Conceptual Tools for the Analysis of Film

Film consists of various audio-visual levels which need to be analyzed in order to grasp the medium's complexity.

Film Units

- *Shot:* A single continuous take, filmed in a single session from one camera setup.
- *Scene:* A section of a motion picture which is unified as to time and place. It is made up from a series of *Shots* and is usually filmed in one session.
  The term *Scene* is also often used broadly and loosely to describe any distinct unit of a film, such as a take, a shot, or a sequence.
- *Sequence:* A number of *Scenes* linked together by time, location, or narrative continuity to form a unified episode. Traditionally, but not necessarily, a sequence begins with a *Fade-in* and ends with a *Fade-out* or some other optical transitional device.

To make sure what part of a film you are referring to, always give the time code (HH:MM:SS)!

Genre

- How is the film labeled by the production company, broadcasting channel, TV guide, DVD rental, online movie / TV platform…?
- How would you describe the relations between genre expectations / conventions and the plot and technical realization of the film?

The Five Formal Axes of Film / Cinematic Registers

1.) *Visual Design*

- What sets were chosen, what lighting is used, what are the predominant colors on screen?
- What costumes and make-up do the actors wear? How do actors perform and how are they arranged in front of the camera?

2.) *Cinematographic Design*

- How are actors and objects arranged within a frame? As a general guideline you can refer to the following scheme:

(adopted from David Bordwell)

- What camera distance, angle and movements are used? Whose point of view does the camera suggest? What is in or out of focus? Which lenses are used?

The visual and cinematographic design are often referred to as *mise-en-scène*: an image's setting, subjects, composition, colour, camera angles, positioning of objects and subjects etc. The analysis of a *mise en scène* focuses on one (specific) scene, whereas the term *mise-en-cadre* denotes the content of the film. However, these two terms are often used as synonyms.

3.) *Editing*

- How are the sequences of events in a movie constructed?
- How are the individual shots put together?
- How long are the individual shots?
- Is there any additional visual information (e.g. on screen texts…)?

4.) *Sound Design*

- Is there any sound where the source is visible on the screen, or implied to be present by the action of the film? (Sourced Sound / Diegetic Sound)
- Is the sound represented as coming from a source outside the story space, i.e. its source is neither visible on the screen, nor has been implied to be present in the action? (Unsourced Sound / Off-Screen Sound; also called "commentary sound")

5.) *Literary Design / Writing*

- What story is told, what is the setting of the story? What characters are introduced, how are they named? What communicative situation can you identify? How is the movie's title related to the story?

Please refer to the Glossary for the adequate *terms* for analysis!

Levels of Meaning

- *Paradigmatic Level*
  Every shot needs to be considered, not an arbitrary accumulation of signs, but a deliberate selection from numerous possibilities.
  Example: A gives B a rose, not just any other flower.
- *Syntagmatic Level*
  Every shot needs to be compared to the preceding and following ones and to be considered within the broader thematic plot structure.
  Example:

1	2	3	4	5
A and B get to know each other	A and B go on dates	A gives B a rose	A&B get engaged	…

(adopted from James Monaco)

Medium

Cinema as institutionalized, collective and ritualized viewing experience:

- The setting of the cinema invites viewers to give the film their undivided attention (darkened auditorium, chair directed at screen, surround sound…).
- The individual viewing experience is constantly influenced by reactions of other audience member and collective viewing experience.
- The ritual of the cinema encompasses going to the venue, buying a ticket, snacks and popcorn, viewing trailers, commercials, waiting for the light to dim and the movie to start.

For DVD / BluRay, Television and Online Streams please refer to the HO Conceptual Tools for the Analysis of TV Shows.

Sources
James Monaco. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond.* 4th ed. Oxford: OUP, 2009. Print.
Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin. "Introduction to the Study of Film Form and Representation." *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies.* 2nd ed. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 3-17. Print.
David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* 8th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print.