Setting off: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

A Short Guide to Writing about Film

SIXTH EDITION

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1

WRITING ABOUT THE MOVIES

WHY WRITE ABOUT THE MOVIES?

Commenting some years ago on his experience at the movies, the French writer Christian Metz described a challenge that still faces the student of movies today: We all understand the movies, but how do we explain them?

As a measure of that common understanding, notice the extent to which movies are a part of a cultural life that we generally take for granted. We all treasure and identify with certain movies—for their laughs, their thrills, or their haunting images of terror—and movies and their stars regularly become part of our daily lives and conversations. In 2004 Clint Eastwood's film about a paralyzed female boxer and her desire to die, *Million Dollar Baby,* provoked regular debates about euthanasia and the politics of film, and that same year, Mel Gibson's story of Christ's crucifixion, *The Passion of the Christ,* stirred heated discussions about the relationship of Christianity and anti-Semitism. In 1997 *Star Wars* lent its name to a controversial military project, and in 1991 *JFK* raised again unsettled questions about President John F. Kennedy's assassination that appeared on television and in newspapers for months before and after the movie's release. In a sense, Erwin Panofsky's 1934 words are probably truer today than ever before:

> If all the serious lyrical poets, composers, painters and sculptors were forced by law to stop their activities, a rather small fraction of the general public would become aware of the fact and a still smaller fraction would seriously regret it. If the same thing were to happen with the movies, the social consequences would be catastrophic. (234)

Publicly and privately, our lives have become so permeated by the movies that we rarely bother to think carefully about them—and less often, if at all, do we think of writing about them.

Normally, we might argue that there is little reason to struggle to explain—and certainly not in writing—what we understand primarily as entertainment. Whether in a movie theater or watching late-night television, we usually watch films because we expect the kind of pleasure seldom associated with an inclination to pick up pen and paper. After seeing Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2005), we might chat briefly about certain characters, music, or scenes we particularly enjoyed or disliked, but we rarely want to offer a lengthy analysis of how the sets, the construction of the story, and the characters worked together. There is often an unspoken assumption that any kind of analysis might interfere with our enjoyment of the movies.

We are less reluctant to think analytically about other forms of entertainment. If, for instance, we watch a dance performance or a basketball game, we may easily and happily discuss some of the intricacies and complexities of those performances, realizing that our commentary adds to, rather than subtracts from, our enjoyment of the event. At these times, our understanding of and pleasure in experiencing the event are products of the critical awareness that our discussion refines and elaborates on. The person who has no inclination or ability to reflect on or analyze basketball or dance may be entertained on some level, but the person who is able to activate a critical intelligence about the rules and possibilities involved experiences a more intricate kind of pleasure.

In fact, our ability to respond with some analytical awareness adds to our enjoyment. And not surprisingly, the same is true of our enjoyment of the movies. Informed audiences often turn to read a review of a show they have seen the night before; many of us enjoy reading about movies we have not even seen. Analytical thinking and reading about an "entertainment" invigorate and enrich it and, perhaps, make the event itself more entertaining. Analytical writing about film offers the same promises and rewards. For example, when pressured to explain carefully why, despite its disturbing story about racism in Los Angeles, she liked *Crash*, one student discovered that her understanding of and appreciation for the film were more complex and subtle than she had first realized. While there was no missing the prominent issues in the film, she began to think more about the title and the unusual structure of the film. She began her expanded response:

> Paul Haggis' Crash (2004) is a rare, hard look at racism in America today. It moves across the multiracial landscape of Los Angeles, depicting the daily lives of African Americans, Latinos, Persian Americans, Caucasians, and Asian Americans: Some are upper-class suburbanites, others young professionals or struggling business owners, and still others angry and disadvantaged kids on the street. What distinguishes the film, however, is not so much its presentation of well-known social and racial differences but how it investigates those differences through the powerful metaphoric significance of the title and through the coincidental overlappings of the many different stories within the film. In Crash racial anger becomes a consequence of the isolation of individuals within their self-contained worlds (like moving cars tightly locked and sealed). Despite this isolation, the movie shows the uncanny inevitability of these individuals continually crossing paths (like speeding cars on roads and highways) where their anger, more often than not, results in explosive conflicts. Out of these "crashes," the movie suggests, there is the possibility of a redemption, for crashes do create contact and this contact with other individuals sometimes leads to compassion and understanding. As the police detective (Don Cheadle) says at the very start of the film, "We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something."

If the movies inform many parts of our lives, we should be able to enjoy them in many ways, including the challenging pleasure of trying to think about, explain, and write about our experience watching them. We go to the movies for many reasons: to think, or not to think; to stare at them; to write about them. We may go to a movie to consume it like cotton candy; we may go to a film where that candy becomes food for the mind. As the fan of *Crash* found out, analyzing our response to a movie does not ruin our enjoyment of it. Writing about a film can allow us to enjoy it (and other films) in ways we were incapable of before. If watching and understanding is one of the pleasures of the movies, writing and explaining can be another exciting pleasure.

Let us keep in mind that writing about the movies is not so far from what most of us do already: When we leave a movie theater after two hours of enforced silence, most of us discuss or argue about the film. Although the difference between talking and writing about a subject is a crucial one, writing about a film is, in one sense, simply a more refined and measured kind of communication, this time with a reader. Our comments can be about the performance of an actor, the excitement elicited by specific scenes, or just common questions about what happened, why it happened, or why the film made the answers to these questions unclear.

Frequently, these conversations evolve from searching for the right word or finding a satisfactory description of how a sequence develops: "I prefer Keaton to Chaplin because Keaton's funnier. Well, I mean, he tells funnier, more complicated stories"; "I hated—no, I found much too

predictable—the ending of *Garden State* (2004)." While talking about movies, even very casually, we search for words to match what we saw and how we reacted to it. Writing about film is a careful and more calculated step beyond this first impulse to discuss what we have seen. Given this normal impulse, we can even enjoy talking and writing about a movie that we didn't like. A friend of the writer who praised *Crash* thus begins his essay more negatively than the student quoted above:

> Crash (2004) is a disturbing film because so few American films even attempt to approach the topic of racism. Regardless of its good intention, however, the movie never escapes a kind of melodramatic melancholy rooted in the sad and often desperate lives of wealthy white suburban men and women, ambitious African-American police officers, Persian entrepreneurs, and angry but conflicted street hustlers. Not only do few of these characters evince much psychological or intellectual complexity, but the reduction of racism to a drama of isolated individuals makes it impossible for Crash to address the larger economic and political forces underpinning racism in America. The ending is indicative: Releasing a group of defenseless Asian immigrants on the streets of New York may suggest that one star character (Ludacris) has tried to do the right thing, but it offers little constructive hope for the future of these nameless aliens.

As these two friends discovered, when we understand the same movie very differently, trying to explain that understanding can be charged with all the energy of a good conversation.

Perhaps more than most other arts and entertainments, the movies frequently elicit a strong emotional or intellectual reaction. Often, however, the reason for our particular reaction to a movie remains unclear until we have had the opportunity to think carefully about and articulate what stimulated it. *Meet John Doe* (1941) might elicit a giddy nostalgia ridiculously out of step with today's political complexities; gay viewers of *The Crying Game* (1992) may find themselves attracted by the honest depiction of the characters' suffering about sexual identity but may be uncomfortable with the background plot about the Irish Republican Army; most audiences of Fellini's *8½* (1963) will probably recognize the importance of the opening sequence, in which a man floats from his car above a traffic jam, but they may be hard-pressed to explain quickly what it means in terms of the story that follows. Analyzing our reactions to themes, characters, or images like these can be a way not only of understanding a movie better but also of understanding better how we view the world and the cultures we live in. In the following three paragraphs, we can see how Geoffrey Nowell-Smith turned his initial excitement about a scene in an Antonioni film into an exploration of that particular scene and, implicitly, into a discussion of his admiration of the human complexity in Antonioni's films:

