

The Essence of Cinematic

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Pure Cinema right here



Film as Narrative

When a person watches a movie for the first time it is only natural that they will primarily focus on the narrative. The narrative of a movie relates to its plot, writing, and characters. Every time a character appears on screen for the first time you try to figure out their place in the story and often you will think of each new character introduced in terms of their relationship to the main character or characters. Other times you may think of a character in relation to a plot; for example in a heist movie you will try to follow how each new character introduced contributes to the intricate plan to steal \$20 million from the targeted bank. For many movies following the characters and the general plot is easy and does not involve much effort at all. For other movies such as Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) you can watch it 10 times and still not be able to adequately explain it to someone else or even fully comprehend it yourself. Generally speaking people's understanding of the movie will increase substantially with each additional viewing. A movie's narrative is usually created by a screen writer(s). A screenplay can be an original writing or an adaptation of someone else's work such as a novel or play.

Film as Visual Medium

As important as narrative is, film is and will always be a visual medium. This is what separates film from novels. Screen Plays are extremely important in terms of their contribution to the overall quality of a movie but there are many other areas to consider as well. And really this is where the quality of a director becomes paramount to a movie's overall quality and merit. You could give the exact same screen play to 50 different directors and get 50 different results in terms of the overall quality of the movie. In other words if you were to give identical screenplays to say Paul Thomas Anderson and 5-time Razzie winner Renny Harlin, you would expect the Paul Thomas Anderson movie to be infinitely better. The best and most talented of directors use their skills to make great movies. But what exactly are these specific areas that directors excel at? Let's take a look...

Elements of Cinema: A Brief Overview of Film Criteria

Film Editing

Film editing refers to the transition between shots. A great film will not just have beautiful standalone shots but an effective transition between the shots. The order of the shots and the transition from shot to shot is vital to a film's ability to connect with its audience. Editing is usually a "post filming" aspect of movies as most of the editing is done in a dark room after the shooting has finished. Editing is essential to a film's continuity since pretty much every movie ever made consists of more than just one shot. An irony of great editing is that it sometimes occurs when you do not notice it. Unlike some of the showier aspects of filmmaking such as camera movement, you often do not want to notice the editing as great editing often means the transition between shots is so seamless that it all feels like one continuous shot. This is not always the case though.

One of the best edited scenes in film history takes place at the end of the first Godfather movie when it cuts back and forth between Michael Corleone at his nephew's baptism and the various hitmen, he hired to assassinate the heads of the rival crime families (and any unfortunate bystanders). It's a meticulously constructed scene in which director Francis Ford Coppola is able to depict the extraordinary hypocrisy of Michael Corleone who is renouncing evil in a church at the same time his hitmen are executing the rival bosses. In this scene Coppola uses masterful editing to show these various events occurring during the same time frame in the movie, also known as parallel editing.

Another prime example of great film editing can be seen in the 1975 movie Jaws, in which Spielberg uses skillful editing in cutting back and forth between the unfortunate swimming

victims and the shark. The way Spielberg films these scenes creates maximum tension and suspense. Had Spielberg butchered the editing the film would simply not work nearly as well.

Camera Movement

Camera movement is defined roughly as a change in the frame which alters the viewers perspective of a scene.

The amount and type of camera movement varies tremendously. Certain directors love to use camera movement in their movies; Paul Thomas Anderson, Martin Scorsese, and Alfred Hitchcock to name a few. Using a lot of camera movement is often associated with high energy filmmakers. On the other end of the spectrum you have someone like Japanese legend Yasujiro Ozu. In Ozu movies the camera is almost always static during a shot. Ozu films are very simple on the surface and intentionally slow paced as Ozu wants the audience to linger on each shot.

Camera movement can convey important information to the audience. In Jurassic Park (1993) Spielberg uses a tilt, which is when the camera moves either up or down vertically, when introducing the audience to the dinosaurs. The purpose of this is to show just how huge they are in comparison to humans. The 1946 film Notorious, features one of Hitchcock's most famous shots. In it the camera overlooks the party from the top of the staircase and very gradually zooms in on the key being held by Ingrid Bergman's character. In this shot Hitchcock uses camera movement to convey information to the audience that is relevant to the film's plot. He is basically saying to the audience "in this ballroom out of all the guests and everything that is going on it is this key which is the single most important piece of information." Great directors communicate with their audiences visually, not verbally.

