

Shakespeare in Love

A SHORT GUIDE TO WRITING ABOUT FILM

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Fourth Edition

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CONTENTS



PREFACE

ix

1

WRITING ABOUT THE MOVIES

1

WHY WRITE ABOUT MOVIES? 1

YOUR AUDIENCE AND THE AIMS OF FILM
 CRITICISM 7

The Movie Review 9

The Theoretical Essay 11

The Critical Essay 12

OPINION AND EVALUATION 15

EXERCISES 19

2

BEGINNING TO THINK, PREPARING TO WATCH, AND STARTING TO WRITE

20

SUBJECT MATTER AND MEANING 25

SILENT DIALOGUE: TALKING BACK TO THE MOVIES 26

TAKING NOTES 30

VISUAL MEMORY AND REFLECTION 36

EXERCISES 40

low the bloodied water spiralling down the drain. In an extraordinary lap dissolve, we emerge from the darkness of the drain out from behind her eye, open and stilled in death. The journey into the depths of the “normal” psyche has ended in tragedy. The veneer of normality has been shattered at her (and our) peril. And the close-up of the eye links us by association with Norman’s eye during the peeping scene earlier, and with our own role throughout as peeping Toms. All the characters of this film are indeed one character, and through the use of alternating subjective camera technique, that character is the individual viewer. (372–74)

Few of us are inclined to work back through notes immediately after seeing a movie. Yet a prompt review of one’s notes is extremely useful and could make the difference between a dull and hazy response to a film and a compelling and subtle one. Methodical notes allow a viewer to map accurately what happens in a movie, to record details about the subject and its meaning that would otherwise soon fade from memory. Unless one has continual access to the film or a script, it is difficult to retain these facts, and without them, anything you have to say will probably appear much too impressionistic. When you go over the film and the key sequences in your notes, ideas begin to take shape. When you can support those ideas with concrete descriptions from the movie, an argument becomes dramatically more convincing.

Exercises

1. Before you have seen a particular film, write one or two paragraphs pinpointing your expectations about it. What do you already know about it? The country and historical period of its origin? About the director? What will probably be the most important features of the film? Specific characters? The sound? Do these expectations lead you to look for certain themes or types of stories?
2. Choose a single short sequence from a film and annotate it as precisely as you can. Describe those annotations in clear, precise prose. Are there any conclusions you can draw or interpretations you would make about the sequence?

3

FILM TERMS AND TOPICS FOR FILM ANALYSIS AND WRITING



Developing a sense of how to question movie images and taking notes on them goes hand in hand with an ability to direct those questions toward specific topics for analysis. Questions and notes should lead to more questions and partial or full answers. This path leads to an essay focused on particular themes and techniques in a movie. A major part of this process is developing a vocabulary with which to ask those questions properly, to describe what you see and think, and to help you focus and organize your analysis. Being able to notice and then comment on a significant “shot/reverse shot” pattern in *American Beauty* (1999) or to describe the “narrative structure” in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) is not just good for classroom conversation; it allows a good writer to make finer, more accurate discriminations and evaluations and to situate a film within the larger tradition of film history and analysis. These kinds of discriminations should begin to point you toward a paper topic.

Every discipline has its own special language or use of words, which allows it to discuss its subject with precision and subtlety. A literary critic, for example, needs to distinguish between a metaphor and a simile, since these terms describe different rhetorical figures, which, in turn, refer to different sorts of perceptions. To write “My love is like a red, red rose” (simile) is different from “My love is the red rose of life” (metaphor), and the person who can appreciate that difference will read and interpret those lines

better. Similarly, a knowledgeable basketball fan will be able to summarize quickly and evaluate the action of a game if he or she knows a specialized vocabulary that includes terms like *jump shot*, *pick*, and *fast break*.

With film, too, a critical vocabulary allows you to view a movie more accurately and to formulate your perceptions more easily. Consider the term *frame*. In writing about film, *frame* refers to the rectangle that contains the image: the frame of the movie screen itself, which does not change during a movie, and, more importantly, the camera frame, which is regularly changing its relationship to the objects being filmed. Being aware of this term and its uses means you will be more sensitive to how the camera frame controls what you see and how you see it. You will be able to note, for instance, that the camera frame may include certain actions and exclude others, and that the angle at which it is placed or its distance from a person adds considerably to what the filmmaker is trying to say. As one student observed of a recent movie, "Although the scene seems to be a typical family gathering, the viewer becomes aware that something is wrong or unsettled because the camera frame is slightly tilted and unusually crowded with characters and furniture." What may sometimes go unnoticed is brought to light through the accurate use of a term.

THEMES

Going over your notes, your first step may be trying to identify the major themes of the movie, which often comes down to stepping back and asking what this film is "about": the triumph of good over evil in *Star Wars* (1977), for example, or reluctant heroism before unimaginable brutality in *Schindler's List* (1993). These themes, in many cases, become the foundation for an analysis, since they point to the main ideas in a movie. They are not, strictly speaking, the "moral" or message of the movie; they are the large

and the small ideas that help explain the actions and events in it. Ask, for example:

- Who are the central characters?
- What do they represent in themselves and in relation to each other? The importance of individuality or society? Human strength or human compassion?
- How do their actions create a story with some meanings or constellation of meanings?
- Does the story emphasize the benefits of change or endurance?
- What kind of life or what actions does the film wish you to value or criticize, and why?
- If there is not a coherent message or story, why not?
- How does the movie make you feel at the end? Happy? Depressed? Confused? And why?

Having sketched some major and minor themes in a film, the writer needs to refine these in terms of the specific situation and aims of the movie. The more sensitive a writer's vocabulary, the more refined the perception and argument will be. Thus, *alienation* may very well describe the broadest thematic lines of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), Frank Capra's *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970), and Barry Levinson's *Liberty Heights* (2000). Although this may be a good start, however, a sharp analysis demands that the writer make finer distinctions about the historical, stylistic, and structural presentations of that theme in each movie. Does the alienation seem inevitable, or perhaps even desirable? Does it lead to new knowledge, or is it a disaster that could have been avoided? Is it presented as a tragic or a comic problem in the movie? Writing about *The Conformist*, a stu-

dent might refine the theme of alienation by observing that here it relates to the protagonist's sexuality and the fascist period in Italy and that, unlike the first two movies (and to some extent, the fourth), the movie never really resolves this alienation. She or he might further specify and clarify that argument by describing how the main character regularly seems entrapped and isolated by the rigorous framing of the camera (Figure 9) and by the many frames within the image as a whole (door frames, window frames, etc.). Note, however, that this kind of refinement of alienation in *The Conformist* does not attempt to fashion an oversimplified and inapplicable moral. One cannot say, "In *The Conformist*, alienation is an evil which dooms the character to misery."



■ Figure 9

The frames within the framing of *The Conformist*.

While identifying themes provides an important foundation for your analysis, writing about the movies involves a wide range of special terms that will help you organize and clarify your topic. The remainder of this chapter discusses the most important of these terms as they are used to discuss four dimensions of the movies:

1. The connections between the movies and other artistic traditions, such as literature and painting
2. The theatrical dimension of the film image, or of its *mise-en-scène*
3. The composition of the movie, achieved through camera positions and editing
4. The use of sound in the film

Depending on your topic, any or all of these dimensions and their vocabulary may be central to your essay.

FILM AND THE OTHER ARTS

Although the movies are one of the youngest of the arts, they have absorbed the structures and forms of many older arts. Not surprisingly, therefore, writing about film requires some of the critical language of these other literary and visual arts: we speak of *plot* and *character* in both films and novels, and terms such as *point of view* are part of the critical vocabulary of painting, literature, and the movies. Borrowed terminology allows a critic to make important connections with other fields; it also demands that a writer be sensitive to how terms and structures change when they are applied to film. Here we will look at three related terms that film studies share with the literary and visual arts: *narrative*, *characters*, and *point of view*.

Narrative

When most of us refer to the movies, we are referring to narrative movies alone, not documentaries or experimental films. A *narrative* can be divided into different components:

- The *story* is all the events that are presented to us or that we can infer have happened.
- The *plot* is the arrangement or construction of those events in a certain order or structure.

Thus, all films that sketch the life of Napoleon would tell the same story: his birth, his rise to power, the French Revolution, his aftermath, and his exile to Elba. The plots in these different movies may, however, be structured and arranged in various ways: one could begin with Napoleon's last days at Elba and tell his story through a series of flashbacks (showing events that occurred earlier than the ones just shown); another could start with his birth and move chronologically through his life.

Always ask yourself how the narrative of the film you are watching is constructed. Is it, first of all, a movie with a story line? If not, why not? Is the story told chronologically, or does the plot rearrange events in an unusual temporal order? Is there a reason for that particular plot structure? What in the story is left out in the actual plot construction? Are there reasons for including some material and omitting other material? Does the way the story is told become a prominent feature of the film, and thus a central factor in an analysis of it? How do you recognize the narrative structure: Is there a *voice-over*, in which a character's voice is heard describing events and thus makes it clear that he or she is organizing the plot? Are there technical elements that give dramatic indications about how the story is structured, such as the change from black-and-white to color in *The Wizard of Oz* or Abel Gance's use of three different screens in his *Napoleon* (1927)? Is the movie especially con-

cerned with questions of time and history which may in turn influence how the plot is constructed, as in *Back to the Future* (1985)? What propels the story: A mystery as in *The Big Sleep* (1946)? A desire to reach a goal, as in *The Wizard of Oz*? Or, is it difficult to say, as in some modern movies in which the plot seems to have no definite direction?

