

History Lab #6: How to Read a Film**Due Tues 11/16**

Most mainstream movies are designed to create an atmosphere of passivity in audiences--allowing them to smoothly absorb the story and become immersed in the action. There is nothing wrong with this, but the purpose of film analysis is to look more closely at a movie than most audiences do. Teaching film analysis starts simply by encouraging observation. What is being shown on the screen? Why are we being shown it? How is it conveying that information? The building blocks of cinematic structure are essential to understanding how movies convey information and meaning. Elements such as camera placement, shot/reverse shot structure, scene composition and editing, all started from somewhere and developed semantic rules as they went along.¹ You might have dismissed such rules as "obvious," or taken them for granted, but the purpose of analyzing film as historical evidence is to highlight and make explicit a film's grammar, language and construction of meaning.

Questions to Consider:

What is this film's genre?

What is the significance of its title?

Whose artistic vision does this film represent? (Writer? Director? Producer? Actor(s)? Music composer?)

Content: What is the plot? Who are the characters? What is the setting?

Context: When was it made? By whom? With what technology?

What is the lapse in time between the period in which the film was made, and the period that it depicts?

What political or cultural perspective does it present?

What other films in its time period does it relate or refer to?

Deconstructing the Film's Semiotics

Framing:

What is in a shot? What is excluded? What is centered?

Depth of Focus:

What is in focus and what is blurry? Focus creates foreground and background; it can create relationships between objects and/or characters within the shot.

Size of Shot:

Is the shot wide or long, communicating vast space or depth? Is a figure miniaturized or featured in a close-up?

Camera Angle:

Linked with the shot's size, camera angle creates focal points. Is the camera looking upward, downward, or

¹ "Teaching Film Analysis," Ehow.com http://www.ehow.com/how-does_4869097_teaching-film-analysis.html

level? The figure in the shot is manipulated by the camera angle (aggrandized or diminished). Camera angle indicates point of view, much like the narrator. Is the camera acting as the eyes of the character (first person narration) or as the eyes of the audience (omniscient narrator)?

Lighting:

What is lit and what is not? Is the lighting harsh or soft? Are there shadows? What colors are highlighted? Light/shadow and color interact to produce psychological and symbolic effects.

Camera Movement:

How does the camera shift to change frame, depth of focus, the size of the shot, or the camera angle? Movement affects point of view and viewer equilibrium. It can be lyrical or turbulent, slow or fast-paced, disorienting or "grounded," creating psychological moods in the viewer.

Music:

Music adds important, yet often devalued, emotional components to film. Frequently certain characters will have musical themes and aural associations that can be made quite apart from the visual.

What other sound effects are used?

Is there a voiceover?

Scene Design:

Where is the scene?

How is the scene constructed?

Editing:

What is the rhythm of the editing in a particular scene-long and lyrical, or short and clipped?

Does the rhythm speed up or slow down?

How are the scenes connected-by cutting, by dissolving, by fading, by blackout? Often one thing will dissolve into another, creating a symbolic link.

Resources:

Holly Blackford, "How to Read a Film," http://wire.rutgers.edu/p_reading_film.html

"Cinema Semiotics," <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/rbj0001.html>

James Monaco, "How To Read a Film" (digital book) <http://www.readfilm.com/HTRbook.html>

Dartmouth Writing Program, "Writing About Film"

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/film.shtml>

Yale University, "Mise-en-scene" <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/htmlfiles/Mise-en-scene.htm>

History Lab #6 - Due Tues 11/16

Study a film from the following list, which relate to the themes of this course. The starred film is owned by the college and has been placed on reserve. For the others, you will want to have access to the film yourself, through interlibrary loan or a video rental/online viewing service, since Worcester State's video collection will not be adequate. This means you need to **PLAN AHEAD** and allow time to view your film **MORE THAN ONCE**. If you want to coordinate your viewing, you can share the film with others in the class, but you'll each need to write your own independent paper by choosing a different scene.

In this lab report,

SUMMARIZE the film: historical context, creators, plot, theme.

SELECT one scene, and **ANALYZE** its shot sequences

Annotating a scene involves labeling each shot in a sequence. For example, a scene may begin with an establishing shot, which segues into a dolly shot. The dolly shot comes to rest in a medium shot of the main character, who is looking off frame. Next comes a reverse angle subjective close-up shot, which dissolves into a montage.

Labeling each of these shots - preferably using a system of abbreviations for efficiency's sake - enables you to keep track of the complex sequence of shots. When you review your annotations, you might see a pattern of camera movement and editing decisions (or, on the other hand, some unusual variation in the pattern) that better helps you to understand 1) how the director crafted his film, and 2) why the scene has a certain effect on the audience.

Once you've taken notes in this way, **DISCUSS** the scene and its impact or its importance within the film, in your paper.

CONNECT this scene to a theme, idea, issue or event we've discussed in this course

REFLECT briefly on this assignment and how it changed the way you viewed this film

Total length = 5-6 pages

Circus (1928)

Freaks (1932)

I'm No Angel (1933)

Charlie Chan at the Circus (1936)

At the Circus (1939)

Meet Me in St Louis (1944)

State Fair (1945)

*The Greatest Show on Earth (1952)

Trapeze (1956)

Toby Tyler (1960)

Roustabout (1964)

Paper Moon (1973)

Bronco Billy (1980)

Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983)

The Elephant Man (1980)

Wings of Desire (1987)

Big Top Pee-Wee (1988)

Adventureland (2008)

Big Fish (2003)