

## Elements of Photography in Filmmaking

from Gilbert H. Muller and John A. Williams, *Ways In: Approaches to Reading and Writing about Literature and Film* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003)

Just as words make up the diction of literature, shots are the diction of filmmaking. Shots are defined as the images that are recorded continuously from the moment a camera is turned on to the time it is turned off. Describing shots involves the concepts of framing and image size. As in photography, all the information in a shot is contained within the frame. The size of the most important image in a frame (often the human figure) is an element that creates the difference between shots. The noted film authority Louis Gianetti defines them in six basic categories: the extreme long shot, the long shot, the full shot, the medium shot, the close-up, and the extreme close-up.

The extreme long shot, often called the establishing shot, shows a whole environment of a scene from a distance. Typical examples include a whole building, a street, or a large part of a forest.

The long shot presents a character in an important physical context. A typical long shot will show a man in a room, for example, where the shot is wide enough to show the details of the room in relationship to the human subject.

The full shot displays exactly what it implies: the full human figure from head to toe.

The medium shot reveals the figure from the waist up.

The close-up concentrates on the human face or a small object (Figure 1).

The extreme close-up is an even "tighter" shot, usually used on the face, and will emphasize elements such as the eyes or mouth.

The angle is another important element of film vocabulary; it refers to the camera position of a shot. An eye-level shot takes a subject from a normal position and creates a neutral view of it. An aerial shot, sometimes called a "bird's eye" shot, shows a view of a scene directly above the subjects. A high shot shows a subject from an angle somewhat above it, often tending to diminish that character in terms of power (Figure 2). A low shot, taken from below the subject, will tend to increase the power or threatening quality of the subject (Figure 3). For example, low shots have traditionally been used in horror films to arouse fear about a character. A combination of high and low shots edited skillfully in a fight scene may help to build tension and excitement. Finally, there is the oblique shot, where the camera is tilted to give an odd, skewed perspective. Spike Lee uses oblique shots in *Do the Right Thing* as part of his filmmaking style to make comments on his characters and the Brooklyn environment of his movie (Figure 4).

As stated, camera movement is one of the key elements that distinguishes filmmaking from photography. One of the main examples of camera movement is a following shot, which will either pan or track with a character. A pan is a camera moving laterally on a stationary camera mount such as a tripod, whereas tracking refers to the camera moving on a mobile camera mount in relationship to a subject. An example of a dynamic following shot would be a crane shot tracking an airplane as it takes off.

The handheld shot produces the most powerful effect of movement. This is a technique first made popular in documentary films, in which a cameraman abandons the use of a tripod and simply holds the camera, following the movement of the subject. Although the image has much more jarring movement than if fixed on a tripod, this technique has been widely copied for some shots in feature films. The handheld shot produces a feeling of kinetic movement and is associated in the audience's mind with a heightened sense of reality. As previously mentioned, the highly acclaimed film *Traffic* (2001) uses handheld cameras extensively to mimic documentary style and add a sense of gritty realism to its tale about fighting the drug war. A fairly recent invention, the steadicam, takes the technique of handheld camera even further. The camera "floats" in a specially designed rig, allowing the freedom and quick movement of the handheld camera without any jarring movement of the image. Some directors feel that a steadicam shot puts the viewer into the scene in a way that no other shot can.

**Lenses and Filters** The use of different lenses is another technique of the camera to change our perceptions. A normal lens—that of 28-40mm—gives a fairly normal image. This is the way most of us see the world. A wide-angle lens, 9-24mm, tends to distort the image, creating more depth of field, so that everything is in focus. It is very useful for long shots where the details of the environment are important. On the other hand, a long lens, 50mm and more, will tend to flatten the image, with only the subject in focus and the rest of the frame out of focus. A long lens is used to eliminate background details, often putting focus on facial expression to highlight an emotional moment in a scene. Filters are devices (glass or plastic) that, when placed in front of the lens, distort the image in various ways. There are many different kinds of filters: some are used to darken or brighten colors, while some are used for special optical effects, such as light sparkles or soft focus. Different colored filters can create a variety of effects. For example, filters can make a series of shots glow with a sepia tone, imitating the look of old photographs.