The various relationships between a story, its plot, and a narrative style are numerous. When most of us think of a narrative film, however, we probably have in mind what is often called a *classical narrative* (Figure 10). To discuss any kind of film narrative, it is use-



■ **Figure 10**

The narrative of *Casablanca* (1942) employs many of the features of classical narrative: a plot propelled forward by a central character (Bogart as Rick), a realistic depiction of events, and a dramatic sense of closure (as Ilsa and Rick sacrifice their love for a greater patriotic good).

full to have some sense of this important narrative form. Usually, a classical narrative has:

1. A plot development in which there is a logical relation between one event and another
2. A sense of closure at the end (a happy or a tragic ending, for example)
3. Stories that are focused on characters
4. A narrative style that attempts to be more-or-less objective

Not all classical narratives are the same, of course, and many fine essays are about the variations and innovations within this model. One student, for example, began his paper on Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* by observing:

Bill Evans

This classic mystery story does not make complete sense. It seems as if the complicated plot has lost track of the story, and frequently it is very difficult to follow the logic of who killed whom and why. Nonetheless, *The Big Sleep* remains a model of classical filmmaking in the way it concentrates all the action on the main characters, Bogart and Bacall. If the plot is confused, these characters make you forget that confusion and realize that the story is about them.

In the following paragraphs, Gerald Mast looks at the narrative structure as it applies to many Hawks films (such as *To Have and Have Not* [1944] and *His Girl Friday*). Note how Mast first places his analysis in the literary tradition of narrative and then moves to a discussion of plots constructed around the notion of "surprising inevitability."

What is a good story? First, there is the construction of an action—not just enumerating a string of events but organizing those events into a

coherent and powerful shape. The construction of a narrative action relies on a very interesting paradox, of which Hawks was well aware. On the one hand, the events in a narrative must seem to flow spontaneously, naturally, surprisingly; nothing must be expected, nothing foreseen. On the other hand, the events in a narrative must be prepared for, motivated, foreshadowed; nothing is unexpected, everything foreseen. On the one hand, everything that happens to King Lear is a surprise. On the other, everything in the play proceeds from Kent's command in the beginning to "See better, Lear." It is surprising that Emma Woodhouse discovers that it is Mr. Knightley whom she really must marry; yet everything in Emma points the way to this inevitable and inescapable discovery. The paradox of narrative construction is that it synthesizes the accidents of nature—which seem random—and the patterns of logic—which are fixed; the outcome of events is simultaneously inevitable yet surprising to the reader or viewer when the inevitable occurs. The narrative that is insufficiently spontaneous and surprising is familiarly condemned as contrived, overplotted, unnatural, and stilted; the narrative that is insufficiently patterned is familiarly condemned as random, wandering, arbitrary, and formless.

How does Hawks's story construction relate to this paradox of surprising inevitability? In over forty years of filmmaking, collaborating with over a dozen major writers, Howard Hawks builds every story in an identical four-part structure. The first part is a prologue that either (1) establishes the conflict in a past or present close relationship of the major characters (this is the usual pattern of Ben Hecht's scripts for Hawks) or (2) initiates a conflict by the collision of two apparently opposite characters upon their initial meeting (this is the usual Furthman-Faulkner pattern). The second and third parts develop the central conflict established in the first, either by letting one of the conflicting characters or life styles dominate in the second part, then the other in the third, or by letting one of the characters work alone in the second part, then both of them together in the third. And the fourth section resolves the central conflict, often by a return to the original physical setting of the prologue, but in which setting the warring characters now see themselves and one another in a new light. Occasionally Hawks adds a very brief epilogue or "tag" to return the narrative full circle to its beginning. Whatever else one can say about this narrative structure, it gives a Hawks story the firmness of shape, the elegance, economy, and symmetry that allow surprising events to transpire within the firm logic and structure of a controlled pattern. (30–31)

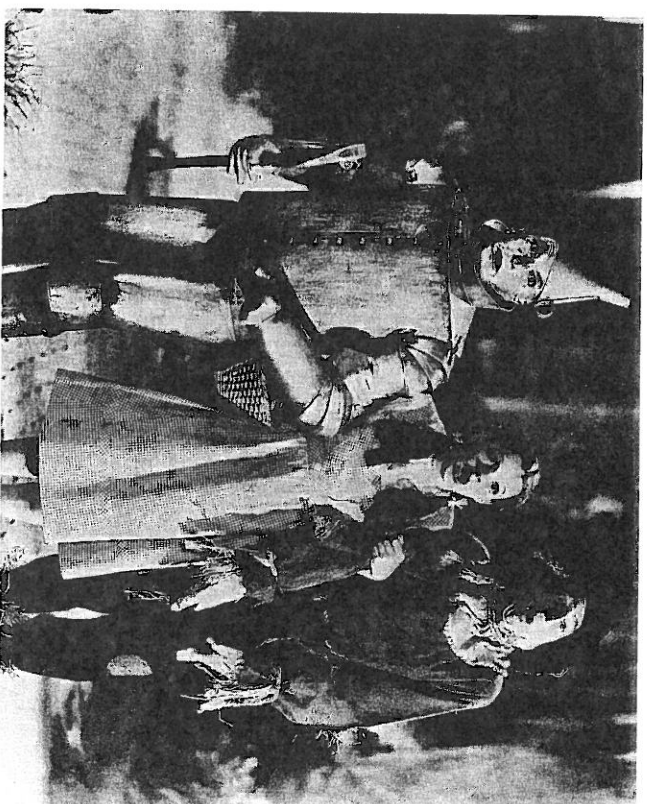
Not all movies are classical narratives or even narratives. Some movies are nonnarrative; that is, they do not tell stories. For instance, there are experimental films that avoid stories and investigate questions unrelated to narrative (such as the abstract patterns of light and shadow on film). There are documentary films that may present real events, such as a typical day at a factory or the religious ritual of a Native American tribe, without organizing those events as a story. In addition, many movies create narratives that are outside the classical tradition or that may intentionally confront that tradition in order to tell their stories distinctively.

When you watch a movie that seems to avoid a traditional story line or that seems to tell its story in an unusual or perhaps confusing way, ask yourself how the movie is organizing its plot and narration and what it is trying to achieve. Does the story seem illogical, as in some surrealist films in which events follow the logic of a dream? Does the narrative seem to be telling two or more stories that are difficult to connect, as in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), in which the story of a woman and her Nazi lover is told alongside the story of the bombing of Hiroshima? Does the movie have a confusing beginning or an unresolved conclusion? Why? How do these or other narrative strategies relate to the stories being told? About *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a writer might, after some thought, begin by observing that both stories concern World War II and are told by two newly met lovers; the difficulty in the narrative structure might then be related to the woman's pain in organizing and communicating her memories to someone from a completely different culture but with a similar historical crisis. Once you have learned to recognize classical narrative forms, you should be more aware of the variety of ways in which stories can be told.

Characters

Characters are another common topic for analysis in literature, drama, and film. They are the individuals who populate narrative and nonnarrative films. Whether they are the main characters or

minor characters, they normally focus the action and often the themes of a movie (Figure 11). Often, a discussion of film concentrates exclusively on what happens to the characters or how they change. *My Dinner with André* (1981), which films the dinner conversation between two men, could more accurately be described as being about two characters telling stories than as being a story about two characters. Both traditional movies, like *The Hurricane* (2000), and untraditional ones, like *Crumb* (1994), focus their narratives almost exclusively on the biography of their main character, boxer Hurricane Carter (in the first case) and underground cartoonist Robert Crumb (in the second). Keep in mind that an analysis of



■ Figure 11

In *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) Dorothy is clearly the central character, but that character grows and defines herself through her interaction with her companion characters, the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Lion.

characters in a movie can be boring or seem simpleminded if you approach them as if they are merely reflections of real people or if you blur the difference between the real historical person, the actor playing the role, and the character. Yet, if you remain attuned to the variety in character types and constructions, you can begin to see subtleties and complications in how characters function and what they mean in different films. As an exercise, choose three different characters—those portrayed by Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*, and Holly Hunter in *The Piano* (1993), for example—and try to describe how and why those characters are so different.

You can begin an analysis of characters by asking yourself if those characters seem or are meant to seem realistic. What makes them realistic? Are they defined by their clothes, their conversation, or something else? If they are not realistic, why not, and why are they meant to seem strange or fantastic? Do the characters seem to fit the setting of the story? Does the movie focus mainly on one or two characters (as in *The Big Sleep*) or on many (as in *Nashville*, in which there doesn't seem to be a central character)? Do the characters change and, if so, in what ways? What values do the characters seem to represent: What do they say about such matters as independence, sexuality, and political belief? Normally, we take characters for granted, and these are a sampling of the kinds of questions you can begin to direct at characters to make more sense of them and to determine why they are important.

Point of View

Like narrative, *point of view* is a term film shares with the literary and visual arts. In the broadest sense, it refers to the position from which something is seen and, by implication, the way that point of view determines what you see. In the simplest sense, the point of view is purely physical. My point of view regarding a house across the street will, for example, be very different if I am looking from the rooftop of my house or from the basement window. In a more sophisticated

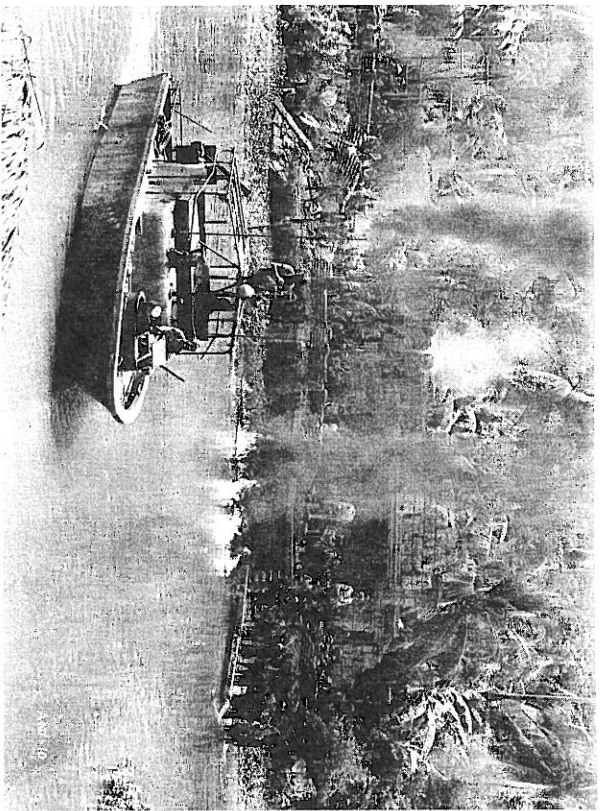
sense, point of view can be psychological or cultural. For example, a child's point of view regarding a dentist's office will probably not be the same as an adult's.

