

Part 1: Reading Meaning in Films through Multiple Modes
& Taking Viewing Notes

Introduction:

Making a film: A simplified flow chart

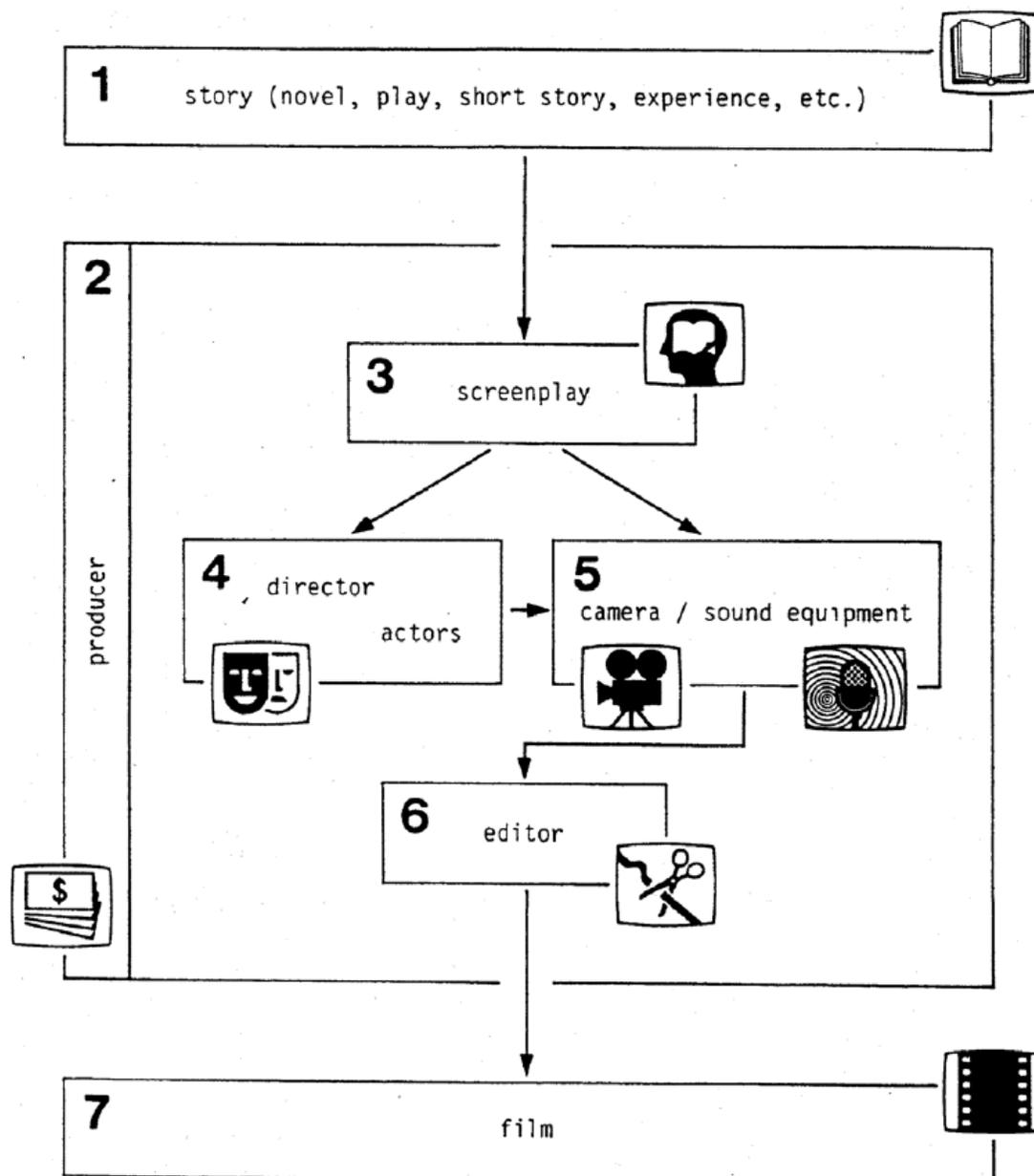


Figure Source:

Liebelt, W. (1996). *The language of film: terminology, interpretation questions and lists for working with films in English class*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.schuleplus.de/Englisch/films/filmanalysis-language.htm>

Critical and Analytical Writing about Film in the Literature in English Classroom

Overview

- How do filmmakers create meaning through multiple modes in a film?
- What are the different modes that contribute to the meaning of a scene in a film?

