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Some suggestions on "how to read a film"

The film critic Christian Metz has written "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand." We are used to sitting back in the dark and viewing a film uncritically; indeed, most Hollywood films are constructed to render "invisible" the carefully constructed nature of the medium. Further, because a film is constructed of visual, aural, and linguistic components that are manipulated in numerous ways, it is a challenge to take apart the totality of the film experience and to interpret how that experience was assembled.

Below you will find brief explanations of ways to analyze the language of film. While this list is not comprehensive, it does contain a lot of information. If film interpretation is new to you, you will not be able to keep track of all these elements while viewing the film—this is an acquired skill. Concentrate at first on a few things that seem to offer the most opportunity for critical reading.

If viewing the film only once, try to take notes in shorthand while watching the film. Arrows can be used to note camera angle and camera movement; quick sketches can be used to note shot composition and elements of mise-en-scene. As soon as possible after viewing the film, write out your impressions of the film, noting the most important elements. If you will be writing on the film and will be seeing it again, take minimal notes the first time through (although do note important scenes you will want to return to) but still maintain a critical distance.

When analyzing a film as a historical document, keep in mind the film's contemporary audiences or authors. Your own personal reaction to the film may serve as a starting point, but you need to convert these impressions into historical analysis—how are you different and similar to the historical audiences/authors? What has changed and what has stayed the same? Remember too the technological changes that have taken place, and keep in mind what audiences would have expected, and how film makers used the technology at their disposal. It is especially important to consider substantial changes in the manner of presentation if you will only be watching the film on a television. Also, be aware that most Hollywood films made after the early 1950s have an "aspect ratio" (height and width ratio) different from television screens. Most video tapes of these films have been altered by the "pan and scan" method which dramatically changes elements such as shot composition and camera movement. Video tapes that are "widescreen" preserve the correct aspect ratio. Most DVDs now come in both "standard" (altered) or "widescreen" (check the writing on the disk) or only in the correct aspect ratio, and most laser disks use the correct aspect ratio. If possible, find a format that has not altered the aspect ratio.

MEANING

Themes/tropes—The broad ideas and allusions (themes) that are established by repetition of technical and linguistic means (tropes) throughout the film (such as alienation, power and control, transcendence through romantic achievement, etc.)

Intent/Message—Sometimes, as with a film like JFK (the Kennedy assassination was the result of a massive government conspiracy) or Wayne's World (adolescence is a goofy time that provides plenty of laughs), this is obvious. (Just because the message is obvious, doesn't mean that the film is simple, or that there is not a contradictory subtext). Sometimes, however, the filmmakers aren't sure of their message, or the intended message becomes clouded along the way. At other times, the filmmakers (principally the producer, director, actors and actresses) are at odds over the intent. At other times, the film makers intend one message and many in the audience interpret the film differently.)

Metaphor and metonymy/symbolism—Similar to literary interpretation, only consider all aspects of the film—linguistic, visual, aural. Metaphors are elements that represent something different from their explicit meaning (for example, the rose petals in American Beauty). Metonyms are elements that are similar or the same (for example, in the final scene of The Grapes of Wrath, Tom Joad represents the lonely battle of activists and Ma represents the resilience of "the people"; or when a part of the whole—such as a close-up of a woman's leg—represents women as sexual objects). Metaphors and metonyms only gain relevance if they are repeated in significant ways or connected with the larger meaning of the film. (Avoid simplistic equations such as the white table symbolizes A; the high angle shot of a character symbolized B).

Subtext—The often numerous messages a film conveys beneath the surface; sometimes intended, often unintended, and sometimes conveying a different or contradictory message than the intended message. Look especially for ironies, contradictions, interesting juxtapositions, or if something initially doesn't seem to "make sense." Subtext is usually developed through the use of figurative elements like metaphor and metonymy.

BASIC ELEMENTS

Title/opening credits—Titles are chosen carefully—consider alternatives and why this title was chosen; consider ambiguities in the title ("His Girl Friday," a film with a strong, independent female protagonist). The opening credits establish a tone, and often are used to foreshadow events, themes, or metaphors—pay careful attention from the beginning.

