How to “Read,” What to Notice, How to Write About a Film

Along with the literary texts we’re reading this term, the films we’re watching form the “textual” material we’ll use to examine various meanings and constructions of masculinity. As I mentioned in class, our viewing of these films will be less film appreciation (though certainly we can appreciate and enjoy much about the films) and will require us to work more interpretively to better understand how these films represent certain features, characteristics, behaviors, stereotypes, and “norms” that seem to signal masculinity. This handout is designed to help you become more keen observers of the “parts” that create the “whole” in a film—ideally, understanding what to look for and what it means will help you arrive at more sophisticated and interesting “readings” of the films.

How to “Read” a Film

Reading a film—moving beyond or perhaps through your enjoyment or annoyance with a film to the mode of analyzing the meaning of the different aspects or features of a film—is the first and perhaps most daunting task. As you watch a film, keep these questions and ideas in mind:

• What does this film look like generally? Is it in color or in black and white? How do I feel about the overall look of this film? Do I like it, dislike it, and why might that be the case?
• How is the story of the film—the events that are presented to us or what we can infer has happened—presented to us? Is this a movie that follows a chronology or is there something unusual about the temporal order of the plot?
• Does the narrative style of the film attempt to be more or less objective? From whose point of view is the story being told?
• Does the film make use of certain technologies—in sound, color, or special effects, for example—that enhance or detract from my viewing of it? How do these technological features contribute to the film in some way?
• Keep the idea of economics in mind: all films have something to do with money, whether they are large-budget Hollywood movies or small budget independent films. What, if anything, does the sort of film this is in terms of budget have to do with the film itself (in terms of its theme, point, story, etc.)?
• What does the film presume about the knowledge of the audience? Does the film seem to assume that the audience has some knowledge of the film’s topic (such as how football is played or why New York is the setting for a lot of gangster movies)?
• Which elements of the movie strike you as unfamiliar or confusing and why?
• Which elements are repeated to emphasize a point?
• When was this film made and why might the time period in which this film was made have some impact on the story that is told and its meaning? What
was going on at that historical and/or cultural moment and how might this have some effect in the film?

- **How does the film open?** How are the credits presented and against what sort of background? What is interesting about the opening in terms of how it "sets up" (or doesn't) the film that follows?

- **How does the film end?** For example, why does Terrence Malick's film *The New World* end in silence? What is that supposed to signal or mean in terms of the story that has just unfolded?

- **Notice the camera movements**: is there a pattern of particularly striking camera movements such as a series of long shots or an especially significant tracking scene?

- **Which three or four scenes seem most important** in the film and why? If you had to write about just one scene in the film, which one would you choose and why?

- **Who is in this film?** Are the film actors mainly female, male, old, young, of what racial or ethnic background (as far as you can tell on the visual surface or in terms of what the film reveals), big stars or not-so-famous, etc.? Why are these film demographics important?

- **Who are the central characters?** What is the relationship between these characters and what does each seem to represent in the film (the importance of individuality? Human strength or compassion)? What do these characters "do" in the film and what is the result of their actions?

- **Do the objects and props in the film** (such as trees and landscape features, buildings, paintings, other inanimate objects, etc.) have special significance that relate to the story, the characters, the "point" of the movie? How are these objects arranged and used in the film and with what effects?

- **Who directed the film?** Have you seen other films by this director? What do you know about this director and the type of films she or he usually makes? Is this film consistent with the other films by the director—how is it or isn't it? What does the director seem to want us to "get" from this film?

- **What does the "message" of the film seem to be**, if anything? What is the overall "point" of this movie?

**Questioning Images, Taking Notes: Useful Film Terms & Topics**

As you watch films and try to answer the questions above, you might find it helpful to draw on the language of film in your analysis. Below I've provided both some terms for you to become familiar with—terms and ideas that will help you critically analyze films—and the shorthand references for many of these terms. In your papers, please avoid using the shorthand system (say "close up" instead of "cu," for example), but when we're watching films in class and you are taking notes (which you should be doing) you might find the shorthand very helpful (since film im@ can move very quick and you might want to remember something particularly striking about a certain scene or camera angle).

**The Shot** = 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, and the frame
that contains the image may shift in terms of perspective. Below are the most common shots in a film:

- **cu** close-up (showing only the character's head)
- **xcu** extreme close-up (showing perhaps a detail of that head, such as the eyes)
- **ms** medium shot (somewhere between a close-up and a full or long shot—showing most but not all of a figure)
- **fs** full or long shot (revealing the character's entire body in the frame)
- **3/4s** three-quarter shot (shoring about ¾ of the figure)
- **ps** pan shot (the camera pivots from left to right or vice versa, but without changing its vertical axis)
- **s/rs** shot/reverse shot pattern (the camera shows a person looking at someone and then shows the individual being looked at)
- **ct** cut (when the film changes from one image to another)
- **lt** long take (the film does not cut to another image for an unusually long time)
- **crs** crane shot (the camera films an outdoor scene from high above)
- **tr.s** tracking shot (the entire camera moves, on tracks or a dolly, following, for example, a walking figure)
- **la** low angle (the camera is low, tilted upwards)—used to increase size, power of an object
- **ha** high angle (the camera is above, tilted downwards)—sometimes used to show vulnerability, decrease size

**scene**—a series of shots that together form a complete episode or unit of the narrative

**storyboard**—drawn up when designing a production (like a rough draft or outline for a film)

**montage**—the editing together of a large number of shots with no intention of creating a continuous reality. A montage is often used to compress time, and montage shots are linked through a unified sound (either a voiceover or a piece of music)