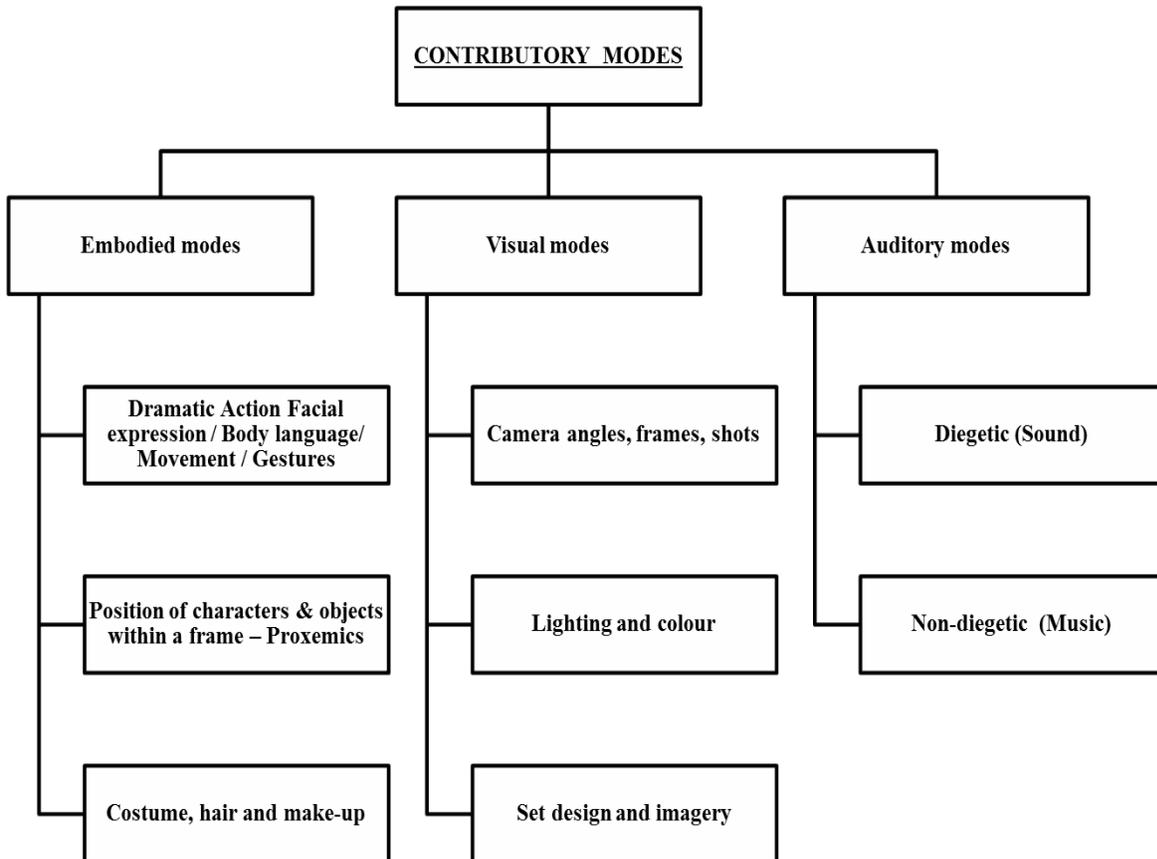


Chart adapted from:

Burn, A. (2013). *The kineikonic mode: Towards a multimodal approach to moving image media*, NCRM ePrints, UK. Retrieved from: <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3085/>

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Key concepts

1) Embodied modes:

a. Dramatic Action/ Performance: Facial expression / Body language / Movement / Gestures

