

How to Watch Film

Consider the following guidelines as proposed by Jeffrey Geiger:

“When observing the vast array of visual and aural elements that make up the moving image, it might seem a daunting task to begin sorting out useful material from extraneous matter. Since it is nearly impossible to engage with every shot in a film, most instructors will suggest breaking the film down into **key scenes or sequences**, in order to facilitate a closer analysis of the film’s key components.

One simple approach to being more attentive to significant elements of the film image recalls the major categories of the Academy Awards, which are given out to **producers ("best picture"), writers, directors, actors, cinematographers, makeup artists, art directors, costume designers, editors, score composers**, and others. Of course, many would argue that the Oscars rarely go to the best films; that issue aside, if we can keep these categories in mind, we’ve gone some distance towards highlighting important details embedded in the moving image.

Context

The category of *producing* brings up the idea of context—the fact that films are always the products of specific social and historical conditions. They are also, by and large, commercial ventures bound by commercial imperatives. It is worth trying to familiarize yourself with the general socio-historical backdrop to a film through additional reading and through clues contained in the images themselves. Why might a specific place and moment in history have given rise to a particular film? Consider the conditions of production (is it a Hollywood blockbuster, a small-scale experimental film, European art cinema, or something else?) and the kind of critical and popular reception it might have had. Who would have been the film’s target audience? Who or what does it "speak" to? Would this film have resembled others made around the same time, or would it have stood out? Try also to position yourself socially and historically in relation to the film. Have certain cultural differences or historical changes had an impact on whether you enjoy and understand the film?

Script

It is often difficult to remember, when watching a completed visual text, that almost all films begin on the page before being transferred to the screen. The *writing or screenplay* category helps us to recall that behind every great film is usually a great script. Try to imagine how the film would appear on the page, paying attention to aspects of the dialogue and plot. Is the dialogue simple and direct or highly complex and allusive? Keep in mind that the script not only designates the actors’ spoken lines and stage directions, but attempts to conjure up larger visual and tonal components of the film, such as settings, camera movements, and the overall mood that the film should create.

Furthermore, thinking about the script also involves thinking about the overall structure of the plot, and, ultimately, this brings up the whole question of *narrative*. Since the vast majority of films we watch are narrative films, you will need to examine the role of narrative in constructing meaning. Even experimental films such as *Un Chien Andalou*, that aims to challenge narrative conventions, or documentary films like *Nanook of the North*, tend to tell stories on some level.

On the level of narrative, it is worth asking: what are the basic conflicts and oppositions that structure the plot, and what are its recurring themes and ideas? Is the plot purely linear, or are there flashbacks and other manipulations of chronology? Are we being told more than one story at the same time (cross-cutting or parallel editing), and if so, what is the relationship between the stories? Think about the manner in which the story is conveyed: do we follow the plot solely through a straightforward dramatization of events or are we guided by intertitles, superimposed words on the screen, or voice-overs? Does the film ever break with convention through the use of narrative elision, repetition, or other interruptions of the continuity? Does the

plot "self-reflexively" draw attention to the fact that we are watching a film by using devices such as film within a film; does it frequently refer to filmmaking, cinema-going, or film culture more generally? Thinking about narrative also leads us to consider the issue of genre, or the common features that lead to one kind of narrative being grouped in with others. Is this a western, a musical, a melodrama, a screwball comedy? How does the film signify genre through its use of themes, images, and technique?

Directors

A great deal, if not most, of the information needed to do productive film analysis can be achieved by exploring the connotations of complex signifiers contained in the image itself. Thinking about *directing* can be helpful here, since in most cases the director determines how the screenplay will be interpreted for the screen. Directors oversee most of the categories discussed below, and can determine the overall pace, style, and technical quality of a film. They not only call the shots, but also are instrumental in determining the overall mise-en-scène of the film (that is, what is "put in the scene" or, literally, "put upon the stage": the spaces and movements conjured up by the image, including the placement and movement of actors, camera movements, locations, set decoration, costumes, and make-up). The director also supervises the editing and postproduction stages of the film.

It is worth noting, therefore, whether the film was made by a "name" director who, through critical consensus, has attained the status of an **auteur**, or by a relatively unknown person. In this case of an auteur, are there any aspects of the film that recall the director's other work? What kind of impact might these associations have upon the film you are watching?