In the same way, we can talk about the point of view that the camera has in relationship to a person or action or even the point of view that a narrative directs at its subject. Usually, movies use an objective point of view, so that most of what is shown is not confined to any one person's perspective. In *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or *Gandhi* (1982), the audience sees scenes and events (the battle of Atlanta, epic encounters in India) that are supposedly objective in their scope and accuracy, beyond the knowledge or perspective of any one person. In specific scenes, however, that audience may be aware that they are seeing another character only through Rhet's or Gandhi's eyes, and in these cases, the camera is re-creating that individual's more subjective point of view. Some movies experiment with the possibilities of point of view: in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), we seem to see the whole story from Captain Willard's (Martin Sheen's) point of view; he introduces the story as something that has already happened to him, but despite this indication of historical objectivity, many of the scenes re-create his personal, nightmarish perspective on the war in Vietnam (Figure 12).

Point of view is a central term in writing about films because films are basically about seeing the world in a certain way. Pay attention to point of view by using these two general guidelines:

1. Observe how and when the camera creates the point of view of a character.
2. Notice if the story is told mostly from an objective point of view or from the subjective perspective of one person.

Ask yourself in what ways the point of view is determining what you see? Does it limit or control your vision in any way? What can you tell about the characters whose eyes you see through? Are they aggressive? Suspicious? Clever? In love?



■ Figure 12

A narrative structured through the point of view of the central character: Captain Willard (*Apocalypse Now*).

Because the movies incorporate the traditions of books, plays, and even sculpture and painting, terms like *narrative*, *character*, and *point of view* are not only useful but necessary in analyzing film. Often, these terms provide the basis for a comparative essay that examines a book and its adaptation as a film. Other kinds of comparative essays may compare different versions of the same movie or a group of films by the same director. When you write a comparative essay of this kind, be sensitive to and careful not only about how these terms connect different art forms, but also about how they highlight differences. Be aware of how the film medium may change the message of the original book or play: look at how a literary or artistic trope is translated successfully into a movie, as well as at what may be lost. To compare *Apocalypse Now* and Joseph Conrad's

Heart of Darkness (1898), a writer may choose to discuss the subjective point of view that describes one Marlow's—Captain Willard's—journey through Vietnam and the other Marlow's journey into Africa. That comparison will be much sharper and more revealing, however, if the writer can show how certain literary techniques (long sentences full of repetitions, for example) create one point of view and how certain film techniques (the use of light and shadow or exaggerated mise-en-scènes, for instance) create the other. These film techniques are the subject of the rest of this chapter.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND REALISM

The mise-en-scène, a French term roughly translated as “what is put into the scene” (put before the camera), refers to all those properties of a cinematic image that exist independently of camera position, camera movement, and editing (although a viewer will see these different dimensions united in one image). Mise-en-scène includes lighting, costumes, sets, the quality of the acting, and other shapes and characters in the scene. Many writers mistakenly believe that these theatrical features are a somewhat unsophisticated topic for analysis, since they appear to be a part more of a dramatic tradition than of a cinematic tradition. Evaluating the performance of an actor may, for some, seem much less important than analyzing the narrative or the camera work. Yet, for many other perceptive critics, the tools and terms of mise-en-scène are the keys to some of the most important features of any movie.

Realism

The major reason that we tend to overlook or undervalue mise-en-scène in the movies is the powerful illusion of realism that is at the heart of the film medium. In many movies, we often presume that “what is put into the scene” is simply what is there; it consequently cannot be analyzed as we would analyze the construction of a plot.

We accept the Philadelphia setting of Jonathan Demme's 1993 movie *Philadelphia* as merely the background that was chosen for the battle between a prestigious law firm and a young associate discovered to be HIV-positive. But comparing the affluent setting of that film with, say, the *mise-en-scène* of Philadelphia in the 1976 *Rocky* (set in the ethnic neighborhoods of South Philadelphia) or in the 1995 *Twelve Monkeys* (set in a Philadelphia of urban squalor and decay) should make it clear that the realism of a place is very malleable. The illusion of realism, in short, is a kind of *mise-en-scène* that makes us believe that the images are of an everyday world that is simply "there"—one we know and are familiar with. Or as Allardyce Nicoll described the problem:

In the cinema we demand something different. Probably we carry into the picture-house prejudices deeply ingrained in our beings. The statement that "the camera cannot lie" has been disproved by millions of flattering portraits and by dozens of spiritualistic pictures which purport to depict fairies but which mostly turn out to be faintly disguised pictures of ballet-dancers or replicas of figures in advertisements of night-lights. Yet in our heart of hearts we credit the truth of that statement. A picture, a piece of sculpture, a stage-play—these we know were created by man; we have watched the scenery being carried in back stage and we know we shall see the actors, turned into themselves again, bowing at the conclusion of the performance. In every way the "falsity" of a theatrical production is borne in upon us, so that we are prepared to demand nothing save a theatrical truth. For the films, however, our orientation is vastly different. Several periodicals, it is true, have endeavored to let us into the secrets of the moving-picture industry and a few favored spectators have been permitted to make the rounds of the studios; but for ninety per cent of the audience the actual methods employed in the preparation of a film remain far off and dimly realised . . .

The strange paradox, then, results: that, although the cinema introduces improbabilities and things beyond nature at which any theatrical director would blush and murmur soft nothings to the air, the filmic material is treated by the audience with far greater respect (in its relation to life) than the material of the stage. Our conceptions of life in Chicago gangsterdom and in distant China are all colored by films we have seen. What we have witnessed on the screen becomes the "real" for

us. In moments of sanity, maybe, we confess that of course we do not believe this or that, but, under the spell again, we credit the truth of these pictures even as, for all our professed superiority, we credit the truth of newspaper paragraphs. (35–38)

You must learn, however, to suspect realism in the movies, since it can distract you from the many interesting possibilities that *mise-en-scène* analysis offers. Watching a documentary from another country or an old movie once considered very realistic, you recognize how relative your sense of realism is and, how, even when the filmmaker may not acknowledge it, the reality of a movie is constructed for a purpose. Simply putting a camera in front of a scene, as one writer has noted, changes the most realistic situation into a kind of theatrical setting. Asked to look more closely at the realism of *Philadelphia*, one student thus corrected her original perception and observed how the *mise-en-scène* of *Philadelphia* was not just where the central character lived and worked:

Cecilia A. Graham

The choice of the city of Philadelphia as the setting for the film of the same name clearly evokes connotations which are central to the film. Since the city itself has historically been referred to as the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia uses the backdrop to set, somewhat ironically, a tale of a gay man whose physical love of a "brother" meets only fear and loathing from the "brothers" in his law firm. At the same time, the *mise-en-scène* of Philadelphia becomes strangely anonymous in this movie. Most of the action of the movie takes place before the sumptuous modern skyscrapers in a business district which could be any business district and in plush offices whose picture windows show a glittering backdrop of only lights and other buildings. This Philadelphia is, finally, a place without much identity, depth, or individuality, and that seems an appropriate *mise-en-scène* for a film that largely sanitizes the suffering and confusion

of a man battling HIV and an extremely narrow-minded society.

Whether the movie is a documentary or a realistic Hollywood film, a practiced eye might begin an analysis by asking basic questions about the theatrics of realism and how it is used. Why does the movie try to seem realistic? How does it try to create a realistic scene? What is included, and what is left out? What realistic details in the *mise-en-scène* relate to the actions of the characters or themes of the movie: the clothing, the homes, the props, or the outdoor world? Treat the *mise-en-scène* of realistic films with the same analytical sense you might direct at a stage play, in which costumes and sets are never selected casually.

Elements of *Mise-en-Scène*

In any film, from the most realistic to the most theatrical, there are specific properties of the *mise-en-scène* at which to direct your attention and from which good paper topics will come.

Settings and *sets* refer to the location or the construction of a location where a scene is filmed. In some movies, you will notice immediately how important the setting and sets are. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), for example, the expressionistic set design may be far more interesting to some viewers than the characters or structure of the story: the sets are obviously painted buildings and streets whose distorted angles and shapes are meant to suggest the mental imbalance and social chaos of the characters. One might make the same case for a movie like *Alien* (1979), in which the elaborately twisted passageways of the spaceship or the mysterious construction where the characters discover the alien eggs reverberate with a symbolic significance associated with women and motherhood. Hitchcock used his settings more ironically as commentaries on the plot and characters. In the climactic closing of *North by Northwest* (1959), for instance, the hero and the heroine climb across the gigantic faces of the presidents on Mt. Rushmore; in a

movie so much about U.S. security and government, this use of setting is not only spectacular but central to the themes of the movie. The settings in these and other cases are much more than background, and a writer interested in the use of sets and settings like these should start with these questions:

- Do the objects and props in the setting, whether natural ones (like rivers and trees) or artificial ones (like paintings and buildings), have a special significance that relates to the characters or story?
- Does the arrangement of objects, props, and characters within that setting have some significance? (For example, are they crowded together? Do inanimate objects seem to have a life, as they do in a Chaplin movie?)