The dramatic action or performance in film includes an actor's facial expressions and body language. With film's ability to create a close-up of an actor's face, for example, there is a much wider and subtler range of emotions and feelings that can be conveyed and expressed through the medium by means of performance. Eyes give particularly important signals when trying to read someone's expression. Likewise movement and the way in which actors hold and move their bodies shows how they are thinking and feeling.

b. Proxemics: Position of characters and objects within a frame or the spatial relationships among characters within the mise-en-scene, and the apparent distance of the camera from the subject photographed

The positioning and movement of characters within a frame is also very significant for both characterisation and narrative within a film. A filmmaker can successfully draw an audience's attention to an important character merely through placing them in the foreground of the frame. Likewise placing a moving body in a stationary background or vice versa has the same effect. Positioning can also be used to indicate relationships between people; for example, creating physical distance between two characters in a frame can indicate emotional distance that they might be experiencing at that point in the film.

c. Costume, hair, and make-up

Costume (the clothes that characters wear) in narrative cinema is used to signify character, or advertise particular fashions, or to make clear distinctions between characters.

Costume and make-up play a large part in mise-en-scene because they can give you a very immediate sense not only of a character's personality but also of their status in the film and how they function within the world around them. They also give you an instant idea of what period a film is set in and the culture it is centred around.

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2) Visual modes:

a. Camera angles, frames, and shots

- Camera Angle - the camera's angle of view relative to the subject being photographed

1. High Angle – “looks” down on the subject - the Angle of Destiny is a decidedly high angle shot that suggests an omniscience, a moment of great contemplation of decision-- often held for an extended period of time
2. Low Angle – the camera “looks” up at the subject - often used to give the figure a dominate and powerful presence; the audience is made to feel submissive
3. Flat Angle/Straight-on angle – the camera is at eye level and on the same plane as the subject

