

## Some suggestions on "how to read a film"

(Thanks to Michael Goldberg, U Washington-Bothell)

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. 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 scène. 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When analyzing a film as a historical document, keep in mind the film's contemporary audiences or authors.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.

## 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.)

**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."

**Metaphor, symbolism**--similar to literary interpretation, only consider all aspects of the film--linguistic, visual, aural. Metaphors and symbolism 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).

## **BASIC ELEMENTS**

**Title/opening credits**--Titles are chosen carefully--consider alternatives and why this title was chosen; consider ambiguities in the title ("Medium Cool," a film about the media, a film about a heated political moment, a film where the main character is trapped in his own image of cool). 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 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 plot is constructed as the basic building blocks of the story, conveying specific events.

The narrative or narration is the process by which story information is conveyed to the audience through all of the cinematic means listed below. 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?

**Motivation**--Motivation is the justification given in the film for the presence of an element; it 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. 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.)

**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**

[see earlier handout on describing a shot]

**SHOT COMPOSITION**--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?

[see earlier handout on describing a shot]

**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.

**Editing pace**--within a sequence, from long takes (the train hallway scene in *Manchurian Candidate*) to "accelerated montage" (the convention scene in *The Manchurian Candidate*); 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) to condense the action of a scene (such as crossing a desert.)

**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.

**Cutaway**--A shot inserted in a scene to show action happening elsewhere.

**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.

**Sequence**--A series of scenes that fit together narratively or representationally.

**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.

**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.).

**Postsynchronous sound** refers to sound that is recorded and placed on the film audio track after the scene is shot (virtually all scores).

**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 the soundtrack but is found to be coming from, say, a car radio, is a diegetic sound.).

**Synchronous (or simultaneous) sound** is heard at the same time the action happens on screen.

**Non-Synchronous (or non-simultaneous) sound** is heard before or after the action happens on-screen.