Story/Plot/Narrative—The narrative provides the basic structure by which a feature film is understood. (Most documentaries also have narratives.) The narrative consists of the story and the plot. The story consists of all of the information conveyed by the film (either directly or by inference) assembled in chronological order to communicate the overall sense of what occurred in the film. The diegesis is the entire world of the story. A film's diegesis may have a different logic than the "real" world, but as long as their is proper motivation (see below) it will make sense to the viewer. Diegetic elements are found explicitly or implicitly in the world of the story; non- or extra-diegetic elements (the soundtrack, the title, a voice-over, an audience's expectations of a star's persona) are outside the story. The plot provides the cause and effect relations that cue the audience and create suspense, surprise, and fulfill expectations. While dialogue provides a good deal of information, pay attention to all the other audio and visual clues that convey information about the narrative.. In considering the narrative structure, note whether the film follows a standard chronological narrative or not and how time is used. What are the key moments and how are they established? What are the climaxes and anticlimaxes? How far ahead is the audience in understanding what is happening to the characters than the characters themselves are? What propels the story forward? What is the pace of the narrative? How do earlier parts of the narrative set up later parts? Where are the key emotive moments when the audience is frightened, enraged, enraptured, feeling vindicated, etc., and how has the narrative helped to establish these feelings? Note when there is a change of knowledge (when characters or the audience become aware of new information) which shifts the hierarchy of knowledge (the relative amount of knowledge characters and the audience have). Does the narrative have a coherent unity, or does it leave the audience feeling unfulfilled or confused? (Sometimes the latter is the mark of an unsuccessful film; sometimes its either an intentional effect to challenge the easy "Hollywood ending" or else the result of the mixed intentions of the various authors.)

Motivation—"Justification given in the film for the presence of an element. This may appeal to the viewer's knowledge of the real world, to genre conventions, to narrative causality, or to a stylistic pattern within the film." (Bordwell, Thompson) Failure to provide proper motivation challenges the sense of "cinematic realism" in a film. (If a character's personal motivation is explained in a film as a reason for his/her action, that falls under "narrative causality." Do not confuse character motivation as revealed through narrative with your own expectations you bring to the film. Characters are not real people, and do not make choices outside of what is conveyed narratively.) Hollywood films tend to stress perfectly motivated narratives so that every element has a purpose. Discovering the underlying motivation of the narrative often helps explain why audience expectations are fulfilled (or if poorly motivated, unfulfilled.) For example, in the Western Unforgiven, the close-up, eerily lighted shot of Morgan Freeman's/Ned's scars from whipping by Gene Hackman/Little Bill motivates Clint Eastwood's/William Money's slaughter of Hackman and various townsfolk. The shot thus cues the audience's desire for revenge through violence (note the metonymic symbolism of the scarred black body and the whip), despite the supposedly anti-violent theme of the film. Extended definition: click here.

Motif—The repetition of an element in ways that acquire symbolic meaning for the element. An motif can be a technical feature (a shot angle, a lighting set up), a sound or piece of dialogue or music, or an object.

Parallelism—Two or more scenes that are similar to each other but which gain meaning because of their differences.

Characterization—Who are the central characters? How are minor characters used? Are characters thinly or fully drawn, and why? Who in the audience is meant to relate to which characters, and what sort of emotion (fear, pleasure, anxiety) are audience members meant to feel because of this identification? Is there a clear or ambivalent hero or villain? What values do the characters represent, and do they change during the film? Are the characters meant to play a particular "type" and do they play against type at any time?

Point of view—Is the film in general told from a particular character's point of view, or is it "objective"? Is the film's perspective primarily intellectual or emotional, visionary or "realistic"? Within the film, is a particular shot viewed from a character's point of view ("subjective shot"), and how does the camera technically reinforce the point of view? Who is the audience meant to be focusing on at a particular moment?

MISE-EN-SCENE—Everything going on within the frame outside of editing and sound

Setting and sets—is the scene shot in a studio sound stage or "on location"? How is the setting integrated into the action, both the larger background and particular props? How is the setting used in composing the shot (verticals and horizantals, windows and doors, the ever popular slats of shades, mirrors, etc.)? How do particular settings (vast mountain ranges, cluttered urban setting) function as signs in order to convey narrative and ideological information? How are colors used?

Acting style—more obviously mannered ("classical"); intense and psychologically driven ("method"); less affectations and more "natural"? Do particular actors have their own recognizable style or type, and how do the filmmakers use the audience's expectations, either by reaffirming or challenging these expectations? What expectations do "stars" bring to their roles? Do they fulfill or challenge these expectations (playing against type)?