> There is one brief scene in *L'Avventura,* not on the face of it a very important one, which seems to me to epitomize perfectly everything that is most valid and original about Antonioni's form of cinema. It is the scene where Sandro and Claudia arrive by chance at a small village somewhere in the interior of Sicily. The village is strangely quiet. They walk around for a bit, call out. No reply, nothing. Gradually it dawns on them that the village is utterly deserted, uninhabited, perhaps never was inhabited. There is no one in the whole village but themselves, together and alone. Disturbed, they start to move away. For a moment the film hovers: the world is, so to speak, suspended for two seconds, perhaps more. Then suddenly the film plunges, and we cut to a close-up of Sandro and Claudia making love in a field—one of the most ecstatic moments in the history of the cinema, and one for which there has been apparently no formal preparation whatever. What exactly has happened?
>
> It is not the case that Sandro and Claudia have suddenly fallen in love, or suddenly discovered at that moment that they have been in love all along. Nor, at the other extreme, is theirs a panic reaction to a sudden fear of desolation and loneliness. Nor again is it a question of the man profiting from a moment of helplessness on the part of the woman in order to seduce her. Each of these explanations contains an aspect of the truth, but the whole truth is more complicated and ultimately escapes analysis. What precisely happened in that moment the spectator will never know, and it is doubtful if the characters really know for themselves. Claudia knows that Sandro is interested in her. By coming with him to the village she has already more or less committed herself, but the actual fatal decision is neither hers nor his. It comes, when it comes, impulsively: and its immediate cause, the stimulus which provokes the response, is the feeling of emptiness and need created by the sight of the deserted village. Just as her feelings (and his too for that matter) are neither purely romantic nor purely physical, so her choice, Antonioni is saying, is neither purely determined nor purely free. She chooses, certainly, but the significance of her choice escapes her, and in a sense also she could hardly have acted otherwise. . . .
>
> Where in this oppressive physical and social environment do the characters find any escape? How can they break out of the labyrinth which

> nature and other men and their own sensibilities have built up around them? Properly speaking there is no escape, nor should there be. Man is doomed to living in the world—this is to say no more than that he is doomed to exist. But the situation is not hopeless. There are moments of happiness in the films, which come, when they come, from being at peace with the physical environment, or with others, not in withdrawing from them. Claudia in *L'Avventura,* on the yacht and then on the island, is cut off, mentally, from the other people there, and gives herself over to undiluted enjoyment of her physical surroundings, until with Anna's disappearance even these surroundings seem to turn against her and aggravate rather than alleviate her pain. In *The Eclipse* Vittoria's happiest moment is during that miraculous scene at Verona when her sudden contentment seems to be distilled out of the simple sights and sounds of the airport: sun, the wind in the grass, the drone of an aeroplane, a juke-box. At such moments other people are only a drag—and yet the need for them exists. The desire to get away from oneself, away from other people, and the satisfaction this gives, arise only from the practical necessity for most of the time of being aware of oneself and of forming casual or durable relationships with other people. And the relationships too can be a source of fulfillment. No single trite or abstract formulation can catch the living essence of Antonioni's version of the human comedy. (355, 363)

In this example, a single scene becomes the stimulus for the essay. The author probes and questions this scene: What exactly has happened, and what does it mean? His obvious satisfaction as a writer comes from analyzing this scene as if it were a mystery to be solved. In the process of his analysis, his original curiosity leads to broader readings of other Antonioni movies and, finally, to his discovery of a consolation in the disturbing predicament that first caught his eye. For this writer, the pleasure of following his curiosity led to the larger pleasure of understanding more about life and happiness in modern times.

YOUR AUDIENCE AND THE AIMS OF FILM CRITICISM

Writing about film can serve one of several functions. It can help you to:

- Understand your own response to a movie better.
- Convince others why you like or dislike a film.
- Explain or introduce something about a movie, a filmmaker, or a group of movies that your readers may not know.

- Make comparisons and contrasts between one movie and others, as a way of understanding them better.
- Make connections between a movie and other areas of culture to illuminate both the culture and the movies it produces.

The purposes that become part of or central to your writing will sometimes depend entirely on your audience: An essay introducing a new movie, for example, is usually written for an audience that has not seen the film. However, even when that purpose is decided on independently—perhaps out of a personal interest in the relation between Spanish films and Spanish culture—what you say will always be shaped by your notion of your audience, and especially by what you presume those readers know or want to know.

If you think of writing as, in some ways, resembling conversation, you will see how the notion of an audience helps to shape what you say. If, for example, you are discussing an American movie, such as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), with a non-American, both the way you make your point about the film and, perhaps, the point itself will be determined by what you believe that individual knows and wants to know about American culture and about the movie itself. (A non-American, for example, may need to be told what the city Nashville and its music mean to Americans, while an American will need very little explanation.) Similarly, in discussing a film with someone who may not have seen it, I would probably first describe that film with a general overview, summarizing the plot and themes as a way to convince that person to see the film or not to see it. If, on the other hand, I am talking about a movie that a friend and I have both seen several times, such as *Batman Begins* (2005), I do not have to remind that person of the plot or even of which actors played which parts. Just as our conversations about movies differ according to the individuals we are speaking with, the way we write about film, and even the critical position we choose, vary depending on the audience we are writing for.

One schematic and traditional way to indicate the different audiences a writer might envision is to distinguish between a screening report, a movie review, a theoretical essay, and a critical essay.

The Screening Report

A screening report is a short piece of writing that acts as a preparation for class discussions and examinations. Primarily a descriptive assignment that organizes notes on a film (see pp. 22–35), the report should contain

about three or four paragraphs (about 1 to 2 pages) focused on two to four points related to the topics of the course or to specific questions provided by the instructor (your target audience for this kind of writing). Unlike a review or critical essay, a screening report avoids strong opinions or a particular argument. Instead, if aims to be as objective and concrete as possible, including audio and visual detail wherever possible. For a class on the road movie, one student begins his screening report of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) this way:

> 1. Badlands as Road Movie: Narrative. Characteristic of this genre is the journey away from home and onto an open road. Like other road movies, here there are no apparent goals, except flight, and the plot develops as a series of episodic events and encounters. After the murder of Holly's father, she and Kit almost randomly kill people they encounter on the road, as a kind of parody of the violence found in other road movies.
>
> 2. Badlands and the Road Movie: Compositions. The most obvious emblem of a road movie is the moving perspective of the car that carries Kit and Holly along the open roads of the west. The framing of numerous shots in this film call attention to the vast and empty spaces that surround the characters, but unlike more realistic road movies, the luminous images of Badlands often create surreal landscapes. The soundtrack is an unusual variation on the genre: Holly's voice-over narration makes the story seem like a cheap romantic novel, and the music ranges from the operatic to honky-tonk.

Since this is a first sketch of the report, more specific details must be added later. Precise description of several shots and scenes will then provide compelling support for discussions in class and for preparation for examinations.

The Movie Review

The movie review is the type of film analysis with which most of us are chiefly familiar, since it appears in almost every newspaper. Normally, a review aims at the broadest possible audience, the general public with no special knowledge of film. Accordingly, its function is to introduce unknown films and to recommend or not recommend them. Because it presumes an audience has not seen the movie it discusses, much of the essay is devoted to summarizing the plot or placing the film in another context (the director's other work, films of the same genre, etc.) that might help the reader understand it. Here, Vincent

Canby's review introduces the readers of *The New York Times* to Malick's *Badlands* (1973):

> In Terrence Malick's cool, sometimes brilliant, always ferociously American film, "Badlands," which marks Malick's debut as a director, Kit and Holly take an all-American joyride across the upper Middle West, at the end of which more than half a dozen people have been shot to death by Kit, usually at point blank range. "Badlands" is the first feature by Mr. Malick, a 29-year-old former Rhodes Scholar and philosophy student whose only other film credit is as the author of the screenplay for the nicely idiosyncratic "Pocket Money." "Badlands" was inspired by the short, bloody saga of Charles Starkweather who, at age 19, in January, 1958, with the apparent cooperation of his 14-year-old girlfriend, Carol Fugate, went off on a murder spree that resulted in 10 victims. Starkweather was later executed in the electric chair and Miss Fugate given life imprisonment.
>
> "Badlands" inevitably invites comparisons with three other important American films—Arthur Penn's "Bonnie and Clyde" and Fritz Lang's "Fury" and "You Only Live Once"—but it has a very different vision of violence and death. Mr. Malick spends no great amount of time invoking Freud to explain the behavior of Kit and Holly, nor is there any Depression to be held ultimately responsible. Society is, if anything, benign. . . .
>
> "Badlands" is narrated by Holly in the flat, nasal accents of the Middle West and in the syntax of a story in *True Romances*. "Little did I realize," she tells us at the beginning of the film, "that what began in the alleys and by-ways of this small town would end in the Badlands of Montana." At the end, after half a dozen murders, she resolves never again to "tag around with the hell-bent type."
>
> Kit and Holly share with Bonnie and Clyde a fascination with their own press coverage, with their overnight fame ("The whole world was looking for us," says Holly, "for who knew where Kit would strike next?"), but a lack of passion differentiates them from the gaudy desperados of the thirties. Toward the end of their joyride, the bored Holly tells us she passed the time, as she sat in the front seat beside Kit, spelling out complete sentences with her tongue on the roof of her mouth.
>
> Mr. Malick tries not to romanticize his killers, and he is successful except for one sequence in which Kit and Holly hide out in a tree house as elaborate as anything the MGM art department ever designed for Tarzan and Jane. Mr. Sheen and Miss Spacek are splendid as the self-absorbed, cruel, possibly psychotic children of our time, as are the members of the supporting cast, including Warren Oates as Holly's father.

