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An Essay on Question 1 & Question 2.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Writing and Reference style this essay will make use of APA style 6th edition.  
Used figures shall not be included in the page count of 10 pages (+/- 10%).

## Question 1

### Introduction

In this essay at hand I will analyze the style used in the photograph *Untitled (Sunday Roast)* from the series *Beneath the roses* by Gregory Crewdson (2005) to discuss how these visual strategies represent the story and relationship between the two visible characters. According to Gibbs (2007a), film style can be analyzed through *mise-en-scène* which in turn comprises the elements lighting, colors, framing, composition, costume, *décor*, properties, camera movements, use of the lens, as well as the actors themselves. Even though these elements are not completely distinct from one another – but moreover unfold in interaction and context with each other (Gibbs, 2007b) – I will try to focus mainly on the three elements *performance*, *composition*, and *colors*. After discussing these single elements and their contribution to the story, the relationship of the characters, as well as genre cues individually, I will combine them to built an overall conclusion about content-related topics of the image.

### Performance

Eye tracking studies proof that other people and especially other people's faces are a major subject of interest when looking at scenes of any kind (Smith, 2013). When taking a first glance on the present photograph, the two people in the image in the same matter represent one of the most dominant subjects of interest within the frame. However, these two persons are not solely located within the picture, but they moreover show a certain *performance*. Every look, every movement, every line, or every action of an actor can be understood as part of the performance (Gibbs, 2007a). Performance can transport a considerable amount of information and emotion and therefore 'performance is central to our understanding of narrative film' (Gibbs, 2007a, p.12).

The staging of both characters placed around a laid table in the middle of a living room, gives a first hint about who these two characters might be and how they are related – most likely a mother and a son having dinner together. However, this scene does not show a typical family dinner with cheerful conversations about each other's day as probably known by many of us from our own youth or as stylized in many films (Baron, 2015). But in demarcation to a happy family dinner, the characters do not interact: they do not speak to each other and even more – they do not even look at each other.

Even though the persons do not seem to interact verbally, visual elements of performance speak a very own language through *appearance*, *body language* and *facial expressions* (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012a). The postures of the woman and the boy appear very similar at first glance: the shoulders are buckled, the heads are leaned slightly downwards, both have their legs loosely pressed together, touching the ground. While the mother has her arms resting in her lap underneath the table out of sight for the viewer, the son has both arms leaned on the armrests of the chair. Nevertheless, the body language of both characters transports the same feelings of discomfort, tenseness, and emptiness. This impression can be validated when taking a closer look at the facial expressions of the mother and the boy. The look on the woman's face, with raised eyebrows, a pressed together mouth, and a blank stare seems empty, but at the same time worried or anxious. The boy in return seems to have no facial expression, which in the context of the situation seems introverted, almost dissociated.

Also noteworthy is the direction of sight of both characters (see Figure 1): The looks appear simultaneously like blank stares inwards, but also directed towards an object in the room. While the woman is staring at a piece of red roast beef on the table (in reference of the picture's title *Sunday Roast*), the boy's stare is directed towards the empty chair across from the woman. Because of these interactions of stares and also because of the fact that two other plates are laid on the table, as well as one of the chairs being shifted, it makes the impression that these two people have not been the only ones during this scene. Rather it could be possible that a third person – as for example the father – might either be expected at the scene or has been present at the scene before, but left the frame in consequence of a fight. However, the inauspicious performance of the actors in dissonance of a family table situation within the context of a middle-class looking house assumingly in the suburbs, portray typical genre characteristics of a family melodrama (Vermeulen, 2017a).



Figure 1. Visualization of the characters' direction of sight.

## Composition

Before starting to analyze the composition in the photograph, first and foremost one has to understand what composition exactly is. The term composition generally can be translated into *putting together*, which means that composition refers to how objects are arranged in relation to each other in the frame ('composition' in Merriam-Webster.com, 2017). Therefore, composition does not solely refer to the composition of films, but can also refer to composition of paintings, music, and – as in this example – also to photographs.

