THE FORMALIST-REALISTIC SCALE

Movies can be arranged on a formalist-realistic scale, depending on the degree to which they contain elements of formalism or realism. Balancing these extremes is the classical Hollywood movie.

The tendencies to formalism and realism appear from the beginning of film-making. In the1890s, the Lumière brothers produced films of everyday events, like *The Arrival of a Train*. At the same time, Georges Méliès was appealing to imagination by exploring effects that could be achieved with film, like *A Trip to the Moon*.

The classical Hollywood or mainstream film, born in the mid-teens of the twentieth century, was the main type of movie produced till the 1960s.

Formalist films.
The beauty or power of the image is primary, displacing a sense of reality.
The visual presentation is stylized.
The story expresses the director's personal vision or passion, which may even be an obsession.
The film usually presents extraordinary characters and events.
Formalism explores ideas, e.g., political, religious, and philosophical ideas. For this reason it is the preferred approach for propaganda.
Most directors who are great stylists are formalists to some degree.
The perceptive viewer is aware that the narrative is being manipulated for an effect.
Formalist narratives may manipulate the time sequence or use an obvious pattern. There may be a disconcerting change of tone, e.g., a lyrical interlude intruding in a grim domestic drama.
Genres almost always formalist are musicals, science fiction, horror/supernatural, and fantasy.

Examples of formalist films

Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) illustrates formalism, as in these chilling scenes of death and a knight playing chess and death leading off his victims in the Dance of Death**.**

Realistic films.
Realism is a style which creates the illusion or effect of reality, of being a "slice of life," without any changes in or any manipulation of everyday life.
The director tries to show the surface of life as closely as possible, so that the viewer accepts the film as a reflection of reality.
Content or the story is generally of primary importance, rather than technique or expressionism.
Plots may be loose, without a clearly defined beginning, middle and end or resolution; the conflict may emerge gradually.
The movie may be episodic; continuity is not a value.

Some film theorists have created subcategories of realistic styles: poetic realism, documentary realism, and studio realism.

Example of realistic films

Both images are from Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), based on Frank Norris's novel *McTeague*.

Classical films.

  These films avoid the extremes of realism and formalism.

  They feature a strong story line, stars, and a high level of technical achievement or production values.

  Classical films are slightly stylized but have a surface believability.

   Plot has a clear beginning, middle, and end, as well as a conflict or dilemma that is resolved unambiguously.

   The plot follows the play structure of conflict, complication, climax, and resolution.

  A narrator may be used to provide continuity and to cover gaps in the story line.

  Visuals seldom take attention away from the actors. Style tends to be transparent or mainly invisible.

  Classical films rely on classical cutting.[1]

Examples of classical Hollywood films

The first image is from Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); the second, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942).

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  [1] In classical cutting, which was developed by D.W. Griffith, dramatic and emotional considerations determine the sequence of shots. For example, Griffith split action into a series of shots; among other innovations, he repeatedly cut from one action or group to another and back to give the sense of simultaneous action or changed from a long shot to a close-up to a medium shot, etc. in a scene.