### Mise-en-Scene

The term "mise-en-scene" refers to the director's staging for the camera. It includes such elements as use of the frame, composition and design, and employment of space. It also refers to the director's use of setting, lighting, costumes, makeup, and acting.

**Staging and Composition** The director's staging in film is similar to staging for the stage in that selecting appropriate character behavior becomes the director's main

task. The difference in film is that it is staging specifically for the camera. By manipulating images to fit into a frame and making decisions about how exactly to use the camera to shoot the scene, the director can change the scene's very nature.

The main issue for the director is how to focus the audience's eye. The composition in the frame will lead the eye to certain images, just as it does in photography. There will be dominant images and those of less importance, all implying thematic meaning. There is also no one formula in composition. Sometimes the eye is drawn to the brightest part of the frame, or sometimes to the tallest image. Sometimes an unusual effect such as a silhouette will help draw the eye.

The space between the characters is also significant and conveys important meaning about relationships. In *Citizen Kane*, in the famous breakfast montage, the characters appear to be drawing farther and farther apart, until the last shot shows them at opposite ends of a long table, alienated from one another. Another example can be seen in *The Godfather*. In the first scene between the undertaker and the Don, there is a sense of grave formality: the undertaker stands throughout, separated from the Don by at least three feet, while at the end of the scene he is kissing the Don's hand formally. In a later scene, with Johnny Fontaine, the singer (the Don's godson), the scene is staged quite differently. Johnny is sitting on the Don's desk, near tears, with the Don standing close to him. In contrast to the first scene, we understand the relationship instantly through the director's staging and use of space.

Another important element is closed versus open framing. Closed framing means that the frame is artfully constructed so that all the important elements seem to be elegantly portrayed within it; nothing spills out of the frame (Figure 5). Open framing, on the other hand, implies that the image wants to spread out of the frame, suggesting more action that the camera does not see (Figure 6). Closed framing denotes more formal composition, while open framing is considered more realistic.

Following is a brief example of student writing that demonstrates an analysis of staging techniques. It concerns a scene from *Eve's Bayou*, directed by Casey Lemmons:

In the scene outside the party, Eve and her father sit opposite each other in a closed frame on the same level. This shows an intimacy, a lack of fear, and no difference in power between them. It isn't until Eve's mother, Roz, enters that the balance is disrupted. She walks in, framed between them, splitting up their warm two shot. It is clear that the mother is a competitor and breaks the closeness between Louis and all the other women, even her daughter.

### Lighting

Lighting helps to create mood, focus our eye, and enhance composition. The contrast between light and shadow is one of the most important elements of film. Highlighting certain parts of the face, such as the eyes, for example, can focus our

gaze on the emotions of the character, while darkness can create suspense and a sense of drama.

A realistic technique of lighting uses sources such as the sun, overhead lights, or light through a window to intensify the light in a scene. Dramatic lighting will use the principle of source lighting, but it will enhance or extend the effect to create focus and drama in a scene. Usually there are at least two light sources in a scene: a key light (the main source) and a fill light (a less intense light that helps to fill in shadows, softening the effect).

Lighting needs to be suitable to the themes and tone of a specific film. High key is bright and even, using low contrast between brighter and darker areas. It has often been used for comedies, musicals, and certain kinds of epic dramas. Low key has traditionally been used for thrillers, mysteries, and dramas where there can be high contrast between light and dark, with a strong use of detailed shadows. In contemporary films, both of these techniques can be used in the same film to produce different effects.

The opening sequence in *The Godfather* is a good example of the use of dramatic lighting for thematic purposes. The film begins with a scene inside a darkened room, where an undertaker is asking the Don for a favor. Using low-key lighting, the only light is on the faces of the characters; the scene appears to be taking place against a virtual dark background (Figure 7). The faces seem almost to be floating in space, disembodied from their environment. The one exception is a shot where Brando's face is silhouetted against the bright pattern of the lights striking the blinds in the window, creating a sense of mystery. This dark interior scene is contrasted with the sequence of a bright wedding scene outside (Figure 8), shot in high key. The meaning is clear: there is a disparity between what goes on in the light and what goes on in the dark. The theme of hidden, dark power has already been communicated just through the medium of lighting.

