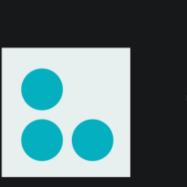
The Unfolding of Artistic Activity in Film Education: A Case Study

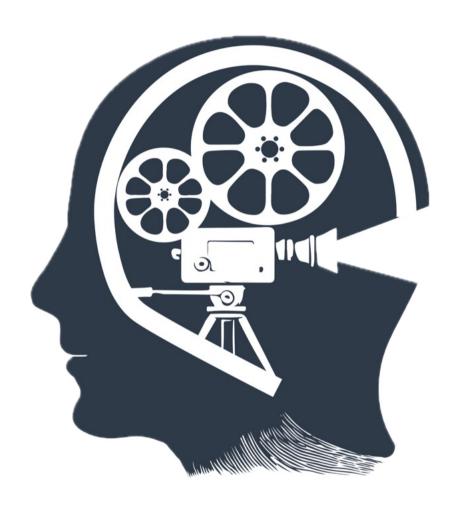
VISUAL MEDIA LAB CONFERENCE (VMLC) 2025

Maarten Coëgnarts (LUCA School of Arts/University of Antwerp) and Elen Lotman (BFM)







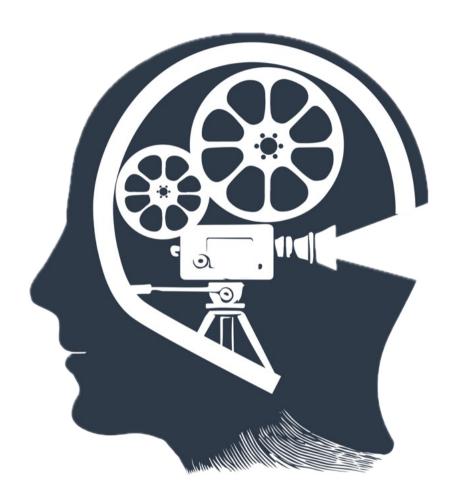


FilmEU Center of Excellence FilMind

(website forthcoming)







Coëgnarts, M., & Lotman, E. (2025). The unfolding of artistic activity in film education: A case study. *International Journal of Film and Media Arts*. (article forthcoming)







PART I: THEORETICAL CONTEXT





Beyond the technical approach in film education

Traditional Focus:

Film education has largely emphasized technical proficiency—cameras, editing software, and tools—to meet industry demands (Cowan, 2019).

The Gap:

While technical handbooks abound, few texts explore creative decision-making or **the cognitive processes** of filmmakers. Filmmaking is often treated as intuitive and ineffable—beyond analysis.

A New Perspective:

Scholars like Pearlman and Lotman argue intuition is learned, not innate, and thus teachable and describable (Brennan & Pearlman, 2023; Lotman, 2021; Pearlman, 2012, 2016).

Educational Implications:

Film education should develop students' **perceptual-cognitive** capacities (Nannicelli 2024)









AESTHETIC EDUCATION: A PERCEPTUAL-COGNITIVE MODEL

Ted Nannicelli¹

1 The University of Oueensland, Australia

Original scientific paper - Received: 12/04/2024 Accepted: 10/05/2024

ABSTRACT

Here is a puzzle about aesthetic education. In a variety of contexts, we commit significant time, energy, and resources to aesthetic education. We teach (and in many cases publicly subsidize) university courses and degrees that have aesthetic education as their primary aim; we also invest public resources into museums, including enrichment programs that are also designed to afford aesthetic education. It would seem that if our commitment to aesthetic education is rational, then aesthetic appreciation is something that can be done better or worse. However, we also, in a variety of contexts (oddly enough, some of them being the same sorts of contexts that are designed to abet aesthetic education), act as if it is true that there is no disputing taste. We may try to persuade students to come around to particular judgments, but we do not penalize students for judging one way or another.

The aim of this paper is to dissolve the apparent puzzle of aesthetic education by clarifying its aims and advancing a conception of it that deemphasizes the role of taste. I claim that, pace "the default view of aesthetic education" (as I shall call it), the primary purpose of aesthetic education is not to educate taste. It is, rather, to facilitate the development of certain perceptual-cognitive capacities so as to enhance aesthetic experience and improve aesthetic appreciation. Thus, I call the view of aesthetic education advanced here "a perceptual-cognitive model".

Keywords: aesthetic education; aesthetic cognition; aesthetic normativity; aesthetic appreciation; taste.





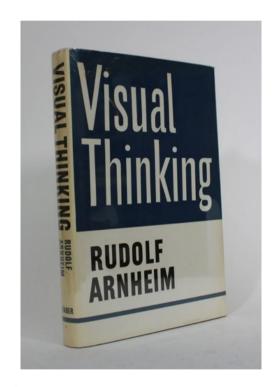
"The primary purpose of aesthetic education is not to educate taste. It is, rather, to facilitate the development of certain perceptual-cognitive capacities so as to enhance aesthetic experience and improve aesthetic appreciation."







What is *growth* in creative cognitive skills?



film EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

- Three Interconnected Faculties (Arnheim, 1983):
 - → Perceiving
 - → Thinking
 - → Forming

These are not separate—to educate one is to educate all three.

Quote:

"There is no perceiving without thinking and forming, no thinking without perceiving and forming, and no forming without perceiving and thinking."

—Arnheim (1983, p. 10)

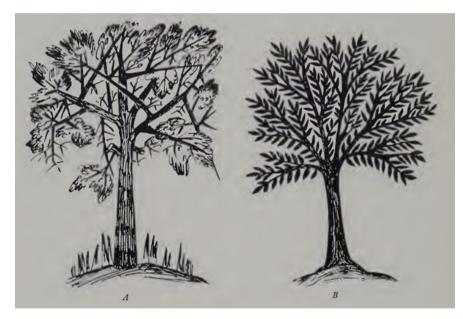
Rejecting Dualisms:

Challenges the split between seeing vs. thinking, and between perceptual vs. conceptual learning.

- Visual Thinking (Arnheim, 1969/1980):
 Creative cognition is inherently visual, spatial, and perceptual.
 → Solving problems and understanding the world through visual imagery and perceptual organization.
- Educational Implication:
 Growth in creative cognition = developing the mind's ability to perceive, think, and form visually.



Visual memory versus visual conceiving



© Schaefer-Simmern (1948)

"Artful representation does not aim at a one-to-one copy, but at capturing structural essence."

- Schaefer-Simmern (1948)

Visual Memory (Fig. A):

Attempts to reproduce objects by recalling isolated details — size, thickness, parts — resulting in disjointed, piecemeal forms.

➤ Relies on rational calculation, not visual understanding.

