

A Short List of Film Terms

Part of being a good film student is knowing the language of film. Here is a very brief introduction to some of the most common terms you will run across in my lectures and at ETC. It is by no means comprehensive; nonetheless, it should give you some basic terms to use when speaking and writing about your projects. For some of you, this list will be a review, but in everyone's case, be sure to clarify any terms that you find confusing. A few of these terms come from literary analysis and from the theater, but most are specific to film.

narrative - An adjective describing a film as being primarily a work of fiction, or a noun that loosely means a fictional story.

documentary - Also an adjective or noun category used to describe a work of nonfiction.

plot - refers to all aspects of the narrative that we see on screen. For example, in the film *Jaws*, Chief Brody's talking to the town council on screen would be part of the plot.

story - refers to all aspects of the narrative that we do not see on screen; these aspects may include events before, during, or even after the plot of the film. In *Jaws*, for instance, Chief Brody had been a police officer in the city prior to the film's beginning; this information is part of the story but not part of the plot.

diegesis - refers to the narrative that we see on screen. This term is much more specific to film, however, and refers to the world that the characters inhabit as much as the plot of the film. The adjective *diegetic*, for instance, refers to something the characters in the film could perceive, whereas *nondiegetic* refers to something they could not (see *diegetic* and *nondiegetic sound* below).

point of view - Most people assume film always has a third-person perspective, but even when it does not use a POV shot (see below), film often has a more subjective perspective through the use of camera placement, voiceover, and other cinema techniques.

mise-en-scène - refers to everything in the frame of the film, which would include lighting, set, props, and the staging and movement of actors. The term derives from the theater, where it is used in a similar way. In the 1950s, a group of French critics at the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* used this term in a different way. For them, *mise-en-scène* meant a special aspect of cinema associated with certain directors. Eventually, you will want to understand both meanings of the term, since this secondary meaning is closely connected to the idea of *auteurism* in cinema.. Initially, however, use *mise-en-scène* in the first sense.

setting - like the literary term, this word refers to the time and place of the film. The setting for *The Usual Suspects*, for instance, is New York and Los Angeles at a time contemporary with the film's year of release (in this case, 1995).

set - This term refers to the actual construction in which the actors are filmed. In *The Usual Suspects*, for instance, a set might be the interrogation room in the film. Sets are usually built for a film, as opposed to shooting on location, where a scene is shot in the actual place in which it occurs in the film. If a film crew shot on location in Venice, Italy, for instance, they might actually be shooting the scene in gondolas on the canals. **Set** is also used generally, however, as a designation for the place where a film is being shot. (So even in location shooting, the director would be "on the set" of his or her film every time he or she went to the place where the crew was shooting for that day.)

prop - another term borrowed from theater. A prop is generally

any object on a set, though clearly the objects that characters will touch become more important. A trumpet, for instance, might be part of the backdrop in a music store scene, but if a character is going to play the trumpet, the prop takes on more importance.

costumes - what the characters are wearing. Bear in mind that even if a character is wearing contemporary clothing (in some cases, the actors' own clothing), that clothing is still considered a costume.

lighting - This term refers to the way in which lights are used for a given film. Lighting, in conjunction with the camera, sets the visual look for a film. The **key light** is the main light used for a scene; **back light** refers to a secondary source, usually placed behind the actors; and **fill** refers to a light placed to the side of the actors. This system is called **three-point lighting** and was very common in classical Hollywood films. You may also run across the term **low-key lighting**, which means that the film was shot often using only the key light at a very low setting. This low level of lighting creates dark shadows on the faces of actors and is particularly moody when used with black-and-white film. It is most often associated with **film noir** but is not exclusive to that genre.

shot (and **close-up** v. **long shot**) - generally, the smallest unit of unbroken film. The camera can move within a shot, but the second that the film makes a transition (see below) to another shot, the previous shot has ended. Alternatively, when used with certain adjectives, **shot** also refers to the distance from the camera to the subject, almost always the actor. In a **long shot** (or a **wide shot**), one can see the entire body of the actor; in a **medium shot**, one can see the actor from the waist up; in a **close-up**, one can see only the actor's face (there is no such term as the "short shot"). You might also see an **extreme close-up** in a film, where you can only see part of the actor's face (just the eyes, for example). Also,

another common term is the **two-shot**, which is generally a medium to medium-long shot of two actors; two-shots were very common in the classical Hollywood era and continue to be used today.