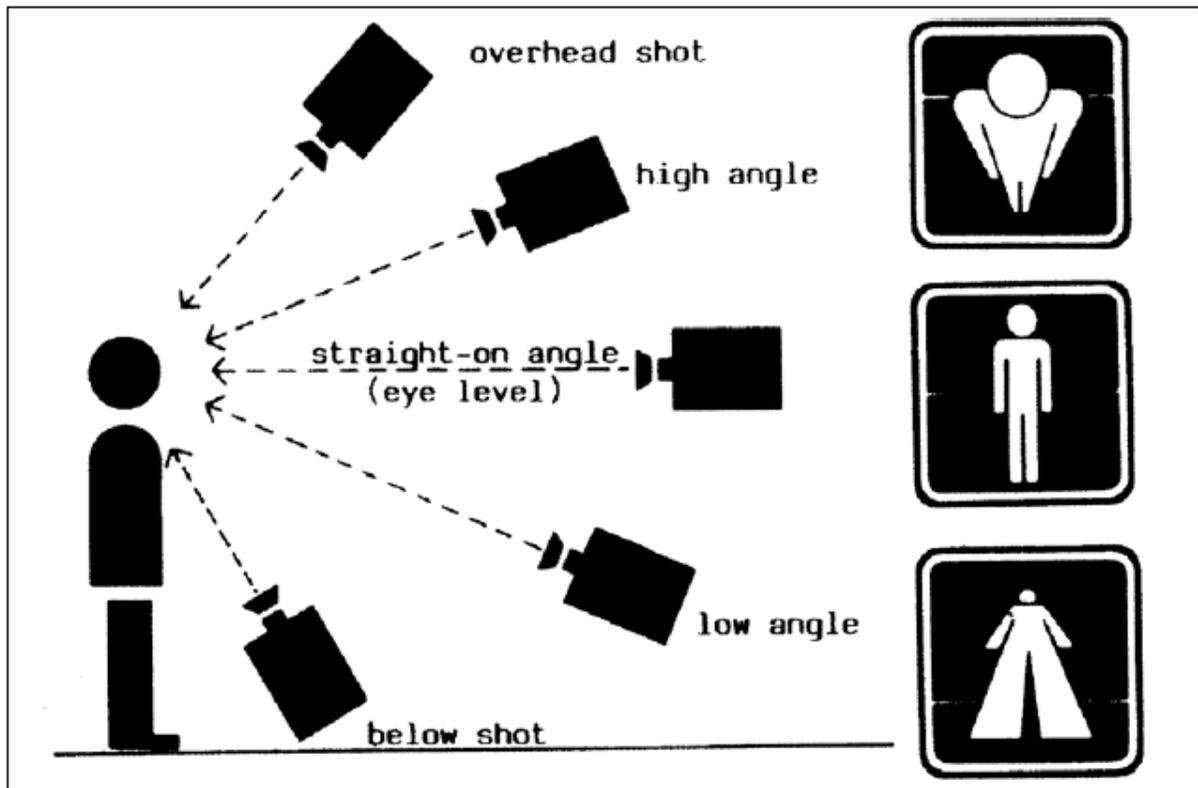


Figure Source:

- Liebelt, W. (1996). *The language of film: terminology, interpretation questions and lists for working with films in English class*. Retrieved from: <http://www.schuleplus.de/Englisch/films/filmanalysis-language.htm>

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- Shot Type – refers to the positioning and distance between the camera and its subject. The main types of shot include:



1. Extreme Long Shot – a panoramic view of an exterior location, photographed from a great distance, often as far as a quarter-mile away; often used to frame landscapes or bird's-eye views of cities -the human figure is barely visible or not visible at all
2. Long shot – figures are more prominent, but the background still dominates; the image roughly corresponds to the audience's view of the area within the proscenium arch in live theatre.
The Long Shot or the Extreme Long Shot are often used as Establishing Shots, ones that orient the audience to location and surroundings, showing the spatial relations among the important figures
3. Medium Long Shot – a balance between figure and background; the figure is usually framed from about the knees up
4. Medium shot – the figure is framed from about the waist up
5. Medium close-up – the figure is framed from the chest up
6. Close-up – a detailed shot usually showing just the head or a small, significant object - used largely to isolate a character from the setting and from all other characters so that the audience will pay attention only to that character. The camera is very close to the object; with human subjects, the face and its expressions are shown. The slightest nuance of expression in an actor's face is shown and can become significant.
7. extreme close-up – singles out a portion of the body or isolates a detail - often used for symbolic purposes to reinforce the significance of an object - may also be used to intensify an emotion--an extreme close-up of an actor generally only includes his/her eyes or mouth

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b. Lighting and colour:

- Lighting can create atmosphere and mood as well as signify meaning, e.g. in the horror genre, light and shade are codes of meaning. Cinematographers use light and shade to direct the audience's attention to a particular part of the filmic space. Lighting can often be used as a characteristic of the style of a whole film or over a number of scenes.
- 1. key light - The **key light** is the main source of illumination, but if used alone it will leave shadows.
- 2. fill light - Another light is therefore required to fill in these areas of darkness and to soften the shadows the key light has cast. This has become known as the **fill light**, a secondary light source of slightly less intensity than the key light which is placed at eye level.
- 3. back light - Yet even this combination of key and fill light must be supplemented further if a director is seeking to create a sense of depth. The third light source that provides the necessary depth is known as the **back light**, as it is placed above and behind the subject. Used on its own, the back light alone would create a silhouette of the subject. But the triple combination of key, fill and back lights, separates the subject from its environment and creates a feeling of depth.
- Lighting techniques can be divided into high key or low key categories.
- 1. A low-contrast ratio of key and fill light will result in an image of almost uniform brightness. This is termed **high-key lighting**. This is a standard, conventional lighting scheme employed in Hollywood genres such as the musical and the comedy.
- 2. A high-contrast ratio of key and fill light will result in **low-key lighting**, producing dark shadows and a night time effect, faces will often be bleached white against a black background. Genres such as horror and film noir employ low-key lighting for its atmospheric shadows and intense contrast of light and darkness.

c. Setting (through set design) and imagery

- Settings used in films are rarely just backgrounds but are integral to creating atmosphere and building narrative within a film. The film maker may either select an already existing locale or may choose to construct the setting through set design. In some cases a particular location or building can even be regarded as a character within the film itself. The overall design of the setting can significantly shape how we understand the action of the story.