Although most good films give the setting and its objects nearly as much meaning as the characters, films differ greatly in how they use their settings in relation to characters and stories. Sets and settings may suggest documentary realism, as in *Gimme Shelter* (1971) (Figure 13); provide images of a character's mind, as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*; describe the central theme of the film, as the house/home in *Met Me in St. Louis* does (Figure 14); or become more complex and important than the story or characters themselves, as perhaps does the Gothic cityscape in *Batman* (1989). In writing about setting, however, one must do more than just describe it: one must seek to discover its significance in relation to the major themes of the film or to other aspects of the film (its system of production or its historical period, for instance). Such a focus will help explain why the setting and the way it is constructed are important.

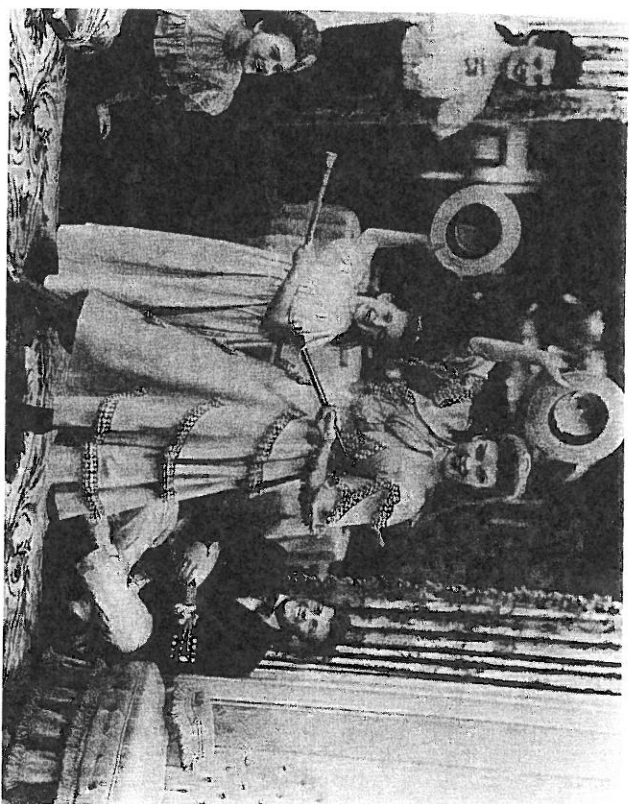
Use the same rule of thumb in discussing other elements of the *mise-en-scène*: whether your interest is acting styles, costumes, or lighting, precise description must be coupled with a sense of why they are important and how they add to the meaning of the movie, that is, how they can become part of a topic for analysis. We all



■ Figure 13

A documentary about the Rolling Stones tour across America, *Gimme Shelter* (1977) describes the thin line between theatrics and realism—and the sometimes dangerous relationship between the two.

know that an actor is the individual who plays the part of a character in a movie. But *acting style*—how an actor plays a part—differs considerably from film to film and from one decade to the next. When looked at thoughtfully, acting style is a challenging topic to address or a target for focusing an analysis of a specific movie. A writer might, for instance, compare the acting style in an Italian neo-realist movie such as *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), in which some of the actors were people chosen precisely because they had no acting experience, with the mannered style of a British or American actor, like Maggie Smith, whose notion of a realistic performance includes a great deal of studied artifice. Carl Dreyer said, “There is no greater experience in a studio than to witness the expression of a sensitive face under the mysterious power of inspiration,” and it is precisely



■ Figure 14

In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the setting of the house often appears more like a stage on which the characters act out their loves, desires, and fears.

that kind of performance which he solicits from René Falconetti in the famous close-ups of his *Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). In the following paragraph, James Naremore describes, with exemplary sense of details, the remarkable acting style of Sandra Bernhard as Marsha in *The King of Comedy* (1983):

Bernhard is in fact a club comic, and in many ways she relies on the conventional devices of clowns. She lacks the symmetrical face of “serious” actors like Fonda or Streep, so she pushes her features into grotesque extremes—poking out her lips or curling them up against her long nose, frowning or letting her jaw hang lax. When she moves, she is all angles, a gangling stick figure who looks like an anorexic bobbysoxer; when she speaks, her voice pitches up to the register of a New York teenager on

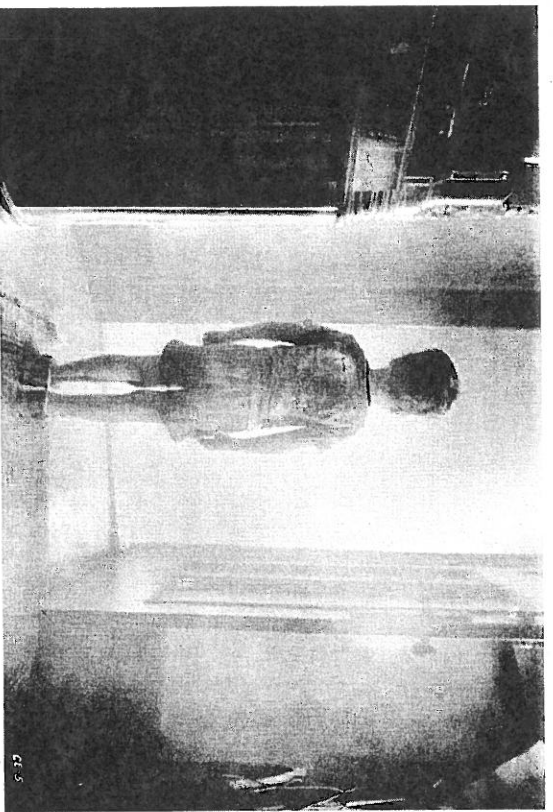
the verge of hysteria. Nevertheless she inflects her exaggerated behavior in ways quite different from old-fashioned zanies like Fanny Brice or Martha Raye. Hers is a comedy of neurosis, a mingling of anxiety and laughter, and she behaves as if the whole weight of an Oedipal scenario were on her shoulders. (282)

Costumes, as we all know, are the clothes the characters wear. Like other aspects of the *mise-en-scène*, they vary along a spectrum from realistic dress to extravagant costumes; often, they provide a writer with the key to a character's identity. James Bond often wears a tuxedo, but Sylvester Stallone's Rocky prefers to wear as little as possible; in both cases, we learn something about the character from the costume. Some films, like *Tootsie* (1982) and *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) are largely about costuming and changing appearances through dress and makeup, and both films are about how men dress like women to confront or deal with conventional attitudes about sexual roles. White hats no longer necessarily indicate a good character, but you should continue to question why characters look and dress the way they do. Do their costumes suggest how they view themselves or how they wish to be viewed by others? Does a character change clothing, as in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), when John Travolta becomes a different person by donning his dancing clothes at night? Do those changes tell you anything about the personality or the society? Is there a special feature of a costume, such as the baseball glove that identifies Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape* (1963), which helps you to analyze that character? Again, do not take the costumes of the *mise-en-scène* for granted.

Lighting describes the various ways a character or an object or a scene can be illuminated, either by natural sunlight or from artificial sources (such as lamps). It allows a filmmaker to direct a viewer's attention in a certain way or to create a certain atmosphere. We all recognize large distinctions, such as the difference between the bright lighting of an outdoor scene in a western and the shadowy

darkness used in the alleyways of a gangster film. We probably notice that, in the first case, the lighting creates a feeling of clarity and optimism and, in the second, a feeling of oppression and gloom. A more demanding task would be to note and comment on the more subtle gradations and patterns of lighting that do not dramatically call attention to themselves. In Bertrand Tavernier's *Sunday in the Country* (1985), for instance, the softly lit interiors and exteriors are meant to re-create the lighting found in impressionist paintings, a vision of the world that the painter grandfather in that movie knows is fading. In Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1978), some scenes use very low light (candlelight, in fact) to emphasize the grotesquely isolated faces of characters who are cut off from each other and from the world that exists in the darkness around them. Whether you notice the lighting immediately or not, be prepared to look for patterns of light and shadows. Are there important graphic patterns (such as sharp shadows), created to highlight a scene or a group of scenes in a movie? Does the lighting or coloring seem totally natural or unusually artificial? Some experimental films make the entire subject of the film the artistic manipulation of light, but any intelligent narrative movie uses lighting with as much a sense of its possibilities and purpose as a painter does (Figure 15).

Mise-en-scène, then, is about the theatrics of space as that space is constructed for the camera. This use of space—how it is arranged and how the actors and objects relate within it—can generate exciting topics and commentary on film. The balance or imbalance that relates figures or various planes in the *mise-en-scène* sometimes says more about that action than does the dialogue. Is, for instance, one character always positioned above another? Is one always in shadows? Likewise, in comparing two sets or settings in a film, you may discover important themes that would otherwise not be noticed: Do catastrophes, for instance, occur only in the city, or only on land? A cinematic *mise-en-scène* is different from but as complex as a theatrical *mise-en-scène*, and a writer about film should aim for the same acuteness and subtlety demonstrated in the



■ **Figure 15**

In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), spectacular lighting techniques and graphics are the heart of the movie.

following analysis of the mise-en-scène (specifically the setting) in Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923):

Mise-en-scène functions, not in isolated moments, but in relation to the narrative system of the entire film. *Our Hospitality*, like most of Buster Keaton's films, exemplifies how mise-en-scène can economically advance the narrative and create a pattern of motifs. And since the film is a comedy, we shall find that the mise-en-scène also creates gags. *Our Hospitality*, then, exemplifies what we shall find in our study of every film technique: an individual element will almost always have several functions, not just one.

