

Film Studies

Of all the art forms, cinema is perhaps the most accessible. After all, everyone loves a good film. And, for most of us, the primary function of a film is entertainment. However, as with all art forms, (and despite its popularity, film making *is* an art) knowing a little about the mechanics behind the art will increase your appreciation of the art form itself.

Cinematography is the art of the cameraman who narrates a story with a camera. The word comes from Greek: *kinema* (movement) + *graph* (picture) = moving picture or motion picture. *Cinema* is the shortened form of *cinematography* and dates from the 1890s when the Lumière Brothers created the first motion picture in France.

In film the camera is the narrator, and it has a number of different tools that it uses to tell the story. The most important of these are *mise-en-scène*, *movement*, *editing* and *sound*.

The *mise-en-scène* refers to all the things that are “put in the scene”: the setting, the decor, the lighting, the costumes, the performance etc.

In cinematic terms *movement* can refer to four different types of movement:

- movement of the subject (across the screen, towards the screen, away from the camera)
- movement of the camera
- movement of the lens (e.g. zoom shots in and out)
- movement of the film (regular speed, slow motion, fast motion and freeze frame)

Editing involves the cutting and piecing together of lengths of film and is at the heart of the filmmaker’s art.

Sound is one of the most vital ingredients of film and refers to:

- sound effects
- music
- language

Any time you see a film you should try to remind yourselves of the art that goes into making a good film. Ultimately, however, you will judge the film on how well it tells its story and your reaction to it.



Film analysis

The following questions should help you when working with a critical evaluation of films.

Background

- Who is the director?
- Has the screenplay been adapted from another work?
- When was the film made?

Structure/form

- What does the title mean in relation to the film as a whole?
- Why does the film start in the way that it does?
- Are there any motifs (scenes, images) of dialogue which are repeated? What purpose do they serve?
- What three or four sequences are most important in the film? Why?
- Is sound used in any vivid ways to enhance the film? (e.g. enhance drama, heighten tension, disorient the viewer etc.)
- How does the film use color or light/dark to suggest tone and mood in different scenes?
- Are there any striking uses of perspective (seeing through a character's eyes, camera angle, etc.) How does this relate to the meaning of the scene?
- How and when are scenes cut? Are there any patterns in the way the cuts function?
- What specific scene constitutes the film's climax? How does this scene resolve the central issue of the film?
- Does the film leave any loose ends at the end? If so, what does it suggest?
- Why does the film conclude on this particular image?

Theme

- What is the theme of the film?
- Does the film present a clear point of view?
- Are there any aspects of theme which are left ambiguous at the end?

Many of the questions above are taken or adapted from Timothy Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (5th ed.).