

Handout: How to “Read” a Film

We are used to watching films purely for entertainment. When we watch in this way, we are mostly passive observers of the action, not really thinking much beyond our feelings and impressions of what is on the screen. As scholars, though, we have to be more diligent in how we treat a film. A film is something we can read just as carefully and consciously as a book or poem. Thus, the first step to being a good film reader is to watch with pen and notebook (or writing journal) in hand, jotting down notes *as you watch* the film. This will give you specific things to talk about in our class discussions and when you write your essays. Here are some things to look for when “reading” (not watching!) a film:

- The first important thing to do when you watch a film is to not merely pay attention to the story, plot, and characters, but to how they are presented by the camera. We tend to think of film as “realistic” because the medium renders people and objects in such a life-like detail. Remember, we as an audience can only see what the camera’s “eye” shows us, and that *nearly everything we see on the screen is manipulated* by the director and others who make the film. So, pay careful attention to how the director “sets up” a shot in any given scene:
 - Is the director using a long shot, a medium shot, a close up, or an extreme close up? Is the shot taken from a high angle, a low angle, or from eye level? Is the camera placed in an “objective” location, or does it represent the point of view of one of the characters? Does the camera move or does it stay in place? Is it handheld or stable?
 - Consider also the composition of the scene. That is, how has the director arranged actors, objects, lighting, etc. to make the effect of the scene? Is there something implied going on off screen? This shot from *The Graduate* is one of the most famously composed images in film history. What does it convey? Why is it so effective?



- Does the film utilize effects like voiceovers, text, direct addresses to the camera and other narrative devices? What is the effect of these devices?

- ❑ Pay attention to how the movie opens and ends. The first thing you see in a movie is the credits. What images are shown in these credits? How is music used to set the mood of the film?
- ❑ Editing: Most people do not pay attention to how a film is edited or how it cuts from shot to shot and scene to scene. This, though, is an important part of how film has an effect on an audience. Pay attention to whether the rhythm of the editing is fast or slow, does the director use long takes in a scene or does he/she divide the scene up with many short takes? Does the editing make for a unified and continuous effect (i.e., you don't really notice it) or is it jarring or destabilizing? Does the editor/director use effects like fade in/fade out frequently?
- ❑ Consider the overall mood of the film as created by acting, music, lighting, sound effects, costumes, colors, sets, etc. (All of these things taken together is what film scholars call *mise-en-scene*, French for "put before the camera.") These small details, all of which filmmakers often pay a great deal of attention to, often go unnoticed but play a crucial role in a film.
- ❑ *Look for repetitions* that cue you in to the things the director or writer thinks are important. Is there a recurring song, music, camera technique, special effect that adds meaning to the film? Just as when you read a book or play, pay attention to these repetitions.
- ❑ Finally, think about how your observations relate to the over-arching ideas, issues, and themes of the film. How do these particulars help your understanding of the whole?