### Sets, Costumes, and Makeup

Setting is of predominant importance in film. Just as in staging, placing a camera in front of a setting changes its nature because of framing. How that environment is seen transmits important thematic messages. Similar to drama on stage, a setting communicates detail about the characters—how they live, what is important to them, and so on. The austere castle of *Citizen Kane* communicates coldness and pretension; this is in contrast to the warm interiors of a film such as *Hannah and Her Sisters* or the apartment scenes of the young Corleone family in *The Godfather Part II*. Many set decorators believe that their most important task is deciding what to remove from a naturalistic environment. The selection of a few telling elements in set decoration—a photo of a loved one, or the frayed pillow on a couch—can often communicate important story points more effectively than the use of a multiplicity of random elements.

Many sets in film attempt to imitate life: they are "found" on location (a street in New York, for example) or constructed to imitate life, either in a studio environment or on location. But in contrast to the realistic approach, sometimes sets are highly stylized, as in the expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or the frightening hotel hallways of *The Shining*. These theatrical settings give an appropriate context for the characters' odd behavior in a stylized film.

Costumes and makeup become one of many tools to reveal character and reinforce the film's themes. A costume can place a character in a certain historical period as well as in a social or economic class. In addition, it can help reveal character traits and become integral to an audience's perception of a character "image"—think of Batman's cape or Stanley's torn T-shirt in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Costumes can be very realistic or can veer toward stylization with symbolic meaning (Fellini's Juliet of the Spirits). Makeup for realistic films is generally subtler than makeup for stage, although it is as important in revealing character through certain hairstyles and cosmetics. Wigs and false noses can be more significant in stylized and nonrealistic films. Consider Olivier's makeup in *Richard III* or Orson Welles' makeup in *Citizen Kane*. In science fiction and fantasy films such as *Planet of the Apes*, costumes and makeup can become the most important design elements in the film.

## Color

Since the 1930s, color has become one of the key components of all design in the use of filters, lighting, sets, costumes, and makeup. Often, of course, color is used realistically to satisfy audience expectations, especially in settings and costumes. On the other hand, saturated color can be used with any one of these elements to produce a rich, theatrical effect, as in a Fellini film like *Casanova* or the musical *Moulin Rouge*. A designer will often use what is termed a "limited palette" of just a few colors to produce specific effects. An extreme example is using just whites, blacks, and grays, as in George Lucas' science fiction movie *THX 1138*. And sometimes one color is used predominantly, such as red, which can be symbolic of romance or terror.

Of course, films used to be shot in black and white until the onset of advanced color techniques. Today, it is a bold choice to shoot in black and white, and usually reveals ambitious artistic intentions. Spielberg made this choice in filming *Schindler's List*, although he used color sparingly by portraying a mysterious girl in a red dress for symbolic effect.

Following is a brief excerpt of student writing that describes how color can be used to underscore thematic meaning in *Do the Right Thing*:

The overwhelming use of red in the film in these early scenes is a prelude to the imminent violence that would explode on screen. The color appears in nearly every outdoor scene but is especially focal when serving as the backdrop for the corner where Sweet Dick Willie and his cohorts congregate . . . Extreme close-ups reveal faces and bodies beaded by sweat. The red background seems appropriate as the

three men appear to be steaming on a red-hot griddle. The red also may serve as a sign of the bloodshed that is hopelessly unavoidable, a harbinger of things to come.

Acting "If you catch somebody 'acting' in a movie," writes the famous British actor Michael Caine in *Acting in Film*, "that actor is doing it wrong. The moment he's caught 'performing' for the camera, the actor has blown his cover ... If your concentration is total and your performance is truthful, you can lean back and the camera will catch you every time, it will never let you fall."