Consider, for example, how the settings function within the narrative of *Our Hospitality*. They help divide the film into scenes and contrast those scenes. The film begins with a prologue showing how the feud between the McKays and the Canfields results in the deaths of the young Canfield and the husband of the McKay family. We see the

McKays living in a shack and are left in suspense about the fate of the baby, Willie. Willie's mother flees with her son from their southern home to the North (action narrated to us mainly by an intertitle). The main action begins years later, with the grown-up Willie living in New York. There are a number of gags concerning early nineteenth-century life in the metropolis, contrasting sharply with the prologue scene. We are led to wonder how this locale will relate to the southern scenes, and soon Willie receives word that he has inherited his parents' home in the South. A series of amusing short scenes follows as he takes a primitive train back to his birthplace. Here Keaton uses real landscapes, but by laying the railroad tracks in different ways, he exploits the landscapes for surprising and unusual comic effects. The rest of the film deals with Willie's movements in the southern town and in the vicinity. On the day of his arrival he wanders around and gets into a number of comic situations. That night he stays in the Canfield house itself, since the law of hospitality has made it the only safe place for him. And, finally, an extended chase occurs the next day, moving through the countryside and back to the Canfield house for the end of the feud. Thus the action depends heavily on shifts of setting that establish Willie's two journeys, as baby and as man, and later his wanderings around to escape his enemies' pursuit. The narration is relatively unrestricted once Willie reaches the South, moving between him and members of the Canfield family. We usually know more about where they are than Willie does, and the narrative generates suspense by showing them coming toward the places where Willie is hiding.

Specific settings fulfill distinct narrative functions. The McKay "estate," which Willie envisions as a mansion, turns out to be a tumble-down shack. The McKay place is paralleled to (contrasted with) the Canfields' palatial plantation home. In narrative terms the Canfield home gains even more functional importance when the Canfield father forbids his sons to kill Willie on the premises: "our code of honor forbids us to shoot him while he is a guest in our house." (Once Willie overhears this, he determines never to leave.) Thus, ironically, the home of Willie's enemies becomes the only safe spot in town, and many scenes are organized around the Canfield brothers' attempts to lure Willie out. At the end of the film another setting takes on significance: the meadows, mountains, river banks, rapids, and waterfalls across which the Canfields pursue Willie. Finally, the feud ends back in the Canfield house itself, with Willie now welcomed as the daughter's husband. The pattern of development is clear: from the opening shoot-out at the McKay

house that breaks up Willie's home, to the final scene in the Canfield house with Willie becoming part of a new family. In such ways every setting becomes highly motivated by the narrative's system of causes and effects, parallels and contrasts, and overall development. (Bordwell and Thompson 142–43)

COMPOSITION AND THE IMAGE

In any movie, it is the camera that eventually films a mise-en-scène: when you watch a movie, you see not only the setting, actors, and lighting but all of these elements as they are recorded and then projected. The composition of a scene through the film image is what distinguishes film from drama, and it is another important dimension of the movies that a good writer should be able to discuss. When you watch a home video, you might first recognize a party with you and your friends. However, with a closer look, you might also comment on how the images, because of the angles, or coloring, make some of those friends look taller or darker than they really are. In the same way, a film image may influence the way you see a scene or a character in that scene. The student who begins by writing, “The scene had three characters. . . .” will seem less attentive and perceptive than the student who begins, “The visual angle on the scene made the three characters appear” This section considers some of the terminology you can use to discuss these compositional features.

The Shot

The *shot* is the single image you see on the screen before the film cuts to a different image. Unlike a photograph, a single shot can include a variety of action or movement, and the frame that contains the image may even move. One shot may show a cowboy at a bar and then magnify the figure by moving the camera closer. When the image switches to another position and point of view on the cowboy—say, from the opposite side of the bar—the film has cut to a

second shot. In writing about film, you should be sensitive to the two primary dimensions of the shot: its photographic properties and its moving frame.

The *photographic properties* of a shot are those qualities of the film image that are found in any photograph, plus the speed at which the scene is filmed. These properties include tone, film speed, and the various perspectives created by the image. *Tone* refers to the range and texture of the colors in a film image. A movie such as *The Wizard of Oz* uses a technicolor scheme full of primary reds and yellows to suggest a fantasy world very different from the black-and-white Kansas. Many of the films by Wim Wenders (such as *Wings of Desire* [1987]) use stark black-and-white tones because he feels those tones provide more realism than color. Woody Allen in *Zelig* (1983) tells its story with intentionally grainy black-and-white tones to make parts of his modern movie look like an old documentary, and in *Schindler's List* Steven Spielberg occasionally disrupts a horrific story in black-and-white with the fleeting glimpse of a child's bright red coat. Ask if the colors are realistic. If not, why not? Is there a pattern in the way a film uses a particular color or group of colors? Does the film use colors symbolically, as Bergman uses red in *Cries and Whispers* (1973) to suggest both violence and passion? If the movie is in black-and-white, how does the black-and-white add to the movie, especially if the filmmaker could have used color? How do the colors and tones relate to the themes of the film?

Film speed is the rate at which the film is shot; it is most obvious in instances of slow or fast motion. Action in slow or fast motion usually indicates a change in the nature of what is happening or how the audience is supposed to perceive what is happening. Sometimes, slow motion is used to indicate that the action is part of a character's dream; sometimes, fast motion is a way of commenting comically on a scene—when, for instance, action on an assembly line suddenly moves at superhuman speed. It is easy to note when the speed of the film is no longer normal; be prepared to examine why these moments are singled out by the filmmaker. In Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983), David Bowie confronts his

Japanese adversary with two kisses, which are filmed in slow motion; it is clear that this is Oshima's way of underlining this shattering climax in their relationship. Keep in mind, however, that many older silent movies were filmed and printed at the rate of sixteen frames per second, and their action may look faster when shown at the modern standard of twenty-four frames per second.

The *perspective* of the image refers to the kind of spatial relationship an image establishes between the different objects and figures it is photographing. These different relationships are the products of different kinds of lenses and the way those lenses are used. Thus, one movie may constantly present scenes with a great deal of *depth* or *deep focus*, so that the audience can see characters in the background as sharply as it sees characters in the foreground. Another movie (often an older one) may wish to isolate or highlight only certain characters or events in the image, and it consequently uses a *shallow focus* that will clearly show only one plane in the image, such as the man with a gun who stands in the foreground apart from the blurry crowd in the background. Much less commonly seen is the odd moment of *rack focus*, when the focus is quickly changed, or pulled, from one figure or object to another within the same shot, as when the image switches focus from the face of a man talking to a piano falling out the window in the background.

Still other kinds of perspective relationships can be used in creating an image, but even while you are learning these other technical terms, you can begin to analyze perspective relationships by asking the basic questions: Who or what is in focus in an image, and why? Do the images create a world with depth, or does that world seem unusually flat? How would you describe the space in a particular image? Is it crowded? Open? Wide? Distorted? When a specific wide-screen image drowns the characters in space, what does this say about them and their world? Make the power of the image in itself come alive in your writing. Make the subject of your essays not just what you see, but how the image makes you see people and things in a certain way and in a certain relationship to one another.

Here is an example in which the student briefly looks at color, tone, and spatial relations in Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973):

N. Singerpanz

Don't Look Now (1973) is a movie about not wanting to see red but being unable not to see red. The story concerns a man and a woman whose young daughter dies tragically by drowning. Later, they go to Venice, where he has a job restoring an old church that is slowly sinking. They both want to forget the horrible death of their daughter, but in Venice, they—and we, the frightened viewers—are pursued by a color, the bright red glow of the raincoat the daughter was wearing when she died.

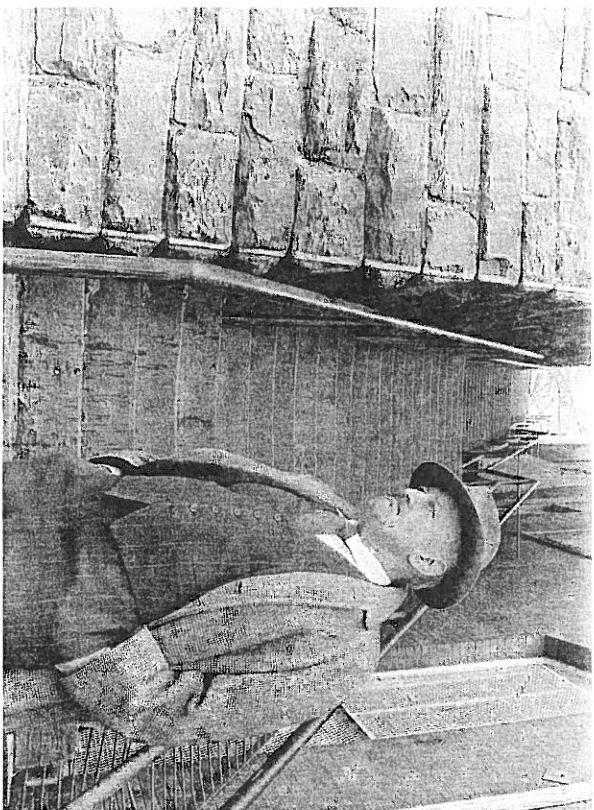
Even before her death the color leaps out of the film. While the father is studying slides of the church he will repair, the tone and texture of the red in the image begins to vibrate and then ooze like blood. As if it is a premonition, he dashes outside to find his child face down in a pond, her coat the same color as the red in the slide.

Venice is a rather gray city in this movie, but wherever the father turns the bright shade of red seems to catch his eye, as if it has a life of its own or is beckoning from another world. For a second or longer, stained-glass windows, pieces of clothing, or a passing car appear to bear the shade of red which we and he have come to identify with the dead daughter. That red is a common color, if a shocking one, only adds to the mystery and confusion as this simple color grows more and more hypnotic and frightening. It seems to contrast with the ordinary gray life of Venice, and, since visual space is made so claustrophobic by the narrow, windy streets of the city, the glimpses we and the father catch of a fleeing red figure in the background become moments of true terror.

