

READING FILMS CRITICALLY

Films, like literary texts, can be decoded or “read” to uncover multiple levels of meaning. While cinema uses language to communicate meaning, it also adds visual imagery, movement and sound. The rhetoric of film becomes more complex than the rhetoric of literature; “figures of speech” become “figures of speech, image, sound and movement”. Like literary texts, motion pictures employ different narrative styles and use punctuation devices to create meaning by linking and separating parts of the film.

To enrich your understanding of the language of motion pictures, this brief guide names and describes some central elements of the rhetoric of cinema. Many of the elements described below are used in popular feature films.

ELEMENTS OF FILM

In literary texts, we speak of the contributing parts as words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. In film, there are:

Frame: A single photograph from a strip of film. A “freeze frame” is a shot that is reprinted a number of times on the filmstrip which, when projected, gives the illusion of a still photograph.

Shot (take): A single unedited, uncut strip of film; images are recorded continuously from the time the camera starts to the time it stops.

Scene: A unit of film composed of a number of interrelated shots, joined by an editor. A scene is usually unified by a location, incident or minor dramatic climax.

Sequence: A unit of film usually composed of a number of interrelated scenes, and usually leading to a major climax.

THE CAMERA: FRAMING, ANGLE, POSITION AND FOCUS

Framing: The use of the edges of the film frame to select and compose what will be visible on screen.

Mise-en-scene: All of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed (setting, lighting, characters, etc.).

ANGLE/TYPE OF SHOT:

Bird's-eye view: Extreme high-angle shot; the camera is directly or almost directly above the image photographed.

High angle shot: the camera is high above the image photographed.

Eye-level: the camera is about five or six feet above the ground –at about eye level of someone of average height.

Low-angle shot: the camera is below the image photographed.

Wide-angle shot: the camera uses a lens of short focal length. This affects a scene's perspective by distorting straight lines near the edges of the frame and by exaggerating the distance between foreground and background planes. This often creates a disorienting sense for the viewer; horror and mystery films may frequently employ this technique.

Point-of-view shot: Any shot taken from the vantage point of a character in the film. Also known as first-person camera, "POV" shot.

Handheld camera: The use of the camera operator's body as a camera support, either holding it by hand or using a harness.

POSITION:

Extreme Close-Up: minutely detailed view of an object or person. An extreme close-up of an actor may include only her eyes or mouth.

Close-up: A detailed view of person or object, usually without much context. A close-up of an actor usually includes only his head. Romantic scenes or introspective scenes often use close-ups.

Medium shot: A relatively close shot, revealing a moderate amount of detail. A medium shot of a figure generally includes the body from the knees or waist up.

Two-shot: a medium shot with two actors. Variation: three shot

Long shot: Includes an amount of picture within a frame, which roughly corresponds to the proscenium arch of live theater.

Extreme long shot: A panoramic view of an exterior location, photographed from a great distance, often as far as one-quarter mile away.

Establishing Shot: A shot, often an extreme long shot, which sets up or establishes the locale, central characters and/or theme of a film. (“Establishing scenes”, usually first scenes, convey the same effect.)

Tracking shot: The camera moves through space horizontal to the ground on a moving support. This type of shot creates the sense that a camera may be following a character.

Panning shot (pan): The camera moves right and left on a stationery tripod, and scans the visual space horizontally.

FOCUS:

Deep focus: All planes of distance from close-up outward are in focus.

Soft Focus: All but one distance range is blurred and out-of-focus, calling visual attention to the plane that is clear. This technique is often used with close-ups.

FILTERS: Sometimes cinematographers use filters, transparent or translucent pieces of glass or gelatin placed in front of the camera or printer lens. Filters alter the quantity or quality of light; colored filters may be used to influence the perceptions of viewers. A golden image may suggest nostalgia, while a blue-ish image may evoke sadness or mystery.

LIGHTING: is used to evoke mood and to direct the viewer's attention to a particular aspect of the frame. "Hard lighting", for example, creates a stark contrast between the lighted and shadowed areas of the scene and may be used more frequently in realistic dramas. In contrast, "soft lighting" is subtler and may be employed commonly in romantic comedies or melodramas.

EDITING:

Many Hollywood films use the style of continuity editing, which seeks to maintain a continuous and clear sense of narrative. Some films, however, employ discontinuity editing, which presents a much more disordered sense of temporal and spatial relationships. Most of the techniques listed below are used in continuity editing.

PLAYING WITH TIME:

Flashback: the interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the past.

Flashforward: The interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the future.

LINKING AND SEPARATING TWO OR MORE SHOTS:

Cut: The splicing of two strips of film together.

Jump Cut: An abrupt transition between shots, which is disorienting to the continuity of time/space. "Jump cuts" are used to create a sense of motion and action in the narrative.

Shot/reverse shot: Two framings edited together, alternating characters in a conversation.

Superimposition: The exposure of more than one image on the same filmstrip.

Montage: Juxtaposition of images emphasizing a dynamic, often discontinuous, relationship between shots.

Cross-cutting: Editing that alternates shots of two or more lines of action going on in different places, usually simultaneously. Sometimes film editors attempt to create a sense of continuity by using the technique of “match-on-action”, in which two different scenes will be connected with a similar action by a character (e.g. closing a car door, opening a window).

Fade: The fade-out is the slow fade of the picture from normal brightness to a black screen. A fade-in is the slow brightening of the picture from black to normal brightness.

Wipe: A transition between shots in which a line passes across the screen, eliminating the first shot as it goes and replacing it with the next one.

Dissolve: A transition between two shots during which the second image gradually appears as a superimposition until the two are evenly blended, and the first image gradually disappears.



Some of these definitions are taken from David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *FILM ART: AN INTRODUCTION*, Second Ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).