One of the most striking techniques of composition in this photograph is created through a variety of frames nested inside of each other. Firstly we have the frame of the actual picture, in an approximate *common European ratio* of 1.66:1 (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012b). And secondly, we have five different *planes* within the frame of the image. The first plane is created by the entrance of another room facing the living room; the second plane is created by the area of the living room itself; the third plane is created by the view into the kitchen located behind the living room; the fourth plane is created by the view outside through the kitchen window; and one could even argue that a fifth plane is created by the look inside the window of the neighbors' house (see Figure 2a for visualization). This nested framing fulfills a variety of different purposes: For one, frames inside frames are also a common convention used in family melodramas (Vermeulen, 2017a). For the other, these many layers of frames may also act as a *metaphor* (Bill, 2010) for the living situation of the family, especially the mother as central character of family melodramas: layers and layers of rooms between her and the outside world represent her being oppressed by society, encapsulated and trapped inside her life as a housewife.

Since the nested framing is evenly formed towards the center, another purpose is to create a balanced, almost symmetrical composition. In support of the symmetry, several items are placed symmetrically around the vertical middle-axis or mirrored on both halves of the image as for example the table, the carpet, the chandelier, the frames on the walls, and, last but not least, the character of the mother herself (see Figure 2b). While the mother is not only in line with the symmetry of the interior, but she is exactly *in the center of the frame* – almost appearing as if she is trying to hold the impression of perfection together – some elements break this neatly arranged symmetry. Especially the position of the boy in the right upper half of the frame and the slightly rotated chair on the down left side of the frame destroy the symmetry and create tension. There

would be symmetry tough, if a third or a fourth person would join the two at the table – which makes the missing person(s) the reason why the illusion of perfection is destroyed.



*Figure 2:* (a) Left: Red lines represent the visualization of the five planes within the image created by a number of nested frames. Blue lines outline picture frames that can be found in the image as typical characteristic element of a family melodrama. (b) Right: Blue lines represent the symmetrical elements in the picture while green lines illustrate the elements that break the symmetry.

### Colors

As with most of the other stylistic elements, colors in and of itself do not have a definite meaning, but interact as a feature of other elements like lighting or props and can be implemented in the context of cultural associations with specific colors (Gibbs, 2007a). When looking upon the photograph at hand, first and foremost a contrast between grey-brownish, de-saturated colors in most areas of the interior and vivid, saturated colors mainly in center of the frame, can be observed. Especially four colors seem to be predominant in contrast to the monochrome establishing of the house: *blue*, *yellow*, *mint-green*, and *red*.

Blue in this case seems to be a feature of the lighting, since the anteroom, as well as the neighbor's house outside the window, are tinted in florescent blue light. Furthermore, it seems like the outside light reflects on the characters clothes by also making their shirts appear blue (see Figure 3a). Even though the blue shirts have an unease, cold tonality, they create a connection between the mother and the boy, because both of them are wearing the same colored shirt. In combination with the similar body language and facial expression as derived above, the relationship of the woman and the boy seems contradicted in as far as they find themselves in a similar state of mind, while still being distant towards each other.

Yellow can be found in many elements of the décor as in the kitchen curtains, the kitchen lamp, the tablecloth, and the flowers in the living room (see Figure 3b). These are all items that usually serve the pure purpose of decoration, but especially catch the eye in this luminous yellow color. In contrast to the monochrome walls, floors and furniture the yellow décor items almost feels purposely draped around the room to cover up the greyness of the place. However, since the yellow tones do not exactly match each other, and appear muddy in context of the monochrome environment, it almost appears like a superficial, failed attempt to create an atmosphere of coziness and home.

Mint-green is exclusively found in two areas of the frame: The paint of the wall in the kitchen, as well as the overall tonality of the left hand side of the picture in the living room (see Figure 3c). It is noteworthy that the mint-green picture on the wall shows a landscape nature scene, building a strong contrast to the indoors of the kitchen. It feels like the picture of nature, which could be associated with freedom, represents the desire of the woman of being free – but all she is left with is the kitchen imitating the colors of desired freedom.

