

A Guide for Analyzing Film

This handout contains information on cinematic techniques, cinematography, film theory, as well as a list of additional resources, both online and in our libraries.

Cinematic techniques-general concepts

From: http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Cinematic_techniques

Cinematic techniques are methods employed by film makers to communicate meaning, entertain, and to produce a particular emotional or psychological response in an audience. Cinematographic techniques such as the choice of shot, and camera movement, can greatly influence the structure and meaning of a film.

Distance of shot

The use of different shots can influence the meaning which an audience will interpret:

- Close-up: May be used to show tension;
- Extreme close-up: Focuses on a single facial feature, such as lips;
- Medium shot
- Long shot
- Establishing shot: Mainly used at a new location to give the audience a sense of locality.

Camera angles

These are used extensively to communicate meaning and emotion about characters:

- Low angle shot: Looking up at a character or object, often to instill fear or awe in the audience;
- Straight angle shot
- High angle shot: Looking down on a character, often to show vulnerability or weakness;
- Canted or Oblique: The camera is tilted to show the scene at an angle. This is used extensively in the horror and science fiction genre. The audience will often not consciously realize the change.

Mise en scene

"Mise en scene" refers to what is colloquially known as "the Set", but is applied more generally to refer to everything that is presented before the camera. With various techniques, film makers can use the Mise En Scene to produce intended effects. Other aspects of Mise en Scene include:

- Costume
- Use of motif, and associated meaning;
- Use of color, and its emotional response;
- Props

Movement and expression

Movement can be used extensively by film makers to make meaning. It is how a scene is put together to produce an image. A famous example of this, which uses "dance" extensively to communicate meaning and emotion, is the film, *West Side Story*.

Cinematography-specific terminology

Provided in this list of film techniques is a categorized list of techniques used in film (motion pictures). (To find out more about any of these, Google the terms)

Camera view, angle, movement, shot

- Aerial shot
- American shot
- Bird's eye shot
- Close up
- Crane shot
- Dolly zoom
- Dutch angle
- Establishing shot
- "Evangelion" shot
- Follow shot
- Forced perspective
- Freeze frame shot
- Full shot
- Head-on shot
- High-angle shot
- Long shot
- Long take
- Low-angle shot
- Master shot
- Matte
- Medium shot
- Pan shot
- Point of view shot
- Reaction shot
- Sequence shot
- Shot
- Shot reverse shot
- Talking head
- Tracking shot
- Trunk shot
- Two Shot
- Video frame
- Whip pan

Lighting

In cinematography, the use of light can influence the meaning of a shot. For example, film makers often portray villains that are heavily shadowed or veiled, using silhouette. Techniques involving light include backlight (silhouette), and under-lighting (light across a character form).

Lighting technique and aesthetics

- Background lighting
- Cameo lighting
- Fill light
- Flood lighting
- High-key lighting
- Key lighting
- Lens flare
- Low-key lighting
- Mood lighting
- Pool hall lighting
- Rembrandt lighting
- Stage lighting
- Soft light

Editing and transitional devices

- Cross cutting
- Cutaway
- Cut in
- Dissolve
- Establishing shot
- Flashback
- Montage
- Point of view shot
- Split screen
- Talking head
- Wipe
- Clock wipe
- Heart wipe
- Matrix wipe
- Star wipe

Special effects (FX)

- 3-D film for movie history
- 3-D computer graphics
- Bluescreen/Chroma key
- Bullet time
- Computer-generated imagery (CGI)
- Special effects
- Stop trick
- Stop motion

Sound

Sound is used extensively in filmmaking to enhance presentation, and is distinguished into diegetic ("actual sound"), and non-diegetic sound.

Diegetic sound: It is any sound where the source is visible on the screen, or is implied to be present by the action of the film:

- Voices of characters;
- Sounds made by objects in the story; and
- Music, represented as coming from instruments in the story space.
- Music coming from reproduction devices such as record players, radios, tape players etc.

Non-diegetic sound: Also called "commentary sound", it is sound which is represented as coming from a source outside the story space, ie. its source is neither visible on the screen, nor has been implied to be present in the action:

- Narrator's commentary;
- Voice of God;
- Sound effect which is added for dramatic effect;
- Mood music; and
- Film Score

Non-diegetic sound plays a big role in creating atmosphere and mood within a film.

Sound effects

In motion picture and television production, a sound effect is a sound recorded and presented to make a specific storytelling or creative point, without the use of dialogue or music. The term often refers to a process, applied to a recording, without necessarily referring to the recording itself. In professional motion picture and television production, the segregations between recordings of dialogue, music, and sound effects can be quite distinct, and it is important to understand that in such contexts, dialogue and music recordings are never referred to as sound effects, though the processes applied to them, such as reverberation or flanging, often are.