Acting in film is a discipline that is strikingly different from acting on stage. While in theater an actor has to project his or her emotions across the proscenium, a camera in close-up records every minute detail of the character's thoughts and emotions. As Michael Caine implies in the above quote, relaxation is one of the most essential elements of acting for film; those actors who are most relaxed are often the most believable as well as the most successful. Critics will say of such actors that the camera "loves" them. Great actors in realistic films give concrete examples of specially observed reality to convince us of the truthfulness of their performance. Think of Dustin Hoffman's strangely inflected speech in *Rain Man* or Diane Keaton's nervous mannerisms in *Annie Hall*. Sometimes an actor in film will even use technical and artificial elements you would normally see on stage and meld them with a convincing film performance. Marlon Brando used a great many technical elements (prosthetics for his mouth and a stylized way of speaking) to produce a very theatrical character in *The Godfather*, but he combined these technical elements with well-observed character idiosyncrasies and emotional veracity. In every frame, Brando conveys what the great acting teacher Stanislavsky called the "inner truth" of the character.

It should also be noted that for some films the acting is broad and stylized as, for example, in a farcical comedy, a science-fiction movie, or a musical. You must be sure to note the genre when evaluating a specific performance.

In evaluating acting in film, we must ask: Does the actor convince us that he or she is this character? What behavioral details make the performance convincing? If the performance is not convincing, why not? Can you catch the actor "acting" or pushing too hard to perform? Is the acting style appropriate for the specific film genre? If the performance is stylized in some ways, are there still elements that enable you to believe in the basic truth of the character?

Below is a writing sample analyzing elements of photography as well as mise-en-scene. It focuses on a scene between Radio Raheem and a group of Puerto Ricans in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. Note how concrete details of photography and mise-en-scene (including acting) are linked to thematic issues.

The scene begins with a shot of the Puerto Ricans talking together, listening to their salsa music. Then Radio Raheem comes into the scene with his radio blasting his trademark song: "Tight the Power." In a medium shot, we see Ste-vie, one of the Puerto Ricans, turning up the volume of his radio, while the camera pans to reveal

Radio Raheem lift his larger radio to fill almost a third of the frame, turning up his volume as well. The camera pans back and forth between them until Stevie concedes defeat with a rueful expression, turning his radio down. The scene ends with a long high shot of the street as Radio Raheem walks away, his back to the camera, leaving the shouting Puerto Ricans behind. A small African-American boy runs after him, and he and Raheem share a high five as Raheem raises his arm in triumph.

It's important to notice how theatrical the scene is, almost posed for effect, which tends to distance us and let us observe the scene for humor rather than draw us into the potential danger of the scene. This is achieved through framing, the use of pans, the acting, and finally by the angle and lens of the final shot.

At the beginning of the sequence, the Puerto Ricans are seen in a classical composition of closed form in framing, reinforcing their sense of solidarity but also revealing that the scene has been carefully staged. Indeed all the shots in the scene reflect this kind of conscious framing. In addition, Spike Lee's use of panning is also theatrical and playful, setting up the macho war of the boom boxes. A cut can imply a separation, tension, and would seem useful in such a scene, but in this case Lee uses pans to tie both Raheem and Stevie together. When Raheem's box starts to fill the frame, as if to say, "mine is bigger than yours/" we are eager to see Stevie's reaction. The timing of the slow pan back to Stevie creates a further sense of expectation and fun in the scene.

When the camera comes to Stevie, he shows deference to Raheem in a medium close-up, and a slight smile begins to form on his lips. Through this actor's performance, we feel that Stevie acknowledges Raheem's power. And it seems that Raheem gains strength from that look and from his "win." He raises his arm in the air and actually seems for a moment to become a role model for this small child. This image is all the more poignant because it is one of the few times that there is any kind of black victory in this film. It has added significance because Lee utilizes a wide-angle shot reminiscent of the first shot of the narrative, the high view of this neighborhood. The shot seems to exult in the black triumph, telling us "this is our neighborhood, now see how powerful we are."

In context with the rest of the movie, this scene reveals that it is possible to have battles without bloodshed. The pans especially reinforce the feeling that the blacks and Puerto Ricans are of the same neighborhood, of a similar lifestyle, and that they are connected to each other. Today one may win and one may lose, but life will go on and no one will get hurt.

## Sound

Sound is an often unheralded part of filmmaking that can affect our response without our conscious knowledge. Through the details of natural and artificial aural effects, sound helps us to identify more strongly with the fictional situation on screen.