Red as a color with one of the most ambiguous and multifaceted interpretations (e.g. love vs. blood) requires an especially careful observation. In Crewdson's photograph the only two elements colored in red are both in the center of the frame and therefore of special importance: The woman's jacket and the roast beef in front of her on the table. This does not only create a connection between the woman and the roast, but also differentiates them from the rest of the image. When assessing one of the conventional cultural associations with the color red, one might think of the term *rebellion*, as also suggested by Gibbs (2007a). The woman dressed in red rebels against social expectations of being a housewife. But, since the beef – she probably cooked it herself - is also colored in red, the rebellion fails as she fulfills the clichés of a hard-working housewife spending hours after hours in the kitchen cooking. However, the red roast itself can also act as a metaphor: the idiomatic expression to 'give someone a roasting' can be paraphrased in 'to criticize someone harshly' ('give someone a roasting' in Merriam-Webster.com, 2017). As mentioned earlier in the paragraph about performance, this might have something to do with a third person, which is not visible in the frame, as most presumably the man of the house, indicating that the woman is suppressed and criticized by her husband.

To put it in a nutshell, the photograph makes use of metaphorically meaningful, yet unrealistic and artificial looking colors. This use of color also contributes another

genre cue of a family melodrama (Vermeulen, 2017a), as for example the fluorescent blue light reminds of the blue tint as used in the family melodrama *Far From Heaven* we screened and discussed during the lecture (slides 18, 19, 21 in Vermeulen, 2017b).

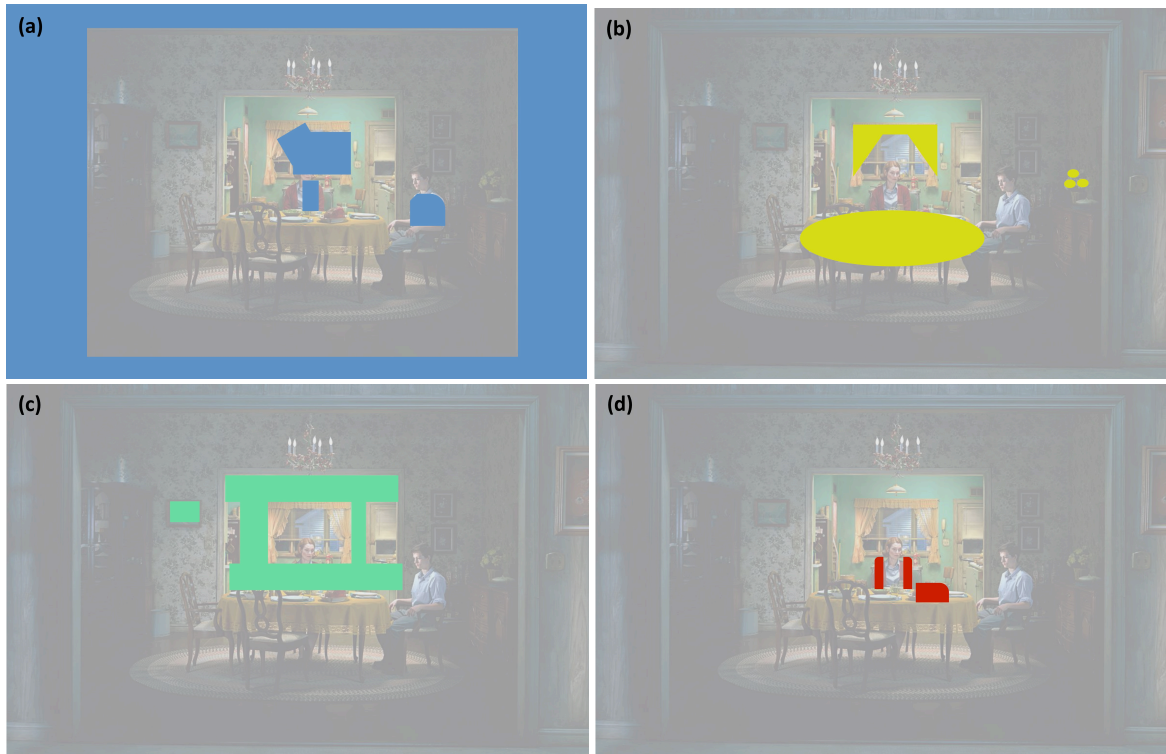


Figure 3. Visualization of colored elements in the frame: (a) blue, (b) yellow, (c) mint-green, and (d) red.

