

What is film analysis, and how does it differ from literary analysis?

Film analysis is when film is analyzed for cultural context, symbolism, narrative structure and mise-en-scene, among other approaches. If these terms are new to you, don't worry—they'll be explained in the next section.

Analyzing film, like analyzing literature (fiction texts, etc.), is a form of rhetorical analysis—critically analyzing and evaluating words, phrases, and images. Having a clear argument and supporting evidence is every bit as critical to film analysis as to other forms of academic writing.

Unlike literature, film incorporates audiovisual elements. Ultimately, however, analysis of film is not too different. Think of all the things that make up a scene in a film: the actors, the lighting, the angles, the colors. All of these things may be absent in literature, but they are deliberate choices on the part of the director, producer, or screenwriter—as are the words chosen by the author of a work of literature. Furthermore, literature and film incorporate similar elements. They both have plots, characters, dialogue, settings, symbolism, and, just as the elements of literature can be analyzed for their intent and effect, these elements can be analyzed the same way in film.

When analyzing film, consider the following:

Contextual analysis

Contextual analysis is analysis of the film as part of a broader context. Think about the culture, time, and place of the film's creation. What might the film say about the culture that created it? What were/are the social and political concerns of the time period? Or, like researching the author of a novel, you might consider the director, producer, and other people vital to the making of the film. What is the place of this film in the director's career? Does it align with his usual style of directing, or does it move in a new direction? Other examples of contextual approaches might be analyzing the film in terms of a civil rights or feminist movement.

For example, *Frozen* is often linked to the LGBTQ social movement. You might agree or disagree with this interpretation, and, using evidence from the film, support your argument.

Signs and Symbols

You must analyze the meaning behind signs and symbols, typically involving metaphors, analogies, and symbolism.

This doesn't necessarily need to be something dramatic; think about how you make inferences about information from the smallest signs in your day to day life. For instance, what characteristics can tell you about someone's personality? Something as simple as someone's appearance can reveal information about them. Mismatched shoes and bedhead might be a sign of carelessness (or something crazy happened that morning!), while an immaculate dress shirt and tie would suggest that the person is prim and proper. Continuing in that vein:

- What might you be able to infer about characters from small hints?
- How are these hints (signs) used to construct characters? How do they relate to the relative role of those characters, or the relationships between multiple characters?

Symbols represent concepts (liberty, peace, etc.) and feelings (hate, love, etc.). They are used liberally in both literature and film, and finding them uses a similar process. Ask yourself:

- What objects or images are repeated in multiple instances?
 - In Frozen Elsa's gloves appear in multiple scenes.
- In what context do they appear?
 - Her gloves are first given to her by her father to restrain her magic. She continues to wear them throughout the coronation scene, before finally, in the Let It Go sequence, she throws them away.
- What might Elsa's gloves represent?
 - Elsa's gloves represent fear of her magic and, by extension, herself. Though she attempts to contain her magic by hiding her hands within gloves and denying part of her identity, she eventually abandons the gloves in a quest for self-acceptance.

Analysis of structure and rhetoric

Structure refers to the organization of ideas in the text. Does the text follow a typical plot structure or a poetic form? Does it contain structural elements associated with a documentary, VLOG, reality television, fictional text, etc.?

Rhetoric refers to the arrangement of language in the text. How does the author manipulate language to engage his/her target audience?

Mise-en-scene analysis

Mise-en-scene analysis is analysis of the arrangement of compositional elements in film—essentially, the analysis of audiovisual elements that most distinctly separate film analysis from literary analysis. Remember that the important part of a mise-en-scene analysis is not just identifying the elements of a scene, but explaining the significance behind them.

- What effects are created in a scene, and what is their purpose?
- How does the film attempt to achieve its goal by the way it looks, and does it succeed?

Audiovisual elements that can be analyzed include (but are not limited to): props and costumes, setting, lighting, camera angles, frames, special effects, choreography, music, color values, depth, placement of characters, etc. Mise-en-scene is typically the most foreign part of writing film analysis because the other components discussed are common to literary analysis, while mise-en-scene deals with elements unique to film. Using specific film terminology bolsters credibility, but you should also consider your audience.

Rewatching the film and creating screen captures (still images) of certain scenes can help with detailed analysis of colors, positioning of actors, placement of objects, etc. Listening to the soundtrack can also be helpful, especially when placed in the context of particular scenes.

Some example questions:

- How is the lighting used to construct mood? Does the mood shift at any point during the film, and how is that shift in mood created?
- What does the setting say about certain characters? How are props used to reveal aspects of their personality?
- What songs were used, and why were they chosen? Are there any messages in the lyrics that pertain to the theme?

Source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/>

Works Consulted

Aumont, Jacques, and Michel Marie. *L'analyse Des Films*. Paris: Nathan, 1988. Print.

Pruter, Robin Franson. "Writing About Film." *Writing About Film*. DePaul University, 08 Mar. 2004. Web. 01 May 2016.