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3) Auditory modes:

a. Diegetic sound - the sound that has a source in the world of the story, such as dialogue spoken by characters, sounds made by objects, or music coming from a source grounded in the narrative.

The diegesis is the 'world of the film': if something is on the screen (including sounds from objects within the mise-en-scene) it is 'in the diegesis' or said to be 'diegetic'. Sound that is a part of the action is diegetic, e.g. wind noise, screeching cars, music from a hi-fi, etc; sound that is added to create mood or atmosphere is non-diegetic. Diegetic sounds may, of course, also be dubbed after filming, or may be exaggerated for effect (e.g. loud footsteps, whistling wind, etc.).

b. Non-diegetic sound - the sound coming from a source outside the world of the story, usually part of the score or soundtrack.

Suggested questions for discussion (In pairs or groups)

1. Identify the various embodied modes used within the scene. How do these modes contribute to the film's narrative? Setting (Where is the film set?) Discussion - How does the set contribute to the finale of the scene?
2. Identify the camera angles and shots used in both the scenes and discuss the meaning conveyed by these angles/shots
3. What the sounds do you hear in the clip? Why do you think that the filmmakers chose to include these sounds? What atmosphere do these sounds give? At what points does the background music blend into or overtake the diegetic sound? How do these sounds contribute to the mood of the scene?
4. Sample activity sheet for students:

Scene	Action	Description of sound	Diegetic/Non diegetic	Atmosphere created by sound	Music – type and atmosphere
1.	Shot 1 of A				
2.	Shot 2 with B				
3.	Shot 3 of C followed by D				

5. Can you identify one scene that is particularly remarkable for its use of either
 - mise-en-scene (setting, costume/make-up, performance and lighting)
 - camera technique (framing, shooting angle, movement, etc)
 - sound (including music)

Explain how and why.

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Useful textbooks for teachers

- Boggs, Joseph M. and Petrie, Dennis W (2004). *The Art of Watching Films, Sixth Edition*. New York, NY. McGraw Hill.
(University-level textbook with invaluable resources for teachers who are looking to educate themselves about the art and language of film)
- Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kristin (2001). *Film Art: An Introduction, Tenth Edition*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
(University-level textbook that focuses primarily on the art of the visual, sumptuously illustrated with a plethora of stills from movies past and present)
- Prince, Stephen (2001). *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film, Second Edition*. Toronto, ON: Allyn and Bacon.
(Comprehensive and well-laid out textbook devoted exclusively to Film Studies)

Useful web resources for teachers

- <https://teachfilmstudy.com/>
- <http://film-english.com/film-glossary/>
- <http://www.intofilm.org/schools-resources>

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Viewing Notes

- 1) Embodied modes:
 - Identify the **embodied modes** used within the scene.
 - How do these modes contribute to the film's narrative?
- Dramatic Action and Position of characters
 1. How does the filmmaker draw our attention to important characters in the scene?
 2. What do the positions and facial expressions of the main characters tell us about the ensuing narrative?
- Costumes, hair, and make-up
 1. What are the characters wearing?
 2. How do they define the characters (and their development)?
 3. Do they carry any cultural implications /meaning related to a particular time period or social class? How?

Scene Description:							
Characters	Name of the character	Action performed	Position in the frame	Facial Expression	Line/ Dialogue	Costume / (Hair and Makeup)	Meaning conveyed (time period/social class/intention)
Character 1							
Character 2							
Character 3							

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2) Visual modes:

- What is the dominant emotion expressed in the scene?
- Discuss how the visual modes contribute to the mood / emotion of the scene?

● Setting

1. Where does the scene take place?
2. Why did the filmmaker choose this place for the scene? How does it relate to the content? What does it suggest?

● Camera Angles Lighting

4. Identify the camera angles - high/low/eye-level?
5. What shots are used by the filmmaker? Long/medium/close?
6. What do these angles and shots mean in the scene?
7. What kind of lighting and contrast is used? Hard/soft? High-key/low-key? Why?

