

ANALYZING NARRATIVE, FICTIONAL MOVIES¹

Criteria for analyzing narrative films:

1. Realism
 - a. Are events, settings, actions, artifacts historically accurate? Are there any anachronisms?
 - b. Is the action plausible? Are a character's actions likely, that is, are they based on the character's psychological makeup rather than the needs of the plot?
2. Morality
 - a. What moral values does the film imply or explicitly advocate?
3. Complexity (vs. complication)
 - a. Are characters rounded, with many traits and even conflicting emotions, or are they flat, with one or two traits?
 - b. Does the film present situations, characters, and/or decisions with the ambiguity that they often have in real life?
 - c. Is the viewer engaged with the film on many levels, e.g., emotionally, intellectually, spiritually?
4. Coherence

Does the movie make sense? do the actions hang together?
5. Intensity of effect.(not special effects for their own sake, merely to stimulate and excite).
6. Genre—e.g., Western, thriller, sci fi, film noir, musical, romantic comedy, mystery, slapstick comedy, slasher, horror, disaster film, .
 - a. How does the movie use the conventions of the genre, and with what effect?

Elements to consider in analyzing a film:

1. Function of a component—e.g., use of color or music, a road, the moon, wind, a house.
2. Motivation or reason for something
 - a. Why does a character act in such a way?
 - b. Why is a character dressed as he/she is?
 - c. Why is an object present, like a candle, a dog, a fireplace?
3. Motif or repetitions which form a pattern.
 - a. A character, speech, or mannerism.
 - b. A color, sound, any object.
 - c. Camera movement or lighting/darkness.
4. Unity.
 - a. Do all the elements have a function in the film?
 - b. Are elements that do not seem to fit into a pattern part of the meaning of the film (e.g., life is chaotic) or a flaw? Does disunity overshadow the unity?
5. Relationship of parts.
 - a. Contrast of elements.
 - b. Relationship of beginning and ending.
 - c. Parallelism of elements, lives, stories.
6. Composition of scene
 - a.. What element (including a character or group) is dominant, i.e., what attracts your eye first?
 - b. What are the subsidiary dominant elements, i.e., what attracts your eye next ?

¹ With the exception of *Persepolis*, all the films assigned in this course present a fictional narrative. I use “fictional” to distinguish these films from documentaries, which may be narratives but are expected to be factual or based on actual events and people. I use “narrative” to distinguish the assigned movies from non-narrative films, such as experimental films, instructional films, political or product advertisements.

- c. How much detail is included in the frame? Is it packed or dense with figures and objects, stark with almost no details, or somewhere in between?
 - d. Do you see a pattern in the arrangement of the elements? The most common patterns are S and X shapes, triangular designs, and circles (pp. 55-6).
 - e. Is the scene open or closed? That is, are you looking at the scene through a window or a proscenium arch which “contains” the image, or do you have the sense that not all the scene has been photographed, that it extends beyond what you see on the screen?
7. Lighting and color.
- a. What is the dominant color? Are contrasting colors used purposefully or symbolically?
8. Camera shots
- a. What is the camera angle and, consequently, your view of the scene? Are you looking down on the subject, looking up at the subject, or looking at eye level?
 - b. What kind of shot is used—extreme long shot, long shot, full shot, medium shot, close-up, or extreme close-up?²
 - c. Is the camera used to distort the image or to filter/mask the image?
 - d. What is in the foreground and what in the background?
9. Characters.
- a. Are the characters placed in a tight or loose frame (p. 61), e.g, can the characters move freely or do they seem confined?
 - b. Where in the frame do characters appear—top, bottom, middle, side?
 - c. Which way are the characters looking—at the camera, away from the camera?
 - d. How much space is there between characters?

Useful questions to ask about a movie:

1. What do we learn when?
2. How and from whom?
3. What is the effect of this construction?

² These terms are somewhat relative. For example, labeling a shot may depend on the director; a long shot for one director may be perceived as an extreme long shot for another director.