

## Film Analysis

All art forms convey meaning, and film is no different. Whereas paintings convey meaning through shape and colour, and works of literature convey meaning through language, films convey meaning through various audiovisual elements, such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound, among others. The purpose of a film analysis paper is to explore how these formal features contribute to a film's meaning.

Remember that a film's formal features are the result of creative decisions made by the filmmaker. So, when analyzing a particular formal aspect of a film, ask yourself: Why has the filmmaker constructed the film in this way? What effect might they be trying to elicit in the viewer? In *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith provide examples of some questions that illustrate how films convey meaning through form:

Does the use of music or noise alter our attitude toward a character? Does the composition of the shot tend to make us concentrate on a particular detail (4.153, the shot of Anne's face in *Day of Wrath*)? Does the use of camera movement hold off story information to create suspense, as in the opening of *Touch of Evil* (pp. 213–215)? Does the use of discontinuous editing cue us to create thematic comparisons, as in the sequence we analyzed in *October* (pp. 259–262)?<sup>1</sup>

Here are some other tips to consider when you are conducting film analysis:

**Aim to persuade.** Just like most university essays, a film analysis paper is a form of persuasive writing, and as such, it advances an argument that is backed up by evidence. Usually, your paper will need to have a thesis statement, located in the introduction, that summarizes your main argument, and body paragraphs that present and analyze evidence supporting your thesis. Your evidence must include specific examples drawn from the film(s) you are studying. For some assignments, you may also be permitted or even required to draw on outside sources (such as film criticism or historical/biographical information) to contextualize your analysis.

**Avoid film review.** The goal of a film analysis paper is not to state whether you liked or disliked the film, or to encourage people to see it or not. The goal is to *analyze* the film. Analysis means breaking something down into its constituent parts and showing how these parts function and relate to one another to make up a unified whole. Film analysis reveals something about how the film works that you may not have noticed the first time you watched it. Therefore, rather than merely claiming that a particular shot is beautiful, ask yourself: Why do I find this shot beautiful? What cinematic techniques does the filmmaker employ to create this effect?

**Avoid excessive plot summary.** Summary states *what* happened; analysis explains *how* or *why* it happened. In a film analysis paper, you can usually assume that the reader is familiar with the film you are writing about and therefore knows “what happened” in it. The reader is much more interested to know how the film was constructed and to what effect. Summarize only those aspects of the film's plot that the reader needs to understand your analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 309.

**Consider the narrative.** Don't take the film's plot—or any of its narrative aspects—for granted. They all result from creative decisions made by the filmmaker and therefore require critical analysis. Ask yourself: How is the sequence of events in the film ordered? Is it linear or not? From whose point of view is the film's story told? Is the narration restricted or unrestricted, subjective or objective? To what effect? If the film lacks a conventional narrative altogether, does it employ another sort of organizing principle or pattern? Keep in mind that your analysis should pay attention to both the narrative and stylistic aspects of the film. If your argument could equally apply to a novel on which the film is based, you are not analyzing the film *as a film*.

**Consider the film's theme(s).** One of the ways films produce meaning is by engaging with themes. Themes are what you might say a film is “about.” They are broad, universal topics, such as romantic relationships, mortality, and good versus evil, which have served as the subject matter of art time and time again. However, different filmmakers deal with these themes in very different ways. Therefore, rather than merely claiming that a film is about romantic relationships, ask yourself: What is the filmmaker *saying* about romantic relationships? And importantly, how is this claim or message reinforced through the film's form and style?

**Consider the film's genre, place in film history, and filmmaker.** To fully appreciate the significance of a film, you may need some understanding of its genre, place in film history, or filmmaker. Ask yourself: Does the film belong to a genre category, such as action, horror, sci-fi, or comedy? Does the film conform to the typical norms and conventions of the genre, or does it deviate from them? To what effect? Is the film part of a specific tradition or movement in film history, such as the French New Wave of the early '60s or the New Hollywood era of the '70s? What characteristics do films of this kind have in common? Is the film the work of a recognized auteur? If so, what is distinctive or unmistakable about this person's filmmaking style?

**Consider the film's ideological stance.** Some films are made to advance a particular social or political message. However, upon close analysis, films may also be shown to express ideological beliefs or assumptions that the filmmaker did not directly intend. When analyzing a film, you should be on the lookout for both types of meaning. Ask yourself: What values does the film advocate (both explicitly and implicitly)? To what degree do these values reflect the time and place in which the film was made? How does the film represent racial, gender, and class relations? Does the film exhibit any unacknowledged biases or prejudices?

### Further Reading

Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. “Glossary.” In *Film Art: An Introduction*, 11th ed., G1–6. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017.

Corrigan, Timothy. “Film Terms and Topics for Film Analysis and Writing.” In *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, 8th ed., 36–82. Glenview: Pearson, 2012.

Gocsik, Karen, Richard Barsam, and Dave Monahan. “Formal Analysis.” In *Writing about Movies*, 4th ed., 35–54. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.