MOVIES ~ WHAT TO LOOK FOR

How does the film (or a specific scene) make you feel? What draws your interest? Why do you believe the film has made you feel or think what you do? As we thought about on the first night, we need to "read a book as deliberately as it was written," according to Thoreau, and the same holds true for film. Consider the elements deliberately coordinated in a film to create the impression the director/writer/actors hope for. Consider the following:

REALISM vs. FORMALISM (most films have some of both)—see p. 4 in your text for a clear layout of realism and formalism:

Realistic Films: the world depicted in the film is not manipulated, but rather a mirror of the "real world." The artist in the film is invisible—the artistry is concealed. Content trumps form. Documentaries are realistic, though even documentaries may have formalistic elements. In the film *J'Accuse*, by Abel Gance, we saw actual WWI footage—this is the height of realism. Realistic directors use standard lenses to produce "a minimum of distortion" (p. 29).

Formalistic Films: the world depicted in the film is highly stylized, even flamboyant; "formalistic filmmakers often prefer lenses and filters that intensify given qualities and suppress others. Cloud formations, for example, can be exaggerated threateningly or softly diffused" (p. 29). Formalists are also known as expressionists. In formalism, the expression is as important as the subject matter. On the extreme end of formalism is the "avant garde." *Un Chien Andalou*, the silent, surrealist film we watched an excerpt of in class, is an example. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali shared dreams they had had (ants crawling out of the hand, a razor blade cutting an eyeball as a cloud cut across the moon) and decided to create a film which represented the suppression of human emotions. Your text mentions that audiences found the fight scenes in Scorsese's *Raging Bull* "realistic," but what they were responding to were stylized images (slow motion, dreamy) that made the audiences feel the power and intensity of a fight. In Bergman's The Seventh Seal (see p. 7 for picture), the very construction of the story (a man living during the Middle Ages where bubonic plague was devastating the population plays a game of chess with Death) is formalistic, though the film contains many "realistic" scenes. We watched All That Jazz—consider the hospital hallucination scene and his dying—how might the death scene be filmed if it were in a "realistic" style as opposed to formalistic? What elements of the scenes we watched in *All That Jazz* made it "formalistic"?

Expressionists are concerned with spiritual and psychological truths. Director Peter Greenaway (we saw a youtube clip from *Prospero's Books*—you may also want to check out his film *The Pillow Book* or *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* online) uses many contrasts in his films to explore psychological truths: sexual pleasure and painful death, elaborate costumes and nudity, etc.

USE OF SHOTS: The angle of a shot can create a specific effect.

High angles (shooting down on the subject) can make people look powerless and trapped or can reduce the importance of the subject. In class, we watched a scene from Jonathan Demme's The Silence of the Lambs in which a girl was in a pit, and her captor was high above her, giving orders and mocking her (and referring to her as "it," but that's a writing element). In your text, on p. 13, you see a picture from The Lives of Others, a German film about a couple whose apartment has been tapped and whose conversations are heard—the camera shoots them from above.

Low angles can make characters seem threatening and powerful (again, the captor in *The Silence of the Lambs* is seen from below, and he seems highly menacing). On p. 14 of your text, you see samples from both *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Batman Begins*. In low angle shots, motion may seem speeded up, creating a sense of confusion.

Oblique angles (a.k.a. the Dutch tilt) can create a sense of imbalance—even chaos—and increase tension since the lines of the picture become unstable; if a scene is violent, oblique angles can create high anxiety. Note the picture on p. 16 of your textbook of *The Island*.

DARKNESS & LIGHT:

HIGH KEY: High lit films are bright with few shadows—this is often used in comedies and musicals.

HIGH CONTRAST: High contrast films feature dramatic contrasts of dark shadows and streaks of light—this is often used in tragedies and melodramas.