> One may legitimately debate the validity of Mr. Malick's vision, but not, I think, his immense talent. "Badlands" is a most important and exciting film. (40)

We can identify more than one function in this essay. Canby aims to convince his reader that *Badlands* is an important movie that is worth seeing, and he does this by introducing Malick and his credentials, by describing the plot and the historical background of that plot, by evaluating the acting, and by placing Malick's movie in the context of other films like it (specifically, *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967] and the two Fritz Lang movies). Equally important, however, is his clear sense of his audience: readers who probably know the popular *Bonnie and Clyde* but little about Malick and the background of *Badlands*. These are readers who have not yet seen the film and would like to know the outline of the story and a little about the characters and actors (Figure 1).

The Theoretical Essay

The more theoretical essay—for instance, an essay on the relation of film and reality, on the political or ideological foundations of the movie industry, or on how film narrative is unlike literary narrative—is at the other

Figure 1 Like most films, *Badlands* (1973) provokes a variety of ways to think and write about it: screening reports, reviews, critical essays, and theoretical reflections.

end of the spectrum. Such an essay often supposes that the reader possesses a great deal of knowledge about specific films, film history, and other writings about film. Its target audience, often advanced students or people who teach film studies, is usually very knowledgeable about the movies. Its aim is to explain some of the larger and more complex structures of the cinema and how we understand them. Note the changes in style, choice of words, and assumptions about the reader's knowledge that point to this writer's 1953 conception of her audience:

> Here is new art. For a few decades it seemed like nothing more than a new technical device in the sphere of drama, a new way of preserving and retailing dramatic performances. But today its development has already belied this assumption. The screen is not a stage, and what is created in the conception and realization of a film is not a play. It is too early to systematize any theory of this new art, but even in its present pristine state it exhibits quite beyond any doubt, I think—not only a new technique, but a new poetic mode. (Langer 411)

Whereas Canby could use expressions suitable to a review, such as "gaudy desperados," "all-American joyride," and "important and exciting film," the phrases might seem out of place in an essay by the philosopher Susanne Langer. It is not that one style is more correct than the other; it is simply a question of audience. A novice to film studies might feel somewhat lost in Langer's comparatively accessible essay on film theory. The reason is that novices are not the audience that this writer supposes; she imagines an audience with experience in the study of history, aesthetics, and philosophy and some understanding of the debates about stage drama versus movies. The purpose of her essay is not difficult to see (to convince her readers of the significance of film as an art), but how she argues her point is understandable when we realize she is addressing an academic and intellectual community that, at the time, was suspicious of the status of the movies as an art.

The Critical Essay

The critical essay usually expected in film courses falls between the theoretical essay and the movie review. The writer of this kind of essay presumes that his or her reader has seen or is at least familiar with the film under discussion, although that reader may not have thought extensively about it. This writer might therefore remind the reader of key themes and elements of the plot, but a lengthy retelling of the story of the film is neither needed nor acceptable. The focus of the essay is far more specific

than that of a review, because the writer hopes to reveal subtleties or complexities that may have escaped viewers on the first or even the second viewing. Thus, the essay might focus on a short sequence at the beginning of the film, or on a camera angle that becomes associated with a specific character. In the following excerpt, Brian Henderson also discusses *Badlands,* but whereas Canby's audience was the reader of a large newspaper, Henderson's audience is more academic, similar to the one a student might address in a film course:

> Whatever their wishes, critics of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) have been drawn into polemical dispute. Writers favorable to the film have defended it against those who called it a failure when it first appeared and against those who have ignored it since then. The issue has been further complicated, and polemics renewed, by the release in 1978 of Malick's *Days of Heaven.*
>
> This is not a favorable background for the serious criticism of any work, still less for that open-ended exploration which a new and unstudied work invites. I believe *Badlands* is one of the most remarkable American films of the 1970s, but I have no interest here in addressing the arguments against it. I assume, at any rate, that the film will be seen and studied for a long time to come.
>
> What is attempted here is a beginning analysis of *Badlands,* or perhaps several beginnings. I take an obvious point of departure: the film's voiceover narration by Holly—indeed only its first part, approximately the film's first sixteen minutes. This is, emphatically, just one approach to the film and not a privileged one. A consideration of Holly's narration opens up other topics and leads to other analyses, but any approach does this.
>
> To treat Holly's narration as I wish to do it is necessary to say something in advance about the film's dramaturgy, acting style and use of language. These important topics deserve, needless to say, fuller treatment than my prefatory remarks provide.
>
> *Badlands'* approach to character is undeniably modern. Kit and Holly are both blank and not blank, emotionless and filled with emotion, oblivious to their fates and caught up in them, committed to the trivial but aware—glancingly—of the essential. They are empty, hence constantly fill themselves up with useless objects, souvenirs, movie-magazine gossip; they pose tests for themselves and try on different make-up, clothes, attitudes, roles. This is an "existential" view of character, and it undoubtedly leads to contradictions by conventional standards. Thus Kit and Holly are in love, living only for the moments they spend together; but they play cards with boredom in the country and even find sex boring. Holly kids with her father and (almost) weeps when he dies, but runs away with his killer a few hours later. . . .
>
> Every mode of cinema has a mode of dramaturgy distinctive to it and a corresponding distinctive acting or performance style. *Badlands,* which may represent a cinematic mode in and of itself, requires a special kind of acting to take its place within, but not upset, a very delicate balance of mise-en-scène, narrative, voiceover, music, etc. We must be able to look at Kit and Holly and to look through them sometimes alternately, sometimes simultaneously. This requires an acting style at once flat and flamboyant, realistic and theatrical. Our eyes must be on the characters even as we are paying attention to other things. Our attention is continually drawn toward the characters, and distracted away from them. Sheen and Spacek realize these requirements superbly, filling the film with their interesting sounds and motions but never resolving into anything, never substantializing, defining or "becoming" characters. Perhaps more correctly, their series of poses is readable as exactly that, or as eccentric character. As in Brecht, it is difficult to distinguish the acting style of the performers from the nature of the characters. (38–40)

Canby's and Henderson's essays are both positive responses to *Badlands,* and they share similar interests. They differ significantly, however, in aim and audience. At least as Henderson declares it, the purpose of his essay is not so much to convince his readers to like or dislike the film but to add to their understanding of it. He assumes that his readers will continue to see and study the movie and, perhaps, to add to the academic debate about it. He also takes for granted that his audience knows the story, knows the characters, and is familiar with terms like *mise-en-scène;* accordingly, he can choose very specific parts of the film—Holly's narration and the acting style—to demonstrate his point that there are important innovations in *Badlands.* Finally, even in this section of the essay, one sees an organization typical of a good critical argument: The writer begins by placing the film in the context of other critical and scholarly views, announces his aim, and then moves from an analysis of character and acting style to some general conclusions about how to understand this style.

For the student writer, the question of audience, highlighted in these three essays, is equally central to writing about film. Sometimes, an instructor may give you an assignment aimed at a specific audience and testing your ability to address that audience: "Write a review of *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) for the readers of *Time* magazine." More often, your

instructor will simply ask you to write a critical essay. Keep in mind that your audience in these cases is neither your instructor alone (who, you might imagine, can learn nothing from you) nor some large and unknown public in the streets (to whom you might be prone to tell the most obvious facts about a movie). Rather, envision your audience in most situations as your fellow students, individuals who have seen the movie and may know something about it, but who have not studied it closely. This audience will probably not need to be told that "*The Wizard of Oz* is an old American film that has become a children's classic"; they may, however, be interested if you note that "*The Wizard of Oz* was directed by Victor Fleming, who the same year (1939) made *Gone with the Wind.*" Likewise, few of your fellow viewers need to be told that "Ophul's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970) is a very long French movie about World War II," but they may be fascinated by a detailed description of the opening shots.

OPINION AND EVALUATION

When you write about film, personal opinion and taste will necessarily become part of your argument. Some critics, for example, have a conscious or unconscious prejudice against foreign films. Others favor the work of a single director, such as John Huston or Alain Resnais. Still others, annoyed by literary adaptations unless they are faithful to the original, dislike films such as the contemporary version of Shakespeare's *Othello* called *O* (2001) but defend the Shakespeare films of Kenneth Branagh. Even those essays that appear to be chiefly descriptive or analytical—biographical or historical writings or essays that aim at an objective analysis of a sequence of shots—involve a certain amount of personal choice and evaluation. In some essays, factual description may be more prominent than evaluative judgments, but the differences are of degree, not kind. Most writing about film involves some personal opinion and evaluation.

