

Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series



This handout discusses ways to approach film as a visual medium. It offers suggestions for focus, prewriting tips, and guidance on how to think critically about a medium many of us think of as popular entertainment. It does not include a comprehensive list of technical film terminology, although it does provide links to several sources that do. This handout deals with decoding film as a viewer, considering how the film appears rather than how it was made.

Overview: What are Visual Rhetoric and Visual Literacy?

The simplest definition for visual rhetoric is how/why visual images communicate meaning. Note that visual rhetoric is not just about superior design and aesthetics but also about how culture and meaning are reflected, communicated, and altered by images. Visual literacy involves all the processes of knowing and responding to a visual image, as well as all the thought that might go into constructing or manipulating an image.

Moving from Passive to Active Viewing

How do we get from images on a screen and sound from a speaker to the variety of impressions with which a powerful film leaves us? We are all able to recount the plot of a film, usually after watching it only once. It is more difficult to explain *how* the images and sounds presented make up such a narrative, communicating meaning not just through the characters' actions, but also through framing, camera movement (reframing), editing, optical effects, lens choice, sound, and a number of other technical elements that often go unnoticed by viewers looking for the plot. Through careful attention to what is on the screen (and how it got there), you can identify the visual strategies employed by a film to elicit a certain effect. The best way to do this accurately, and a good starting point for understanding how any film works, is to watch it carefully and observantly, to take notes while watching, and to watch it *more than once*.

The list of things that go into any single film can be daunting. To make the task of approaching film from an analytical viewpoint more manageable, this handout addresses three basic components of film:

- Image
- Movement
- Sound

Image

Mise-en-scène and Framing

One of the best things about DVD technology is that it is even easier now than it was with video to get a clear still image, which is a good place to start to think about how film builds images into meaning. The two main things to pay attention to in a filmic image are *mise-en-scène* and framing. *Mise-en-scène* is a French term meaning literally “put in the scene,” and it was originally adapted from the theater. It refers to everything that goes into a film before it is photographed, including set dressing or location, costumes, lighting, actors, blocking (actor locations and movement), and dialogue. If you like, it is what you would have seen if you were there with the crew when the scenes were being filmed. The camera adds to this framing (setting the bounds of the image, usually in a rectangle) and camera movement (reframing). The latter is discussed in the next section, but framing is as important for still photography as it is for film, since it works with *mise-en-scène* to determine the overall composition of the image.

Moving from Description to Analysis

Here are three descriptions of the same image:

1. K. is asking the Advocate for help.
2. K. is framed in the center of the shot, with the Advocate dominating the right side of the frame. The setting is fancy but dilapidated, and there are two prominent light sources, one from the deep space behind K. and another lighting the faces of the two figures.
3. Although K. is framed in the center of the shot, there is no doubt as to who has the power here. The Advocate towers over him, interposing himself between K. and the camera and dominating the right side of the frame. He casts a shadow on K.'s chest, reinforcing, as does the high-angle camera looking down on K., K.'s lack of power relative to the man whose help he is seeking. The location of a strong light source in the deep space behind K. reminds the viewer of K.'s distance from his goal, and combines with the fabric hanging from the chandelier to create a surreal effect, setting the tone for the entire scene.



Orson Welles, *The Trial* (1962)

Of the three descriptions, the first *describes what is happening* in the shot, but pays little attention to what is actually on the screen. The second *gives a formal description* of the image. It is not exhaustive, but it covers several significant points (framing, setting, and lighting). It does not move, however, from description to meaning (although terms like “dominating” and “dilapidated” gesture in that direction). The third description deals with the same visual traits, but also *explains how those traits create meaning*.

The point is not just to show three examples of increasing detail, but to consider these as steps toward visual analysis. A description of what is happening is a fine place to start, since you will need to know how an image fits into the film as a whole. From there, try to list all the visual qualities of the image that you can, focusing on both framing (camera angle and image composition) and *mise-en-scène* (actors and blocking, costume, setting, lighting). Some will be more important than others for any given shot, but the important thing at this stage is to list all that you can. Finally, take this list and try to explain the effects the different traits you have listed have on you as a viewer. There is no set rule for this, so you will have to be creative. Don't just make things up, though—try to stick to what's on the screen and what you can infer from that with confidence. You will be surprised how much easier interpretation is once you have a

finite list of traits to describe an image. If this still seems daunting, you might want to check out our handout on photography, which goes into more detail on analyzing still images.