Scene Description:						
Scene Setting – i.e. Location						
Shot	Action	Line/ Dialogue	Camera Angle	Camera Distance / Shot type	Lighting and colour	Emotion/ Mood + Effect
Shot 1						
Shot 2						
Shot 3						

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3) Auditory Modes: Sound design

1. What sounds do you hear in the clip?
2. Why do you think that the filmmakers chose to include these sounds?
3. At what points does the background music blend into or overtake the diegetic sound?
4. How do these sounds contribute to the mood of the scene?

Scene: Description						
Shot	Action	Line/ Dialogue	Description of sound	Diegetic/Non -diegetic	Atmosphere created by sound	Music – type and atmosphere
Shot 1 of A						
Shot 2 with B						
Shot 3 of C followed by D						

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Part 2: Writing about Film

1. Analyzing film

- Purpose of analyzing artworks: to articulate an idea that helps us better understand and appreciate the work
 - “better understand” means the analysis cannot just describe surface-level features of the work; it must propose new and/or non-obvious ideas about the work
 - criterion for obviousness: would most competent audience members immediately agree with the main point of the analysis?
- What is analysis?
 - generally: to explain how something’s parts relate to the thing as a whole
 - for artworks: to explain how elements of the artwork (its “parts”) combine to create the functions, effects, or meanings (or a combination of these) of the artwork as a whole
- Note: analysis is not evaluation
 - Film reviews and film criticism often include evaluative claims about film quality (i.e. whether a film is good or bad in various ways)
 - Film reviews and film criticism often incorporate film analysis to support their evaluative claims
 - But film analysis does not involve evaluation; its aim is to explain how a film’s elements work together to achieve certain effects

2. Film form

- Different types of artworks are made of have different elements of form and use different techniques
 - poetry
 - elements: words
 - techniques: rhyme, alliteration, metaphor
 - painting
 - elements: paint, canvas
 - techniques: color choice, composition, perspective
 - film
 - elements: motion, images, sounds

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- stylistic techniques: editing, cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound
- narrative techniques: characterization, providing or withholding information, structuring narrative into acts
- A film's formal elements are combined in an overall system to convey the film's narrative and to create certain effects or meanings
 - As a system, the elements affect each other and work together
 - Films have narrative elements (e.g. characters, story events) and stylistic elements (e.g. camera movement, lighting)
 - Film conventions are characteristics that are common to certain types of films, such as particular genres or films from certain historical periods
 - Audiences are often familiar with film conventions even if we are unable to identify or articulate them
 - A film's form and the audience's experience of film conventions combine to create expectations in the audience, which the film will fulfill, modify, and/or oppose
- Principles of film form
 - Functions
 - Each element of a film has particular narrative and/or stylistic functions
 - To explore an element's functions, ask:
 - what other aspects of the film rely on the presence of this element?
 - is the presence of this element in the film explained by any other element of the film?
 - Note: functions do not depend on a creator's intent; an element may function in a certain way regardless of its intended purpose
 - Similarity and repetition
 - Formal elements may be repeated across a film, creating a *motif*
 - Repeated elements are sometimes said to draw attention to parallels between scenes, characters, or events
 - Difference and variation
 - Motifs are rarely repeated exactly; there is variation between them
 - Formal elements may also be presented in ways that create opposition
 - Development

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- Aspects of a film may change in a progression that extends across a film
- *Segmenting* a film can help identify patterned ways that formal development occurs
- Unity or disunity
 - Elements of a film fit together in a system that is unified to a greater or lesser degree
 - Although mainstream audiences often like unity, particularly narrative unity (e.g. no plot holes and all narrative threads resolved at the film's end), unity need not be seen in evaluative terms

3. Preparation for writing the film analysis

- Summary of analysis process:
 - preparation/note-taking
 - thesis development
 - thesis support
- Preparation:
 - A film analysis will require watching the film several times and taking detailed notes
 - Create a film segmentation: a summary description of a film, in list or outline form, briefly describing the film's narrative events
 - Usually, each scene is given one line
 - Depending on the film, other information may need to be captured in the segmentation
 - e.g. in a film with many flashbacks, you might note the time in which the scene takes place
 - The segmentation helps you identify patterns in the film's elements or structures
 - During this process, take notes on salient film techniques that are not captured in the segmentation