Visual Conceiving (Fig. B):

Reveals **visual order** through the interdependence of all elements.

➤ A change in one part affects the whole — demonstrating **structural unity** and **perceptual coherence**.

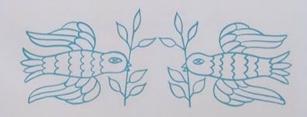


NEGRO BOY SITTING IN MORNINGSIDE PARK
Done by a thirty-seven-year-old social worker

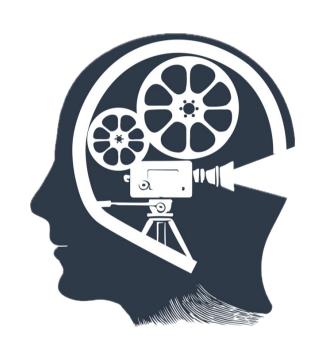
THE UNFOLDING OF ARTISTIC ACTIVITY

Its Basis, Processes, and Implications

BY HENRY SCHAEFER-SIMMERN
WITH A FOREWORD BY JOHN DEWEY



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES / 1950



"Growth in artistic thinking amounts to the refinement and advancement of the ability to think visually and to solve problems in the realm of perception."





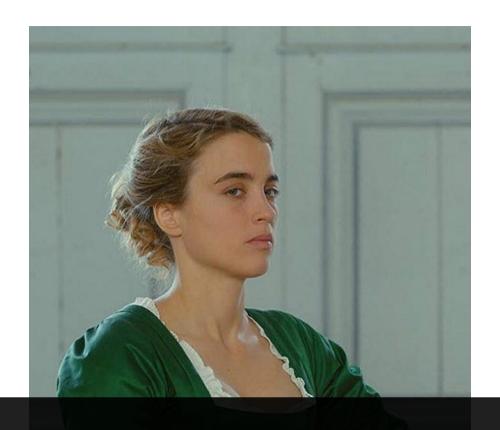


Some examples of visual thinking in film history...

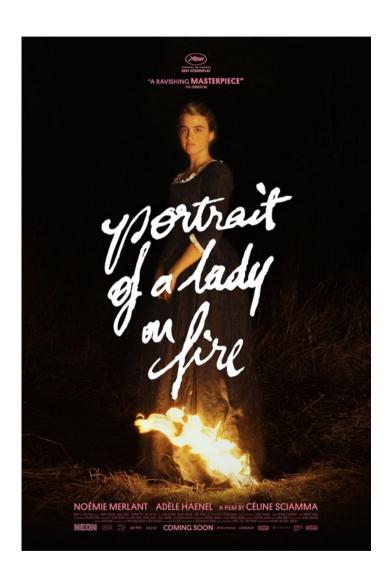






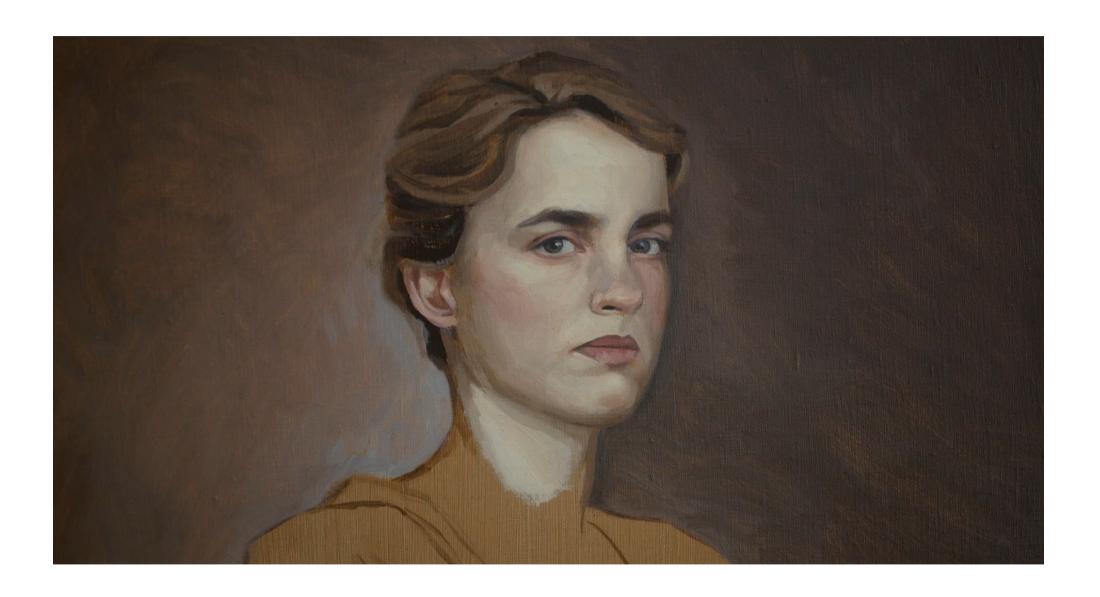


Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Sciamma et al., 2019)