pan - the movement of a stationary camera on a horizontal axis. A camera on a tripod that moves from left to right (following a parade, for instance), would be panning.

tilt - the movement of a stationary camera on a vertical axis. A camera on a tripod that moves up and down (following a plane landing, for instance), would be performing a tilt.

tracking shot - the movement of the shot when the camera is no longer stationary. The term refers to the tracks that cameras were once rolled on when creating one of these shots. Although tracks are still often used with a tracking shot, the term might also refer more generally to a moving shot that appears stable, such as a steadicam shot, which uses a gyroscope to avoid the shaky effects associated with hand-held shots. You may also run across the term **dolly shot**, which refers to what the camera rests on (a platform with wheels) while the camera moves in certain kinds of shots. **Dolly shot** is sometimes used interchangeably with **tracking shot**, since dollies very often use tracks.

handheld shot - refers to a shot where the camera is held by the camera operator. Hand-held shots are often associated with a certain look, which is shaky, and most people associate the hand-held shot with a kind of documentary realism. Narrative films and television often use the hand-held for this reason, as they are able to create a sense of gritty realism. The television show *Law and Order*, for instance, often uses hand-held shots when the detectives are questioning suspects on the streets, giving the viewer the sense that the scene is more real. Bear in mind, however, that no one technique ever has the same meaning in every film (a handheld

shot might be used to decrease the sense of realism).

crane shot - A shot taken from a crane. You often see these shots at the beginning of a scene (using it as an establishing shot) or the end of a scene. The end of a movie, in fact, often uses a crane shot (though sometimes is even more extreme).

POV shot - stands for “Point of View” shot. This type of shot does not refer to the technology used so much as the way we interpret it. In this kind of shot, we are looking through the eyes of a character; you have probably seen a POV shot when a character who has been rendered unconscious is waking (the other characters look directly into the camera, in a low-angle shot (see below), and say “Are you okay?” as the edges of the frame are blurred and the speech has an echo effect).

high-angle shot, low-angle shot - These terms refer to camera placement. If a camera is looking down on an actor from a high vantage, it is a high-angle shot; if a camera is placed very low to the ground and looks “up” at actors, it is a low-angle shot. High-angle shots might emphasize that characters are being overwhelmed by their circumstances, while low-angle shots might emphasize that characters are somehow larger than life. Be very careful, however, when attaching a certain cinema technique to a recurring plot device or tone. There are always exceptions, and you need to evaluate every scene individually.

take (and **short** v. **long take**) - generally, a take refers to the time a shot is begun to the time it stops. On a film set, a director might have to go through several takes before settling on the shot he or she wants (you have probably seen this in films before, with the clapboard and someone shouting “Take 12”--meaning they have done this shot eleven times before this one). Alternatively, like shot, **take** also takes on a secondary meaning when combined with certain adjectives (in this case, long and short), except that a long

or short take refers to time, whereas a long shot or close-up refers to distance. A **short take**, for instance, might be one or two seconds long, although contemporary films continue to use shorter and shorter takes of less than a single second (making two or three seconds, which sounds like a short amount of time, not very short at all). A **long take** would refer to a single unbroken shot that lasts for a larger amount of time--thirty seconds, for instance. One extreme recent example of a long take would be *Russian Ark*, a film shot on digital video and using a single, very long take for the entire film. Another more extreme example would be Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, where the director used long takes of several minutes apiece and attempted to hide the cuts by tracking behind characters' backs or pieces of furniture. Some directors are also famous for the use of long takes, such as Jean Renoir and Orson Welles.

frame – Literally, a frame of film refers to the smallest unit of film possible. Film frames appear on a film strip, which, when projected, creates the illusion of motion. Film is shown at 24 frames per second (or f.p.s., a common abbreviation). In a much looser sense, scholars sometimes talk about the **frame** to mean the four sides of the film as it is being projected, and they also often use it as a verb (e.g. “The film *frames* the action in such a way that we can see both characters at once.”)