**cut**—the ending of a shot (if the cut seems inconsistent with the next shot, it is called a jump cut)

**fade in or out**—the image appears or disappears gradually

**dissolve**—one image fades in while another fades out so that for a few seconds the two are superimposed

**The Sound**

**Soundtrack**—consists of dialogue, sound effects, and music. Should reveal something about the scene that visual images don't (or contributes to visual images)

**score**—musical soundtrack

**sound effects**—all sounds that are neither dialogue nor music

**Voiceover**—spoken words laid over the other tracks in sound mix to comment upon the narrative
**Diagetic sound**—sound that is part of the film world we are watching, “natural” in some way to the scene (for example, if the scene takes place at the beach, we hear the waves crashing; if the scene is at a party, we hear music from a d.j. or cd player)

**Non-diagetic sound**—sound not part of the film world, not “natural” to the scene going on (for example, in the beach scene, instead of waves crashing we might hear an orchestra playing)

**Lighting** = important for conveying mood or atmosphere
- **Key light**—usually the brightest and most important, noticeable, influential
- **Back light**—helps counteract the effect of the key light, thus making a figure appear more “rounded,” fuller in some way, more multi-dimensional
- **Filler light**—helps soften the harsh shadows created by the use of the back and key lights
- **Low-key lighting**—sharp contrasts of light and dark using mainly key and back light. (used frequently to suggest “mystery,” and in film noir of the 40s and 50s)
- **Underlighting**—placing a light under a face or an object (gives a dramatic, distorting effect)
- **High-key lighting**—softer than low-key lighting, appears more normal and realistic

**Mise-en-scène** = Roughly translated, this is a French term for “what is put into the scene” (put before the camera), and it refers to all those properties of a cinematic image that exist independently of camera position and movement and editing. It includes:
- **Lighting** (who or what receives what lighting? Who or what is in shadow? Are there patterns in the lighting?)
- **Costumes** (extravagant, period, do characters change often and why, is clothing important to understanding a character, etc.)?
- **Setting** (where is this taking place? Does the setting change and why? What is the space like on film?)
- **Acting** (acting styles or quality—is this an Academy Award winner or a newcomer? Is the acting subtle or overplayed?)
- **Props** (objects used to create realistic atmosphere)

**Approaches to Writing About a Film**
In his book, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* (Harper Collins 1994), Timothy Corrigan observes that there are three primary ways to write about a film: 1) a “Movie Review,” which we are perhaps most familiar with, since these appear in newspapers and are aimed at a general audience, 2) the “Theoretical Essay,” usually written by an expert in some are of film history or film studies, often for an equally knowledgeable audience of academic scholars and intellectuals, and 3) the “Film Essay,” which sort of falls between these first two modes of film writing. In this class, you will be writing “Film Essays” and can reasonably begin your writing process with the following assumptions, understandings, and goals:
- Your reader has seen or is at least familiar with the film under discussion
- Lengthy retellings of the plot of the film are thus unnecessary
- Your task is to reveal subtleties or complexities that your reader might have missed when viewing the film
• You are not trying to convince readers to like or dislike the film (and you should avoid judgments about your own like or dislike of the film in your essay, though inevitably our likes or dislikes influence our “readings” of a film)
• You should not try to tackle too many aspects or “parts” of a film in your essays for this class (which are relatively short in length)

1) Narrow your focus to an analysis of a central feature of the film—this might include a particular shot, scene, character, use of sound or lighting, camera angle, setting, and so forth. For example, instead of trying to explain how many scenes or features of a 2 hour film reveal John Wayne as the archetypal “man,” focus on a scene you find particularly useful for understanding how the film sets about to create “norms” about masculinity through John Wayne.

An early scene in The Searchers, when John Wayne’s character, Ethan Edwards, returns from the Civil War and arrives at the homestead of his brother and family, sets up the requirements for what constitutes the ideal “masculine” man. Ethan’s movements and physical size first signal his potential for masculine behavior: after dismounting from his horse, Ethan swagger towards the house where he stands a looming figure in the doorway. Shot against the mountains in the backdrop, larger than the doorway itself and than any other character in the scene, his physical presence equates him with a landscape that is majestic, immovable, and omni-present throughout the film. As the film goes on to show, Ethan’s ability to move through and “conquer” this landscape affirms a power that is distinctly masculine—especially when contrasted with the female characters who either remain behind the doorways of houses, are killed, or are captured and again hidden from public view in teepees.

2) Another approach might be to emphasize or focus on the “formal” elements of a film—the structure or style of the movie—looking for patterns such as narrative openings and closings, significant repetition and/or variation of camera movements, or the relation of shots and sequences to each other. Here’s an example that pays attention to sequence:

In Rebel Without a Cause, a shot of extraordinary beauty comes after the first twenty minutes of the film, during which the surroundings have been uniformly cramped and depressing, the images physically cluttered-up and dominated by dark colors, browns and blacks. Now, James Dean is about to set out to school; he looks out of the window. He recognizes a girl (Natalie Wood) walking past in the distance. Cut to the first day/exterior shot, the first bright one, the first “horizontal” one. This is a close shot of Natalie Wood, in a light-green cardigan, against a background of green bushes. As she walks, the camera moves laterally with her. This makes a direct sensual impression which gives us insight into Dean’s experience, while at the same time remaining completely natural and unforced.