Remember that the early "motion pictures" were just that—moving images without sound. In these early motion pictures, there was often printed dialogue at the bottom of the frame or on a separate frame. What was missing was sound. It wasn't until 1927 that sound could be heard briefly in a film, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. It was released at precisely the time that American jazz was beginning to captivate the world, and from *The Jazz Singer* came Jolson's famous, boastful prediction, "You ain't seen nuthin' yet!"

The sound technique we are most familiar with is live sound, which is recorded at the moment the camera is rolling. This is also called synchronous sound, since the object is to synchronize the dialogue and effects (such as knocking on a door) with all the visuals.

However skillful the recording is, filmmakers also use added sound effects after shooting, in what is called postproduction. A beach scene where a couple walks across the sand filled with shells, sounds of seagulls and/or children playing may be added in a studio, even though these elements weren't part of the original sound environment. In addition, the sound of walking through sand and shells may be "foleyed," meaning that a sound effects technician makes the effect afterward, precisely matching the visual. All these extra effects create a rich texture of sound, helping the audience become totally immersed in the reality of the scene.

Sometimes sound is created in the studio to produce nonrealistic effects, as in the frightening noises produced by the girl in *The Exorcist*, or the heartbeat used as background for a dream sequence in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. Such sounds add unforgettable emotional power to these sequences.

Of course, music can be equally important to a film. It may help create a mood, build tension, or remind us of a time, place, or person. Music is often used thematically; that is, certain themes or melodies may be associated with certain characters or emotional states. When these themes return, they help an audience associate the image with that feeling. In *The Godfather*, the major theme by Nino Rota is almost sentimental in the way it harkens back to the Italian roots of the family. When it is used in different scenes, even in violent ones, the audience is reminded of the emotional connections within the family.

A skillful use of both music and sound in *The Godfather* is the scene where the movie producer discovers the severed horse head in his bed. The sequence starts in virtual silence, with several dissolves of the exterior of the mansion, as the camera pulls us in closer and closer. Now the familiar main theme music of the film sneaks in softly. Then, when we see the producer sleeping in bed, the theme moves into a "B" section with a variation that sounds like calliope music for a carousel. At first playful, this music gradually becomes more and more dissonant and rises in volume and intensity, climaxing the moment when the producer finds the bloody head. At the climax of the music, he begins to scream as the music stops. But his screams continue on and on—then silence. Sound and music have combined to produce a chilling effect.



Here are some important questions for analysis of sound and music: Is synchronous and postproduction sound used for realistic purposes, or is it used to create certain nonrealistic effects? What sounds seem especially important in heightening important moments in the film? Can you identify the musical themes of the movie? Do these themes have any connection to the film's general themes? How does music and sound make certain sequences effective?

## Editing

Editing is integral to the way that film tells the story. The word "cut" is familiarly used in editing, defining the basic technique. Just as in a computer word-processing program, the editor cuts and pastes together shots from a film, selecting the information from the scenes to be seen and assembled. Since the days of D. W. Griffith in the early twentieth century, editing has produced a powerful effect on the organization and structure of a film.

Some basic terms of editing are useful to know as a tool for analysis. Remember that a shot is defined as the images that are recorded continuously from when a camera is started until it is turned off. Even so, an editor will usually cut into this shot in order to move on to another. Therefore, a cut or edit terminates one shot and begins the next. Sometimes, instead of a "hard" cut, a dissolve is used, superimposing one shot over another briefly before the other shot takes over. Fade-ins (usually from black) and fade-outs (usually to black) are used to gradually begin images or gradually terminate them.

Frequently in editing, sound and music are used in tandem to bridge cuts and make them smoother. It is also used as a contrasting element to give the shots added meaning. In some of the great battle scenes in Kurosawa's *Ran*, however, all natural sound is cut out completely and symphonic music takes over, creating a dreamlike effect, heightened by the use of slow motion.

The conventional editing technique is called continuity editing, where an action sequence is cut so that each part seems to be continuous in time. Here is an example: a man reaches for the doorway in long shot, cut to the hand on the door, cut to the door opening in medium shot, and then cut to a reverse shot of the man walking through the door. In such editing, the editor's input is virtually invisible, and the action seems to take place seamlessly in real time. But, if one wants to jolt the audience by an odd or unique succession of images, the jump cut is used instead. Here, the editor will remove elements that help continuity, cutting, for example, from a man walking to a closed door to him walking away from the now open door.