No reader, of course, will be satisfied with a writer who uses his personal opinions to avoid or disguise a solid critical position. After watching Laurence Olivier's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1944), one student wrote:

> Although I have not read that many Shakespeare plays, this is the first one I ever liked. The opening, I think, is the most interesting part and the section that first grabbed my attention, because, in my opinion, it literally transforms what I feel is a dry play into an exciting film and, at the same time, comments on the difference between drama and film. In those opening images, it seems to me that Olivier acknowledges the original stage world of the drama and shows, I feel, how the movies can transcend dramatic limits. He makes the play much more alive for me.

Here the excess of *I*'s and personal qualifiers weakens the point the writer wishes to make, and it is doubtful that idiosyncratic problems, such as the writer's limited experience with the Shakespeare plays, are of the faintest interest to any reader. However, removing all references to the writer's personal experience of the film results only in stiffer but equally unsure prose:

> The opening is the most interesting part of Henry V (1944), because it comments on the central difference between drama and film. In these opening images, Olivier acknowledges the original stage world of the drama and shows how the movies can transcend those dramatic limits.

Somewhere in between, the writer finds the proper balance of personal experience and objective observation, judiciously integrating those personal experiences and feelings about the film that are probably also valid for other viewers:

> Even for the viewer uneasy with a Shakespeare play, Olivier's Henry V (1944) is an engaging experience. For me, the opening is the most interesting part and the section which is most likely to attract a reluctant viewer, because it literally transforms what, for some, might be a dry play into an expansive film and, at the same time, comments on the central difference between drama and film. In these opening images, Olivier acknowledges the original stage world of the drama and shows how the movies can transcend those dramatic limits. For viewers like myself, Shakespeare suddenly comes alive.

The useful rule of thumb here is to try to be aware of when and how your personal perspective and feelings enter your criticism and to what degree they are valuable or not—when, in short, those judgments seem to say something true not only for yourself but for others as well. A personal distaste for action films or, say, for slow-paced romantic stories could become a rich part of an essay when the writer carefully thinks

through and offers reasons for that distaste. Or my expectations, as someone who mainly sees slick Hollywood films, could be crucial in analyzing my slight confusion yet fascination with a film by the Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier—such as *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)—because other viewers have often shared that confusion.

In the examples used earlier, both Canby and Henderson openly introduce their own opinions and personalities into their argument. Neither balks at using *I* to underline the presence of his perspective: "One may legitimately debate the validity of Mr. Malick's movie, but not, I think, his immense talent" (Canby); "I take an obvious point of departure: the film's voiceover narration by Holly. . . . This is, emphatically, just one approach to the film and not a privileged one" (Henderson). Canby's is perhaps a more opinionated *I;* Henderson's is more detached and cautious. Yet, both Canby and Henderson use their personal positions to help form and energize their different responses to Malick's film. One might say that these uses of *I* are only the most forthright and direct indication of the many other evaluations and judgments that enter the essays: Canby's criticism of the romantic, junglelike setting where the two outlaws hide, and Henderson's interest in narrative and theoretical questions about "performance."

When you write about the movies, personal feelings, expectations, and reactions may be the beginning of an intelligent critique, but they must be balanced with rigorous reflection on where those feelings and expectations and reactions come from and how they relate to more objective factors concerning the movie in question: its place in film history, its cultural background, its formal strategies. François Truffaut, both an intelligent filmmaker and a perceptive critic, has observed that "instead of indulging passions in criticism, one must at least try to be critical with some purpose. . . . What is interesting is not pronouncing a film good or bad, but explaining why" (370).

Writing about film, then, is admittedly complex. It can also be exciting and rewarding. In 1908 Leo Tolstoy remarked about the movies: "You can see that this little clicking contraption with the revolving handle will make a revolution in our life—in the life of writers" (410). Try to approach films with the same interest and shrewdness. Try to conceive of yourself as a writer with an equally purposeful and dynamic relationship with the movies you watch and enjoy. Or, in the words of filmmaker Sally Potter, director of *Thriller* (1979), *Orlando* (1992), *The Tango Lesson* (1997), and *Yes* (2004), remember that there is a "pleasure in analysis, in unravelling, in thinking" (Pam Cook 27).

Exercises

1. Take opposite sides in a debate about a single film. Write one or two paragraphs criticizing the film and then one or two paragraphs defending it.
2. Write a screening report on a single film and then a review of three or four paragraphs. Then, rewrite it as a critical essay. Explain briefly the differences and what is gained and lost in each.

2

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

Of the several difficulties in writing about film, one of the most prominent is getting a handle on an experience that has so many different layers. Put simply: What should you choose to analyze and to write about? The story? The acting? The editing? Watching a film involves everything from the place where we see it and the price we pay to the size of the screen, the pace of the story, and the kind of music used as the background for that story. In Jean Cocteau's words, "The cinema muse is too rich." As the first step to an intelligent viewing, spectators need to break the habit of watching films "out of the corners of their eyes," as Cocteau puts it (217). This is where analysis begins.

Certainly our primary experience of a movie is the singular and, perhaps, private one of watching it for the first time—involved and enjoying it, one hopes, but possibly annoyed yet still somewhat involved. As the director in Jean-Luc Godard's 1983 film *First Name: Carmen* (played by Godard himself) writes, "Badly seen, badly said": Seeing a movie with all your attention is the only way to begin writing about a film—even one you don't like. Either as preparation before the screening or shortly afterward, however, you, as the writer, need to sort out that personal and primary experience along manageable lines, and this sorting out should become the groundwork for your analysis of the movie. Should you talk about the characters? About technological innovations? About the film's effect on an audience? Where should you start to direct your attention and your analysis, so that you do not give yourself the impossible task of writing about the whole movie? Because the movies you see on the screen are a product of many different forces—writers, production demands, the cost of technology, and hundreds of others—that in a sense precede the images you are watching, it is necessary to approach those movies with sensitivity to some of these basic questions, influences, and problems. In the movies, much energy and time goes into "preproduction" activity, when directors and producers outline and prepare

scripts and filming strategies; your analysis will be better if you similarly spend at least some time on some general, preliminary questions. As far as possible, prepare yourself for a movie; even before it starts, ask questions about it and about your own potential interest in it:

1. As an art form, the movies involve literature, the pictorial and plastic arts, music, dance, theater, and even architecture. The student interested in architecture might thus respond keenly to an Eisenstein or Antonioni movie if he or she can direct that interest to how these filmmakers use architectural space to add to the drama they are presenting. A music or art student might be drawn to certain art or experimental films, such as *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), or to the musical or artistic features of a movie (Figure 2). Ask yourself which art forms interest you most and which you know the most about. Could you use your knowledge of literature or painting as a guide to a particular film? What might be behind the large number of recent adaptations of famous novels, like the movie versions of *Harry Potter and the Sorceror's Stone*

Figure 2 Kenji Mizoguchi's *Utamaro and His Five Women* (1946) tells the tale of one of Japan's most renowned visual artists. His celebrity rests on the brilliant *ukiyo-e* wood block prints he produced in the early nineteenth century, and Mizoguchi's cinematic recreation of that life raises many questions for the student of art: For instance, is there a connection here between the popular art of the movies and the popular art of *ukiyo-e* prints? Does the film recreate certain techniques or features of that artistic tradition?

(2001) or *Vanity Fair* (2004)? Might your interest in popular or classical music suggest that you look for a topic in movies like *Holiday Inn* (1942), *West Side Story* (1961), *Amadeus* (1984), or *Moulin Rouge* (2001)?

2. The film industry depends on and responds quickly to changes in technology. Having grown used to contemporary Hollywood movies, most of us find that we react differently to a silent movie or to one in black-and-white—an obvious example of how the early technology that produced these movies determines how we view them. Many other tools of the trade—various sound technologies, color stocks, or special effects—can likewise become the starting point for a revealing analysis. Whether a movie is made for a large screen or for a television screen can say a great deal about the story (note how epic movies like *The Ten Commandments* [1956] just don't seem the same on television). As some commentators have suggested, the computer technology used in *The Matrix* (1999) may be the most interesting topic concerning that movie. If you are interested in technology, prepare to note features of the movie and its story that might depend on technology. Does the director make special use of black-and-white film stocks? Why? Does sound technology seem to play a large part in the movie? Is the movement (or lack of movement) of the camera related to the kind of camera used (like the hand-held cameras of the French New Wave, which conveyed a sense of on-the-spot realism)? Usually, these initial questions will require some later research and thinking to be answered adequately and to become related to an analysis of the movie. The student with some initial interest in the industrial and technological side of the movies, however, will often find good material for a strong essay if he or she approaches movies on the lookout for the role technology plays in them.