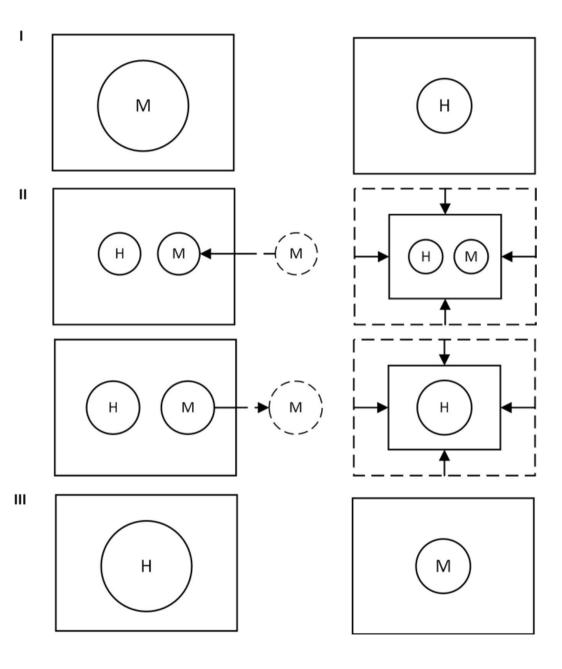


Plot

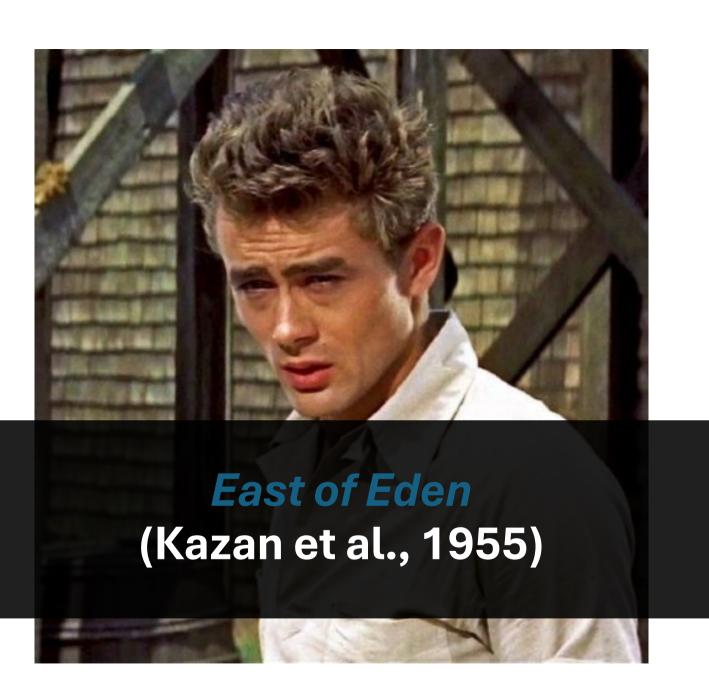
In 18th-century France young painter Marianne, is commissioned to do the wedding portrait of Héloïse without her knowing. Therefore, Marianne must observe her model by day to paint her portrait at night. Day by day, the two women become closer as they share Héloïse's last moments of freedom before the impending wedding.

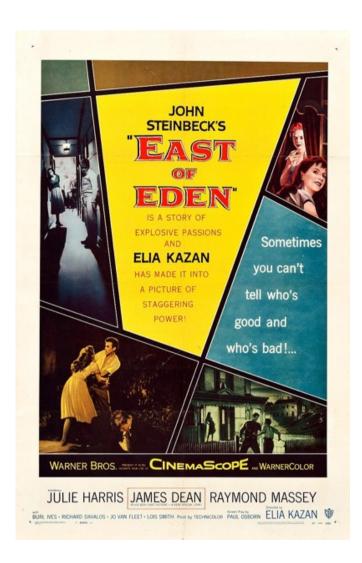












Plot

The plot line is loosely based on the biblical story of Cain and Abel. The story is set in 1917, during World War I, in the central California coastal towns of Monterey and Salinas. Cal and Aron are the young adult sons of a farmer and wartime draft board chairman, Adam Trask, with whom they live in the Salinas Valley. Adam is a deeply religious Christian. Aron is pious, dutiful, and responsible, while Cal is moody, embittered, and thinks he is sinful. He believes his father loves only Aron. Adam told the boys their mother, Kate, died when they were infants.







A = Father and girl B = AronC = Cal (James Dean)

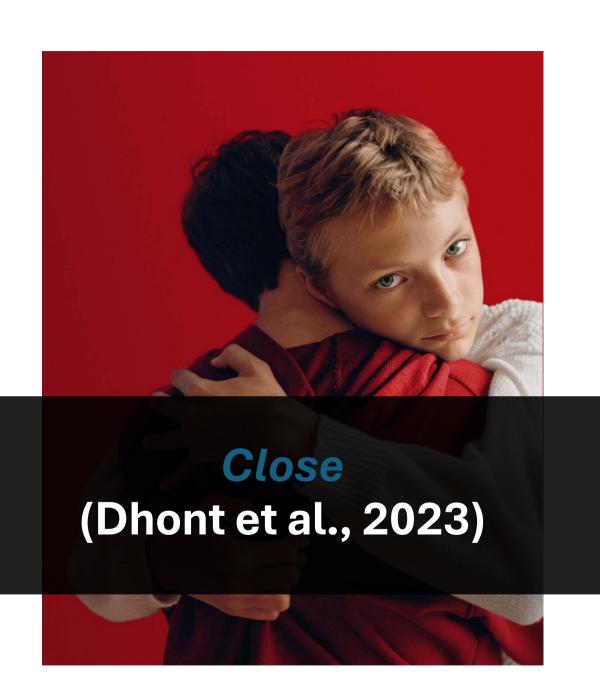






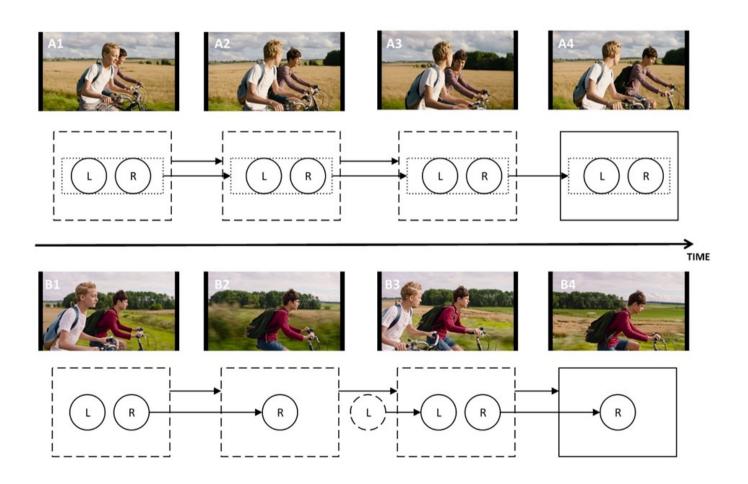


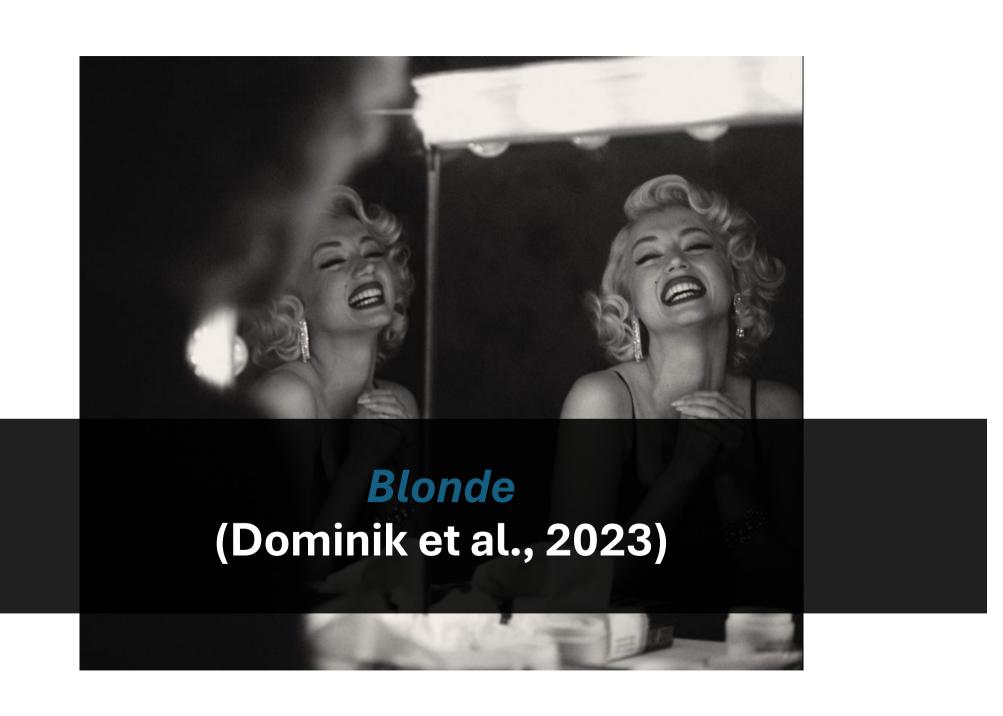
Tilt angle (aka "Canted shot", "Dutch angle)