LOW KEY: Low key films use "diffused shadows and atmospheric pools of light" (p. 17)—mysteries, thrillers, and gangster films use low key lighting. (ex: *Blood Simple*)

(See the example of *Mr. Brooks* on p. 18 and the effect of shadows and light on a face)

A subgenre of crime thrillers are **FILM NOIR** movies (more on this when we cover genres. In film noir, the setting is usually dark and urban (often LA). These films can feature alleys and tunnels to convey a sense of entrapment and bus terminals and cheap hotel rooms to convey a sense of transience. Film noir has its roots in hard-boiled crime fiction, which had its roots in the Depression (the entrapment of poverty was ubiquitious) and which had its roots in **German expressionism** (pre-WWI). Fritz Lang's Metropolis is an example of German Expressionism, in which the sets are flat, the scale is off, (more diagonal lines than horizontal and vertical) and lighting creates odd shadows, creating a dreamlike state of mind (and producing a sense of instability). (Before midterm, we will watch scenes from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, filmed between the two wars.) Another element of film noir is narration—we saw a clip from *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, actually a comic spoof of film noir (but with the element of narration). Classic examples of film noir are *Double Indemnity* (see description, p. 19) and *Sunset Boulevard* (you might want to watch clips on youtube for examples).

LYRICISM: "Stylistic externalization of the scene's emotional content" (p. 15) ~ in other words, the entire setting of the scene echoes the emotions of the characters in the scene (e.g. during an argument, a tempest may be brewing as the characters quarrel).

Some films are called "**painterly**," meaning they are filmed to have the look of paintings (e.g *Moulin Rouge*, *Girl with the Pearl Earring*). Objects and people may appear soft but illuminated. On the other hand, some films have a "**linear**" style, which "emphasizes drawing, sharply defined edges, and the supremacy of line over color and texture" (p. 21—examples of each can be seen on p. 21—*Braveheart* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*). (Do not confuse linear style with linear narrative—to be discussed later.) We will later see a clip from Barry Lyndon ~ note the candle-lit scene as an example of painterly: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c_dOMVXRhw).

COLOR: See your handout for generalized psychological associations with color, noting that color can work on a subconscious level, and that variations on the shades can be employed to achieve very different effects. In general, as your book notes, "warm colors (red, yellow, orange) suggest aggressiveness, violence, and stimulation" (p. 22). Reds can also suggest passion and sex (we will later watch a scene from *American Beauty* and the role of red roses). We will also watch The Godfather and watch for the low-key lighting. Note in your text page 25, the description of *Life Is Beautiful* and how the colors change (and become more washed out) as the mood of the movie shifts from funny and cheerful to life in a concentration camp.

Note how in *Days of Heaven*, the lighting created a nostalgic effect (a golden glow) of a paradise (that the characters ended up losing due to human frailty and corruption)

FOCUS: **Rack focusing or selective focusing** can "guide the viewer's eye to various distances in a sequence" (29). Consider the scene we watched from The Graduate in which Benjamin reveals to Elaine that his former mistress was Elaine's mother—first Elaine's face is out of focus, and as she realizes what Benjamin is telling her, it comes into focus (and her mother's face is out of focus).

MISE EN SCÈNE: The look and feel of a work due to the visual composition. The arrangement of the props and set, the lighting, and even the positioning and movement of the actors (blocking) all creates the mise en scène. In considering this, look at the following factors:

➢ Actors' distance from one another (distant or close together as in example p. 73 from Renoir's *Grand Illusion*); review pp. 79 – 82, "Proxemic Patterns")
➢ Actors' position from one another (see example from *The Graduate*, p. 68)
➢ The amount of space around the actor and where the actor is in the space
➢ Symmetry or asymmetry (see examples p. 56)
➢ What is NOT in the picture (e.g. in Fritz Lang's *M*, what is the effect of NOT seeing the child killer but only hearing his whistle?)
➢ Open form vs. Closed form (open form is documentary-like ~ the filmmaker appears to have stumbled onto the scene and shot it; it is loosely framed ~ more REALISTIC; closed form is arranged, more artificial, and emphasizes the unfamiliar; it is tightly framed ~ more FORMALISTIC)—see examples on pp. 86 – 90 (doorways and windows can suggest enclosure and entrapment); notice the realistic effect of the panoramic view in Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (p. 52)
➢ Juxtaposition of lights and darks
➢ Where the dominant figures appear on the screen (upper? lower? P. 62)
➢ Visual confusion (to create anxiety)
➢ Parallelism (to "[imply] similarity, unity, and mutual reinforcement," p. 65)
➢ Is a character/characters blocked somehow from our view? (see p. 70, example from Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*)
➢ Do the characters/character face us, have their backs to us, are they in profile, etc.? (see ex. pp. 74 – 76)
➢ What is the lighting like? High key? Low Key? High Contrast?