3. Film technology, production, and distribution are commercial and economic enterprises. It is crucial to keep this in mind when approaching any movie. If, for instance, a viewer is going to see a low-budget, independent film (such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* [1967]) at the local art house, the expectations about that movie will—and should—be different from those about a glossy multi-million-dollar blockbuster (such as *Fantastic Four* [2005]) at a showcase cinema. No film is necessarily good or bad because of its commercial or economic constraints and freedoms, but the ability to adjust one's expectations does allow a viewer to more accurately assess the achievements or failures of a movie. Thus, for some films from South America or Africa, the often rough and unpolished look not only is an unavoidable byproduct of financial constraints but, in some cases, is also a conscious political sign used to distinguish them from the glossy products of Hollywood. At the other end of the economic scale are

the massive Hollywood productions, with gargantuan budgets that mean they must capture the largest possible audience and so must take very few risks that might alienate part of that audience. Although this sort of angle on a movie will require some research if it is to develop into an essay, an awareness of or sensitivity to the economic and commercial determinants behind any movie can prepare you for a more intelligent and complex response to the images on the screen. Be open-minded and suspicious: If it looks like a movie that was made inexpensively, does this reduced cost allow it to do and say things that a big-budget movie might not be able to? Conversely, how do some Hollywood movies take advantage of a big budget or make creative use of a small budget? Where is much of the money directed? The stars? The special effects? The promotion? Why? Does the film seem especially earthy or commercial, or does it try to reach a compromise between the two? Why? Who is the intended audience for the film? Teenagers? The middle class? Intellectuals? Men? Women?

Having these and other preparatory questions in mind as you sit down to watch a movie will sharpen and direct your analytical abilities. These questions can be a crucial guide through a first viewing, that difficult time when you are trying to determine what is worth writing about and what is not. After seeing D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) for the first time, one student dismissed it as a "primitive and racist story with a lot of old-fashioned images"; another student simply accepted it as "almost a documentary about the Civil War and the Reconstruction." David Cook's analysis, however, is influenced by a sense of the historical complications and limitations of the movie as well as a sense of the presumptions of a modern audience watching it many years later:

> In its monumental scale, in its concentration upon a crucial moment in American history, in its mixture of historical and invented characters, in its constant narrative movement between the epochal and the human, and, most significantly, in its chillingly accurate vision of an American society predicated on race, *The Birth of a Nation* is a profoundly American epic. We can fault Griffith for badly distorting the historical facts of Reconstruction, for unconscionably stereotyping the African-American as either fool or brute, and for glorifying a terrorist organization like the Klan, but we cannot quarrel with his basic assumption that American society was, and is, profoundly racist. That he endorses and encourages this situation rather than condemns it is properly repellent to contemporary audiences, as it was to many persons in 1915. But we must not allow our sympathies to obscure our own critical judgment, for then we make the same mistake as

> Griffith. And, as Americans, we must never overlook the possibility that the impetus for our most hostile reactions to Griffith's racism lies somewhere within our most deeply cherished illusions about ourselves. (79)

SUBJECT MATTER AND MEANING

The preliminary questions above should remind you that the images you see are the product of certain influences and conditions, not just the world seen through a frame. The movies are not just about a subject but the rendition of that subject for particular reasons and to create certain meanings. Films are not just about a story, a character, a place, or a way of life; they are also what John Berger has called "a way of seeing" these elements in our lives. Any film at any point in history might describe a family, a war, or the conflict between races, but the ways these are shown, and the reasons they are shown in a particular way, can vary greatly. These variations, through which a subject is given a specific meaning or meanings, are a large part of what analysis is concerned with. Why does the student who dismissed *The Birth of a Nation* later hail *The Deer Hunter* (1978), another film about a war involving races, as "one of the best movies ever made"? The subject is quite similar, but its meaning has changed significantly for that student.

To write an intelligent, perceptive analysis of the stories and characters in the movies, you must be prepared to see them as constructed according to certain forms and styles that arise from many different historical influences. This is what analysis of the movies is fundamentally about: examining how a subject has been formed to mean something specific through the power of art, technology, and commerce. Be prepared to respond to the influences that most interest you. Be prepared with a questioning mind from the beginning.

SILENT DIALOGUE: TALKING BACK TO THE MOVIES

Once the movie starts, your preliminary questions should become more and more specific regarding the movie you are watching, what it is about, and how it is constructed.

One of the most helpful techniques in preparing to write analytically about literature is our scribbling of marginal comments next to a text, the underlining we do, or simply the question marks we put next to difficult

passages. No one approaches a book or work of art with all the answers or even all the questions. Part of the excitement in viewing or reading a challenging work comes from the questions it provokes. Thomas De Quincey's "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" originates in a specific question that De Quincey asked himself after seeing a production of the play: "From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*. It was this: The knocking at the gate which succeeds to the murder of Duncan produced to my feeling an effect for which I never could account" (389). What, he asked himself, produced that effect? From that very specific question and personal uncertainty came one of the best essays ever written on Shakespeare.

This kind of questioning and annotating is one of the surest ways to start an analysis of a movie. In contrast to literature, however, the special challenge with film is that the images are constantly moving, so an analytical spectator must develop the habit of looking for key moments, patterns, or images within the film—even during a second or third viewing.

As you watch more films and grow more aware of differences and similarities, the right questions come more readily. At first, though, two guidelines may help initiate this dialogue with a movie:

- Note which elements of the movie strike you as unfamiliar or perplexing.
- Note which elements are repeated to emphasize a point or a perception.

Every movie uses patterns of repetition that are contrasted with striking singular moments. Recognizing these patterns and deciphering why they are important is a first step toward analyzing the meaning of a movie. Why, for instance, do so many scenes in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) take place in the family homes of the characters? Why, in George Cukor's *The Women* (1939), is black-and-white used for all the scenes except the fashion show? Even if you do not determine the answers to these questions while you are watching the movie, asking them is the key to a good analysis. These questions can be as elementary as:

- What does the title mean in relation to the story?
- Why does the movie start the way it does?
- When was the film made?
- Why are the opening credits presented in such a manner against this particular background?

- Why does the film conclude on this image?
- How is this movie similar to or different from the Hollywood movies I have seen recently or from those of an older generation?
- Does this film resemble any foreign films I know?
- Is there a pattern of striking camera movement, perhaps long shots or dissolves or abrupt transitions (see pp. 57–72)?
- Which three or four sequences are the most important?

When Andrew Sarris, a critic for the *Village Voice,* saw Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* (1985), he found the opening sequence not only bizarre but partly inexplicable; to some extent, his review evolved from that experience. On seeing Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940) for the first time, most contemporary audiences would probably remark, and perhaps have difficulty with, the rapidity of the dialogue, and following up this simple observation with more careful thinking could bring some of the brilliance of this movie into focus. Spike Jonze's film *Being John Malkovich* (1999) is constructed through a series of strange images, characters, and situations, provoking questions about what is happening and why. Sooner or later viewers must deal with these implicit questions if they are to make sense of the film: What does it mean that actor John Malkovich plays himself? What does it mean that puppeteer Craig Schwartz works on the 7½ floor of a building where the ceilings are only four feet high? How would one describe the relationship between Craig and his seductive co-worker Maxine? Is this movie meant to be a serious comment on identity or simply a goofy spoof of obsession with stars? The number and nature of your questions—both about what you see and how it is shown—could vary infinitely depending on the movie or movies being discussed. Potentially, any and every aspect of the film is important. Talking about *You Only Live Once* (1937), Fritz Lang noted, for instance, a seemingly minor detail that, if the studio had allowed it to remain, would have focused on a central theme in the film: "I wanted to have a kind of ironic touch when Fonda and Sidney flee from the law and she goes and buys him some cigarettes, which ultimately provide the means of his betrayal. I wanted her to buy Lucky Strike cigarettes to stress the irony of the bad luck they bring him." Learn to jot down information about props, costumes, camera positions, and so on, even during a first screening, and then choose the most telling evidence. These are the first steps in developing a strong and perceptive argument. Note how one student used his questions about two striking features of *The Women* to focus a short analysis of that film:

Roger Malone

By most counts, The Women seems to be a standard movie about social relations in a 1930s society. There are, though, two odd twists to the movie that should catch anybody's eye: First, there is not a single man in the movie and, second, in the middle of this black-and-white film, there is a rather long fashion show sequence in full color. Why these twists, and are they something more than gimmicks?