Movement

So far, this isn't very different from analyzing photography. But film isn't just photography, but a series of photographs shown in succession (at a rate of 24 frames per second) to create the illusion of movement. This section offers suggestions for how to talk about a moving image.

There are two main types of movement in film: *continuous* and *discontinuous*. The former involves characters and/or objects moving within the frame, either as a result of their movement or of the camera's. The latter is a result of editing, in which two discontinuous bits of film are spliced together (the most basic form is a cut, but this also describes dissolves, wipes, etc.). You will want to keep these separate in your mind, since they describe different aspects of the filmmaking process (filming and editing).

Here are some basic questions to ask when thinking about the role of movement in the visual language of film:

- What is the pacing like? Are things moving quickly or slowly?
- Are the characters in synch, or is one shuttling around the frame while others remain stationary? Or are they all stationary while the camera moves around them?
- If the camera does move, how does it move? Is it quick, slow, jerky, or smooth?
- How long are the shots (the time between two cuts)? You can even time these by the second, or see how many there are per minute. You might also want to think about the relative shot length of two different scenes.
- And, the crucial question, *what effect does all this have?*

Tips for Analyzing a Film for Its Visual Qualities

- As with still images, there is no simple key for decoding the effects different types of movement can have. One of the best ways to start interpreting the *meaning* of movement is to think about your own reaction to the film and then try to figure out what it is in the film that makes a scene feel calm, frantic, exciting, depressing, etc.
- If it is hard to isolate the visual aspects of a film from the plot, try watching a scene with the sound off. Especially if the narrative depends on dialogue, watching it in "silent mode" will help you focus on the visual. The opposite can also help you to analyze the function of sound.

Sound

It may seem strange to discuss sound in a visual literacy handout, but there is no getting around the fact that most films you will see have a sound track to accompany the image track. This is usually made up of three main components:

- Dialogue
- Sound effects
- Music

One or more of these will be more important than the others for any given scene, but try thinking about all of them when you go to analyze a scene. Often, the absence of one of these will be as important as its inclusion. For example, a long scene of dialogue without background music may make a fiction film seem more "real." On the other hand, a long dialogue scene in a crowded restaurant without background music

or noise may be deliberately unrealistic, focusing the viewer's attention on the intimacy of the conversation rather than the setting. For a demonstration of how important sound is for a film, even and especially when you don't notice it while watching casually, try watching the scariest part of a horror film without the sound. Then, listen to the same scene without watching the images. How scary are both "versions," how do they each compare to the combined image/sound experience, and what does that tell you about how the film communicates?

Recommended Texts

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. New York: Longman, 2001.

Part of the Longman's *Short Guide* series, Corrigan discusses different approaches to film and provides useful tips on ways to begin writing about film. The book includes a glossary of technical film terms, and a section of the book deals with these terms in more detail. It also features sample essays and a section on conducting film research.

Bordwell, David and Kristen Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2006.

First published in 1979 and updated every few years, Bordwell & Thompson's book has become the standard textbook for film courses. Although the authors pay attention to genre, history, production, and distribution, the book is most useful for its attention to style and how formal aspects of films create meaning. It is a bit much to get through for a single paper on film, but is a useful resource, featuring a glossary of discipline-specific terms and clearly delineated chapters on different aspects of film analysis.

Useful Links

Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

www.imdb.com

For quick information about a film, director, actor, producer, or production company, IMDb can't be beat. It is not an ideal place to end your research, but it is a fine place to start.

Dartmouth Writing Program Handout on Film

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/film.shtml>

This handout is more focused on the writing aspect of writing about film than on visual literacy, and discusses different approaches to film (film history, ideological analysis, cultural studies/national cinemas, and auteur theory) not addressed here. It also features a short glossary of film terms.

Yale Film Analysis Guide

<http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/index.htm>

A more detailed web resource than the Dartmouth handout, the Yale site is an easily navigable guide to film terms that incorporates examples through color stills and even brief wmv files. The guide also features examples (in the "Analysis" section) of shot by shot analyses of scenes from Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers* (1960) and Antonioni's *Il Grido* (1957), which are quite useful for figuring out what notes on film might look like.

Handouts in the Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series

Overview: Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy
Using Visual Rhetoric in Academic Writing
Writing about Comics and Graphic Novels
Writing about Film
Writing about Paintings
Writing about Photography
Writing with Maps
Using PowerPoint and Keynote Effectively
Creating Scientific Poster Presentations
Crafting and Evaluating Web Sites

The banner images at the beginning of this handout are all from Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958).