Consider p. 47, the frame from Hitchcock's *Notorious* and how Bergman's placement in the shot displays her entrapment; Consider p. 51 and the positioning of the three characters in *House of Sand and Fog*; On p. 50, the author of your text writes of Truffaut's The Wild Child, "The surrounding blackness is a metaphor of how the youngster 'blocks out' his social environment while focusing on an object immediately in front of him. As an aesthetic device, the frame performs in several ways. The sensitive director is **just as concerned with what's left out of the frame as with what's included**."

MOVEMENT:
❧ Is the movement natural or wooden and stilted as in ballet and mime? Do they suggest grace, clumsiness, pain? Are the movements highly artificial, choreographed?
❧ The author of your text notes, pp. 95 – 100, "The distance and angle from which movement is photographed determine much of its meaning. In general, the longer and higher the shot, the slower the movement tends to appear. If movement is recorded from close and low angles, it seems more intense, speeded up. A director can photograph the same subject—a running man, for example—in two different setups and produce opposite meanings. If the man is photographed in an extreme long shot from a high angle, he will seem ineffectual and impotent. If he's photographed from a low angel in a medium shot, he will seem a dynamo of energy."
❧ Are the characters moving toward us or away from us?

SOUND: How does the sound impact your experience of the film?
❧ What are the qualities of the music that evoke sadness, tension, etc.? The number of voices? The specific instruments? The number of instruments?
❧ Is the soundtrack ironic? (Ex: the happy music for the sick dysfunction of the family in *Natural Born Killers*)
❧ The tone of voice? The pitch? The volume?
❧ How does accent influence your experience of the character? Are the accents used stereotypically or do they seem natural to the character?
❧ Is there silence? Does the silence evoke a sense of peace? dread? discomfort? boredom?
❧ Are there sound effects? How do they influence the feel of the scene?

- Is there a voiceover for narration? Is the narrator an adult, child, foreign-born individual commenting on another country? What is the effect of the narration? (Sometimes narrators offer wisdom and insight, or, as your text notes, p. 232, the narrator may be naïve or ignorant.)
- The list from p. 235 – 236: "Is the sound distorted? Why? . . . Is there any symbolism in the use of sound? Does the film employ repeated motifs? . . . . What about the language choice? Any fancy words? Swearing and coarse expressions?"

ACTING STYLE:
- Are the characters highly expressionistic (e.g. silent films) or more naturalistic (as in Method Acting, e.g. Marlon Brando, James Dean)?
- Is the actor a big name (e.g. Julia Roberts, Tom Hanks) or a lesser known individual? What is the impact of the "star" factor presence or absence?
- Body language—what does the character's body language tell us? (Ex: Sophie in *Naked* after the rape)

COSTUMES & MAKE-UP: consider the elements pp. 324 – 328 to determine the overall impression the image makes: Period; Class; Sex; Age; Silhouette (form-fitting or loose and baggy?); Fabric; Accessories; Color (hot or cool, subdued or bright); Body exposure

NARRATOLOGY (how the story works):
- Realistic ~ the author is invisible and "the events speak for themselves"; the events usually unfold chronologically; realistic narratives have looser plots with no clearly defined beginnings and endings; "the story itself is presented as a 'slice of life,' . . . not a neatly structured tale." (p. 344)
- Formalistic ~ the author manipulates and may tell the story out of order of the natural sequence of events; in formalistic narratives, "time is often scrambled and rearranged to hammer home a thematic point more forcefully" (p. 347)
- Are there flashbacks?
- Is there a journey motif? What is the journey?
- Non-fictional Narratives ~ they don't tell stories in the conventional sense (e.g. documentaries and avant garde films); Documentaries ~ deal with facts
- Are there archetypal patterns?

1) The story ~ is it a story you can relate to? Is it a story you wish you were a part of? Why or why not? What are the elements of the story that captivated you? Did the story keep you wondering what might happen next? If the story line was predictable, was it a story line you enjoy reliving? Is it a true story? If so, does the fact that it actually took place make it more powerful for you?

