

Writing about Film

Writing about a film does not differ a great deal from writing about a literary text (novel, short story, play, etc.). It may be helpful to think of a film as a “visual text.” A film and a novel have similar elements: plot, characters, narrator (sometimes), setting, theme, etc. Much like the author of a novel uses words to tell a story, the director of a film uses the camera (images and sound) to tell a story. You may want to answer questions similar to those you would ask if writing about a novel.

- How is the film’s title meaningful or symbolic?
- What is the film about? What is its theme or message?
- How is the genre (drama, comedy, etc.) significant?
- What is the mood of the film? How is it conveyed?
- How are the characters portrayed? How do the characters interact?
- What is the effect of the *mise-en-scene* (costumes, sets, props, lighting, & sound)?
- What is the effect of the camera movement, angles, framing, and lighting?
- What is the effect of the film editing?

The main difference between writing about a novel and writing about a film comes from the analysis of technical aspects. It is important to examine the cinematic elements of the film. Below are some of the basic cinematic terms you should know (adapted from Golden’s Reading in the Dark).

Camera Angle

Low Angle: camera is below the subject looking up

High Angle: camera is above the subject looking down

Lighting

Bottom/Side Lighting: direct lighting from below or from one side

Front/Rear Lighting: soft, direct lighting on face or back of subject

Low-Key Lighting: scene is enveloped in shadows and darkness

High-Key Lighting: scene is flooded with light

Shot

Framing: composition of the image on screen

Close-up: subject fills the frame

Long Shot: camera is some distance away from the subject

Establishing Shot: establishes the scene; often a long shot or series of shots

Dolly Shot: camera is in motion toward or away from the subject

Tracking Shot: camera is in motion, parallel to the subject

Transition

Cut: rapid change from one shot to another

Dissolve: one image fades into another

Fade In/Out: one image gradually emerges from black/fades to black

Additional resources:

Corrigan, Timothy. A Short Guide to Writing about Film. New York: Longman, 1989.

Golden, John. Reading in the Dark. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001.

Mast, Gerald, and Marshall Cohen. Eds. Film Theory and Criticism. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

McMahan, Elizabeth, Robert Funk, and Susan Day. The Elements of Writing about Literature and Film. New York: Macmillan, 1988.