop visual literacy—the ability to “read” and “write” cinematic images with sophistication and intentionality. By making explicit the systematic relationships between visual construction and film drama, the framework enables students to move beyond imitation of surface styles toward understanding of underlying principles, fostering both critical analysis and creative innovation. The framework also has implications for interdisciplinary collaboration in filmmaking. By providing a shared vocabulary and methodology for discussing visual construction in relation to narrative, the framework facilitates communication among directors, cinematographers, production designers, editors, and other creative collaborators. The graphical intensity mapping tool, in particular, offers a visual representation that can be shared and discussed across departments, ensuring that all collaborators understand how their contributions support overall dramatic objectives.

7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several directions for future research emerge from this framework. First, empirical validation of the graphical intensity mapping tool through systematic analysis of large film corpora would establish normative benchmarks for visual-narrative alignment across genres, periods, and cultural contexts. Such research could employ computational video

analysis methods to automatically extract visual intensity metrics, enabling large-scale quantitative studies of how visual construction varies across different types of films.

Second, experimental research examining viewer responses to systematically varied visual construction would test the causal relationships proposed in the framework. By creating experimental stimuli that manipulate specific visual dimensions while holding narrative content constant, researchers could measure how visual choices affect attention, emotion, comprehension, and engagement. Such research would validate (or challenge) the assumptions underlying the framework and refine understanding of how visual construction affects audiences.

Third, extension of the framework to emerging media forms—virtual reality, interactive films, video games, immersive installations—would explore how visual construction operates in non-traditional cinematic contexts. These media forms introduce new dimensions of visual construction (such as viewer-controlled perspective in VR or branching narrative structures in interactive films) that require adaptation of the framework. Research in this direction would ensure the framework remains relevant as cinematic storytelling evolves.

Fourth, cross-cultural research examining how visual construction conventions vary across different film industries and cultural contexts would test the universality of the framework. While cognitive mechanisms of perception and attention may be universal, cultural conventions of visual storytelling vary significantly. Research comparing Hollywood, European art cinema, Asian cinema, and other traditions would reveal which aspects of the framework are universal and which are culturally specific.

Fifth, longitudinal historical research tracing the evolution of visual construction practices across cinema history would contextualize contemporary practices within broader trajectories of stylistic change. Cutting's (2016) empirical analysis demonstrates that editing patterns have evolved systematically over cinema history [11]; similar research examining composition, lighting, colour, and movement would reveal how visual construction conventions emerge, stabilize, and transform over time. Finally, integration of the framework with other dimensions of film analysis—sound design, music, performance, production design—would create a more comprehensive model of how all elements of filmmaking contribute to dramatic meaning. While this article focuses on visual construction, cinema is a multimedia art form in which visual, aural, and performative elements interact to create unified experiences. Future research should examine these interactions systematically, exploring how visual construction coordinates with other dimensions to support narrative and emotional objectives.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has proposed a comprehensive framework for systematically linking the visual construction of cinematic imagery to film drama. By integrating practitioner-theoretic perspectives (Wollen's practice-theory synthesis and linguistic model), empirical research (Cutting's four-act narrative structure, Wang et al.'s aesthetic intensity curve), and

methodological exemplars (Pravylo and Yilmaz's mise-en-scène critique), the framework provides both analytical tools for scholars and planning tools for filmmakers. The multi-dimensional visual analysis model identifies five primary dimensions of visual construction—composition, lighting, colour, camera movement, and editing rhythm—and demonstrates how each dimension can be systematically mapped to dramatic phases (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution). The graphical intensity mapping tool visualizes the relationship between visual intensity and narrative intensity, enabling both analysis of existing films and planning of new productions. Together, these methodological components operationalize the core argument: that visual construction can be systematically linked to film drama through measurable, analyzable relationships.

The framework is grounded in contemporary film theory and cognitive science, drawing on research that explains how visual choices affect viewer perception, attention, emotion, and comprehension. By aligning visual construction with cognitive mechanisms—predictive processing, attentional guidance, multisensory integration, emotional response—the framework ensures that visual strategies are not merely conventional but cognitively effective, exploiting universal features of human perception to serve narrative purposes. The implications of this framework extend beyond academic analysis to practical filmmaking and film education. For practitioners, the framework provides systematic methods for planning visual construction that aligns with dramatic objectives, enabling more deliberate and effective visual storytelling. For educators, it offers pedagogical approaches that deepen students' understanding of the complex interplay between visual form and narrative content, developing visual literacy and creative sophistication. For scholars, it provides analytical methodologies for examining how visual construction contributes to dramatic meaning-making, enabling systematic comparison across films, directors, genres, and cultural contexts.

As cinema continues to evolve in an increasingly crowded and sensory-rich media landscape, the ability to articulate and analyze the relationship between visual construction and film drama becomes ever more crucial. The framework proposed here contributes to this ongoing project by making explicit the systematic relationships between visual form and dramatic content, bridging intuitive creative practice with empirical analysis. By treating the visual construction of cinematic images with the same narrative rigor, intellectual depth, and creative passion as any screenplay or performance, filmmakers ensure that cinema's unique power—the dance between showing and telling—continues to move hearts and minds with resonance and unforgettable dramatic impact.

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