4. Thesis development:

- The thesis will propose one or more functions that the film's techniques serve for the film as a whole
 - Analysis: how the parts relate to the whole
 - These large-scale functions are often expressed in terms of effects or meanings

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- Effects
 - Film elements, usually in combination, can create certain effects on the audience
 - These effects can be understood psychologically, and include narrative comprehension and elicitation of emotion
 - e.g. claims about effects:
 - “*The Godfather*’s opening scene suggests that Michael is different from other members of the Corleone family.”
 - “*The Godfather* structures its narrative to encourage the audience to sympathize with Michael.”
- Meanings
 - Films convey two types of meanings to the audience: explicit and implicit
 - Explicit: meanings directly represented or directly implied by the film’s images and sounds
 - explicit meanings will be agreed on by competent viewers
 - e.g. explicit meanings:
 - “*The Godfather* is about a mafia family.”
 - “*The Godfather* shows that family influence can change a person’s moral values.”
 - Implicit: meanings hidden in the film, and conveyed only indirectly
 - competent viewers may disagree about implicit meanings
 - an analysis that concentrates on proposing implicit meanings conveyed using symbolism, metaphor, or stylistic techniques is often called an “interpretation” or “reading” of a film
 - e.g. implicit meanings:
 - “*The Godfather* suggests that moral behavior is a childish fantasy that must be abandoned once one accepts adult responsibilities.
 - “*The Godfather* reflects the anti-immigrant sentiment of the 1970s by showing an Italian family succeeding only through illegal activity.”
- Make specific claims rather than promising future ideas

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- A strong thesis makes a specific claim about the film that is the conclusion of an analysis, rather than describing what the essay plans to do or vaguely referring to a topic area
- e.g. strong thesis: “*The Godfather* uses editing and set design to emphasize its theme that the mafia is as much about family obligations as it is about criminal activity.
- e.g. weak theses:
 - “This essay will explore ways *The Godfather* relates family obligations and crime.”
 - “This essay will discuss set design and editing in the film *The Godfather*.”
 - “*The Godfather* approaches issues of family and criminal activity in several different ways.”
- thesis “red-flag” words: explore, discuss, analyze, describe, examine
- a strong thesis will signal not just the main insight of the analysis, but signal how the insight will be supported (i.e. what types of evidence or examples may be used)
- Unity
 - the thesis should propose and defend one main idea
 - if the thesis compares two artworks, it must provide a good reason to compare them; typically, the reason is that the comparison is mutually illuminating (i.e. comparing the artworks helps us understand each artwork better)
 - a comparison is mutually illuminating when the thesis shows that the films have both similarities and contrasts that bring out non-obvious features of each film
 - e.g. the films achieve a similar effect but in different ways: “*The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* both portray the internal conflict of a young man rising in status in a mafia family. *The Godfather* primarily portrays this internal conflict indirectly, using techniques such as lighting and facial expressions. *Goodfellas*, in contrast, relies on direct expression of this conflict through voice-over from the film’s main character.”
 - This comparison brings out features of the films, such as the level of directness through which internal conflict is portrayed, that might not be noticed otherwise.

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- e.g. the films promote different themes despite apparent similarities: e.g. “Although *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* both portray the intersection between family obligations and criminal activity in mafia families, *The Godfather* suggests that these relationships can work together successfully, while *Goodfellas* suggests that they are opposing forces.”
 - This comparison encourages the reader to consider whether each film shows family and crime as reinforcing or opposed, which is a non-obvious feature of each film.
- a comparison is not justified when the works are overly similar, overly different, or when the contrast does not bring out non-obvious features of the works
 - e.g. “Both *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* use set design and costuming to accurately portray their settings, but the former is set in the 1950s, while the latter is set in the 1970s.”
 - This thesis is simply factual description. Even if the paper provides a great analysis of how the films use set design, the thesis does not suggest anything that is added by comparing these two films in one paper rather than discussing them separately.
 - e.g. “Both *The Godfather* and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* have protagonists who face moral dilemmas based on the criminal activities of their fathers, but in the former, the protagonist obeys his father’s wishes to join a life of crime, while in the latter, the protagonist rejects his father’s request to join the dark side.”
 - This thesis doesn’t tell us anything illuminating about the films—any viewer would immediately agree that the thesis accurately summarizes the films’ plots. Nothing is gained by comparing these films within one paper.