The women at the heart of this movie are in some ways independent and resourceful. Their lives are not, though, "liberated" in any modern sense, for men are constantly being discussed and influencing the behavior of all the women. The physical absence of all the men from the screen consequently becomes an ironic way of suggesting how powerfully present those men are in the lives of women. For the women in this movie, even when men are not there, they are there.

The fashion show sequence seems related to this same idea. The sets, the costumes, and the actresses in The Women are all stunning, and the female characters all seem concerned with how they and their surroundings appear—especially to men. What could be a more accurate and appropriate centerpiece for the movie than a fashion show of women showing other women how to appear and what to wear? What could be a more effective way to underline the importance of this moment in the film than by making it the only color sequence in the movie?

The Women was made in 1939 by the same studio that produced The Wizard of Oz the same year. In The Women, however, the flight into color does not last as long as Dorothy's, and for these women, the yellow brick road is fashion itself. Through its unusual

twists, moreover, it seems to make an often-recognized point: Even when you cannot see behind the curtain at the center of the action, hiding there is still a man.

TAKING NOTES

Good film essays require more than one viewing, either of the film itself or of the usually more available video version (see pp. 133–134). With one viewing, it is nearly impossible to see all the subtleties and complexities in a movie and, at the same time, to take notes on this information. Ideally, in fact, a first viewing can be a more-or-less note-free viewing during which you enjoy the film on its most immediate level. With the second screening, you can begin to take more careful and detailed notes.

Often, though, that needed second or third screening may not be possible, especially if the film is older, foreign, or not in wide distribution. In such cases, despite the difficulty in taking your eyes off the screen momentarily, it is important to take notes of some sort during a first and only viewing. If more than one screening is possible, notes can be increasingly detailed and complete.

Preliminary notes can be simply a shorthand version of the questions and dialogue a movie generates in your mind. No one can—or wants—to note everything that appears, especially because taking notes takes your eyes away from other information on the screen. The trick is to learn to make economical use of your time and to recognize key sequences, shots, or narrative facts. (One useful exercise is to limit yourself to noting, with as much detail as possible, what you consider the three or four most important scenes, shots, or sequences in a film.) Depending on our interests, we all respond to different points or figures in a movie (at least on one level), but most films offer recognizable dramatic moments or major themes that signal an audience to attend to what is happening: the opening sequence in *Citizen Kane* (1941), when "Rosebud" is first pronounced; the climactic death of the father in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957); the use of sound in Lang's *M* (1931); the dramatic impact of isolated scenes between Bogart and Bacall in practically any of their movies; or the explosive moment when Mookie breaks the window of the pizza parlor in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Even when a film denies or parodies these dramatic moments or themes—as in Chantel Akerman's *Jeanne Dielmann* (1976) and many Antonioni films—

those variations from the norm may be the central point that a viewer should note and attempt to make sense of.

In noting this kind of information, be as specific and concrete as possible; record not only the figures and objects in the frame (the content) but also how the frame itself and its photographic qualities (the form) are used to define that content through camera angles, lighting, the use of depth and surface, and editing techniques. A person preparing to write about *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) might note the father's role in this family of women or the odd, macabre scenes with the youngest daughter, Tootie. With practice, however, that writer would also be able to jot down information about the theatrical use of space in specific scenes or the spectacular use of bright color. Similarly, even a student new to R. W. Fassbinder's films would probably catch some of the major motifs or salient moments in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979): the numerous ironic turns in sexual relations that seem so bound up with financial matters or the confusion about whether, at the conclusion, the heroine does or does not commit suicide. A bit more advanced viewer, however, might also remark on the careful overlapping and disjunctions between the sound track and the images: Perhaps the student will describe the subtle but powerful scene in which Oswald casually plays a concerto measure on a piano that alternates with the same phrase in the sound track's background music, or perhaps he or she will note how, during that melodramatic closing sequence, the radio in the background blares a World Cup championship match.

Most writers develop a shorthand system for technical information: *pov* for "point of view shot," or *ls* for "long shot" (a shot that shows, for example, the whole of a figure from a distance, as opposed to a close-up of a face or a hand). Some of these are standardized abbreviations that are easy to learn and use when taking notes (the abbreviations do not, of course, appear in this form in your final essay):

cu	close-up (showing only the character's head, for example)
xcu	extreme close-up (perhaps showing a detail of that head, such as the eyes)
ms	medium shot (somewhere between a close-up and a full 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 (showing only about three-quarters of the characters' bodies)

ps pan shot (the point of view pivots from left to right, or vice versa, but without changing its vertical axis)

s/rs shot/reverse shot pattern (the point of view shows, for example, 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 point of view films an outdoor scene from high above)

trs tracking shot (the entire point of view moves, on tracks or on a dolly, following, for instance, a walking figure). You can indicate the direction that the camera tracks by using arrows:

la low angle (the point of view is low, tilted upward)

ha high angle (the point of view is above, tilted downward); the exact angle can be made clearer by using arrows.

Ultimately, each individual develops a personal shorthand and other abbreviations to record accurately the details of a scene or sequence. (These and other terms are more fully defined in Chapter 3.) Often, for annotations on sound or dialogue, a key phrase or word may be what allows you to give a more precise description of the scene or sequence later. Sometimes, these annotations may even take the form of a quick sketch, as with this student's attempt to note how, with these five shots (Figures 3–7) from the "Odessa Steps" sequence in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Eisenstein's editing of the soldiers' attack on a mother and child works to create conflicts in the movement within each shot.

No one will exhaustively annotate an entire film. Anticipating a specific argument and essay, everyone will focus on different kinds of information, from themes and characters to technical elements and editing structures. If a writer wishes to analyze the famous shower sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), for instance, some preliminary notes might look something like this: (1) ms Marion and Norman, cramped space, "trapped," birds, eyes, sexual tension; (2) classical painting/peephole; (3) 90° cu then pov N at undressing M; (4) shower, tight space;

Figure 3 cu—sold legs.

(5) murder: quick cuts, cu's knife, face, flesh, M's pov; (6) M clawing curtain, cu drain, cu eye. This is a quick sketch that needs to be filled in later. If a second viewing is possible, more dialogue or details can be added. Yet, beginning with these notes, a writer could develop a fairly sophisticated and rigorous reading of this key scene.

VISUAL MEMORY AND REFLECTION

Preliminary notes and sketches will form the basis for a good argument, however, only if the writer elaborates on them shortly after seeing the movie by filling in the shorthand with more carefully measured descriptions. Jean Mitry, the renowned French film historian, once said his most important asset was an unusually precise visual memory. The best writers about film either come equipped with or are able to develop a sharp auditory and visual memory, which allows them to remember details about a movie. (Remember: A memory can be trained and developed; no one should seek to justify careless viewing and annotation by claiming a "bad memory.") The sooner one can go back to those preliminary notes, the

Figure 4 fs—moth & ch/sol.

better, for then the memory can be triggered to add more specifics and place images in the context of the larger story and other narrative issues. Returning to his notes on *Psycho,* that writer might recall other images that emphasize eyes in the movie and make connections between the hole in the wall and the close-up of the shower drain or between the cramped space of Norman's den and that of the shower. He or she might realize that the sequence is remarkably balanced and frighteningly logical in being extended as it is until the final close-ups of the dark drain and the dead Marion's open eye. On further reflection, that writer might decide that, based on the opening shots of the film, *Psycho* is about "looking" and the sexual or gendered implications of looking.