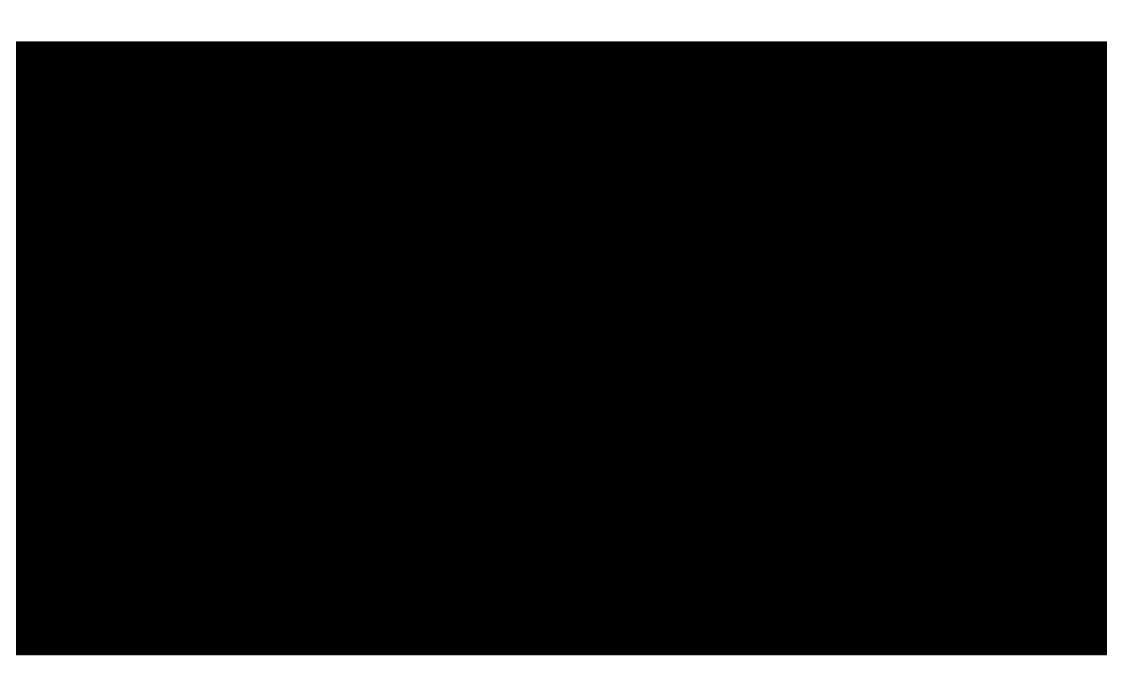


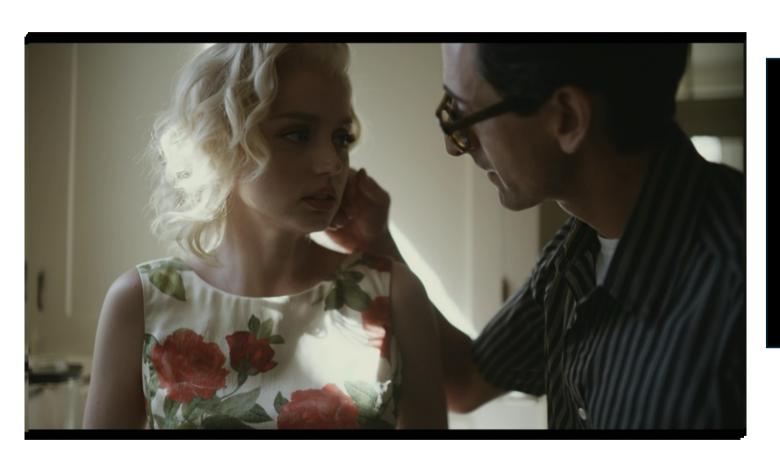


Plot

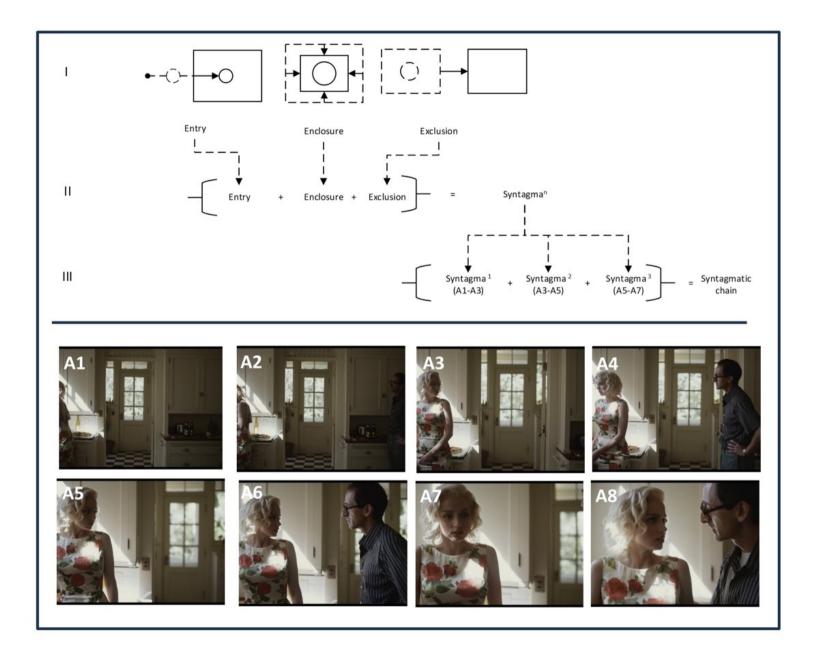
Blonde is a fictionalized account of Marilyn Monroe's life, exploring her rise to fame and the emotional turmoil beneath her glamorous image. The film delves into her complex inner world, tracing her journey from a troubled childhood as Norma Jeane to her transformation into a Hollywood icon. As she struggles with fame, toxic relationships, and a lack of control over her own identity, the film portrays Marilyn's life as one overshadowed by exploitation and the relentless pressures of the industry, blurring the lines between reality and her public persona.