Another kind of editing is associative editing. This is when certain images are placed together not in a logical sequence but one in which the juxtaposition of the images has significance. The association of the images creates a new meaning, more than the sum of all the shots together. Such juxtaposition is often used in nonrealistic sequences. Intercutting two or more kinds of sequences is an outgrowth of such technique. Think of the climax of *The Godfather*, which intercuts the baptism of a

child with the brutal murders of Michael Corleone's enemies. Sound makes the sequence even more powerful; the soft murmuring of the catechism of the baptismal service is used both to bridge edits and as a contrasting element, as the scenes move back and forth between the baptism and the murders.

Rhythm and pace are other important elements of editing. In a climactic sequence, an editor may break the shots into shorter and shorter units, heightening the tension of a film as it moves toward a climax.

Sometimes filmmakers want to make a story point visually, without dialogue, using a combination of music and sound to help demarcate the passage of time. For example, a sequence will show a couple falling in love in a succession of romantic encounters, rather than dialogue scenes. Such a sequence is called a montage.

In analyzing a certain sequence in terms of editing, you might ask yourself these questions: Do the shots seem long in duration, or does the editor try to break the shots of a sequence into short units? Does the rhythm of editing change as a sequence progresses? Does this help create tension or further the action? Is music or sound used in interesting ways to make the edits work better? Are dissolves used instead of "hard" cuts? What is their effect on the storytelling? Is the editing mainly continuity editing or are there sequences where jump cuts and/or associative editing is used? If images are juxtaposed with each other, what is their meaning? Are some of these images being used as symbols? How does the editing style affect an audience and relate to the themes of the movie?

Below is a writing sample that emphasizes editing in a montage sequence in *Eve's Bayou*, directed by Casey Lemmons:

When Eve has her first premonition in the film, we get an interesting mixture of formal and expressionistic movie-making technique. Eve falls asleep and foresees the death of her uncle, who gets killed in a car accident on the way home. In her premonition we see flashes, a spider, a coin, a falling hat, and her uncle's car. Overexposure is used to flash from shot to shot in a quick cutting montage style. We also see repetition of past events such as Eve watching her drunken uncle leave in his car, which is driven by his wife, Mozzette. Thus, past and future intermingle, until Eve wakes up in the present, startled by her vision of death. There is a mixture of temporal ellipsis and associative editing, as past events are relived, and images appear which in and of themselves would have no connection to the plot, the characters, or the "reality" of the film. They are effective, however, because they serve the purpose of making a psychological connection to the characters and events about to unfold. These images also convey the emotional and psychological state of the characters and even speak to the themes of the movie. The spider's web, for example, reinforces the concept of memory being a tapestry. The premonition sequences are shot in black and white, in contrast to the rest of the film, which further adds to the tapestry theme and mystic ambiance of *Eve's Bayou*.

## INTERPRETING FILM

Robert Corrigan has identified several different approaches in critiquing film. The most important approaches are auteur, historical, genre, ideological, and formalistic. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the auteur theory looks at a film from the standpoint of the major creative force, usually the director. This theory implies that there are common qualities or stylistic devices in any director's body of work. For instance, certain films of a director can be compared to each other, or one director's work can be compared to another's.

Another common approach is the historical one, whereby the film's historical context becomes the most important factor in criticism. Here the writer can look at film practices of the period, compare and contrast other films of that period, or compare films of different periods. Then there is genre criticism, already discussed, which links films with similar styles, themes, and narratives into a specific group such as horror, westerns, thrillers, teenage comedy, and so forth. In this instance, the film under study is usually compared to other films of that genre. In ideological criticism, the writer evaluates what the film is trying to say in terms of its political message, often comparing it to other films or works of that ideology. A film may state its message so explicitly that the film may seem like propaganda (Oliver Stone's *JFK*), or the film's ideology may be more subtle, implying certain cultural and political value judgments without overtly stating them (Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman*). Uncovering and evaluating a film's ideological message can be one of the most interesting and fruitful tasks in film criticism.