## Conclusion

Even though performance, composition and colors are just a handful of the visual characteristics that can be analyzed in this photograph, all of these visual devices point into a similar direction: There is just *something off* in this picture. The combination of absent, non-interactive stares in the performance, the breach of symmetry in the composition and the use of unrealistic colors, all transport the same feeling of unease, discomfort and tension in the image while at the same time hinting towards the genre of a family melodrama.

In contempt of the photograph by Crewdson not being a still from an actual film, many parallelisms to an ordinary film still in terms of mise-en-scène and cinematography can be found. Using photographs analogically to film stills is no new development, but some artists specifically crave the goal of creating photos which cannot be distinguished from film still. One famous example is the photo series *Untitled*

*Film Stills* by Cindy Sherman, where every photo looks like it might be taken from a film. Similar to Sherman's photos, I also think that the photograph at hand cannot be distinguished from a film still if the viewer is not given the necessary background information. Crewdson uses visual elements of film, paired with genre characteristics of a family melodrama to enable the viewer to create their own *mental film* about what happened before, during and after this shot was taken. The visual characteristics like performance, composition or colors were chosen just as carefully as they would for a film. Even though this was not in major focus in the essay at hand, especially the use of lighting in this photograph resembles the use of lighting in film. How the light illuminates the living room is impossible without the use of artificial light sources. Furthermore, there is no accordance of how the light hits the characters (looking as if they were illuminated from the upper *left* corner) in combination with the fall of the shadows (pointing as if the light came from the *right* upper corner). This ambiguous illumination of the room is one of the main features I would also expect in a film (still), especially in regard of a family melodrama, since it typically contains some sort of mismatch as for example of plot and style (Vermeulen, 2017a).



## Question 2

### Introduction

Nicolas Ray's film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) represents one of the first 'groundbreaking attempt[s] to portray the moral decay of American youth, critique parental style, and explore the differences and conflicts between generations' (Wikipedia, Retrieved November 14, 2017). To be able to understand the given scene in context, I will first of all give a quick synopsis of the story and the main characters: *Jim Stark* (James Dean) is a troublemaker, who just moved to a new town with his family, where the trouble seems to continue after getting involved in a fight with his new peers. Jim also meets *Judy* (Nathalie Wood), the so-called 'property' of one of the guys of the gang. Jim and Judy have one major thing in common: A difficult relationship with their parents. While Jim's submissive father is not able to stand up for him in front of his domineering wife, Judy's father is a sexist, who mistreats her and her mother (Wikipedia, Retrieved November 14, 2017).

In the further course of this essay I will firstly illustrate the relationship of Jim and his father by taking a closer look at *costume, props*, as well as the *editing* in the given scene. Hereafter will I compare this relationship with the relationship of Judy and her father, followed by a comparison to the relationship of Sid Jenkins and his father in season 1, episode 5 of the British teen drama series *Skins* (Brittain & Spiro, 2007).

### The relationship of Jim and his father

The scene at hand shows Jim entering the second floor of the family's house finding his father Frank cleaning up the supper he made for his wife but accidentally dropped on the floor. One of the most striking elements can be found in the use of costume when comparing Jim's and his father's clothes: Jim is wearing a black, slightly too big coat over a white shirt, which looks like an attempt to appear more grown-up than he really is. In return, Frank is wearing an apron over his suit, covering up the male, adult clothes with typical clothes of a household help or even a newborn baby. Through this stylistic choice of clothing, the impression of switched up roles of dominance is achieved: Jim, the adolescent young man takes over the role of the adult parent, while Frank, the grown-up man holds the position of a degraded, incapable newborn, crawling on the ground.

