

How to read a film as a text

Formal analysis

Formal analysis (textual analysis) seeks to understand how form relates to meaning.

Terminology

shot: a view provided by an uninterrupted run of the camera

sequence: a segment of the film

frame/framing: the view that we see and the act of constructing it

shot size: close-up (CU) head and shoulders; medium shot (MS) waist up; wide/long shot (WS/LS) full figure

camera angles: high, low, neutral

camera height: high, low, standard

camera movement

- side to side: pan or track
- up or down: tilt or pedestal

shot duration: the length of the shot (consider in relation to others in the sequence)

mise-en-scène: elements that are put in the frame

- props
- set and décor
- lighting
- costume and make-up
- staging: actors, movement, performance
- consider the overall composition of the frame

editing: consider the significance of shots in relation to each other

sound: is it complimentary or contrapuntal to what we see?

Writing conventions in formal analysis

Use “the viewer.” Avoid “you.”

e.g., Paro is first introduced to the viewer in close-up. This suggests to the viewer that...

Formal analysis assumes that films can't make the viewer think or feel anything. Films are persuasive (i.e., they use rhetorical appeals).

Avoid: The lighting makes the viewer think that...

Use: The lighting suggests that...

The lighting implies that...

The lighting conveys the impression that...

The lighting aligns the character with...

The lighting associates the character with...

Be sure to explain links between claims, support (evidence), as well as the implications of what you notice.