

English 197: Writing Link with Comparative Literature 272

How to Read a Film

Shots

The most basic element of film is called the “shot,” which refers to an uninterrupted segment of film that focuses on a subject, setting, or blank screen. Directors can control the shot composition by varying the distance between the camera and the subject being photographed.

A **close-up shot** focuses on the face and allows the viewer to see the expression of the eyes thus allowing us to recognize the actors’ emotions. In an **extreme close-up**, only part of the subject fills the frame, for example the actors’ eyes.

A **medium shot** presents the subject from the waist up, while a **medium close-up** focuses on the head and shoulders. Both medium shots and medium close-ups are commonly used for conversation or dialogue.

A **long shot** shows the subject’s entire body and much of the surrounding environment; in an **extreme long shot** the subject’s body is discernible, but appears small in relation to the surroundings. Directors frequently use either a long shot or an extreme long shot as an **establishing shot**, a shot that establishes the setting for the viewer by showing where the people and action are located.

Directors often use a “funnel effect” with shots—a long-medium-close sequence.

Angles

Directors are also able to manipulate camera angles. The camera’s angle in relation to the scene decides the point of view of the scene and establishes how the viewer will look upon the object or action:

A **normal, or “eye-level,” angle** puts the viewer on the same eye-to-eye level as the actors. This angle may encourage audience identification with the subjects. A **point-of-view** shot places the camera, and thus the viewer, in the approximate position of one of the actors.

A **low angle**, which puts the camera below the actor, affects the viewer by making the object or person photographed appear prominent.

A **high angle**, which looks down on the actors from above, making them appear smaller. An extreme of this angle is the **“bird’s-eye view,”** which is shot high and directly over the subject, disorienting the viewer or giving him/her an omniscient feeling.

An angle that is used much less but can be very effective is the **Dutch angle**. This occurs when the camera is tilted so that the viewer feels off-balance. Often this angle is used in mystery or horror films to convey the feeling that something is wrong, or not as it should be.

Lighting

Standard **three-point lighting** employs a bright **key** light, the main source of illumination positioned to one side of the camera; a dimmer **fill light** that illuminates the shadows created by the key light; and a **back light** that distinguishes foreground elements—typically the scene’s primary actors—from the background.

High-key lighting provides bright, even illumination with few noticeable shadows. **Low-key lighting** creates sharply defined areas of light and dark.

Camera Movement

Directors also use camera movement to shape what the viewer sees. Camera movement allows viewers to follow subjects; it also introduces setting, creates tension, draws the viewer’s eye to an area of interest, and changes our perception of space and characters, among other effects.

A **tilting** camera moves vertically from up to down or down to up on a stationary base. A tilt shows the viewer a subject little by little, as when a woman's body is shot from the legs up.

A **panning** camera moves horizontally on a stationary base. Panning allows viewers to see the size of a particular space, to follow a subject moving across space, to notice a specific object of interest, or to see through the eyes of a character looking from side to side.

In a **tracking, or dolly, shot**, the camera moves along tracks, typically following the movement of an actor. The camera may also be moved via a **crane**; crane shots move smoothly through space. A **Steadicam** allows a camera operator to move with subjects without the use of tracks (the Steadicam is mounted to the operator's body). The Steadicam apparatus works well for long, continuous shots.

Cuts

A **cut** is the transition between one shot and the next or one scene and the next.

Most films move quickly, and they depend upon the movement provided by the **simple, or "straight," cut** a cut in which one image replaces the previous one. With simple cuts, the director often "matches" shots graphically or in terms of action.

Another type of cut is called a **dissolve**, where shots melt into one another; one scene fades as the new scene emerges. A dissolve often precedes a shift in locale and perhaps a minor passage of time.

Similarly, in the **fade in/fade out**, the screen goes to black as the picture fades out, and then the new scene slowly emerges from the black. This technique is used within a film to mark major divisions, establishing a longer passage of time or a more dramatic shift in locale.

Analyzing a Film

As you view films, consider how the cuts, camera angles, shots and movement work to create particular meanings. Think about how they establish space, privilege certain characters, suggest relationships, emphasize themes, or forward the narrative. In addition to shot distances, angles, editing, lighting and camera movement, note details of the narrative, setting, characters, props, costume, tone, and sound. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How is the story told (linear, with flashbacks, flash-forwards, episodically)? What “happens” in the plot?
- How does the film cue particular reactions on the part of viewers (sound, editing, characterization, camera movement, etc.)? Why does the film encourage such reactions?
- Is the setting realistic or stylized? What atmosphere does the setting suggest? Do particular objects or settings serve symbolic functions?
- How are the characters costumed and made-up? What does their clothing or makeup reveal about their social standing, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or age? How do costume and makeup convey character?
- What is illuminated, what is in the shadow? How does the lighting scheme shape our perception of character, space, or mood?
- What shot distances are used? Do you notice a movement from longer to closer shot distances? When are the various shot distances used (e.g., the opening of the scene, during a conversation, etc.)? What purposes do the shot distances serve?
- How do camera angles function? How do they shape our view of characters or spaces?
- How do camera movements function? What information do they provide about characters, objects, and spaces? Do they guide the viewer’s eye toward particular details? Do they align the viewer’s perspective with that of a character?
- What types of cuts are used? How are the cuts used (to establish rhythm, shift between characters, transition between spaces, mark the passage of time)? Does editing comment on the relationships between characters and/or spaces?
- Do different characters use different kinds of language? Do certain characters speak through their silences?
- What is the music’s purpose in a film? How does it direct our attention within the image? How does it shape our interpretation of the image?
- How do industrial, social, and economic influence the film? Do conditions in the filmmaking industry limit the way in which the film can represent particular subjects? Does the film follow or critique dominant ideologies? Does it reflect and shape particular cultural tensions?