On a thematic level, for example, Howard Hawks has been identified as frequently including strong female characters in his films during a historical period in the US marked by prominent representations of male dominance. The presence of these female characters might suggest the need to consider more complex readings of representations of masculinity and femininity in all of his films. On a technical or stylistic level, John Ford is frequently frames characters and situations through windows and doors, creating a painterly "frame within a frame" effect. This recurring technique suggests the need to further consider associations conjured up by thresholds, which tend to connote potential movement, transition, and change. These frames also suggest significant juxtapositions between interiors and exteriors: between the realm of safety and domestic order and the realm of danger and the unknown. That said, a director-centered approach is far from foolproof, and often runs the risk of ascribing intentionality to the image: that is, second-guessing the intentions of the filmmakers, based on scant evidence. Ultimately, the meanings we gather from reading moving images are our own—but it is always important to back up these claims with evidence from the film.

Actors

Clearly, good film analysis requires looking carefully at the image and making note of actions, objects, and spatial relations taking place within the frame, even when they appear wholly unremarkable. *Acting*, for example, can be natural, but it can also be intentionally played up (melodramatic or "over the top"), played down (muted or deadpan), or entirely non-professional. In Hollywood films, particularly, the presence of a **star** such as John Wayne or Katherine Hepburn can also have an impact on the status and meanings associated with particular characters. An entire film might be a star vehicle for Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts, Marlon Brando, or an actor-director like Clint Eastwood, in which case we need to think not just about the significance of particular characters to the plot, but also about how "extra-filmic" aspects of the film's star persona interact with the "pro-filmic" of the narrative itself—that is, how a star can influence both the production and popular reception of a film, thereby influencing the meanings produced by what ends up on the screen.

Motion picture photography

Cinematography is a general term for the techniques of motion picture photography. This category defines the "look" of the film and encompasses a diverse range of aesthetic choices, such as **framing, camera movement, film speed** (slow or fast motion), **film stock** (black and white or color; fine grained or coarse grained), **exposures, camera angles, lenses** (deep focus, wide angle, zoom), **shot selection** (wide, medium, two-shot, close up), **lighting** (natural or artificial, high key or low key), and other technical areas. A film's cinematography contains innumerable revealing details, but it is usually designed (at least in the classical Hollywood tradition) to be unobtrusive: facilitating, rather than upstaging, the telling of the story. Some films, like *Citizen Kane*—known for cinematographer Gregg Toland's deep focus and long takes—have intentionally pushed the limits of this presupposition, developing creative and innovative takes on cinematic realism while constructing a highly artificial *mise-en-scène*. In a famous scene following the screening of a newsreel about Kane's life near the beginning of the film, reporters and editors of "News on the March"—a parody of "The March of Time" newsreels—are dramatically backlit by a projector booth and an empty movie screen as they discuss Kane's mysterious life. In some shots, their silhouetted, gesticulating arms and hands appear to throw beams of light across the room. While on one level this might be read as primarily a virtuoso photographer's display, serving no function beyond the visual, but on another level the dramatic lighting setup impels us to speculate about the images' possible significance. Are these reporters heroic figures on a quest for truth? Or, confident as they appear, are they floundering amidst the projector's bright light and an empty screen, their figures articulating only empty space as they embark on a futile attempt to discover "Rosebud"?

Editing

If cinematography defines the "look" of the image, **editing** determines the rhythm and pace of the film. Editing encompasses not just the process of stringing shots together to make up particular sequences, but involves the assemblage and sequencing of whole scenes or sections of the film, thus determining how the narrative unfolds (for example, the story of *Memento* unfolds backward—this is mainly a narrative device, but on another level it required a skilful editing job to allow for the transitions between scenes to make sense). One tends to think of editing as primarily pertaining to the visible "cut" between shots, but it extends to other areas too, such as sound. The dominant system of editing, handed down from the Hollywood tradition, is known as **continuity editing**, which strives to render the cuts invisible in order to produce a seamless visual and narrative experience. Continuity editing involves such techniques as **cuts on action** (creating the illusion of continuous motion from one shot to the next), **shot-reverse-shot** structuring that obeys the "**180 degree rule**" (positing an artificial line which the camera cannot cross, thereby creating the illusion of a unified space across shots), **eye-line match** (in which the look of a character is matched spatially to what he or she is looking at), and **sound bridging** (in which continuous music or sound is used to "bridge" the cuts between shots), among other techniques.

