

Film Studies Notes

Terms to Know:

Basic Terms:

Frame - the smallest compositional unit of film structure, the frame is the individual photographic image both in projection and on the film strip. The term also designates the boundaries of the image as an anchor for composition.

Genre - A category used to classify a film in terms of certain general patterns of form and content, such as the Western, the horror film, or the gangster film.

Montage - Its simplest meaning is “cutting.” Sergei Eisenstein, however, developed an elaborate theory of montage based on the idea that shots relate to each other in a way that generates concepts not materially present in the content of the shots themselves. (Montage can also refer to the presentation of a great deal of narrative information through editing in a short period of time.)

Off-screen space - The implied filmic space beyond the borders of the film frame at any given moment in projection.

Persistence of vision - the physiological foundation of the cinema: an image remains on the retina of the eye for a short period of time after it disappears from the actual field of vision; when a successive image replaces it immediately, as on a moving strip of film, the illusion of continuous motion is produced.

Scene - a vague term that describes a unit of narration. In film, it may consist of a series of shots or of a single sequence that was shot in one location.

Sequence - a unit of film structure made up of one or more scenes or shots that combine to form a larger unit.

Set - the location where a scene is shot, often constructed on a soundstage.

Shot - a continuously exposed, unedited piece of film of any length: the basic signifying unit of film structure. The average shot length (ASL) and the number of shots vary with every film.

Special effects - a term used to describe a range of synthetic processes used to enhance or manipulate the filmic image.

Stop-motion photography - a technique used for trick photography and special effects in which one frame is exposed at a time so that the subject can be adjusted between frames; reputedly discovered by Georges Méliès.

Zoom - a variable-focus lens (one capable of focal lengths ranging from wide-angle to telephoto), often used to create optical motion without tracking the camera. Also used to describe a shot made with such a lens.

Technology: (Early History)

Cinematographe - the camera-projector-printer invented by the Lumiere Brothers in 1895

Kinetograph - The first viable motion-picture camera, invented in 1889 by W.K.L Dickson for the Thomas Edison Laboratories.

Kinetoscope - Invented before the projector, this was Edison;s peep-show device in which short, primitive moving pictures could be seen.

Shots:

Close-up - in its precise meaning, a shot of a human subject's face or other object alone; more generally, any close shot.

Continuity - the final editing structure of a completed film; also, arranging events by editing as if they had occurred continuously when, in fact, they were shot out of sequence.

Continuity editing - Editing shot together imperceptibly so that the action of a sequence appears to be continuous.

Crane shot - A shot taken from a mobile-crane device.

Establishing shot - A shot, usually a long shot, that orients the audience in a film narrative by providing visual information (such as location) for the scene that follows.

Extreme long shot - A shot made from a considerable distance, sometimes as far away as a quarter of a mile. It provides a panoramic view of a location without camera movement.

Focus - the clarity and sharpness of an image, limited to a certain range of distance from the camera.

Full shot - a shot that includes the subjects entire body and often a three-fourths view of the set. A type of medium long shot.

Long shot - A shot that generally includes the whole figure of its subjects and a good deal of background.

Long take - A single unbroken shot, moving or stationary, that describes a complex action that might otherwise be represented through montage. It is essential to mise-en-scene aesthetics.

Match cut - A cut in which two different shots are linked together by visual and/or aural continuity.

Medium close-up - A shot distanced midway between a close-up and a medium shot; e.g., a human subject's face and torso from the chest up.

Medium long shot - A shot distanced between a medium shot and a long shot, usually showing a subject's entire figure (a full shot) or three-fourths of it from the knee up.

Medium shot - a shot distanced midway between a close-up and a full shot; e.g. a human subject from the waist up.

Pan - any pivotal movement of the camera around an imaginary vertical axis running through it; from "panorama."

Reaction shot - A shot that cuts away from the central action to show a character's reaction to it.

Still - a photograph that re-creates a scene from a film for publicity purposes, or a single-frame enlargement from a film that looks like a photograph.

Subjective camera - a technique that causes the viewer to observe events from the perspective of a character in the film.

Tracking shot - a single continuous shot made on the ground with a moving camera; also known as a traveling shot. Aerial shots and crane shots are also continuous.

Sound:

Asynchronous sound - Sound that does not proceed directly from the film image.

Contrapuntal sound - Sound used in counterpoint, or contrast, to the image.

Direct sound - Sound that is recorded simultaneously with the image. With modern developments such as portable tape recorders and soundproofed cameras, direct sound has become common.

Dubbing - the recording and post synchronization of a dialogue or sound effects track - for example, foreign language dubbing.

Foley effects - Live sound effects, produced by performers known as "Foley artists" after Universal Pictures film editor Jack Foley, who created the first studio for such effects in the 1950s. Foley artists - also known as "Foley walkers" since the most common sound effect is footsteps - are often trained dancers because they have a good sense of timing.

Score - the musical sound track for a film. The word is also used as a verb.

Sound effects - all sounds that are neither dialogue nor music.

Sound track - there are two basic types of sound track in use today: optical and magnetic. Optical sound tracks encode information on a photographic light band that widens, narrows, or varies in density on the edge of the film strip. Magnetic sound tracks encode information electromagnetically on specially treated surfaces.

Synchronization - or "sync" is the use of mechanical or electronic timing devices to keep sound and image in a precise relationship to each other.

Synchronous sound - sound whose source is made clear by the image track.

Voice-over - a voice track laid over the other tracks in a film's sound mix to comment upon or narrate the action on screen.

Editing:

Crosscutting - Juxtaposing shots from two or more sequences, actions, or stories to suggest parallel action

Cutting - Moving from one image or shot to another by editing.

Dissolve - or “lap dissolve” A transitional or expressive device that superimposes a fade-out over a fade-in so that one image seems to overlap with another.

Fade-in - A technique for beginning a scene whereby an image gradually appears on a blackened screen, finally brightening into full visibility.

Fade-out - The opposite of fade-in.

Fast motion - Action filmed at less than 24 frames per second (standard sound film speed), so that when the processed film is projected at normal speed the action appears accelerated. Most silent films were shot at close to 16 frames per second, and so they display unintentional fast motion when projected at sound speed, as they frequently are today. (Undercrank)

Intertitles - Printed titles that appear within the main body of a film to convey dialogue and other narrative information. Intertitles are common in (but not essential to) the silent cinema.

Parallel action - a narrative strategy that crosscuts between two or more separate actions in order to create the illusion that they are occurring simultaneously.

postsynchronization - synchronization of sound and image after the film has been shot - an important step forward in the liberation of the early sound-film camera from its glass-paneled booth. Also called dubbing.

Slow motion - The action appears much slower on the screen than it would in reality.

Subtitle - a printed title superimposed over the images, usually at the bottom of the frame, to translate foreign dialogue, etc.

Other terms:

Realism - In cinema, realism describes a type of filming in which fidelity to the nature of the subject itself is more important than the director’s attitude toward it. As opposed to Expressionism, there is usually a minimum of montage and special effects.

Surrealism - a movement in painting, film, and literature that aims to depict the workings of the subconscious by combing incongruous imagery or presenting a situation in dreamlike, irrational terms; more generally, surrealism may suggest any fantastic style of representation.