This pattern of dominance can also be found when analyzing used props more closely, beginning with the meaning of the staircase. Jim's silhouette slowly comes through as he walks up the staircase. By standing on top of the stairs, he holds a higher position than Frank who is still kneeling on the ground. They are not on eyelevel, but Jim is looking down on his father, which can also be understood in literal sense. Moreover, in the shots where Frank is crawling on the floor (e.g. 0:44 in the Youtube video), he is covered by the bars of the staircase, making the impression of prison bars. This can symbolically be understood as if his wife keeps Frank behind bars and the only possibility for him to move out of this prison is by working for her – symbolized by the plate of food outside the bars. It is also noteworthy that Jim's attempt of helping his father is not by talking to him, since he is struggling with what to say, but by pulling him over the bars of the staircase by the tip of the apron (1:06) – literally dragging him out of his prison.

By keeping this in mind, the very first scene of Jim standing in front of the fridge, drinking milk from a bottle gets a totally different connotation. The image of a man, arriving home at night after a long day of work, opening the fridge and drinking a cold beer is a typical cliché of masculinity many of us might have in mind. Jim in front of the fridge late at night partially fulfills the cliché, only with the difference that what he is drinking is not beer but milk. This indicates that Jim is located in an in-between phase between still being a child and becoming a grown-up. The side of him, which is still a child, needs parenteral care (represented by the milk as symbol for the substance of breast-feeding), while the adult part tries to imitate the impressions of manhood (represented by him grabbing a cold drink of the fridge with sweat drop on his forehead).

Another hint about the discord between Jim and his father can be found in analyzing the editing more closely. The single shots are connected through ordinary *cuts*, without making use of any particular techniques like *fades*, *dissolves* or *wipes*, which creates a coherent unity in time and space (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012c). *Crosscutting* is used, switching between scenes where Jim is visible followed by shots where Jim's father is visible and vice versa. At first glance it appears as if we have a change of *shots* and *reverse-shots*. However, a *shot-reverse-shot* between two characters typically contains both in the frame, the person talking upfront as well as the back of the head of the other person (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012c). In the scene at hand however, we only see Frank's back of the head while Jim is in the center of the image, but not the other

way around. When Jim's father is in the frame, we don't see Jim's head, which indicates that these shots are *point-of-view shots* from the perspective of Jim. The viewer shall see exactly what Jim is seeing through his eyes to sympathize with Jim and feel the disappointment he feels towards his father.

The emphasis on Jim's perspective is also stressed by the length of shots, which indicates a specific *rhythmic relation* in the cutting. When comparing the on-screen time of shots where Jim is visible versus where Frank is visible, a tremendous discrepancy between both can be found (see Figure 4 for visualization). Jim's shots vary in length between 5 up to 12 seconds, resulting in a total on screen-time of 58 seconds, while his father's shots vary between 3 to 7 seconds, resulting in an overall screen-time of 21 seconds. The short clips of Jim's father almost feel like quick inserts or *blinks of an eye* in between the shots of Jim. This stresses the embarrassment Jim feels towards his father, because the editing appears as if he could not withstand to look at his father in this outfit crawling on the floor. Noteworthy is also that in the majority of the shots only one of the characters is in focus of the frame, whereas only the very last two cuts show them actually interacting other than by dialogue. This also underlines the message that the relationship seems to be torn apart and distant. The only scene where both characters psychically interact ends by Jim leaving the room and Frank continuing to clean up the food on the floor, which illustrates that no accordance between father and son could be found.



Figure 4. Visualization of *rhythmic cutting* in the scene at hand. Orange images show shots of Jim, blue images show shots of Frank and the green image shows the shot where both characters are in focus of the frame.

### Comparison with the relationship of Judy and her father

Judy also has a difficult relationship to her father, though for different reasons. In contrast to Jim, who adopts the role of an adult, Judy does not want to be more adult than she is, but awaits to be treated by her father like she used to as a girl. Moreover, masculinity plays an important role in both scenes in as far as Jim's father Frank has lost

his masculinity due to ridiculous clothing and crawling on the ground and Judy's father exaggerates his masculinity.