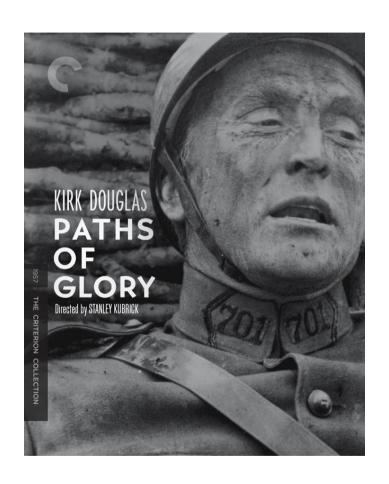
Increase of emotional intensity (abstract) is increase of substance (pressure) inside a container (concrete).







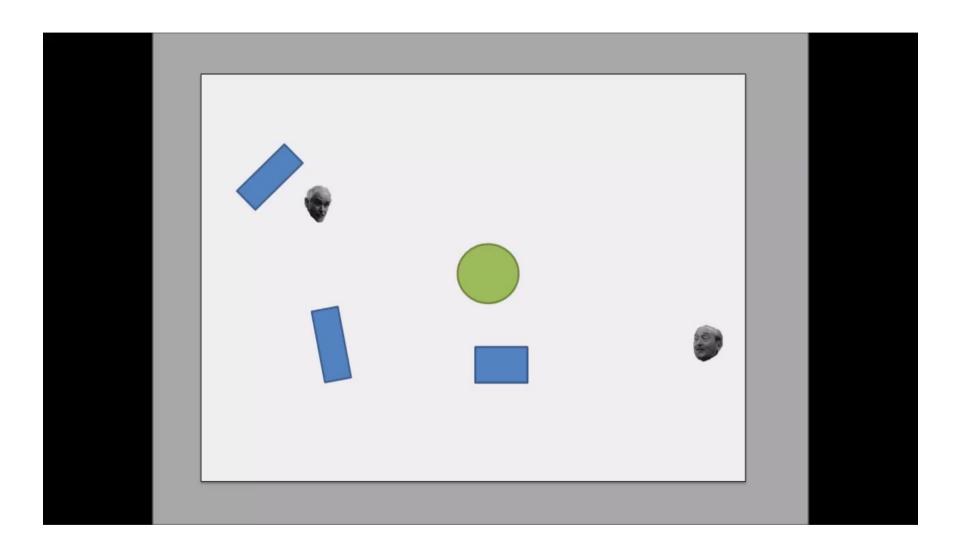
Paths of Glory (Kubrick et al., 1957)



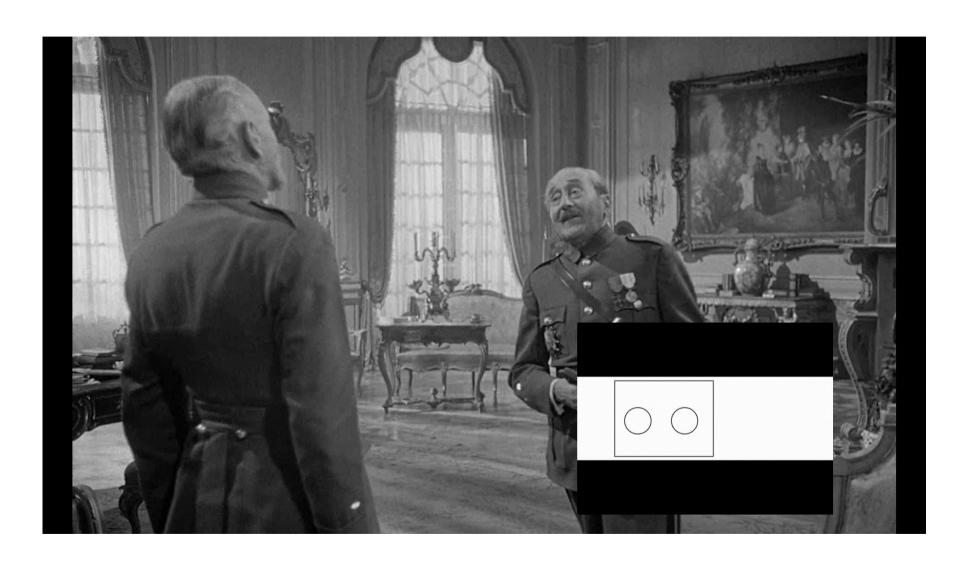
Plot

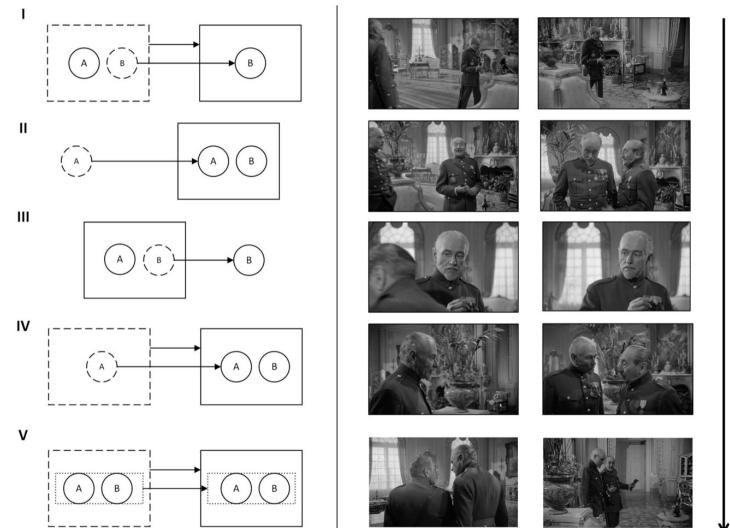
In the opening scene of *Paths of Glory*, two high-ranking French generals, General Mireau and General Broulard, engage in a tense conversation about a planned attack on an impregnable German position, the "Anthill." Broulard, a shrewd and calculating figure, pressures Mireau to lead the attack, subtly using flattery and promises of career advancement to appeal to Mireau's ambition. Though initially resistant, knowing the mission is almost certain to fail, Mireau is swayed by the lure of prestige and agrees to proceed, prioritizing his career over the lives of his soldiers. This power play sets the tone for the film's exploration of authority, moral compromise, and the dehumanizing effects of war.