Camera movement is also essential to the energy and pacing of a movie. I mentioned Paul Thomas Anderson above and for good reason. PT Anderson loves an active camera, his 1997 film Boogie Nights features Mark Wahlberg playing a rising adult film star and the late Burt Reynolds as an adult film director who mentors Wahlberg's character. There is a terrific scene early on where Reynolds character brings Wahlberg's character to his mansion for the first time. The entire scene has a crazy amount of energy to it, and the camera is incredibly active; this is effective as it allows the audience to feel like they are a part of the scene and allows them to feel what Wahlberg's character is feeling, this overwhelming sense of excitement in being in brought to this new environment. The camera even follows characters underwater after jumping off the diving board into the pool.

mise-en-scène

A word of French origin that translates to “placing the stage” in English. This term actually comes from theatre, but it translates to movies as well. In addition to being able to convey information to the audience, mise-en-scène can also be used for aesthetic purposes. Consider the way that Wes Anderson uses symmetry for instance (see shots below)



Or the way objects are meticulously placed in this beautiful shot from Roma (2018)



Film Form

Film Form is a little harder to define than some of the other key elements of cinema. Form can be defined in more than one way but what form generally refers to is the structure of a film. I discussed this in the “Film Form vs Content” article.

Form is often contrasted with Content

- Content is often defined as What a film depicts including the subject matter, characters, plot/storyline, etc.
- Form can be defined by How that content is depicted including camera techniques, story structure, visual motifs, etc.

Form also refers to consideration of how the individual shots and scenes relate to the overall movie. A movie could consist of many great/beautiful shots throughout but not necessarily add up to a great overall result. In other words it relates to the idiom of something being greater than the sum of its parts.

If a movie as a whole is less than the sum of its parts then it probably lacks solid film form. A great film is cohesive, it is more than just great individual shots and scenes.

Realism vs Expressionism

The extent to which a movie uses stylized effects is another element of being Cinematic.

To a certain extent everything you observe on screen when watching a movie can be thought of as existing on a spectrum where Realism is located at one end of the spectrum and Expressionism is located at the polar opposite end of the spectrum.

Realism at its most extreme indicates that what is depicted on screen is what it would look like if you, the audience, were actually there. In other words there are no stylized effects. This can be contrasted with expressionism which emphasizes a director using stylized effects.

Here is a shot from Barry Levinson's 1982 film *Diner*. I am not sure as to whether or not this diner depicted in the film actually exists or not in real life but surely a Diner that looks like this inside certainly could exist.



Contrast the shot above from *Diner* (1982) with the below shot from Martin Scorsese's 1990 film *Goodfellas*. In this shot De Niro, Pesci, and Ray Liotta's characters are digging up a dead body to move it to another location to avoid detection from law enforcement. As you surely notice, the red lighting is not what it would look like if you were actually at the scene which is being conveyed. It should also be noted that realism does not require the place shot in the film to actually exist, just that it could exist. Thus, this is an example of Scorsese including stylized effects, specially with the use of color. If I had to guess I would say it is because red is often associated with violence (blood), death, evil, and Hell.



Directors will “stylize” the shots using a combination of color, camera angles, speed, etc. The purpose is to use these various techniques to convey particular information to the audience.



In *Vertigo* (1958) Hitchcock uses a famous shot known as a “dolly zoom” to convey the psychological state of Scottie, Jimmy Stewart's character. Scottie has a fear of heights which

is known as Acrophobia and this in turn causes vertigo which causes Scottie to feel dizzy. Hitchcock conveys all of this by using a highly stylized distorted image whenever Scottie looks down from a high up place. In other words Hitchcock is communicating information to the audience visually.

The Importance of being “Cinematic”

While there may not be any single agreed upon definition of what Cinematic means, it is agreed upon that film is different from literature or even plays. Obviously, literature is not a visual art form and thus its overall quality and merit is determined exclusively by its characters, story, themes, etc. But even theatre, which is a visual art and even has some common elements of Cinema such as mise-en-scene lacks many of the other key elements of Cinema such as camera movement, camera angles, film editing, use of color, camera speed, and film form.

A film could have a great story and characters but if it does not succeed in many of the Cinematic elements then it is unlikely to stand the test of time as an all-time great film. Hitchcock is a part of my personal Mount Rushmore of great directors along with Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick, and Akira Kurosawa. And yet when I saw Vertigo (1958) as a kid I did not really understand all the acclaim. This was mainly due to the fact that I thought the plot was so farfetched and ridiculous. Watching it years later as an adult I realized the plot was just as ridiculous as I remembered it. But I now understood why it is frequently listed amongst the all-time greatest movies. It has outstanding visuals from audacious use of color to the distorting visual effects associated with James Stewart's character to the gorgeous museum art quality depiction of San Francisco. Not to mention one of the best film scores and meta commentary related to Alfred Hitchcock's depiction of obsession on the screen (which resembled the way he treated his actors and especially actresses). There is so much to admire about Vertigo as a film that would simply not work if it were say, a play. And really this is what separates movies from plays and is why most of the greatest films of all time would not be able to translate to plays. This is the essence of what being cinematic means.