5. Thesis support

- the thesis should be supported with detailed examples
- essays should start with a claim, provide a detailed example, and then carefully explain how the example provides support for the claim
 - most students ignore this last step, although this step is crucial

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- e.g. claim: “In the opening scene, Michael is shown to be different from the rest of the family.”
 - weak continuation: “He is dressed differently.”
 - The example is not detailed
 - adequate continuation: “He is dressed in a soldier’s uniform, while the rest of the family are dressed in suits and formal wedding dresses.”
 - The example is detailed, but not explained. It is left to the reader to fill in the blanks, but the reader may not agree that the difference in costume is significant.
 - strong continuation: “He is dressed in a soldier’s uniform, while the rest of the family are dressed in suits. Since Michael is the only person in uniform, he is visually isolated, while the black suits worn by the other men reinforce their identity as members of a group.”
 - The example is detailed, and its implications are explained, making it much more convincing.

6. Common problems

- scope of paper too broad
- interpretive claims, especially about symbolism or representation, isolated to one use or scene, rather than applied to a film as a whole

Resources

Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2015). *Film art: An introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill. [look for an older edition, such as the 8th (2006), that includes the section “Writing a Critical Analysis of a Film”, which is only available online with the newest editions]

Geiger, J., & Rutsky, R. L. (2005). *Film analysis: A Norton Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton. [introduction is useful]

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Part 3: Understanding and Analysing Editing

This section will introduce the 2 basic concepts of film editing. By discussing classic and contemporary film examples, the course will lead the students to appreciate film arts from the editing point of view.

1. What is editing?
Example: Kuleshov's experiment
2. Basic concept of film editing:
Narrative and time, Narrative and space, Narrative and sound
3. Two types of editing (1): Non-continuity
 - 3.1 Russian montage
Examples from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*
 - 3.2 Jump cut
Examples from J-L Godard's *Breathless*
4. Two types of editing (2): Continuity
 - 4.1 Long-take
Examples from FW Murnau's *Sunrise*
 - 4.2 Hollywood seamless editing
Examples from Hitchcock's *Strangers on a train*
5. Contemporary application of the two editing concepts
Examples from Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*

References

David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.

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1. Film Editing – the shot to shot relationship

2. Film Language

- Technology
- Cultural and historical context
- Story- telling (Narration)
- Identify the film language
- Study the historical context
- Discuss the implication in the context of the film

3. Film Language

- 1) 場面調度 (mise-en-scene)
- 2) 攝影 (cinematography)
- 3) 剪接與後期製作 (editing and postproduction)

4. The magic of editing

The Kuleshov Experiment (1910s-1920s)

5. Continuity Editing

(Hollywood example)

- “The basic purpose of the continuity system is to control the potentially disunifying force editing by establishing a smooth flow from shot to shot.” (*Film Art: An Introduction*, p.210)
- Narrative time and Narrative space

6. Alfred Hitchcock’s

Strangers on a Train (1951)

7. The Fatal encounter

8. Long take

(Art-cinema example)

- “But throughout the history of cinema, some filmmakers have consistently preferred to utilise shots of greater duration than the average... The long take promotes the single shot to a role of great formal significance.” (*Film Art: An Introduction*, p.188)
- FW. Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927)
- The use of long take
- Respect the real time and space
- Emotion intensity of the characters

9. Spatial and Temporal Discontinuity

- Soviet Montage
- Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)
- French New Wave
- Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1960)
- Jump cut
- Love in a modern world
- Instability/ cross-cultural love