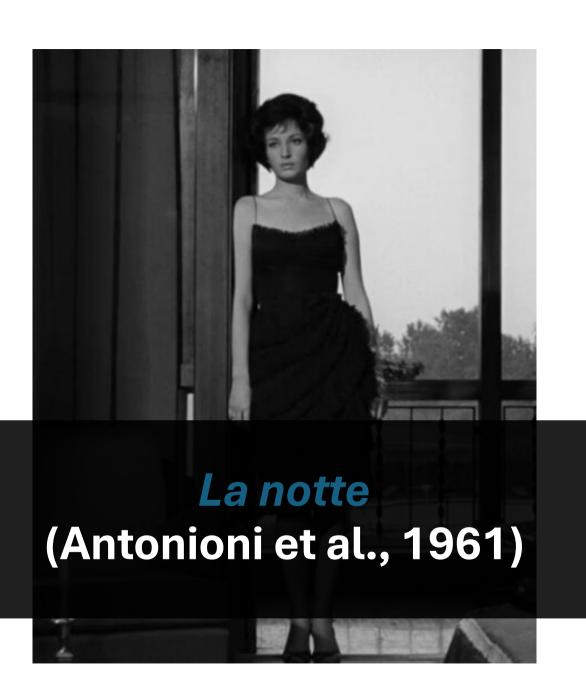
TIME













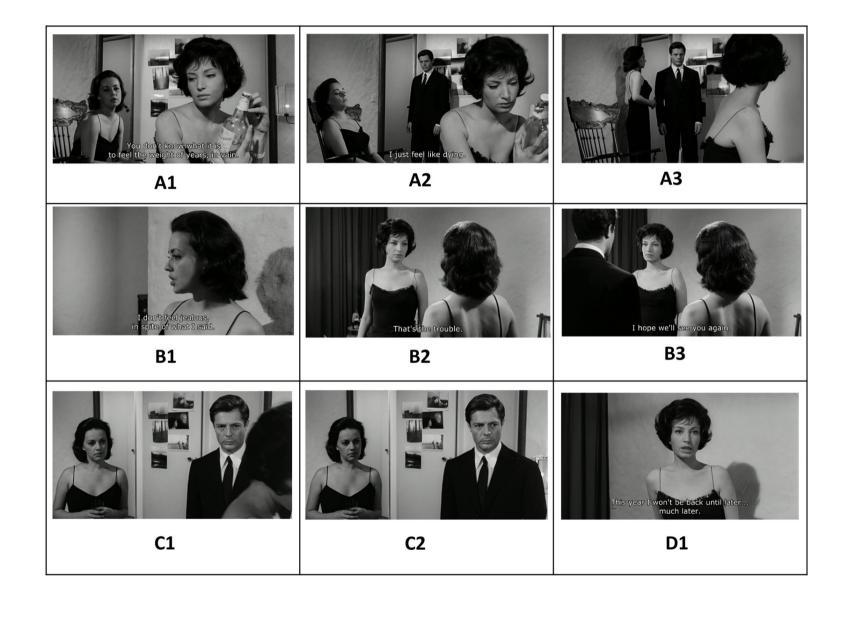
Plot

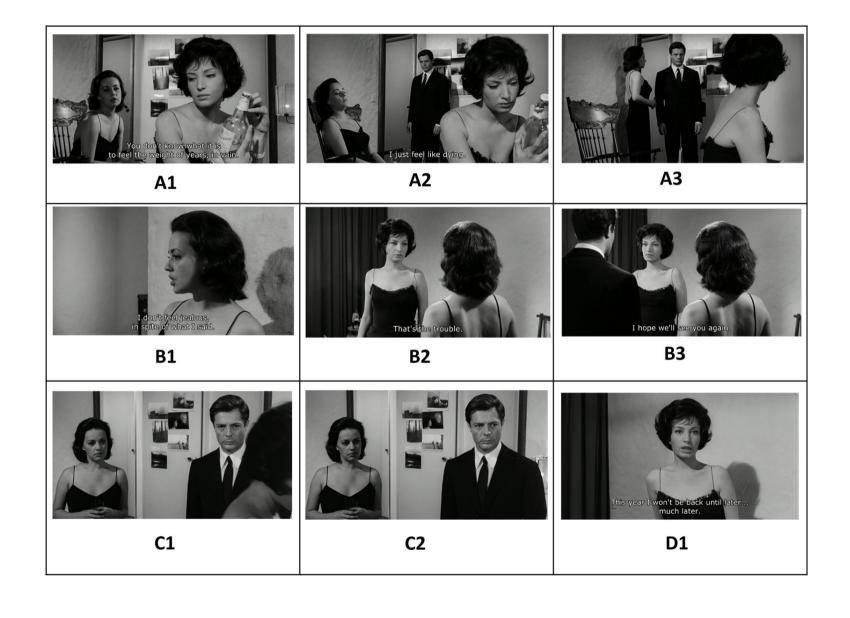
La Notte follows a day in the lives of a married couple, Giovanni and Lidia, whose relationship is deteriorating. As they navigate Milan's social scene—from visiting a dying friend to attending a lavish party—they confront their emotional distance, unspoken disappointments, and the hollowness of their affluent lives. By dawn, they face a stark realization about the emptiness of their marriage and their inability to rekindle their lost passion.



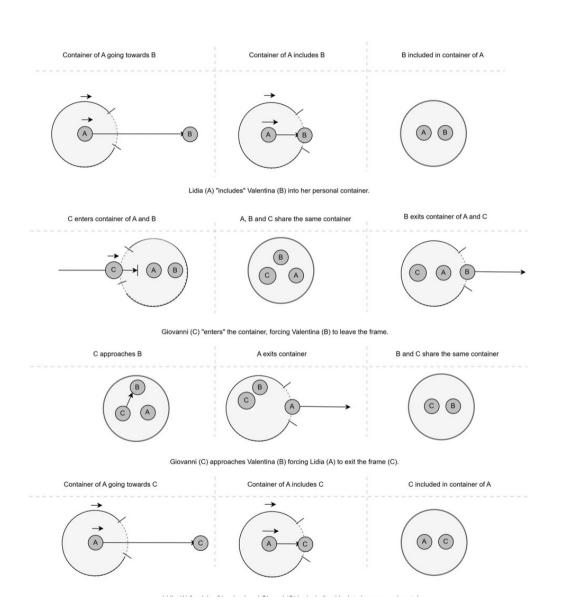














PART II: THE CASE OF BFM





This study:



- Empirical focus: a semilongitudinal review of student exercises ("études") at BFM, tracing growth in perceptual thinking and cinematic expression over a semester.
- A description of the educational output will support a developmental argument in terms of growth in perceptual thinking.