When you've reviewed your notes, the shape and direction of your argument may begin to appear in an idea of what you wish to say about this movie. Whether or not you are prepared before a first viewing, possible arguments and topics should begin to present themselves as you begin to add to and develop those preliminary notes. While going over

Figure 5 fs—sol/moth. & ch.

notes on *The Marriage of Maria Braun,* one student discovered that her initial perception of the movie as a glossy melodrama was complicated by those strange technical maneuvers with the sound track that she had recorded in her notes; her essay then discussed the ways in which the sound track signaled the splits and divisions between the main character's private, emotional life and her public, social life (Figure 8). Using the shorthand notes on Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* shown earlier, that student started a shot-by-shot analysis that moved from those notes to a clear verbal description of those images. Note how a precise description of this sort can function alone as the foundation for critical analysis:

Anna Prescott

In Eisenstein's The Battleship Potemkin (1925), the "Odessa Steps" sequence combines powerful human images with graphic visual patterns. I will highlight five shots at the center of this sequence to illustrate its formal construction and emotional direction. First, early in the sequence, there is a shot of the soldiers' legs

Figure 6 ms—moth & ch.

marching methodically, on a diagonal line, downward from left to right. Not long after that image comes a shot of a mother walking up the middle of the image with her wounded child, toward the soldiers, on a line which directly confronts the direction of the soldiers' movement as they move down on her from above. The angle of the shot changes again, and now, from behind and to the right of the soldiers, we see them fire their rifles directly toward the woman and child (here the camera's off-center perspective intersects with the line that connects the aim of the rifles and the movement of the woman toward them, making the spectator a kind of visual mediator). That image then changes to a shot of the same woman as she is about to be killed, seen now much closer and looking up toward the camera (which is the direction of the soldiers). Shortly afterward, a baby in a carriage tumbles down the steps, another child-victim

Figure 7 ms—baby.

propelled to its death by the downward force of the soldiers' diagonal. That the direction of this child's fall is now from the lower left to the upper right of the frame may suggest, though, the "uprising" that is soon to follow these images. Beyond the obvious sacrifice of the weak and innocent, these five shots place the viewer at the graphic intersection where the lines of an implacable mechanical force collide with the lines of human resistance.

Finally, the writer on *Psycho* begins to focus an essay on looking and sexuality with the central shower sequence: *Psycho* becomes a film about the violence implicit in the sexual and gendered dynamics of men and women looking at each other, and Marion's murder becomes the most dramatic example of people trapped in the violence and horror of their sexuality. Or, as Donald Spoto refined his notes:

> The psychological shock of the sequence, however, derives from the fact that the character with whom we have identified has been brutally

Figure 8 *The Marriage of Maria Braun:* A melodrama made cramped and uncomfortable by the camera framing.

eliminated. We have felt her frustration, hoped she would escape the police, enjoyed her innocent teasing of Norman, shared her sense of release at the decision to make amends and experienced the first moments of that cleansing shower. And, through Hitchcock's brilliant direction, we have felt her hideous pain, and her inability to avoid the persistent stabs as she turns around in the shower. The cleansing water turns to blood. We have followed every step of the way in her descent from the banal to the horrific. Now, seeing her last sight through her eyes, we watch her left hand slowly sliding down the tiles in a last attempt to "scratch and claw," as Norman has put it, out of this shower-turned-coffin. She slowly turns and, leaning against the wall with her last breaths, slides down into death. She stares, with gradually closing lids, then reaches out—for us. But we pull back, so she grabs the shower curtain for final support, ripping it from the hooks as she falls forward and over the edge of the tub. One more glance at the cleansing laver, from a point under the shower nozzle, and then in one of the most brilliant images in any film—we follow 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 take 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 *Cinderella Man* (2005) or to describe the "narrative structure" in *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) not only is good for classroom conversation, but also 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 topic for a paper.

Every discipline has its own special language or use of words that allows it to discuss its subject with precision and subtlety. A literary critic, for example, needs to distinguish between a metaphor and a simile, because these terms describe different rhetorical figures, that, in turn, refer to different sorts of perceptions. "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 such as *jump shot, pick,* and *fast break.*

With film, too, a critical vocabulary allows you to view a movie more accurately and 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 regularly

changes 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 because 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 to 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 a meaning 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? 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 his or her

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 Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003).

This may be a good start, but 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 student 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,

Figure 9 The frames within the framing of *The Conformist* (1970).

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."

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 to 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, its 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* (1939) or Abel Gance's use of three different screens in his *Napoleon* (1927)? Is the movie especially concerned 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 useful 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

Figure 10 The narrative of *Casablanca* (1942) employs many of the features of classical narrative: a plot propelled 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).

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' *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* [1940]). 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' 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: They do not tell stories, or they subsume stories within other organizational structures other than narrative. 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 (Figure 11). In addition, many movies create narratives that are outside the classical tradition or that may intentionally confront that tradition to tell their stories distinctively.

When you watch a movie that seems to avoid a traditional story line or 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

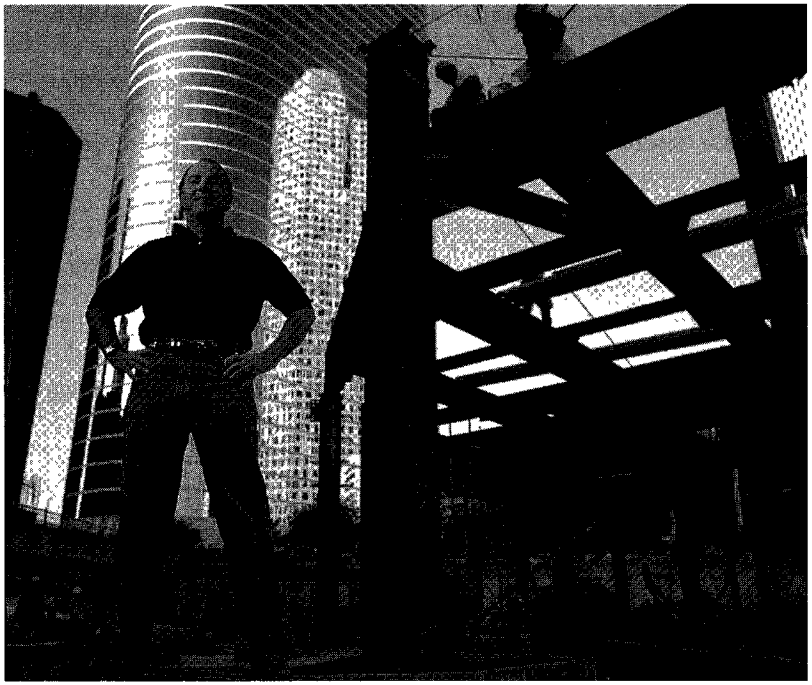

Figure 11 Alex Gibney's *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) is a documentary that describes the massive financial collapse of a powerful American corporation. Less a story than an investigation, the film uses interviews, old video and film clips, abstract visual patterns, and contemporary music tracks to expose the deceptions and contradictions of the official story.

normally focus the action and, often, the themes of a movie (Figure 12). 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 *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), and untraditional ones, like *Crumb* (1994), focus their narratives almost exclusively on the biography of their main character, con artist Frank Abagnale, Jr. (in the first case), and underground cartoonist Robert Crumb (in the second). Keep in mind that an analysis of 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

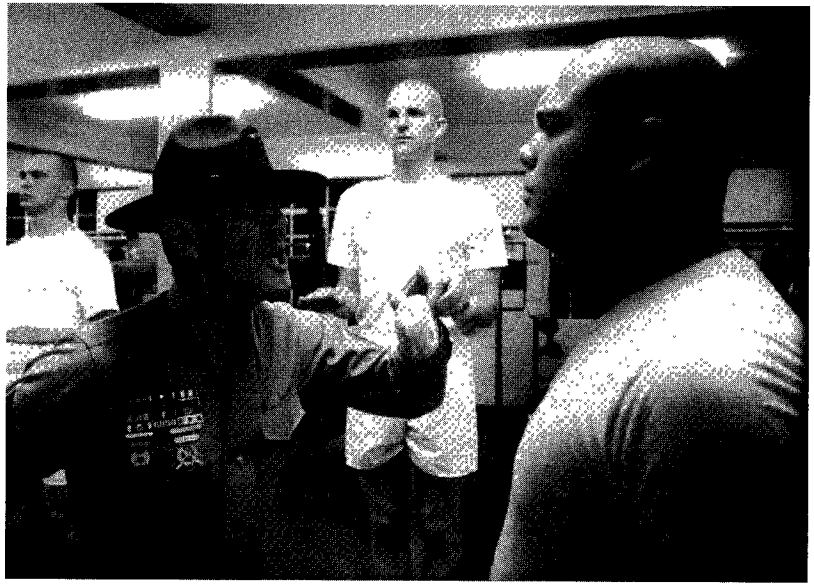

Figure 12 Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) presents characters in a more extreme and disturbing way than many films. It follows the development of young men who, drafted to become soldiers during the Vietnam War, are transformed into killing machines.

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 Julianne Moore in *The Hours* (2002), 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* [1975], 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 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 about 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 (Figure 13). 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 Rhett'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.