2) The writing ~ movies are written and then performed, executed. What do you find in the writing? Here are some elements found in literature that you may also find (in addition to plot elements) in the film:

Metaphors & Symbols: **Metaphor**: One thing is directly equated with another; an implied analogy that identifies one object with another; **Symbol**: A specific thing that may stand for an idea, values, people, or way of life; it points beyond its own meaning toward greater and more complex meaning. "A symbol creates a direct and meaningful equation between 2) a specific object, scene, character, or action AND 2) ideas, values, persons, or ways of life. In effect, a symbol is a substitute for the elements being signified"; symbols can be cultural (universal)—everyone connects with them because of our knowledge of the culture (e.g. water as a symbol of life, winter to symbolize old age, and spring to symbolize youth)—or symbols can be contextual or authorial (specific only to one story or situation); we'll watch *The Piano* ~ what do you think the piano symbolizes?
Paradox: An apparent contradiction that is nevertheless somehow true;
Tone: The writer's or speaker's attitude toward the subject that colors it emotionally; what is the filmmaker's attitude toward his topic (whether love, marriage, war, family dysfunction, etc.)?
Allusion: A reference, explicit or implicit, to something within our culture (literature, history, art, music, etc.);
Allegory: An extended metaphor; a narrative or description that has a second meaning beneath the surface, like a Bible parable or a fable; a story or entire structure that may be applied to another parallel situation or set of situations (e.g. in The Bible, the parable of a farmer sowing his seeds is an allegory, as is Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"; many feel that

Avatar is an allegory for the extermination of Native Americans; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (about the Salem witch hunts) is about the hunt for communists in the 1950s

Irony: A situation or wording in which the opposite of what's meant or expected is said, or a discrepancy between what a character says and what the reader or other characters know to be true:

- **Verbal Irony** ~ saying the opposite of what's true (the language is ironic); Verbal irony is related to satire and sarcasm ~ e.g. if someone falls, and someone says, "How graceful!" that's verbal irony
- **Dramatic Irony** ~ a discrepancy between what the actors/speakers know and what the audience sees—the audience usually knows or understands something the actor does not—often in horror movies, audience members see what's coming and want to scream to an actor to watch out!
- **Situational Irony** ~ A discrepancy exists between the actual circumstances and those that would seem appropriate or between what one anticipates and what actually comes to pass; example: the short story "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry ~ a poor couple pawn their most precious possessions to get a gift to match the other's most precious possession—he sells his watch, filled with sentimental value, to buy a comb for his wife's hair; she sells her long hair to buy a watch fob for his watch. In *The Ref*, it is ironic that with a couple who don't get along, it's the burglar who breaks in who becomes a marriage counselor of sorts; in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy doesn't belong in the institution but is simply escaping serving jail time, but he ends up staying, while other less strong, less stable patients, are free to go; in *The Godfather*, atrocious killings take place during a baptism during which Michael renounces evil

PLOT: the "controls governing the development of the actions"—not just the actions, but the motivation and causation; this includes "conflict" (the opposition of two people or a person or people and circumstances around them, or between groups). Plot includes the following:

1. Exposition (laying out the main characters, their backgrounds, characteristics, interests, goals, limitations, assumptions, etc.)
2. Complication (the onset of the major conflict) ~ in *The Wizard of Oz*, one complication is that Dorothy wants to know life beyond her farm in Kansas; another is Dorothy's conflict with Emma Gulch over Toto
3. Crisis (the "turning point": the conflict reaches its greatest tension—the reader's curiosity is at its greatest—usually followed by the climax) in *The Return of the Jedi*, this might be in the battle scene in which the Death Star is destroyed.
4. Climax (the rising action, the story's high point—maybe a decision, action, affirmation or denial, illumination, realization, etc.); in *Lord of the Rings,* the hobbit destroys the ring; the climax of *The Graduate* is when Benjamin storms the church to get Elaine;
5. Resolution or dénouement (the final outcome, resolution of mystery the completion of the story or play after the climax) in *The Wizard of Oz*, it is when Dorothy's at home with her family and realizes it has all been a dream.

Protagonist: central character (sympathetic or not)
Antagonist: the force (human or non-human) working against the protagonist; in *Deliverance*, it may be the two mountain men, the river, the ignorance of the South, or the South itself
Flat & round characters (latter complex, developed, dimensional)—flat characters are not developed—they're filler characters
Stock character (stereotypes—evil mother-in-law, greedy politician, clever detective, Englishman w/ monocle, etc.)
Static and developing characters—static characters do not change or grow; developing characters may have epiphany, but not static characters

POINT OF VIEW: Who's telling the story? In Days of Heaven, the narrator is a young girl, a secondary character watching what unfolds. How does her narration color our feelings about the film?