First-Year "Études" at Baltic Film, Media and Arts School (BFM)



Programme Structure:

- 4-year BA in Film Arts with 7 specialisations
- Year 1: Shared curriculum focused on fundamentals of film language

Scaffolding Method:

Structured exercises with **strict formal constraints**, not content limits.

- → Enables **learning by doing**, even before mastering skills.
- Case Study Assignment:
 - Task: 1 event, 2 characters
- Approach to Analysis:
 - Focus on **perceptual organization**, not emotional expression (cfr. Simmern)
 - Emphasis on universal patterns of artistic growth, not individual differences

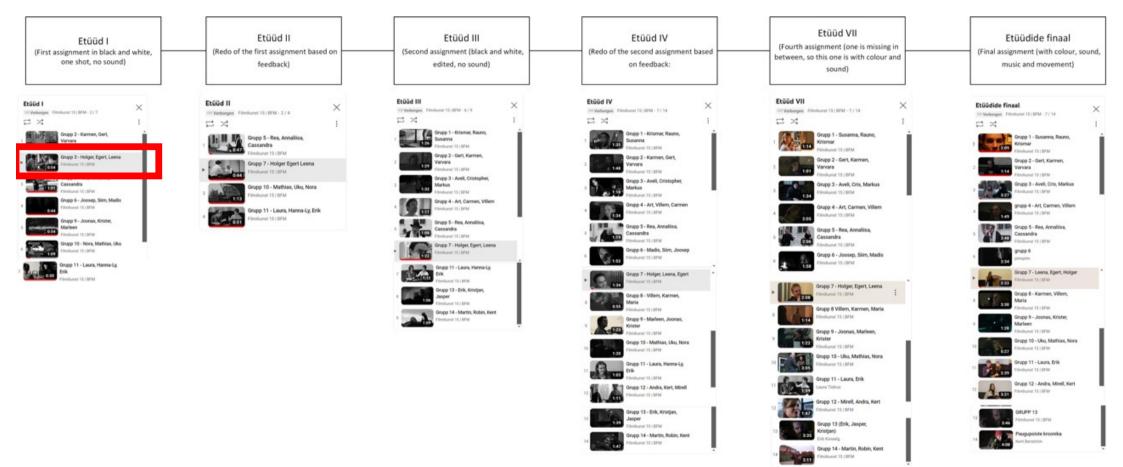
Key Insight:

Growth is **formative and cumulative**, visible in students' evolving ability to shape perceptual form and cinematic expression.





