Film Analysis

What this handout is about

This handout provides a brief definition of film analysis compared to literary analysis, provides an introduction to common types of film analysis, and offers strategies and resources for approaching assignments.

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-scene, among other approaches. If these terms are new to you, don't worry—they'll be explained in the next section.

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, and you may have discussed other approaches in class. As with any other assignment, make sure you understand your professor's expectations. This guide is best used to understand prompts or, in the case of more open-ended assignments, consider the different ways to analyze film.

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 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.

For example, Frozen is often linked to the LGBTQ social movement. You might agree or disagree with this interpretation, and, using evidence from the film, support your argument.

Some other questions to consider:

- How does the meaning of the film change when seen outside of its culture?
- What characteristics distinguishes the film as being of its particular culture?

Mise-en-scene 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 way it looks, and does it succeed?

Audiovisual elements that can be analyzed include (but are not limited to): props and costumes, setting, lighting, camera angles, frames, special effects, choreography, music, color values, depth, 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. The Resources section of this handout has links to sites that describe mise-en-scene elements in detail.

Rewatching the film and creating screen captures (still images) of certain scenes can help with detailed analysis of colors, positioning of actors, placement of objects, etc. Listening to the soundtrack can also be helpful, especially when placed in the context of particular scenes.

Some example questions:

- How is the lighting used to construct mood? Does the mood shift at any point during the film, and how is that shift in mood created?
- What does the setting say about certain characters? How are props used to reveal aspects of their personality?
- What songs were used, and why were they chosen? Are there any messages in the lyrics that pertain to the theme?

Writing the film analysis essay

Writing film analysis is similar to writing literary analysis or any argumentative essay in other disciplines: Consider the assignment and prompts, formulate a thesis (see the Brainstorming Handout and Thesis Statement Handout for help crafting a nuanced argument), compile evidence to prove your thesis, and lay out your argument in the essay. Your evidence may be different from what you are used to. Whereas in the English essay you use textual evidence and quotes, in a film analysis essay, you might also include audiovisual elements to bolster your argument.

When describing a sequence in a film, use the present tense, like you would write in the literary present when describing events of a novel, i.e. not "Elsa took off her gloves," but "Elsa takes off her gloves." When quoting dialogue from a film, if between multiple characters, use block quotes: Start the quotation on a new line, with the entire quote indented one inch from the left margin. However, conventions are flexible, so ask your professor if you are unsure. It may also help to follow the formatting of the script, if you can find it. For example:

ELSA: But she won't remember I have powers?
KING: It's for the best.

You do not need to use quotation marks for blocked-off dialogue, but for shorter quotations in the main text, quotation marks should be double quotes ("…").

Here are some tips for approaching film analysis:

• Make sure you understand the prompt and what you are being asked to do. Focus your argument by choosing a specific issue to assess.
• Review your materials. Rewatch the film for nuances that you may have missed in the first viewing. With your thesis in mind, take notes as you watch. Finding a screenplay of the movie may be helpful, but keep in mind that there may be differences between the screenplay and the actual product (and these differences might be a topic of discussion!).
• Develop a thesis and an outline, organizing your evidence so that it supports your argument. Remember that this is ultimately an assignment—make sure that your thesis answers what the prompt asks, and check with your professor if you are unsure.
• Move beyond only describing the audiovisual elements of the film by considering the significance of your evidence. Demonstrate understanding of not just what film elements are, but why and to what effect they are being used. For more help on using your evidence effectively, see 'Using Evidence In An Argument' in the Evidence Handout.

Resources

New York Film Academy Glossary
Movie Outline Glossary
Movie Script Database
Citation Practices: Film and Television

Works Consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Aumont, Jacques, and Michel Marie. L'analyse Des Films. Paris: Nathan, 1988. Print.
Pruter, Robin Franson. "Writing About Film." Writing About Film. DePaul University, 08 Mar. 2004. Web. 01 May 2016.

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