Film Theory

Film theory debates the essence of the cinema and provides conceptual frameworks for understanding film's relationship to reality, the other arts, individual viewers, and society at large. Like traditional literature, critical theories also apply to films. Here are some theories specifically built around film, and discussions of traditional ones as they relate to film. Some information here is from:

<http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Film_theory> and the rest is from *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, by Timothy Corrigan. Please feel free to investigate on your own.

Historical Approaches

The historical approach involves investigating films according to their place within a historical context and in light of historical developments. Such an approach might explore the following:

- Historical relationships between films themselves, as when a writer compares and contrasts the use of sets in a film from the thirties with their use in a film from the seventies.
- The relationship of movies to their reception, demonstrated in an essay that explores how television in the fifties changed the expectations of movie audiences at that time.

National Cinemas

The presumption behind this approach is that film cultures evolve with a certain amount of individuality and that to understand a film we must locate it first in the political and aesthetic climate of the nation and time. According to this approach, ways of seeing the world and ways of portraying the world in the movies differ for each country and culture, and it is necessary to understand the cultural conditions that surround a movie if we are to understand what it is about.

When discussing a movie or group of movies from a culture, a writer might begin by questioning, with an open mind, what exactly distinguishes these films from the ones with which he or she is familiar. The following questions can be employed when generating ideas for an essay using this theory:

- How do the meanings of these films change when they are seen outside their culture?
- What similarities do films from this culture have that distinguish them from your culture? What does that say about cultural priorities, goals, or biases?

Auteur theory

Auteur criticism is one of the most widely accepted and often unconsciously practiced film criticisms today: it identifies and examines a movie by associating it with a director or occasionally with another dominant figure, such as a star (say, Clint Eastwood). Auteur criticism, examines the director's or dominant figure's works looking for commonalities or underlying themes, approaches, or ideas.

An essay using Auteur theory might focus on:

- How the auteur's works have changed over time
- How the auteur's break from the mainstream norm of the time he or she is working in represents something
- Are their special marks of this filmmaker in each of the films? How does that affect the works individually and as a whole?

Formalist Film theory

This type of analysis looks at the formal structures/elements of film, such as lighting, camera angles, mise-en-scene, are used to create a specific tone, style, effect, or message. Strictly speaking, formalist criticism does not emphasize matters outside the film proper.

- A writer may carefully look for stylistic or formal repetitions in the editing or lighting of the movie and may then describe how they work in relation to the rest of the film.
- Another option is to choose a visually complex scene or sequence and describe how it works and why it is important to the movie.

Ideological Film Theory

In one sense, ideology is a more subtle and expansive way of saying politics, at least if we think of politics as the ideas or beliefs on which we base our lives and our visions of the world. In critical writing attuned to ideology, any cultural product or creation carries, implicitly or explicitly, ideas about how the world is or should be seen, and how men and women should see each other in it: the clothes you wear express social values just as the films you watch communicate social values. Whether we agree or disagree with the values expressed in a particular movie, the ideological critic maintains that these movies are never innocent visions of the world and that the social and personal values that seems so natural in them need to be analyzed.

The following six approaches are the principal ideological schools of film criticism today. Each attends not only to the films themselves, but also to the ways those moves are made and understood by audiences.

- Studies of Hollywood Hegemony (control/power) focus on how classical film formulas dominate and sometimes distort ways of seeing the world.
- Feminist studies investigate how women have been both negatively and positively represented through the movies. We can extend this to gender studies and look at the way in which men have been treated or represented as well.
- Race studies concentrate on the depictions of different races in films, such as Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans
- Class studies analyze the social and economic arrangements shown in movies to illustrate how social power is distributed in and through certain films.
- Post colonial studies examine moves within a global perspective, aiming to reveal the repression of or emergence of indigenous perspectives within formerly marginalized or colonized cultures (like India or Iran)
- Queer theory investigates how normative relations can be challenged or disrupted through films, especially through confrontations with heterosexual values.

Resources

Online resources (you may have best luck when searching the web or databases, if you search for "motion pictures.")

Movie information and scripts

- The Internet Movie Database, lists movies, actors, directors, etc. Good place to find background and technical information on films: <http://www.imdb.com>
- SimplyScripts - links to hundreds of free, downloadable scripts: <http://www.simplyscripts.com/>
- Drew's Script-O-Rama: <http://www.script-o-rama.com/>
- Movie Scripts Archive: <http://www.mooviees.com/all/scripts>
- The Movie Turf (Scripts): <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/9371/scriptlist1.htm>

Analyzing and Writing about Film

- Google has a good links page to film theory and criticism
http://directory.google.com/Top/Arts/Movies/Theory_and_Criticism/
- Google's links to Online Journals:
http://directory.google.com/Top/Arts/Movies/Theory_and_Criticism/Journals/
- Yale's film analysis guide: <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>
- Watching and writing about film: <http://faculty.roosevelt.edu/putnam/392/Film/1.htm>
- A Checklist for analyzing movies: http://www.kenney-mencher.com/a_checklist_for_analyzing_movies.htm
- Dartmouth's page on writing about film:
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/film.shtml>