Costumes (or lack thereof)—note contrasts between characters, changes within film; use of colors. This also includes physiques, hair styles, etc.

Lighting— Key Light: main lighting, usually placed at a 45 degree angle between camera and subject. Fill Light: Auxiliary lights, usually from the side of the subject, that softens or eliminates shadows and illuminates areas not covered by the Key Light. High Key Lighting is when all the lights are on (typical of musicals and comedies); Low Key Lighting is when one or more of the fill lighting is eliminated, creating more opportunity for shadows. High contrast lighting refers to sharp contrast between light and dark; low contrast refers to shades of gray. Hard lighting creates a harsh light; soft lighting creates a muted, usually more forgiving lighting. "Hard" characters often get hard lighting, and visa versa. Highlighting or spotlighting: pencil-thin beams of light used to illuminate certain parts of a subject, often eyes or other facial

features. Backlighting: placing the main source of light behind the subject, silhouetting it, and directing the light toward the camera. Toplighting: lighting from above. Lighting and camera angle are the key means of creating shadows and shadings in black and white films, which are important elements of the overall mise en scene when conveying meaning. All of the above terms are bipolar, when in fact many lighting setups lie somewhere in between.

Diffuser/Filter: A gelatin plate that is placed in front of light to change the effect. (Whether to cast a shadow or soften the light, for instance.)

CINEMATOGRAPHY—The camera work that records the mise-en-scene between edits. Each shot represents many choices made by the film makers. Why have they made these choices? What do these choices represent?

Tone—bright, sharp colors; grainy and black and white: hazy? If black and white when color was available, why would the film makers make this choice?

Film speed—slow or fast motion used? film speed reversed?

Camera Angle—The angle at which the camera is pointed at the subject: low (shot from below), high (shot from above), or eye-level (includes extreme low and high angle shots). This creates the angle of vision—the point of view—for the audience, and is often used to establish character's level of power and control (high angle shots can make character seem diminished), but there are many other uses as well.

Tracking, Panning, and Tilt—Tracking shot moves the camera either sideways or in and out. The camera can be mounted on a "dolly," "handheld" to create a jerkier effect, mounted on a crane and moved in all directions within a limited range, or in a helicopter, train, car, plane, etc. for other effects. Panning swings the camera horizontally, tilt swigs it vertically. These effects are often used simultaneously.

Angle of View/lens—The angle of the shot created by the lens. A wide angle lens presents broad views of subjects, and makes possible a large depth of field (many planes of action) as well as a deep focus shot. A normal lens (35 mm) can only focus on one plane at a time. A telephoto lens has a very narrow angle of views which acts like a telescope to focus faraway subjects and flattens the view.

Focus—"Shallow focus" uses sharp focus on the characters or things in one area of the shot and soft (blurred) focus in the rest. "Deep focus" brings out the detail in all areas of the shot. "Focus In" gradually "zooms" in on the subject, "focus out" gradually "zooms" out (these are known as "focus pulls"). Rack focus is an extremely fast focus pull that changes focus from one image/character to another by changing the focus to a different plane.

Shot distance—Full shot, three-quarters shot, mid- or half-shot, close-up and extreme close-up for shots of bodies; (extreme) long-shot, mid-shot, (extreme) close-up to describe more general.

Can be used to create sense of isolation (extreme long shot of character in a desert) or great pain, anger or joy (extreme close-up of character's face). Choice of lens (see above) can create strange effects (wide angle close up extends and distorts image at the edges, like a funhouse mirror; telephoto lens used in long shots flatten distances and putting background out of focus.

Frame—the border that contains the image. Can be "open" (with characters moving in and out); "moving" (using focus, tracking, panning); "canted" (at odd angles, unbalanced shot composition).

Shot composition—The relation of the elements of mise-en-scene to the frame. Small frames used with close-ups can create sense of claustrophobia, often enhanced by the set (low ceilings, numerous props and furnishings) and lighting. The set can also be used to frame the shot in other ways (lamps, flags, etc. on either side; a bed out-of-focus at the bottom of the frame) as can characters (as signs of intimidation, marginality, support, etc.) These types of shots are unbalanced. Look also for shots that are perfectly symmetrical.

MONTAGE—Editing ("cuts") within scenes and in the film in general, creating continuities and discontinuities, juxtapositions, and narrative structure. The standard Hollywood practice is to make cuts "invisible," and thus they are often difficult to pick up within a scene. "Montage" is also the term used for a series of quick cuts from a variety of locations that cohere narratively or thematically (the baptism scene in The Godfather I is a good example). "Accelerated montage" is what it sounds like (the prison escape scene in His Girl Friday).