Group 3

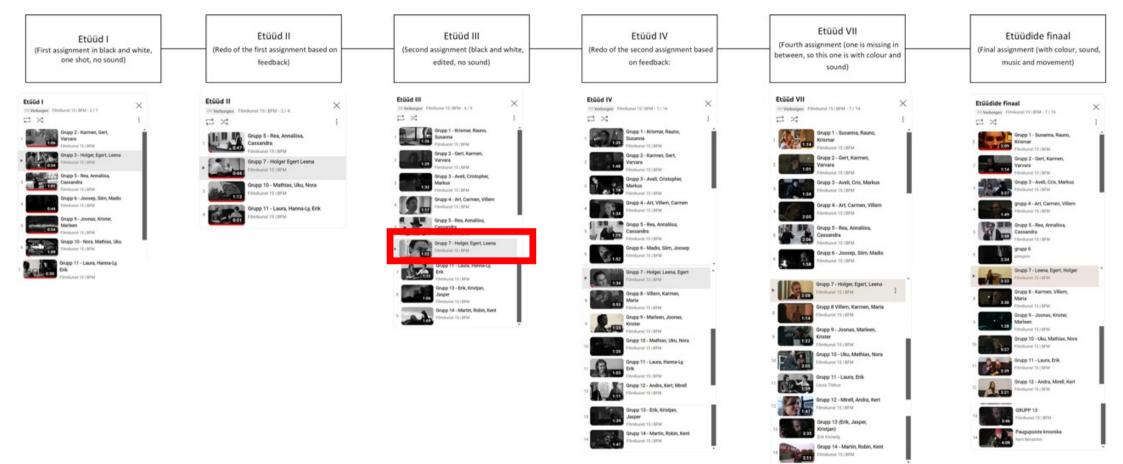




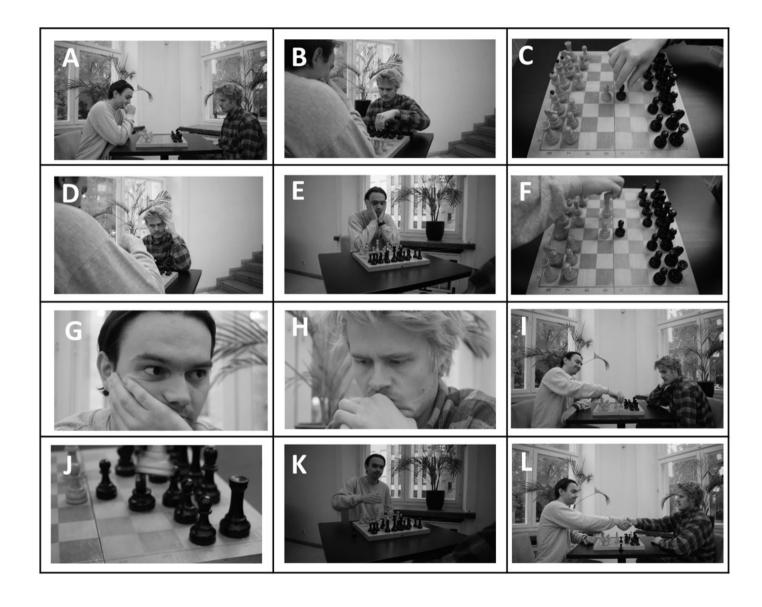


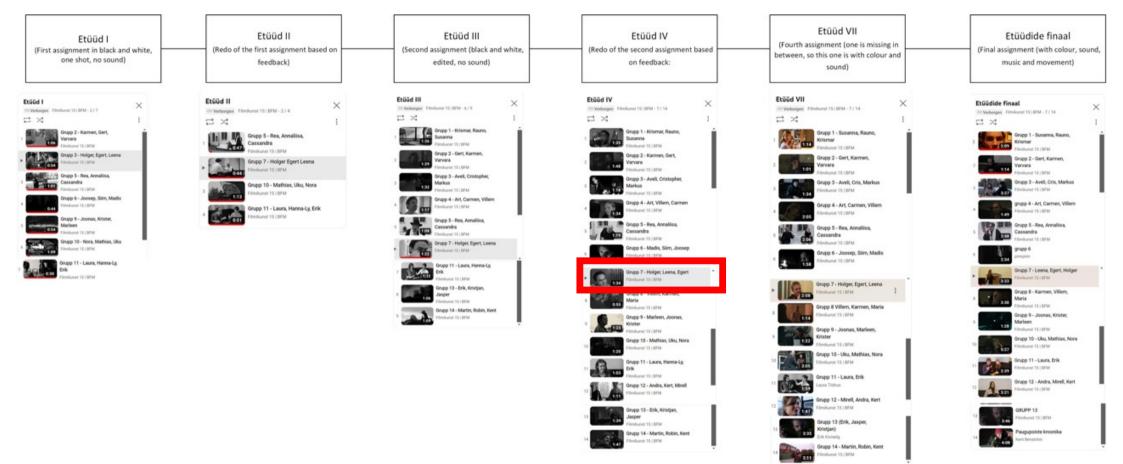




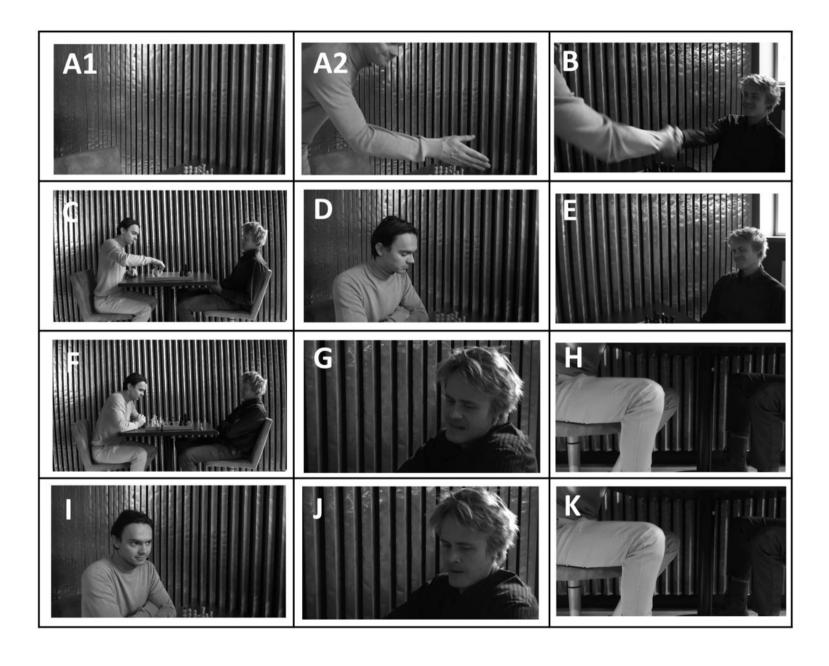


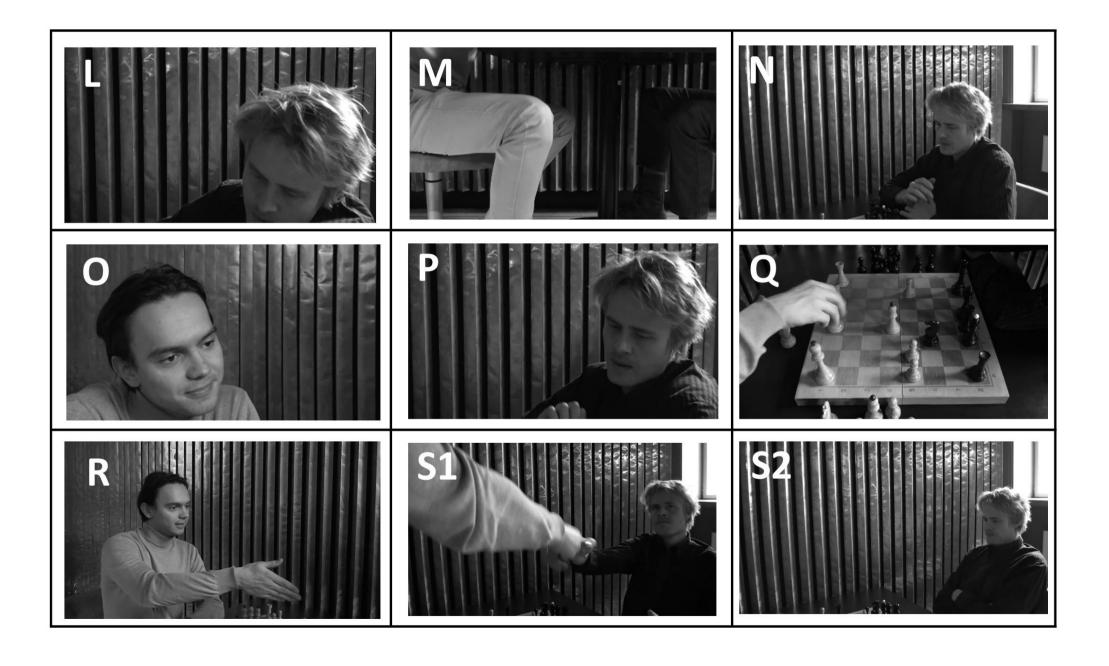














Preliminary conclusion

Initial Stage:

- Early études showed limited use of visual structuring:
 → Static shots, lack of segmentation or rhythm
 → Minimal awareness of how perception shapes cinematic meaning

Progress Through Practice:

- Growth driven by iterative feedback and structured exercises
- Students began applying concepts like framing, gaze, and movement to guide viewer attention

Collaboration & Distributed Cognition:

• Artistic growth also emerged through **collective dialogue and peer feedback**

Later Études:

- Marked by refined cinematic skills:
 - → Continuity editing, spatial design, dynamic pacing
- Demonstrated a shift from basic storytelling to intentional, embodied visual thinking

Key Insights:

- Artistic development is a **cumulative**, **collaborative process** that integrates individual learning with **distributed perceptual-cognitive awareness**.
- By adopting interdisciplinary approaches and embracing the cognitive dimensions of cinematic representation, we can better support the development of aspiring filmmakers and cultivate a rich artistic landscape in the realm of film practice.







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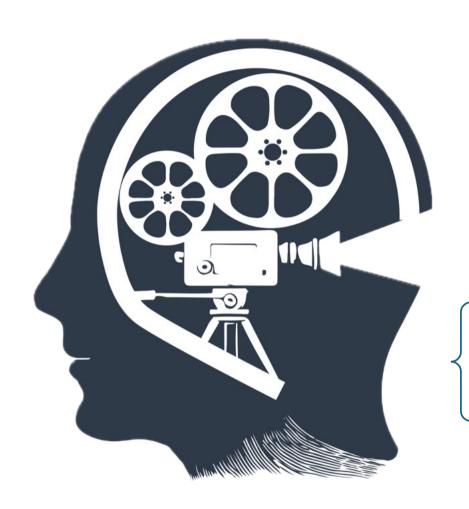
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Thank you!

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