This color becomes a life in itself, a life that comes to mean death. The grays of Venice and the mazelike spaces of its streets make this color

impossible to miss and more fascinating because it is always vanishing into the depths. The shock of the final scene, when we and the father finally corner the color, suggests that we have been horribly seduced by the power of Roeg's images.

The *frame* of the movie image forms its border and contains the *mise-en-scène*. Many movies, such as Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), fill their *mise-en-scène* with the internal frames of windows or doorways or stage sets to call attention to the importance of frames and point of view in the story. Almost every film, though, must maintain a certain consciousness about the frame of the movie screen and the frame of the camera (Figure 16). A wide-screen frame is especially suited to catching the open spaces of a western or the vast stellar



■ Figure 16

What makes this shot from *The Exorcist* (1974) so disturbing?

spaces of sci-fi films. The smaller standard frame is perhaps best suited to more personal interior dramas or genres like the melodrama, to which a small frame can contribute a sense of anything from domestic comfort and closeness to claustrophobia. Through the course of a film, there will be a number of other more particular questions to ask about the framing:

- What is the angle at which the camera frame represents the action? Does it create a *high angle*, viewing its subject from above, or a *low angle*, viewing the action from below? When a conversation between two people is shot through a group of alternating high angles and low angles, it could mean that one character is tall and the other is short; it could also say that one of the two is the more dominant personality.
- Does the height of the frame correspond to a normal relationship to the people and objects before the camera: that is, are they at eye level, more-or-less? Or does the camera seem to be placed at an odd height, too high or too low? At the beginning of *Rebel Without a Cause*, for instance, the camera is positioned at ground level to capture James Dean's desperate and pathetic embrace of a small toy as he crumbles to the ground.
- Does the camera frame ever seem unbalanced in relation to the space and action (called a *canted frame*)? If so, why does this occur when it does? Is it re-creating the perspective of a character looking at the action from an odd angle, so that the buildings appear diagonal rather than vertical? Is it meant to re-create the perspective of a drunk, or might it be a more subtle way of commenting, for instance, on a community that lacks harmony and balance?
- What kind of distance does the frame maintain from its subject? Does the film use many close-ups (for instance, showing just the characters' faces), medium shots (showing most

of a character's body), or long shots (showing full bodies from a distance)? Perhaps a scene uses a series of these shots, beginning with a long shot of a man on the street, then showing a medium shot of him looking in a store window, and concluding with a close-up of his surprised face as he sees something in the window. Does the movie develop a more elaborate combination of these that might be interpreted according to some meaningful pattern: close-ups for love scenes and long shots for battle scenes, for instance?

- Besides describing and containing the action, does the frame suggest other action or space outside its borders? Do important events or sounds occur outside the borders of the frame—in *off-screen space*? What is the significance of this off-screen space or its relation to what is seen within the frame? Is off-screen space used for comic effect, as in a Buster Keaton movie in which we discover that the wheel he is sitting on is part of a train located outside the frame and is about to move? Or does it have a serious meaning, as in Robert Bresson's films, in which off-screen space suggests a type of spiritual reality his characters are unable to grasp or understand because it is literally beyond the frame of their world?

Within one scene, any of these compositions may change as the camera creates a *moving frame* by altering its position in relation to the object being filmed. A romantic close-up of two lovers whispering, for example, may suddenly change its meaning if the camera frame moves backward and makes them part of a long shot full of spectators: what was at first romantic has become, through the movement of the frame, comic. This kind of framing action, called *reframing*, can be done in ways that rely entirely on the movement of the frame, not on the editing of images through cuts (see pp. 74–81).

When the frame moves to high, overhead *crane shots*, which look down on the action, we all realize there has been a dramatic

change in perspective: the film may be emphasizing the smallness of the character in relation to the rest of his or her space, or it may be revealing other action, such as the approach of the cavalry on the other side of the mountain range. When the frame moves up and down, *tilting* from one position, it may simply be following the point of view of a character who is looking up and down, but it may also be a way of making a statement about high and low objects (about, for instance, the tourist who feels overwhelmed by the skyscrapers of New York City). Another kind of mobile frame is the *pan*, in which the frame moves from side to side without a change in the position of the camera or the point from which the scene is viewed: surveying the street before him, a character may look slowly from left to right, and the camera may pan to re-create the continuous movement of his gaze. In contrast, a *tracking* or *dolly shot* is not stationary but follows or intrudes on the action by moving the position of the camera (often on small tracks) and thus taking the frame forward, backward, or around the subject. During a cocktail party scene, the film may re-create the roving intimacy of the gathering by using a dolly shot that follows a character through the crowd. If this action is achieved by a *hand-held shot*, in which the camera is carried by the camera operator, the shot may be jerkier (and may in some ways seem more realistic).

Since frames imply a perspective on the world or on certain characters, their mobility or lack of it can point to the very foundation of the world you see in those frames. Is it an active world you are seeing or one that seems rigid and static? The complexities of that world is often revealed as the frames move and change, and the more exactly you can note these frames, the more incisive your analysis will be. Try, at some point, to base your analysis of a character or a situation exclusively on the framing action that describes them. What patterns can you see? Does this character always look at the world through close-ups that track through crowds and situations, without ever getting a larger perspective on them? Does that consistent way of framing the action suggest that he participates but never really sees the whole picture?

Remember that frames and their actions have no universal meaning. Just as colors do not have unchanging symbolic value, camera angles and movements do not have to mean the same thing in different movies. Low-angle shots do not always signify dominance, nor do high-angle shots always suggest oppression (as is sometimes thought). Although in one movie a low-angle shot may remind the viewer that a weak character is being looked at by a stronger, more dangerous person, in another movie that low-angle shot may be used to describe the wonder of a child looking at a person she loves. If you begin by noting visual details carefully, you can reflect on how particular framing actions work in specific films and on how they provoke certain questions about those films and their themes. An endless series of close-ups means one thing in a movie made for American television, where it may underline the importance of the individual character, and another thing in a European art film, where it may suggest the unknowable quality of the human face. In an Ozu film, the low height of the director's frame may be meant to suggest the more relaxed, mediative perspective of a Japanese looking at the world from the floor of a tatami room, but the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman claims that the low height of her frames occurs because she is short! The lesson should be clear: Don't simply describe technical details and expect them to be self-explanatory. Rather, put them to work to convey an idea about the various ways frames and their points of view operate and what they mean in specific films, in specific cultures, and at specific times.

The Edited Image

In the simplest sense, editing is the linking of two different pieces of film (two different shots). Usually, the editing follows some logic of development (an image of a woman and then the object she is looking at, for example) or is meant to make a statement of some sort (an image of an egotistical czar and then one of a peacock). Recall the cowboy at the bar: when a long shot shows him at the bar and then

slowly tracks in closer to capture him close up, this is reframing within a single shot. But if after that first image the camera stops and moves to another position (maybe a low angle on the other side of the bar), that reframed long shot has now been edited into two shots. The break between the two images is a *cut*.

A shot can be held on the screen for any length of time, the result being a certain *editing pace* or *rhythm*. Since the pace of the editing is relative, we should try to note why and how a film or part of a film is edited according to a certain rhythm. We expect a chase scene to be rapidly edited (with lots of quick cuts and brief shots), but to make us comically aware of our expectations about editing, that chase scene could be edited with very slow rhythms and few cuts. As an exercise, observe exactly how long a single image remains on the screen in any movie, and then reflect on why the filmmaker cuts to another angle or image at that point. Does the director use mostly *long takes*, shots that remain on a scene or object for an unusually long time (as Terrence Malick did in *Thin Red Line* [1999] when he held the image on grassy fields or the branches of trees for mystically long periods)? Or does the film cut rapidly from one image to another, as in chase sequences in *The Terminator* (1984)? Does the pace of the editing change with the scene, for example, by using quick cuts on the streets and slow, long takes inside the home?

In the larger sense, *editing* refers to how shots are built into larger pieces of a movie and hence larger units of meaning. A series of shots can thus be carefully joined to create a single *scene*, which is usually an action confined to one place and time: for example, in Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), the scene when Ada (Holly Hunter) arrives on a remote beach in nineteenth-century New Zealand or, in *Potemkin*, the scene in which the officers inspect the rotten meat. The latter begins with a group of angry sailors gathered on deck around a piece of maggot-infested meat; the ship's surgeon inspects the meat, which is shown in close-up, and announces that the maggots are simply dead flies; the scene ends as another officer disperses the outraged sailors.

When these shots describe significantly more action and more time and more than one location, the interwoven and unified group of shots or scenes that results is often called a *sequence*. In *The Piano*, the beach scene becomes part of a larger arrival sequence when Ada is met and led through the jungle to her future home; in *Potemkin*, the scenes that dramatize the sailors' mounting discontent make those scenes part of a complicated sequence leading to their rebellion. As part of the previous exercise, see if you can now mark off sections of a film that show how shots can be edited into complex relationships that create unified scenes or sequences.

Most of us pay little conscious attention to editing because we know and enjoy most the *continuity editing* of classical cinema. This editing style is appropriately called *invisible editing* because the filmmaker, not wanting the editing to distract from the story, avoids cuts and transitions between images that would be too obvious. Through various means, the filmmaker attempts to hide the film editing so that we view the images as a continuous picture. Thus, even though *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is a very skillfully and stylishly edited movie—carefully balancing Sam Spade's entrances and exits and his keen method of noticing the details in a room—we view it as a continuous action in which obtrusive cuts would seem out of place.