Finally, formalistic criticism focuses on certain specific elements of film discussed in this chapter, such as *mise-en-scene*, camera techniques, or narrative devices. Usually a writer will choose one or sometimes a combination of two of these approaches in a critique of film.

## EVALUATING FILM

In evaluating whether a film is "good" or not, it is important to consider a few main points that will aid in writing a critical overview. First, there is the question of unity of style. Do the most important filmic elements such as photography, acting, editing, and design support and complement each other? Is this unified style supportive of a strong theme? Does the film fit into a certain genre? Does it imaginatively add something to the traditions of that genre or does it merely copy them in a clichéd manner?

Second, there is the film's structure and script. If the film follows the classic form, is there a cause-and-effect relationship between elements? Do events flow naturally, and in this flow of action are there surprises and twists that engage an audience's interest? Are the story elements chosen carefully so that plot elements introduced in the first act come to fruition in the second and third? Is there a strong climax and resolution? If the structure is nonlinear, do these varied elements build to some powerful emotional and/or intellectual effect? Does the dialogue seem appropriate

to the style and environment of the film? If it is meant to be a realistic film, is the dialogue natural and spontaneous?

Third, we must examine the issue of character and acting. Do the characters and relationships seem specific and real? Do we identify with their goals and problems? Do the actors seem convincing? Do the actors present well-observed character details? Is there emotional truth in the playing? Is the acting style appropriate for the specific film genre?

Finally, we need to look at a film as a whole. Common-sense issues are certainly relevant. For example, does the film hold our interest throughout? Also, do we care about what happens on the screen? And after we leave the theater, has the film had a powerful effect on us? The answer to this last question separates the great films from the merely good ones.

The well-known theater and film director Peter Brook, in his important book *The Empty Space*, analyzes this kind of effect on an audience. Even though he is writing about the theater, his remarks are also applicable to the art of film:

I know of one acid test . . . When a performance is over, what remains? The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell—a picture. It is the . . . central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say . . . A few hours could amend my thinking for life. This is almost but not quite impossible to achieve.

Thus, according to Brook, we might ask two questions: Does the film engage our imaginations to such an extent that the images, dialogue, or sounds "scorch . . . our memory?" Has the experience of watching the film made us think or feel differently than we did before?

Below: "Elements of Film" Illustrations

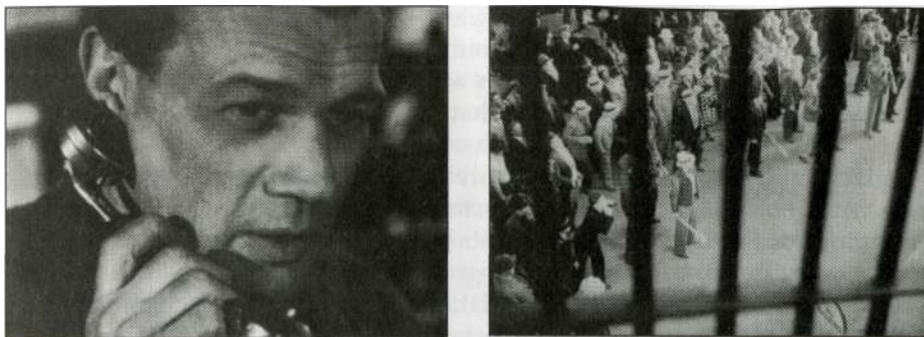


FIGURE 1 *The Third Man*. A close-up (left)

FIGURE 2 *Fury*. This high shot shows us what the hero sees, from his point of View (right)



FIGURE 3 *The Maltese Falcon*. This low shot of Casper Gutman emphasizes his obesity (left).

FIGURE 4 *Do the Right Thing*. An oblique shot (right).



**FIGURE 5**  
*Touch of Evil*  
Depiction of  
closed  
framing .





FIGURE 7 (top) & 8 (bottom) *The Godfather*. In Fig. 7, low-key lighting sets the mood for the dark interior dealings between the undertaker and the Don. The following scene—the bright wedding in Fig. 8—is shot in high key. These contrasts in lighting emphasize the disparity between the bright, open future Michael promises his wife and the dark, hidden power of his family.