screen - often used with on or off to refer to what we see within the frame. On-screen action, for instance, is something we can see, whereas off-screen action might be something we hear but which takes place outside the frame. Screen also refers to the actual physical screen on which we project a film.

shallow/soft focus - refers to how much of the shot is in focus. With shallow or soft focus, generally we can only see the actor's face in focus. The background appears blurry. This kind of focus was common in Classic Hollywood and is still common, because if

the viewer cannot see the background, then the director does not need to light the background, for instance, or make sure the background is perfectly ordered. Also, a blurry background focuses our attention all the more on what is in focus, which is generally the actor's face. Shallow focus is achieved with a long lens (this can be confusing, since one would assume a shallow focus would require a short lens).

deep focus - refers to a shot in which everything, including the background, is in focus. This type of shot is much more difficult to achieve, since the entire set must be adequately lit, designed, etc. Also, the danger is that the viewer's attention will shift from subject to backdrop, but some directors use this "danger" to their advantage. William Wyler, for instance, in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, shows a man playing a piano in the foreground while another man in the background calls his girlfriend (the first man's daughter) to break things off. Without **deep focus**, this shot would be impossible. Directors Jean Renoir and Orson Welles are most often associated with deep focus, which sometimes (but does not always) accompany long takes and a moving camera (since everything is lit, the camera is much more able to move fluidly and reposition itself among actors and props).

rack focus - Shifting the focus from one object to another within a single shot. Sometimes, directors will use a rack focus when two characters are on screen at once but are positioned at different distances from the camera.

editing - refers to the way that individual shots are connected to one another to make the film.

montage - this word has two meanings. First, **montage** can simply be another word for editing, which is often the way you will see it in film theory or when we study the Soviet filmmakers of the early twentieth century. Second, and more commonly in

contemporary usage, **montage** refers to a series of shots edited together to show a longer activity evolving in a shorter amount of time or to show a series of related activities. A sports film, for instance, might have a training montage, where the character becomes much better at the sport (the film might condense three months of training, for instance, into a two-minute montage of jogging, lifting weights, etc.). Or a film might show a series of related activities through montage. For instance, a film about a news station might have a montage of the evening news preparing to air (with shots of make-up being applied to the anchors' faces, cameras being moved into position, producers arguing over a story, and other images and sounds we might associate with this scene).

transition - refers to the way a shot moves from one to the next. Films use several different kinds of transitions, including:

- **cut** - simply splicing one shot to the next. The most common kind of transitions, cuts are used extensively in editing.
- **dissolve** - when one shot “bleeds” into another. In other words, the end of the first shot is still visible as the second shot becomes visible. Dissolves are often (but not always) used to show a smaller amount of time passing than a fade in or fade out.
- **fade in, fade out** - Going from black (nothing on the screen) to a shot (fade in), or going from a shot to black (fade out). These transitions usually (but not always) connote a larger amount of time passing or might also be used to signal a break in the narrative (the end of an act, for instance).
- **wipe** - one shot “wipes” across the screen and replaces another. You do not see wipes used overly often in contemporary films, although some directors use them often (the *Star Wars* films use wipes consistently).

- **iris-in, iris-out** - this transition almost never appears in contemporary films and was used much more commonly in early cinema. Here, the shot goes from a full frame to focusing a small circle around a certain part of the shot, with everything else blacked out (the iris-in), or the reverse occurs (the iris-out). You may have seen this transition at the end of a Looney Tunes cartoon, when the cartoon character will sometimes poke his or her head out of the iris as it closes in and crack one last joke (e.g when Porky Pig says, “Tha-tha-tha, that’s all folks”).

scene - a series of shots that form a cohesive unit of narrative. For instance, in *Rear Window*, we might discuss the **scene** where Grace Kelly kids Jimmy Stewart about not marrying her yet. Films have both acts and scenes, like theater, although they are often less obvious because there are rarely intermissions or accompanying programs in film. Screenwriters typically use acts when writing a film. Scholars, however, almost never discuss an **act** of a film, whereas **scene** is used extensively.

continuity editing - also called invisible editing or Classic Hollywood editing. This system of editing is the system that Classic Hollywood established (though it had been in use before that period) and is essentially the system that exists today. Understanding this system is crucial to understanding cinema, since even those directors who break with this system are in a sense defining themselves against it. This system is associated with the following other terms:

- **establishing shot** - This term has two meanings. In one context, establishing shot refers to the shot at a beginning of a film or scene that established location. For instance, if the setting of a film is 1940s Occupied France, the film might open with a shot of the Eiffel Tower with two Gestapo soldiers in the

foreground. This shot establishes place (and sometimes, as in this example, time). Establishing shot is also used in continuity editing to describe a shot that establishes the spatial relationships in a given scene.