Yet, continuity editing depends on some highly crafted editing techniques, techniques that, when analyzed, reveal important points about the characters and story. *Establishing shots*, for instance, are those shots that begin a scene or sequence as a way of locating a scene clearly in a certain place before dividing that sequence into more detailed shots. *Casablanca* (1942) begins with a series of establishing shots that describe the city on the map, the kind of people in the city, and, finally, the outside of Rick's cabaret. Only then does the film move inside to begin its story about Rick. The *shot/reverse-shot*, or *shot/countershot*, pattern is also a fundamental part of continuity editing. With this technique, an exchange between two characters (or a character and an object) is edited to appear logical and

natural, by cutting from the person speaking or looking to the object or person that is being addressed or seen; for instance, a shot shows Humphrey Bogart asking Ingrid Bergman a question and then cuts to her responding. When considering a film that uses continuity editing, a writer can begin, as with realism itself, by questioning the basic purposes of the techniques used:

- Are there larger implications concerning the world and society in the “continuity”? Is the movie trying to create a sense of a logical or safe world? Do establishing shots, for instance, indicate that the characters (and the audience) know where they are and should feel at home? Does the continuity help establish, as in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), a sense of logical inevitability, a feeling that events and relationships have to move toward a natural conclusion, that Hepburn and Grant will remarry?
- Has the continuity editing been adjusted to fit a genre or to create certain emotional responses? Do road movies have fewer cuts and more long takes? In westerns, do the shot/reverse-shot patterns involve people and things more than people and other people?
- When the editing presents a fundamentally continuous and unified world, are there times when that continuity is disrupted? If so, why? In *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), for instance, Orson Welles regularly disrupts the viewer's sense of space and time through the questionable reliability of the narrator, O'Hara, or through visual distortions such as in the hall of mirrors at the end of the movie. In this case, the disrupting images and editing imply the collapse of a world incapable of maintaining old certainties.
- Does the shot/reverse-shot pattern in a particular sequence tell you anything about the characters involved or how they

see the world and each other? Are considerably more shots given to one person or the other? Does the editing create a pattern in which one character's eyes never meet the other's?

- How would you distinguish between the continuity editing of an older, classical movie like *Ben Hur* (1925) and that of a more modern Hollywood film like *Men in Black* (1997)? Does one use more long takes and the other more quick cuts? How would you differentiate between the continuity editing in a European movie like *Rules of the Game* (1939) and an American movie like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)? Does the first rely more on a moving frame to emphasize the world around the characters and the second more on smooth editing techniques that emphasize the characters themselves?

Continuity editing can also use more noticeable and stylized methods, which are often associated with older movies. These include:

- *Fade-in or fade-out*: An image is darkened or lightened so that it appears or disappears.
- *Iris-in or iris-out*: The new image appears as an expanding circle in the middle of the old image or the old image becomes a contracting circle that disappears into the new image.
- *Wipe*: A line moves across an image to gradually clear one shot and introduce another.
- *Dissolve*: A new shot is briefly superimposed on the fading old shot.

When these techniques are used in a movie, ask what they are meant to achieve. Used in older movies, they create logical transitions from one time or place to another. In a D. W. Griffith film, a fade might be saying, "Later that same day," as the shot reveals the same kitchen in the evening; a wipe could suggest, "In another part of town"—when the interior of the court house is wiped off

by a line across the image and a Chinese opium den appears on the other side of the line. When watching an older film, ask if one technique is used for one kind of linkage (a wipe connecting different places, for example) and another technique for other situations (a dissolve indicating changes in time). When analyzing modern movies, ask why the editor would choose these older continuity devices. Does Woody Allen use irises just for a humorous effect, since they are so unusual in a contemporary movie? In *The Cotton Club* (1984), are the wipes simply a reference to the 1920s, when the story takes place, or are they a dramatic means of emphasizing the passage of time and history—one of the main themes of the film?

Besides recognizing the techniques of continuity editing, you should learn to recognize, make sense of, and analyze how films undermine or challenge your expectations about continuity editing. Especially in more contemporary films, begin to notice when a film breaks with the standards of continuity editing and begin to ask questions such as these:

- Why are there so few establishing shots in a particular movie? Is it difficult to say where an action takes place because the scene begins with a close-up of a character or inside an unidentified room? Do the characters seem to share our disorientation? Is this disorientation related to the themes of the film?
- Why is the temporal continuity within a film broken up in such a confusing fashion? Does the editing use a number of *jump cuts*, in which a continuous shot is suddenly broken and the image jumps to new figures or another background or even the same background but at a different time? As a character discusses her life, for instance, the monologue may be broken in places, while the light in the room changes with each jump cut to indicate the passage of time. Is the filmmaker trying to make us more aware of the passage of

time, or is he or she commenting ironically on this character's boring life story?

- Why is there no point of view we can identify with? Does this have something to do with the lack of shot/reverse-shot scenes that would allow us to identify with the perspective of a character? Does the filmmaker, as Werner Herzog often does in his films, force his audience to remain detached from the ordinary people and to identify instead with animals, lunatics, or dwarfs? Does the film contain images that seem to have no place in the story? A movie about war may inexplicably cut to an image of a cherry tree time and time again. Is it a symbol? Is it part of a character's memory? Why is the continuity of the action broken by this unexplained image?

In these cases, the editing calls attention to itself, and the trade-off for that obtrusiveness is an initial confusion about why the editing has upset the usual perception of the world. When that confusion leads to larger questions (and, perhaps, to answers) about the themes and the historical context of the film, the writer is beginning to sketch a paper topic. After thinking about the Herzog movie, one student realized his paper would discuss how Herzog's unconventional editing, particularly his undermining of a shot/reverse-shot exchange, is part of an effort to move the audience outside the logical patterns that have traditionally placed human society at the center of the world, part of Herzog's vision of a natural world that is more important than individual men and women.

When examining editing strategies and the relationships between shots, begin with these general guidelines about what to look for, but adapt them to deal with concrete and specific uses and variations in each film.

First, observe how the editing of the shots establishes certain relationships between the objects and actions. Does the editing establish connections or oppositions among the people, things, and actions being shown? In *The Last Laugh* (1924), the doorman is fre-

quently linked to the image of the revolving door, and the identification of the two predicts the reversal of the man's good fortune. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a prehistoric ape tosses a bone into the air, which then becomes the image of a spaceship. This famous *match-on-action*—two images' being edited together as parallel actions or motions—crystalizes thousands of years of human development propelled by violence and the need to conquer people and territory.

Second, accustom yourself to noticing more abstract relationships between images. This is a more difficult practice, but, as the example from Eisenstein's *Potemkin* shows (pp. 33–39), these more abstract aspects of editing can be brilliantly used for certain effects. Does the direction and movement of the figures in the different images match when these shots are connected, creating, for example, a kind of visual and emotional force driving in a single direction? Are graphic contrasts or similarities created through the use of space in the different shots, for example, by alternating large and small spaces? Does the editing set up certain rhythms by strictly controlling the length of each shot? (Although most of us know best the accelerated rhythms of a chase sequence, the editing can fashion many other kinds of rhythms.) Remember these formal patterns have no final and universal meaning in themselves, and their evolution through film history is not independent of other historical questions. Although editing can be seen as a formal way of organizing images in time and space, more than just formal or technical issues are usually involved. Look precisely at editing, but let it lead you to think more about how and what films mean. In the following student essay, the writer examined a very short sequence in *Citizen Kane* and related the editing and the composition of the image to a specific theme:

Scott Richardson

Editing Breakfast in *Citizen Kane*

Soon after Charles Foster Kane marries Emily, the woman of his dreams who is brought back from Europe like one of his statues, their marriage begins to

collapse. The severity and intensity of this collapse are captured in one two-minute sequence, which remains one of the most striking examples of Welles's evocative and economical editing in *Citizen Kane*.

The sequence begins with a medium two-shot of Kane and Emily in relatively warm light. Their conversation is teasing and intimate, visually reinforced by a shot/reverse-shot exchange of loving looks: he tells her she is beautiful, and when she complains about his having to leave for his newspaper office, he says he will call and change his appointments. That exchange is followed by five more short shot/reverse-shot pairs, and in each, the eyes of the couple grow increasingly suspicious and severe. The conversations are progressively hostile and clipped, and the newspaper becomes both a visual and a verbal symbol of their growing division. In the first scene of this middle section, she complains, "Charles, if I didn't trust you . . . What do you do on a newspaper in the middle of the night?" In the third, Emily pleads with him to stop attacking her uncle, the president, in his newspaper. By the fifth, he is not even allowing her to finish her sentence:

EMILY: Really, Charles, people have a right to expect . . .

CHARLES: What I care to give them.

Through the entire sequence, the changes in the clothing and other aspects of the mise-en-scène indicate that the passage of time is also a passage away from emotional intimacy. Kane changes from a romantic tuxedo to a business suit. Their setting alters from an unobstructed and close space to an obstructed space cluttered with plants, flowers, and newspapers.

The succinct logic of the editing is then powerfully concluded with a shot/reverse shot and then another two-shot. In the shot/reverse shot, the eyes no longer meet or match, since they are

now both reading separate newspapers—he, his own (*The Inquirer*); she, the rival (*The Chronicle*). Formally balancing the opening of the sequence, the medium-long two-shot has much colder and darker lighting. The two former lovers are placed conspicuously at opposite sides of the frame.

The real time that this sequence describes is probably many years. Yet, through a rigorous and creative use of an edited space and a series of conversations within that space, Welles depicts more than just the synopsis of a failed marriage. Linking the six encounters, appropriately, with flash pans, he also tells a succinct and cinematic version of the entire tale of *Citizen Kane*: of how Kane's greatest desires seem to turn to dust almost immediately after he achieves them and of how he consequently becomes a man always alienated in the great spaces that surround him.