Sample criticism/writings

- Good sample with visuals so that you can see how a film analysis is developed
<http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>
- A good sample critical article about *Land of the Dead* from the *Film Journal*
<http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue13/landofthedead.html>

Resources in our library

- *The Filmmaker's Handbook : A Comprehensive Guide For The Digital Age* / Steven Ascher and Edward Pincus ; Transmountain; TR850 .P54 2007
- *Film Classics*. Transmountain; REF PN1994 .F43835 2006
- *Cinemachismo : Masculinities And Sexuality In Mexican Film* /Sergio De La Mora. Northwest, Transmountain ; PN1993.5.M4 M67 2006
- *Science, Literature, And Film In The Hispanic World* / edited by Jerry Hoeg and Kevin S. Larsen.; Transmountain ; PQ6046.S39 S39 2006
- *Allegories Of Cinema : American Film In The Sixties* / David E. James. Transmountain ; PN1993.5.U6J27 1989
- *American Dissident : The Political Art Of Michael Moore* / Francois Primeau. Transmountain ; PN1998.3.M665P74 2007
- *Forgive Us Our Spins : Michael Moore And The Future Of The Left* / Jesse Larner. Transmountain ; PN1998.3.M665 L37 2006
- *Hollywood, The Pentagon And Washington* / Jean-Michael Valantin. Mission del Paso; PN1995.9.P6 V35 2005
- *Make-Believe Media : The Politics Of Entertainment* / Michael Parenti.
- Valle Verde; Call number: PN1995.9.P6P37 1992
- *Speeding To The Millennium Film & Culture, 1993-1995* / [Electronic Resource] Joseph Natoli. c1998 Electronic Book
- *Endless Night [Electronic Resource] : Cinema And Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories* / edited by Jane Electronic Book c1999
- *Ideology And The Image : Social Representation In The Cinema And Other Media* / Bill Nichols. PN1995.N48 1981 BOOK c1981
- *Movies As Social Criticism : Aspects Of Their Social Psychology* / by I. C. Jarvie. Valle Verde; PN1995.9.S6J297 BOOK 1978
- *The Power Of Movies : How Screen And Mind Interact* / Colin McGinn. Mission del Paso; PN1995 .M3785 2005
- *Film As Social Practice* / Graeme Turner. BOOK 1999 Valle Verde; PN1995.9.S6 T87 1999
- Life the movie : how entertainment conquered reality / Neal Gabler. Mission del Paso; PN1995.9.S6 G32 2000 BOOK 2000
- *Movies And Mass Culture* / edited and with an introduction by John Belton. Rio Grande; PN1995.9.S6M68 1996
- *Gender, Ethnicity And Sexuality In Contemporary American Film* / [Electronic Resource] / Jude Davies And Carol R. Smith. 1997 Electronic Book
- *Generation Multiplex : The Image Of Youth In Contemporary American Cinema* / by Timothy Shary ; Foreword By David Considine. BOOK 2002 Valle Verde; PN1995.9.Y6 S53 2002
- *Kings Of The Bs : Working Within The Hollywood System : An Anthology Of Film History And Criticism* / edited By Todd McCarthy And Charles Flynn. BOOK 1975 Valle Verde; PN1993.5.U6K48
- *Masters Of The American Cinema* / Louis Giannetti. BOOK c1981 Valle Verde; PN1993.5.U6G49 1981

Starting Points for Film Analysis

As you begin to think about films, here are some questions that may guide you toward things you might discuss in your analysis.

- Is there a larger theme or cultural worldview inherent in the film?
- How is this theme(s) or worldview(s) expressed?
- What types of “voices” are used in the film? Is there a match between the speaker who you see and the voice associated/assigned to him/her? Are voices manipulated – how and for what purpose?
- What genre/type of film is this (e.g., ethnographic, educational, popular/feature, documentary)?
- What cinematic strategies are used to reinforce particular themes or messages? (e.g., lighting, montages, creative “cuts”, etc.)
- What images or symbols are employed in the film? Are these symbols presented strategically? If so, how?
- Is there a narrator? What is the narrator’s primary function in the film?
- Are the voices of the narrator and the people filmed on equal par? To what degree is intersubjective nature of film/filmmaking apparent in the final product?
- Who are the major characters in the film? Are women visible in the film?
- Whose perspective(s) guides the film?
- Does the film rekindle any thoughts in regard to the politics of representation?
- Might stereotypes be challenged or reinforced in the film?
- Does the film represent some aspect of culture using a cultural relativistic framework?
- Are power relations between filmmaker and those filmed apparent in the video?
- How “real” is this film? Does it seem more like a highly edited production (as are all texts) or less-produced/ethnographic?
- Is the focus of the film properly contextualized? How so? How might the film be better contextualized (historically, socio-culturally, politically, etc.)?