Editing pace—within a sequence, from long takes (the opening credits of The Graduate) to "accelerated montage" (the chase scene of Bullit); within the film in general, to establish overall tone. Since the "natural" state of a Hollywood film movement, long takes coupled with a still camera can be used to increase intensity of a shot, make the audience uncomfortable, etc.

Establishing shot—Initial shot in a scene that establishes location, characters, and purpose of the scene.

Shot/counter shot—standard device used during dialogue between two characters; often starts with a "two-shot" of the two characters, then moves back and forth. Combined with camera angle, shot distance, and pace to establish point of view. Note when this standard device is not used, and for what purpose. Note when the person speaking is not viewed, or only back is viewed.

Reaction shot—Quick cut to pick up character's reaction to an event. Lack of reaction shot when it seems logical should be noted.

Jump Cut—A cut that occurs within a scene (rather than between scenes) that removes part of a shot. This shot is often done for effect by making the cut obvious and disrupting the invisible editing of Hollywood style.

Freeze Frame—A freeze shot, which is achieved by printing a single frame many times in succession to give the illusion of a still photograph.

Crosscutting—A shot inserted in a scene to show action happening elsewhere at the same time.

Cutaway—A cut within a shot to a location that links the action of the shot and condenses time (for example, a reaction shot of a woman watching a man climb some stairs, cutting out a flight in between the shots).

Match Cut—A cut in which two shots are linked by visual, aural, or metaphorical parallelism.

Scenes—An end of a scene is usually marked by a number of possible devices, including fade-ins and fade-outs (which may include a quick cut or a fade to black—note the length of time the blackout is maintained, which often implies significance of preceding scene, or else a long passage of time); wipe (a line moves across the screen, usually used in older films); dissolve (a new shot briefly superimposed on an old shot), often used to express continuity or connections (for example, the "stump scene" in Shane).

Sequence—A series of scenes that fit together narratively or representationally

Accelerated montage—a series of quick cuts that relate a variety of shots from different locations into a coherent story or

SOUND—Sometimes non-dialogue sound is the hardest element to pick out and analyze, yet is often extremely important and subject to just as much of the film makers focus as other elements. Note how sound is used—to underscore emotions, to alert the audience to an upcoming event, as an ironic counterpoint, etc. Carefully created and edited sounds (including the use of silences) creates a rich aural images the same way that mise en scene, shot composition, and montage create visual images. Note that sound is both part of the mise-en-scene and is a separate category of editing (since the audio track is separate from the video track).

Dialogue—Is it overlapping, mumbled, very soft or loud?

Sound effects—both the effects themselves (a doorbell ringing) and the manipulation of the sound (stereo effects which move sounds across the sound spectrum, or balance sounds on one side or the other; filtering and manipulating sounds).

Score—the background music used throughout the film. The score often maintains and manipulates a similar theme at various times (especially in older films), and is often used in relation to the narrative structure. Particular motifs or themes may be used in relation to particular characters.

Sound Bridge—Connects scenes or sequences by a sound that continues through the visual transition.

Direct sound refers to sound that is recorded at the time the scene is shot (usually dialogue, although audio inserts are possible. All audio inserts would be post-synchronous sound.).

Postsychronous sound refers to sound that is recorded and placed on the film audio track after the scene is shot (virtually all scores). Most non-dialogue sounds are inserted after production (for example, footsteps), as well as a fair amount of dialogue that is either inserted when characters are not shown speaking onscreen, or simply pasted over sections that the are deemed to need improvement.

Diegetic sound is heard within the film's diegesis (dialogue, a shot from a gun on screen).

Off-screen sound appears within the film's diegesis but not within the frame (extending off-screen space).

Non-diegetic sound is heard outside of the film's diegesis (such as film scores and voice-overs). A pop song that seems to be part of a the soundtrack but is found to be coming from, say, a car radio, is a diagetic sound and is an element worth noting.

Simultaneous sound is heard at the same time the action happens on screen.

Non-simultaneous sound is heard before or after the action happens on-screen.

For links to definitions used in film theory, CLICK HERE.

List of Essential Film Terms from Bordwell and Thompson, Film Art, CLICK HERE.

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last updated 9/14/00