SOUND

Few of us have learned to listen to the movies. What this common failure means to new and curious students of the movies is that many topics and problems having to do with film sound have only recently begun to be addressed and are waiting for good ears to take them up. If students with an interest in music and sound direct and concentrate that interest on a movie or a specific group of movies, they will tackle some original and provocative material.

In theory, sound can be used and edited with as much complexity and intelligence as images can. Certainly, sound has many dimensions and uses in film: it can be described according to pitch, loudness, or timbre; it can figure in a film as *direct sound* (recorded when the image is being shot) or *postdubbed sound* (sound and dialogue added later in the studio). Movie sound can take the form of dialogue, music, or noise (thunder, or a car

screaching to a halt), any or all of these sounds being naturally or artificially produced. Film sound can have a multitude of relations to the image and the narrative: it can be background music; its source may be on- or off-screen; and it can even precede or follow the image it is linked to (as when a character's remark forms a bridge into the next image).

Throughout film history, one can find movies in which the sound alone would make a major topic for analysis. A well-known example, Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), sets up a complex opposition between the graceful music of Bach on the soundtrack and the tormented story of Bach's physical and financial troubles. Francis Coppola's *The Conversation* (1973) recounts the story of a man who specializes in sound surveillance, who tries to discover the truth through sound alone, and who finally loses all faith in the visual world. Some of the most fascinating and provocative uses of sound are found in films of the early 1930s, when sound was first being introduced into the movies. In one early sound film, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935), Hitchcock employs sound as a central element in the plot: at a critical moment, he creates a dramatic *sound match* by connecting a woman's scream and the whistle of a locomotive to link disparate images (Figures 17 and 18).

To write about sound, one must first learn to attend to sound—truly to listen. This does not mean that the more obvious or dramatic uses of sound in film—in movies with lavish sound tracks like Philip Glass's *Koyanisquatsi* (1982) or films organized around musical performances like *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999)—cannot inspire good essays. But since a good essay is one that reveals intuitive, careful, and discriminating thinking, a good essay on sound will attend to what might normally escape a normal viewer and listener. A writer about sound in film might therefore begin by asking bluntly:

- What is the relation of the sound to the image in specific scenes or sequences? How might the answer to that question

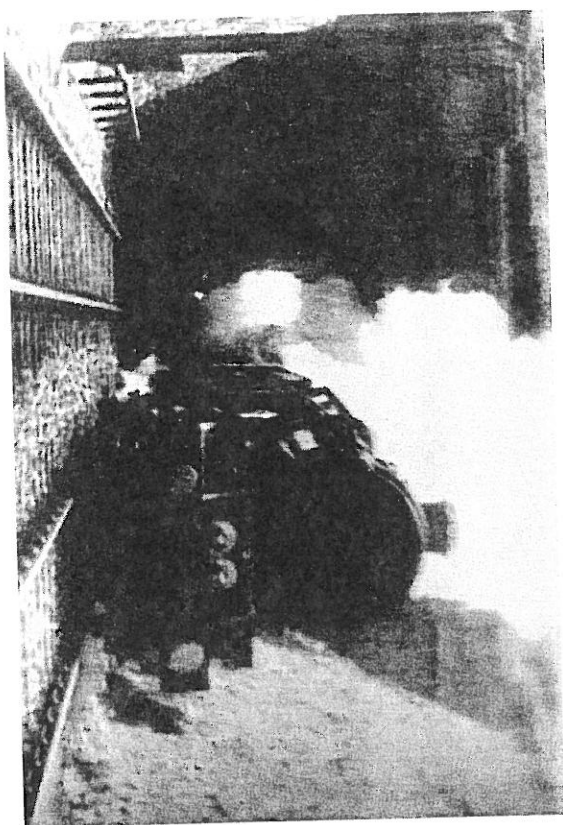


■ Figure 17

The Thirty-Nine Steps: creating transitions and links. . . .

be refined to reveal the aims, achievements, or even failures of sound in the movie?

- Is the sound used to link images, or does the sound have the conventional role of beginning and terminating with the image?
- Does sound ever become more important than the image, and what is the reason for this unusual strategy?
- Do the musical numbers in a musical have any special relation to the narrative structure (for instance, do they occur when the characters need to escape into fantasy)?
- Why does the dialogue of the characters overlap or seem mumbled in some recent movies, so that it is difficult to understand the characters? Does the dialogue serve some other purpose than to help tell the story?



■ Figure 18

... through sound matches.

- What role does silence play in this movie?
- Are there sound motifs that identify the characters or actions? Does the rhythm of the sound support or serve as counterpoint to the rhythm of the editing?
- If you had to pick three key sound sequences from this movie, which would they be and why?

These questions are only a sample of the many inquiries that movie sound and particular movies might inspire. Listen to all film sound, and write about it with the same curiosity and suspicion exhibited by the characters in Godard's *Everyman for Himself* (1980), who continually hear background music and wonder where it's coming from and why. Here a renowned French filmmaker (and

early innovator with sound), René Clair, writing in 1929, detailed one of the first successes with sound in the cinema:

Of all the films now showing in London, *Broadway Melody* is having the greatest success. This new American film represents the sum total of all the progress achieved in sound films since the appearance of *The Jazz Singer* two years ago. For anyone who has some knowledge of the complicated technique of sound recording, this film is a marvel. Harry Beaumont, the director, and his collaborators (of whom there are about fifteen, mentioned by name in the credit titles, quite apart from the actors) seem to delight in playing with all the difficulties of visual and sound recording. The actors move, walk, run, talk, shout, and whisper, and their movements and voices are reproduced with a flexibility which would seem miraculous if we did not know that science and meticulous organization have many other miracles in store for us. In this film, nothing is left to chance. Its makers have worked with the precision of engineers, and their achievement is a lesson to those who still imagine that the creation of a film can take place under conditions of chaos known as inspiration.

In *Broadway Melody*, the talking film has for the first time found an appropriate form: it is neither theater nor cinema, but something altogether new. The immobility of planes, that curse of talking films, has gone. The camera is as mobile, the angles are as varied as in a good silent film. The acting is first-rate, and Bessie Love talking manages to surpass the silent Bessie Love whom we so loved in the past. The sound effects are used with great intelligence, and if some of them still seem superfluous, others deserve to be cited as examples.

For instance, we hear the noise of a door being slammed and a car driving off while we are shown Bessie Love's anguished face watching from a window the departure which we do not see. This short scene in which the whole effect is concentrated on the actress's face, and which the silent cinema would have had to break up in several visual fragments, owes its excellence to the "unity of place" achieved through sound. In another scene we see Bessie Love lying thoughtful and sad; we feel that she is on the verge of tears; but her face disappears in the shadow of a fade-out, and from the screen, now black, emerges a single sob.

In these two instances the sound, at an opportune moment, has replaced the shot. It is by this economy of means that the sound film will most probably secure original effects. (93–94)

In observing and writing about sound or any formal features, your first goal should be as much precision as possible. Developing a vocabulary of technical terms can be extremely helpful, but most important is developing the ability to write concrete descriptions of images and sounds in the way that best allows your reader to see and hear the images and sounds you are describing. Sometimes, of course, that detailed precision is more difficult to achieve than at other times. When you must work with only sketchy notes, try to get as much out of those notes as possible. There is nothing wrong with writing about a general style in a film (“a predominance of long shots,” “an amplified sound track,” or “exaggeratedly artificial sets”), as long as your paper has a focus that does not rely solely on generalities. Otherwise, always try to integrate as much accurate concrete description as possible into your argument. As practice, describe—without analyzing—all the technical features of an opening or closing sequence of a movie or an especially interesting use of sound in a scene.

Interpretation, analysis, and evaluation are, however, the primary goals of most writing about film these days. Your appreciation of these elements of a film and how they work together must, at some point, be assimilated and made part of your ideas about what the film or films mean. Whether you examine the editing of a sequence, the lighting throughout a series of films, or how the mise-en-scène, framing, and sound work together in a single scene, remember that seeing, listening, and thinking must join forces as you begin to put your perceptions into words.

SAMPLE ESSAY

This student essay on *The Searchers* (1956) is a good example of how a discriminating analysis involves comparative questions (about film and literature) and, in the process, demonstrates how the movie uses specific technical and formal strategies to express its themes.

Richard Geschke
The Darkened Doorways of *The Searchers*

Based on a 1954 novel by Alan Lemy, John Ford's 1956 adaptation of *The Searchers* dramatizes some of the critical changes that can occur in moving a story from a book to the screen. Most film adaptations require some adjustments to the plot (usually deletions). But in Ford's *The Searchers*, we witness a major alteration in the central character, Ethan Edwards, which in turn effects the significance of the entire story. As part of Ford's transformation of Edwards, the film uses a specific image pattern based on the composition of a darkened doorway, an image pattern that indicates how a film narrative can sometimes supplement or even surpass a literary narrative.

Although most of the central plot elements remain intact, the most significant change in the adaptation is the character of Ethan Edwards. In the novel he is a fairly traditional western hero who, without much psychological complexity, rescues his niece and returns home. In the film, however, his character grows much more complicated in three ways. First, from the beginning, there is the subtle but definite indication of a mysterious and possibly criminal past: since the end of the Civil War, Ethan apparently resisted returning home and possibly participated in some unmentionably dangerous, violent, or illegal acts. Second, Ford's Ethan struggles with the turbulent dangers of sexual desires. As carefully suggested by the opening sequence with Ethan and his brother's wife Martha, Ethan has had to repress his love and passion for Martha, presumably knowing that passion would violate the domestic and family codes he lives by. Third, in the film, Ethan is clearly a rascist. Unlike in the novel, here he makes sarcastic remarks about his “half-breed” nephew (who is partly Native American) and, more importantly, his mission to find Debbie is, unlike in the novel, motivated by the