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

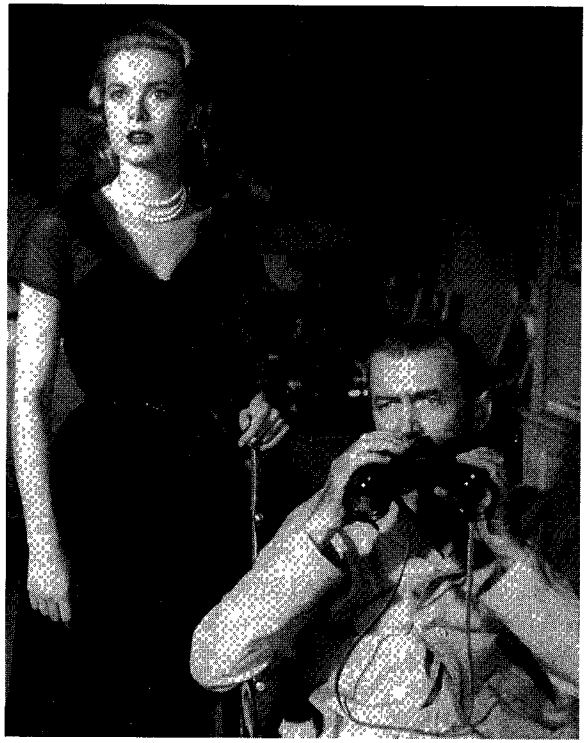

Figure 13 Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1945) is a film explicitly organized around the point of view of a photographer confined to a wheelchair. As he and his girlfriend watch the secret lives of his New York neighbors, he discovers both the power and dangers of a point of view.

the characters whose eyes you see through? Are they aggressive? Suspicious? Clever? In love?

Comparative Essays

Because the movies incorporate the traditions of books, plays, and even sculpture and painting, terms such as *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 novel *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 because they appear to be more a part 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 movie *Rocky* (set in the ethnic neighborhoods of South Philadelphia) or in the 1995 movie *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 nightlights. 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 percent 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 blanch 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 be suspicious of realism in the movies, because 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 understanding this movie. Since the city itself has historically been referred to as the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia uses its urban 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* (1920), 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 uses 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 14); provide images of a character's mind, as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari;* describe the central theme of the film, as does the house/home in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) (Figure 15); 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

Figure 14 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.

Figure 15 In *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), the setting of the house often appears more like a stage on which the characters act out their loves, desires, and fears.

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 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 neorealist 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 that kind of performance which he solicited from René Falconetti in the famous close-ups of his *The Passion of Joan of 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 *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), 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), that 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* (1984), for instance, the softly lit interiors and exteriors are meant to recreate 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 painting does (Figure 16).

Figure 16 In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), spectacular lighting techniques and graphics are the heart of the movie.

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 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 tumbledown 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 the 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. Some films, such as Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), use stark black-and-white tones to suggest an older movie genre or past historical period. Woody Allen in *Zelig* (1983) tells a 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* (1972) 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 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 begin 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 17). A wide-screen frame is especially suited to catching the open spaces of a

Figure 17 What makes this shot from *The Exorcist* (1973) so disturbing?

western or the vast stellar 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* (1955), 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 Buster Keaton's movie *The General* (1927) 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. 65–72).

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 recreate 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 are 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, meditative perspective of a Japanese person looking at the world from the floor of a tatami room, but the Belgian filmmaker Chantel 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 that 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.* Because 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 *The 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 in which Ada (Holly Hunter) arrives on a remote beach in nineteenth-century New Zealand or, in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), 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 *The Battleship 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 the 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 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* (1947), for instance, Orson Welles regularly disrupts the viewer's sense of space and time through the questionable reliability of the narrator, O'Hara, and 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, classic movie like *Ben-Hur* (1925) and that of a more modern Hollywood film like *Chicago* (2002)? Does one use more long takes and the other more quick cuts? How would you differentiate between the continuity editing in a European movie such as *The Rules of the Game* (1939) and an American movie such as *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 because 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:

- 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 with which we can identify? 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 a 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 frequently 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—crystallizes 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 *The Battleship Potemkin* shows (see pp. 28–33), 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* (1941) 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 screeching 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 to which it is linked (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

Figure 18 *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935): creating transitions and links . . .

financial troubles. Francis Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) 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 18 and 19).

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 Ridley Scott's war-film *Black Hawk Down* (2001) or films organized around musical performances like *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999)—cannot inspire good essays. But because 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:

Figure 19 . . . through sound matches.

- What is the relation of the sound to the image in specific scenes or sequences? How might the answer to that question 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?
- 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 *Every Man 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 LeMay, 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 affects 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 desire. 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 racist. 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 wish to kill her because he believes she has been sexually violated by her non-white captor.

A violent, racist, and sexually troubled Ethan thus motivates and complicates the straightforward plot of the novel in new ways. On the one hand, The Searchers proceeds as a linear quest: Ethan and Marty Pauley search for the lost Debbie, who has been kidnapped by the Comanche tribe of Scar. That plot is ultimately resolved, in a classical manner, when they find her and she is returned home. A counter-current within this linear, forward plot, however, is an interior search that seems to move backward and inward in the film, investigating Ethan's twisted mind and dark past. At the center of these parallel plots, Marty becomes more and more aware of Ethan's violence and racism, and increasingly confronts him, eventually attempting to stop him from killing Debbie. At first, Ethan does not appear to respond to any of these demands for self-knowledge, and his climactic confrontation with Scar suggests that nothing about him has changed: He not only kills the Comanche chief but, in an act of grotesque brutality, Ford has this cinematic Ethan actually scalp Scar (which does not happen in the novel).

When in a scene that immediately follows, Ethan chases down Debbie but does not kill her, the film indicates, however, that something has indeed changed in Ethan, that his search for Debbie has revealed something horrid about himself to himself. Perhaps the scalping of Scar, who more and more seems a reflection of Ethan, has acted as a cathartic confrontation with his own dark soul. Perhaps his entire quest has, with the help of Marty, allowed him to see his own barbaric and primitive self. His decision to spare Debbie's life becomes then, at least in part, a decision to acknowledge

and free himself from his own violent desires and troubled past. Driven by the need to restore a home and domestic life, Ethan's narrative has now become an inquiry into the dark passions that threaten that home life from within.

Brilliantly dramatizing the tension between Ethan's two searches is a pattern of shots focused on darkened entryways. At the opening, a three-quarters shot from behind Martha shows her looking across the plain as she stands in a doorway. The black interior of the cabin contrasts sharply with the bright light that fills the doorway from outside. A tracking shot then follows Martha out onto the porch where she watches Ethan riding toward her in the distance. At the conclusion, virtually the same shot recurs as Ethan delivers Debbie to her new home with the Jorgensens. After Debbie and the Jorgensens enter the black interior, the newly married Marty and his wife follow. Ethan, though, hesitates on the porch and then turns back into the desert.

Both these shots position Ethan as a wanderer separated from the domestic interiors that he approaches. Complicating this image, moreover, those interiors are blackened in a way that suggests a darker reality than is usually associated with the inside of a home. In an important sense, I believe, the exteriors represent that wild and primitive world that Ethan must wander through, while the interiors of home (and self) represent for Ethan the shadowy and dangerous passion now associated with his illicit love of Martha.

Between these two scenes of darkened doorways is a third scene whose black space acts as the turning point in Ethan's story and a measure of what has changed between the beginning and end of this narrative. After killing Scar, Ethan chases the fleeing Debbie to a cave. Shot from the interior as a medium long shot, the

composition here clearly replicates the doorway shots that open and close the film. After approaching the cringing Debbie, Ethan does not, as we expect, kill her but instead lifts her up and says "Let's go home, Debbie." As part of a climactic turning point that begins with his brutal scalping of Scar, the scene becomes a moment of partial and temporary redemption for Ethan as he enters that darkened interior but quietly refuses to act out his repressed violence. When he releases Debbie later at a similar threshold, Ethan has recognized his own violent passion and has resisted it. As he turns at the threshold and walks back into the desert, the long take becomes an acknowledgement that Ethan cannot enter that domestic world because of who he is. In the words of the sound track, he is a man who must continue to "search his heart and soul."

There may be many social or personal reasons for these alterations in adapting the novel to the film in this way. What is clear is that Ford's version of the story is a much more troubling and disturbing version as it injects race and sexuality into a character and the narrative. In this case adapting a literary narrative as a film narrative becomes not simply the translation of characters and themes but the creation of significantly different characters and themes.

Exercises

1. Write a three- or four-paragraph evaluation of a film adapted from a work of literature. What are the most visible omissions and additions? How and where has the film most effectively used its own formal techniques? Has the film adaptation simply re-created the main themes and plot elements of the literary work, or has it changed the meaning and themes in some way?

2. For one film, write three or four paragraphs on a single element of film technique—such as image composition, editing, or sound. Whichever technique you concentrate on, first simply describe the most important instances in the film and only then evaluate how those techniques add to the meaning of the specific shot, scene, or sequence.