*Position and height* of characters as one of the most important visual cues in the scene between Jim and his father can also be analyzed in the scene between Judy and her father. In Jim's scene, Jim was standing and therefore had a higher position than his father crawling on the ground, which resulted in a feeling of degradation of the father. In Judy's scene, Judy is also the one holding the higher position by standing in front of her father who is sitting at the table. However, the effect here is different, since her father does not seem submissive, but in spite of his lower position still appears as the more dominant part. This is because a man sitting at the dinner table, surrounded by women who serve him radiates a sense of chauvinism. Also the purpose of Jim standing and Judy standing differs: Jim is standing as symbol for him standing all by himself, without the help of his father standing up for him. Judy is standing as expression of rebellion against her family and against the burden of growing-up. Judy's mother, as well as her father both command her several times to sit down, which she does not only decline but much more also leave the house. Additionally to the uneven positions of Judy and her father, Judy's brother enters the scene and sits on the father's lap. This action serves the purpose of stressing even more that Judy and her father are not on eyelevel anymore, but Judy has to stand up to get his attention, while her brother is privileged.

### **Comparison with the relationship of Sid and his father**

The British teen drama series *Skins* also deals with the topic of young adolescents growing up. The concept of the show is rather unique, since all of the main characters have an own episode throughout the show, which gradually unfolds the character's troubles and conflicts. Episode 5 of season 1 called *Sid*, deals with Sid Jenkins and the relationship to his parents, especially to his father. Sid has failed an exam in history class, which is why he gets grounded by his father with the words 'You can say goodbye to sunshine, sunshine' (minute 2:32) who makes an embarrassing scene, yelling at Sid in the middle of the school hallway. From the beginning of the episode the allocation of roles is more than clear: Sid's father Mark is furious, dominant, choleric; while Sid is silenced, incapable of doing his obligations and acting submissive towards his father. The scene I choose to compare to the relationship of Jim and his father is a scene at the very end of the episode (minute 38:54 – 40:46, can be seen on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRTG6PH3BI0>) where the roles of both characters

suddenly have turned. In this scene Sid returns home and finds his father drinking and smoking, in awe that his wife, Sid's mother, has left. In contrast to all of the scenes before Sid here takes action, commands his father to get his mother back and grounds him by using the same words as used by his father in the beginning of the episode 'you can say goodbye to sunshine, sunshine'.

One of the most obvious differences between this scene in *Skins* and the scene in the *Rebel* is the temporal context of the decade the movie/series take place. In *Skins* elements like alcohol, cigarettes, mobile phones and other types of more modern technologies are used to display conflicts and at the same time to attract adolescent viewers from the 90's (since this episode was launched in early 2007). Also the language is rather vulgar with a lot of swear words like 'Shut up!' or 'fucking stupid bastard', matching the young, rebellious youth slang of that time. However, I also chose this scene in *Skins*, because Sid and Jim are likewise disappointed by their father, but show different reactions towards them. While Jim is lacking words and starts a failed attempt of helping his father to stand up, Sid finally bursts out all the anger and disappointment that has accumulated throughout time. Both genres are titled 'Drama', yet the *Rebel* is a film while *Skins* is a TV-Series. How the protagonist boys express their disappointment therefore also matches characteristics of film versus TV, since Jim uses a behavioral attempt which is typical for the visually-heavy genre of film, while Sid is expressing his feelings through speaking, which is typical for dialog-heavy TV (Mittell, 2015).

## Conclusion

*Rebel Without a Cause* is known to be a pioneer film in the topic of generation conflicts between adolescents and their parents for a good reason: The film achieves to transport the message of generational clash not only through its story but also through visual elements as illustrated before with the examples of costume, props and editing. Also, the film makes exceptional use of the same visual motifs in different contexts to illustrate how diverse parental relationships can be. The motif of standing (up) is present in both relationships, between Jim and his father, as well as between Judy and her father, but serves different purposes. Even though *Rebel Without a Cause* seems to have initiated the era of films about youth standing up against their parents, it was and definitely will not be the last film dealing with this topic. As exemplary illustrated on the example of Sid's conflict with his dad, many contemporary TV-series and films features the topic of generational conflicts, albeit embedded in the context of the current decade.

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