**Film Studies**

**M2 LC**

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**Film Analysis**

This lecture presents a brief definition of film analysis compared to literary analysis, provides an introduction to common types of film analysis

**What is film analysis, and how does it differ from literary analysis?**

Film analysis is the process in which film is analyzed in terms of semiotics, narrative structure, cultural context, and mise-en-scène, among other approaches.

Analyzing film, like analyzing literature (fiction texts, etc.), is a form of rhetorical analysis—critically analyzing and evaluating discourse, including words, phrases, and images. Having a clear argument and supporting evidence is every bit as critical to film analysis as to other forms of academic writing.

Unlike literature, film incorporates audiovisual elements and therefore introduces a new dimension to analysis. Ultimately, however, analysis of film is not too different. Think of all the things that make up a scene in a film: the actors, the lighting, the angles, the colors. All of these things may be absent in literature, but they are deliberate choices on the part of the director, producer, or screenwriter—as are the words chosen by the author of a work of literature. Furthermore, literature and film incorporate similar elements. They both have plots, characters, dialogue, settings, symbolism, and, just as the elements of literature can be analyzed for their intent and effect, these elements can be analyzed the same way in film.

**Different types of film analysis**

Listed here are common approaches to film analysis, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. Keep in mind that any of the elements of film can be analyzed, oftentimes in tandem. A single film analysis essay may simultaneously include all of the following approaches and more. As Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie (1999) propose in Analysis of Film, there is no correct, universal way to write film analysis.

**Semiotic analysis**

Semiotic analysis is the analysis of meaning behind signs and symbols, typically involving metaphors, analogies, and symbolism.

This doesn’t necessarily need to be something dramatic; think about how you extrapolate information from the smallest signs in your day to day life. For instance, what characteristics can tell you about someone’s personality? Something as simple as someone’s appearance can reveal information about them. Mismatched shoes and bedhead might be a sign of carelessness (or something crazy happened that morning!), while an immaculate dress shirt and tie would suggest that the person is prim and proper. Continuing in that vein:

What might you be able to infer about characters from small hints?

How are these hints (signs) used to construct characters? How do they relate to the relative role of those characters, or the relationships between multiple characters?

Symbols denote concepts (liberty, peace, etc.) and feelings (hate, love, etc.) that they often have nothing to do with. They are used liberally in both literature and film, and finding them uses a similar process. Ask yourself:

What objects or images are repeated in multiple instances?

In Frozen Elsa’s gloves appear in multiple scenes.

In what context do they appear?

Her gloves are first given to her by her father to restrain her magic. She continues to wear them throughout the coronation scene, before finally, in the Let It Go sequence, she throws them away.

Again, the method of semiotic analysis in film is similar to that of literature. Think about the deeper meaning behind objects or actions.

What might Elsa’s gloves represent?

Elsa’s gloves represent fear of her magic and, by extension, herself. Though she attempts to contain her magic by hiding her hands within gloves and denying part of her identity, she eventually abandons the gloves in a quest for self-acceptance.

**Narrative structure analysis**

Narrative structure analysis is the analysis of the story elements, including plot structure, character motivations, and theme. Like the dramatic structure of literature (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), film has what is known as the Three-Act Structure: “Act One: Setup, Act Two: Confrontation, and Act Three: Resolution.” Narrative structure analysis breaks the story of the film into these three elements and might consider questions like:

How does the story follow or deviate from typical structures?

What is the effect of following or deviating from this structure?

What is the theme of the film, and how is that theme constructed?

Consider again the example of Frozen. You can use symbolism and narrative structure in conjunction by placing the symbolic objects/events in the context of the narrative structure. For instance, the first appearance of the gloves is in Act One, while their abandoning takes place in Act Two; thus, the story progresses in such a way that demonstrates Elsa’s personal growth. By the time of Act Three, the Resolution, her aversion to touch (a product of fearing her own magic) is gone, reflecting a theme of self-acceptance.

**Contextual analysis**

Contextual analysis is analysis of the film as part of a broader context. Think about the culture, time, and place of the film’s creation. What might the film say about the culture that created it? What were/are the social and political concerns of the time period? Or, like researching the author of a novel, you might consider the director, producer, and other people vital to the making of the film. What is the place of this film in the director’s career? Does it align with his usual style of directing, or does it move in a new direction? Other examples of contextual approaches might be analyzing the film in terms of a civil rights or feminist movement.

Some other questions to consider:

How does the meaning of the film change when seen outside of its culture?

What characteristics distinguish the film as being of its particular culture?

**Mise-en-scène analysis**

Mise-en-scene analysis is analysis of the arrangement of compositional elements in film—essentially, the analysis of audiovisual elements that most distinctly separate film analysis from literary analysis. Remember that the important part of a mise-en-scene analysis is not just identifying the elements of a scene, but explaining the significance behind them.

What effects are created in a scene, and what is their purpose?

How does the film attempt to achieve its goal by the cinematic techniques it uses, and does it succeed?

Audiovisual elements that can be analyzed include (but are not limited to): costumes, setting, lighting, camera angles, frames, sound effects, music, color values, placement of characters, etc. Mise-en-scene is typically the most foreign part of writing film analysis because the other components discussed are common to literary analysis, while mise-en-scene deals with elements unique to film. Using specific film terminology bolsters credibility, but you should also consider your audience. If your essay is meant to be accessible to non-specialist readers, explain what terms mean.