Alternatives to continuity editing are increasingly common, and have been widely imported into mainstream video and filmmaking. Still, these alternatives have long been associated with various forms of resistance to dominant modes of film production, and therefore have been seen as working in opposition to dominant ideology. Eisenstein's **montage theory**, for example, posits that shots and editing are the basic components of film: he called them "the nerve of cinema." Eisenstein argued that a dialectical relationship exists between separate images or signifiers, and that the juxtaposition of shots in film generates new meanings that were absent from the original components. That is, shot 'a' juxtaposed with shot 'b' leads to a new idea, 'c', which expands beyond the ideas associated with individual shots 'a' and 'b'. This concept led Eisenstein to advocate an editing technique—montage—in which the dynamic juxtaposition of shots engendered radical associations in the film viewer. Other alternative editing styles range from the disorienting Surrealism of Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* to the use of jump cuts in Godard's *Breathless*—a technique Godard expanded as he developed a theory of "countercinema." In almost all of these cases,

alternatives to continuity editing have suggested to its purveyors that editing practice can constitute a conscious refusal of the ideological status quo implied in the standard Hollywood style.

When analyzing the editing of a particular film or sequence, then, make note of the techniques described above; if you notice alternative techniques to the classical Hollywood mode, such as eye-line mismatches, abrupt cuts, violation of the 180 degree rule, and so on (and you will find that many Hollywood films also intentionally go against these rules), try to consider the function and implications of these techniques within the overall *mise-en-scène* and narrative framework of the film. Think too, especially, of the impact of these techniques on the viewer, and whether they willingly throw viewers out of the framework of belief normally created by the narrative structure. Is the editing encouraging absorption into the narrative, or is it striving to make the viewer more intently aware of the viewing process itself?

Sound

The last component to be discussed here, **sound**, is frequently overlooked and underplayed in film analysis. Sound comprises **spoken dialogue, sound effects, music, and all other aural aspects** of the film—sounds that are, in most cases, produced artificially in the studio through post-dubbing. When listening to a film, try to become more sensitive to the illusory aspects of **artificial sound**. Sounds of footsteps, tinkling keys, and slamming doors might seem authentic since they are bound to the diegesis—the narrative world conjured up by the film—while the musical score, even while helping to trigger emotional responses, may sound patently artificial. But both **diegetic sound** (that is, the on-screen and off-screen sounds heard by the characters in the film that constitute part of the narrative) and **non-diegetic** sound (all other sound effects, such as voice-overs and musical scores) is produced long after the visuals, and matched to the visual track during postproduction.

Studio productions like *Casablanca*, *The Godfather*, and *2001* rely on artificial sound in order to maintain continuity—artificial sound levels can be highly regulated in the process of post-dubbing, while real sound is more unpredictable. Furthermore, actors and directors have come to rely on post-dubbing as an opportunity to smooth over flaws in vocal performances or to disguise gaps in the narrative. A number of films, such as Donan and Kelly's *Singin' in the Rain*, Almodovar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, and Fellini's *8 1/2*, directly address the process of sound production as part of the plot, and in so doing ironically draw attention to the ways that the fictional cinematic world produces aural and visual fantasy. Pasolini's *Theorema* uses artificial sound that is so obviously 'poorly' done that we can't help but notice its fakeness, thereby making us aware of the cinema's production of illusion. A keen ear will begin to pick up the subtle differences between artificial sound and real sound. Many films, such as Kiarostami's *Close-Up* or *Through the Olive Trees*, reject the use of artificial sound, due to financial restrictions and/or the desire to enhance a sense of cinematic realism. Real sound, with its uncontrollable bumps, scratches, and dogs barking in the distance, can often have a more visceral and immediate impact than the standard Hollywood offering.

Remember, finally, that the best film analysis avoids placing too much emphasis on obvious aspects of the film, such as retelling the plot, reproducing passages of dialogue, or simply listing visual techniques. The best analysis works to reveal the denser meanings behind the surface of the film, drawing on concrete examples from the text. Good analysis examines the broader implications of what the film *represents*, rather than what it *shows*.