

How to Analyze Film

1. Characters

Study the major characters appearing in the scene. Also look for extras (supporting actors who don't speak) and bit players (supporting actors who have a few lines of dialog).

- Note which characters are in the scene at the start, who arrives later and who leaves before the scene ends.
- Ask yourself what each character wants and whether the character gets what he or she wants.
- Watch for status changes. In most scenes, the statuses of some of the characters will change. For instance in a scene where "John" asks for a favor from "Larry" and is refused, "John" has low status and "Larry" has high status. If "John" then pulls out a gun and forces "Larry" to perform the favor, "John" becomes the character with high status.
- Identify how the casting of particular actors influence how you see the characters.
- Study the characters' costumes and ask yourself what the costumes tell you about the characters.

2. Setting

Take note of where the scene takes place, both in terms of the place and the time. In particular, note when the scene occurs within the timeline of the movie and whether the scene depicts events out of order.

- Many movies have scenes that occur out of order, such as when the character is remembering or relaying events that happened at another time (a flashback) or because the director has made the creative choice to show events out of order. Usually, even though the events are out of order, the story itself is told in a straightforward manner from the first scene to the last scene.
- As it relates to the story, ask yourself why the scene is taking place where it is and whether it helps to tell the story or distracts from it.
- The setting may have been chosen by the director for reasons other than telling the story. Try to determine if the setting is important to the story or just interesting to the director.

3. Mise-en-Scene

Pay careful attention to how what you see in the scene helps to tell the story. This is called the mise-en-scene, a French term that roughly translates to visual storytelling.

- Keeping in mind that what you see in the scene is not the entire location but only what the director has decided to show, ask yourself why the director chose to show this part of the location and not another. This works equally well for scenes shot on a soundstage rather than on location, because the set will only comprise a part of the location it represents.
- Note which characters and objects are in the center of the scene and which are in the background or periphery.
- Study which parts of the scene are out of focus and whether this changes during the scene.
- Pay attention to how the scene is lit. Note whether it is brightly lit or in shadow and whether the light has a particular hue. Think about how the scene might play if the lighting is changed.

4. Camera Work

Make a list of every camera shot. A typical scene can include dozens of shots, from close-ups on a character's face to extreme long shots showing the entire scene from a great distance. There are also shots during which the camera moves, tracking the movements of a character or zooming in on an object. Each is meant to serve a purpose in telling the story.

- Note whether the camera is acting as the eyes of a character or is simply watching the scene being shot.
- Try to determine why the director choose each shot, and what the effect of each shot is.
- Pay particular attention to unusual camera shots, such as slow motion, tilted shots or shots where the camera is allowed to shake. For example, a tilted camera shot is often used to suggest that the character represented by the camera is drugged.
- Think about how the camera shots affect the pace of the scene.

5. Sounds and Music

Close your eyes and concentrate on what you hear during the scene. Many scenes have several "layers" of sounds and music, from ambient sounds that might actually be heard at that location, such as traffic or birds, to sounds that are inserted to help create a mood. Many scenes also include music that helps to tell the story.

- Keep in mind that the director may have deliberately taken out any true ambient sounds and inserted others. Imagine what you might actually hear at the scene's location and whether the director made a good choice in the sounds he or she included.
- Take note if the director inserted sounds to evoke a particular emotion from the audience. For instance, a beat or ticking clock creates a sense of urgency or dread.
- Listen to the music and ask yourself what it represents and whether it tells you what to expect. For example, a composer might create a particular melody that you will hear whenever a character is thinking about his lost love.
- Determine whether the movie contains original music or music the director has licensed from another artist. Ask yourself why the director chose one or the other (or both).
- Close your eyes and listen to music. Try to guess what is happening by what you hear.