THEME: controlling idea or central insight—not preachy or moralistic: usual a generalization about life (not too specific to story and not overly broad either—e.g. loyalty to one's country is always the right thing; also accounts for all details of the story; theme can be expressed in several ways but should not be reduced to a cliché (e.g. Don't judge a book by its cover); films may have many themes: in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the theme may revolve around racism, ignorance, courage, or social class—e.g. social class and prejudice is born of ignorance and can lead to great tragedy

SETTING: the time & place a story occurs ~ *Gone with the Wind* must take place in the South after the Civil War; what is the effect of setting in the films we watch?

TRAGEDY: (INTERPRETIVE DRAMA) from "Tragos" in Greek, meaning "goat"; tragos-oide means goat song; the term may have come from 1) the goat being sacrificed as part of the original improvised ritual honoring Dionysus, 2) the chorus who wore the goatskins for costumes, or 3) the goat which was offered as a prize in the early choral contests. The word tragedy in drama is different from the way "tragedy" is used in our everyday language. Tragedy relates the fall of an individual and begins in prosperity but ends in adversity.   According to Aristotle, tragedy is defined by these elements:

1)   The tragic hero is a man of noble stature and possesses extraordinary powers, but he is not simply all saint or all sinner, all good or all evil, which leads to characteristic #2.
2)   The tragic hero has a frailty, tragic flaw (hamartia), usually a positive quality in excess or disproportion; therefore, the character's downfall lets the reader or audience recognize that disaster may be brought about because of mistakes any human might make and we therefore can identify with the hero and sympathize with his or her predicament. Traditional flaws are jealousy, pride, or ambition.
3)   The playwright uses pity and fear to purge our emotions (catharsis).
4)   The hero comes to the point of recognition of his or her mistakes (anagnorisis); the protagonist acknowledges his or her own place in the cosmic scheme and recognizes his own errors which have led to the tragedy.
5)   Begins in prosperity but ends in adversity.
6)   The tone of tragedy is often ironic.
7)   Usually in tragedy outside forces beyond the hero's control are involved.
8)   The punishment exceeds the crime--we feel not that the hero got what he deserved, but that the retribution resulted in a waste of human potential.
9)   Organic unity--logical cause-and-effect progression; the interdependence of all elements of a work, including character, actions, speeches, descriptions, thoughts, and observations.

Tragedy usually investigates spiritual values and struggles, and the tragic tension is built on inner conflicts which test the protagonist's integrity.

COMEDY: (INTERPRETIVE DRAMA) from the Greek word "komos" meaning celebration or merrymaking; it arose from the celebration of the rebirth of Dionysus (Death to Rebirth spawned comedy and accompanying themes such as adversity to prosperity, winter to spring); it is the opposite of tragedy and addresses the regeneration or reformation of a group of people or a society; it begins in adversity and ends in prosperity. Comedies frequently end in marriages. Comedy aims at catharsis through laughter and amusement to remind us of our human frailties (as opposed to tragedy which is cathartic through fear and pity).

Tragicomedy: a mixture of comedy and tragedy (most plays do contain elements of both)

Melodrama (ESCAPIST DRAMA) combines two Greek words meaning music and drama (at one time melodrama meant opera); melodrama is considered antithetical to tragedy: tragedy examines values, but melodrama exploits action; tragedy confronts good and evil with unblinking honesty, but melodrama escapes from life; tragedy considers the eternal spiritual problems, but melodrama deals with the transitory, the material and the physical. Melodrama is simply an oversimplified conflict between absolute good and evil; plot is emphasized over character development; it features characters who are all good or evil and rigs the consequences of actuality by manipulating the plot toward escaped.

Farce is to comedy what melodrama is to tragedy. The purpose of farce is to entertain and it has little intellectual content or symbolic significance and is not concerned with presenting a message. Farce is the comedy of situation, featuring a structure of exaggerated action and low comedy which exploits the physical (bodily humor, mostly).

Ideology (political, religious, international vs. nationalistic, feminist; economic; gender issues; more);