- **shot/reverse shot** - After an establishing shot, the shot-reverse shot refers to the close-ups used when two characters are in conversation. (Because we have already used an establishing shot, we now know where the characters are in relation to one another.)
- **match-on-action** - connects two shots cut together by having a character finish an action in the second shot begun in the first shot. For instance, if a character lights a match in the first shot, the same character will draw it up to a cigarette in the second.
- **eyeline match** - The directions that actors look affect the way we perceive their spatial relationships to one another. **Eyeline matches** are important for establishing who a character is talking to or what a character is looking at. For instance, if a character is talking to two people on either side of him or her, then the character will look to the left of the camera to connote that he or she is talking to the person in that direction.
- **the 180-degree rule** - This term refers to the rule that once a spatial relationship has been confirmed with the establishing shot, no close-up will cross the imaginary line drawn between those two actors until a new line (or axis) has been established, usually through another establishing shot.

zoom-in, zoom-out - using certain lenses, the camera can move more closely into a subject (the zoom-in) or pull back (the zoom-out). The zoom-in is sometimes called a push-in, and the zoom-

out is sometimes called the pull-back.

sound - everything we hear from the audio track of the film.

music - any music that comes from the audio track. Music might be diegetic (a song on the radio of a car a character is driving) or nondiegetic (scary music when a villain appears on screen).

diegetic sound - sound that other characters would be able to hear. A song on a radio, for instance, as a character drives down the highway, would be a diegetic sound, as would someone coughing audibly during a scene. It is important to note that diegetic sound is a sound that characters could hear, even if they are not present when that sound occurs. The sound of a radio playing in an apartment, for instance, is a diegetic sound, even if no character is present in the apartment during the scene.

nondiegetic sound - sound that characters cannot hear. The two most common types of nondiegetic sound are voiceovers, which is a character's narration that plays over any given scene, and nondiegetic music, which is music used to inflect the mood of a given scene. Creepy horror-movie music, for instance, that plays when a character is walking into an old house, is nondiegetic music, since that character cannot hear the music. Sometimes, this effect is parodied (with characters commenting on the scary music playing), and some directors will transition from a nondiegetic sound to a diegetic sound (or vice-versa), as when a song is playing on a radio that then becomes the nondiegetic music even as the characters move into a new scene without the radio in it.

ambient sound - This term generally refers to any sounds that are used to establish location. The ambient sound of a scene in a park, for instance, might include birds chirping, children laughing, or a dog barking. The ambient sound of a train station would include the whine of train brakes, the tinny sounds of arrival and departure

announcements, and the general noise of people walking and talking.

Further Reading:

Many books on film have a glossary that defines these terms and others at greater length. Here are some other sources, some of which are available at Hunt library main campus. Even if they are not, however, you should ask your librarian about interlibrary loans, which would allow you to procure most, if not all of these:

Blandford, Steve, et al. *The Film Studies Dictionary*. London: Arnold, 2001. *This text defines not only terms specific to film production but many theoretical terms as well.*

Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 6th Edition. New York: McGraw Hill, 2001. *Bordwell and Thompson's study is a classic book on formal aspects of film. See especially their explanations of continuity editing.*

Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film*. 4th edition. New York: Norton, 2004. *If you are enrolled in a film history course at Salisbury University, you may already be using this book in your course. Cook's book provides an insightful history of the cinema and also contains a glossary.*

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. New York: Longman, 2001. *Corrigan's text is very useful for students who want to improve their writing about cinema. It also includes a glossary.*

Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000. *Hayward's book is centered less on technical*

vocabulary and more on theoretical and conceptual terms. It provides excellent explanations of those concepts, however, and supplements explanations with recommendations on further reading. As with The Film Studies Dictionary, it would be useful for students reading essays who run across theoretical jargon with which they are unfamiliar.