3

FILM TERMS AND TOPICS FOR FILM ANALYSIS AND WRITING

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify and refine key themes in a movie.
- Define the primary parts of a film narrative: the story, the plot, and the narration.
- Examine the different kinds of movie characters and the significance of the narrative point of view in a film.
- Understand how to approach a comparative essay, such as an essay about a movie adaptation.
- Explain the different elements of mise-en-scène.
- List the various properties of a shot.
- Describe the different ways and strategies for editing a film scene or sequence.
- Specify some of the key terms and tactics associated with film sound.

Developing a sense of how to question movie images and take notes on them goes hand in hand with an ability to direct those questions toward specific topics for analysis. Questions and notes should lead to more questions and partial or full answers. This path leads to an essay focused on particular themes and techniques in a movie. A major part of this process is developing a vocabulary with which to ask those questions properly, to describe what you see and think, and to help you focus and organize your analysis. Being able to notice and then comment on a significant "*shot/reverse shot*" editing pattern in *Milk* (2008) or to describe the "sound montage" in *All Is Lost* (2013) is not only good for classroom conversation, but it also allows a good writer to make finer, more accurate discriminations and evaluations and to situate a film within the larger

tradition of film history and analysis. These kinds of discriminations should begin to point you toward a topic for a paper.

Every discipline has its own special language or use of words that allows it to discuss its subject with precision and subtlety. A literary critic, for example, needs to distinguish between a metaphor and a simile because these terms describe different rhetorical figures that, in turn, refer to different sorts of perceptions. "My love is like a red, red rose" (simile) is different from "My love is the red rose of life" (metaphor), and the person who can appreciate that difference will read and interpret those lines better. Similarly, a knowledgeable basketball fan will be able to summarize quickly and evaluate the action of a game if he or she knows a specialized vocabulary that includes terms such as *jump shot*, *pick*, and *fast break*.

With film, too, a critical vocabulary allows you to view a movie more accurately and formulate your perceptions more easily. Consider the term *frame*. In writing about film, frame refers to the rectangle that contains the image: the frame of the movie screen itself, which does not change during a movie, and more importantly, the camera frame, which regularly changes its relationship to the objects being filmed. Being aware of this term and its uses means you will be more sensitive to how the camera frame controls what you see and how you see it. You will be able to note, for instance, that the camera frame may include certain actions and exclude others and that the angle at which it is placed or its distance from a person adds considerably to what the filmmaker is trying to say. As one student observed of a recent movie, "Although the scene seems to be a typical family gathering, the viewer becomes aware that something is wrong or unsettled because the camera frame is slightly tilted and unusually crowded with characters and furniture." What may sometimes go unnoticed is brought to light through the accurate use of a term.

THEMES

Going over your notes, your first step may be trying to identify the major themes of the movie, which often comes down to stepping back and asking what this film is "about": the complicated relation between good and evil in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), for example, or reluctant heroism before unimaginable brutality in *Schindler's List* (1993). These themes, in many cases, become the foundation for an analysis because they point to the main ideas in a movie. They are not, strictly speaking, the "moral"

or message of the movie; they are the large and the small ideas that help to explain the actions and events in it. Ask, for example, the following:

- Who are the central characters?
- What do they represent in themselves and in relation to each other? The importance of individuality or society? Human strength or human compassion?
- How do their actions create a story with a meaning or constellation of meanings?
- Does the story emphasize the benefits of change or endurance?
- What kind of life or what actions does the film wish you to value or criticize, and why?
- If there is not a coherent message or story, why not?
- How does the movie make you feel at the end? Happy? Depressed? Confused? Why?

Having sketched some major and minor themes in a film, the writer needs to refine these in terms of the specific situation and aims of the movie. The more sensitive a writer's vocabulary, the more refined his or her perception and argument will be. Thus *alienation* may well describe the broadest thematic lines of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), Frank Capra's *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970), Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* (2013), (Figure 3.01) and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

Figure 3.01 In Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* (2013), the theme of alienation becomes intricately entwined with the problems of aging, memory, and family.

This may be a good start, but a sharp analysis demands that the writer make finer distinctions about the historical, stylistic, and structural presentations of that theme in each movie. Does the alienation seem inevitable, or perhaps, even desirable? Does it lead to new knowledge, or is it a disaster that could have been avoided? Is it presented as a tragic or a comic problem in the movie? Writing about *12 Years a Slave*, a student might refine the theme of alienation by observing that here it relates clearly and specifically to the protagonist's race as an African American and the state of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and that, unlike the other movies, the film never fully resolves this alienation and its social and psychological impact. That student might further clarify that argument by describing how the main character regularly appears in close-ups and long takes that dramatize an inexpressible pain and confusion that are both internal and external. Note, however, that this kind of refinement of alienation in *12 Years a Slave* does not attempt to fashion an oversimplified and inapplicable moral or conclusion. To say, "In *12 Years a Slave*, the character's alienation is the result of the action of a band of evil men" may miss a complexity of issues related to family, politics, and the human body.

Although identifying themes provides an important foundation for your analysis, writing about the movies involves a wide range of special terms that will help you to organize and clarify your topic. The remainder of this chapter discusses the most important of these terms as they are used to discuss four dimensions of the movies:

1. The connections between the movies and other artistic traditions, such as literature and painting.
2. The theatrical dimension of the film image, or of its mise-en-scène.
3. The compositions of the movie, achieved through camera positions and editing.
4. The use of sound in the film.

Depending on your topic, any or all of these dimensions and their vocabulary may be central to your essay.

FILM AND THE OTHER ARTS

Although the movies are one of the youngest of the arts, they have absorbed the structures and forms of many older arts. Not surprisingly, therefore, writing about film requires some of the critical language of these other literary and visual arts: We speak of *plot* and *character* in

both films and novels, and terms such as *point of view* are part of the critical vocabulary of painting, literature, and the movies. Borrowed terminology allows a critic to make important connections with other fields; it also demands that a writer be sensitive to how terms and structures change when they are applied to film. Here we will look at three related terms that film studies share with the literary and visual arts: narrative, characters, and point of view.

Narrative

When most of us refer to the movies, we are referring to narrative movies alone, not documentaries or experimental films. A *narrative* can be divided into different components:

- The *story* is all the events that are presented to us or that we can infer have happened.
- The *plot* is the arrangement or construction of those events in a certain order or structure.
- *Narration* refers to the perspective that organizes the plot according to a certain emotional, physical, or intellectual point of view.

Thus, all films that sketch the life of Napoleon would tell the same story: his birth, his rise to power, the French Revolution, its aftermath, and his exile to Elba. The plots in these different movies, however, may be structured and arranged in various ways: One could begin with Napoleon's last days at Elba and tell his story through a series of flashbacks (showing events that occurred previously to the ones just shown); another could start with his birth and move chronologically through his life. Finally, the narration of these actions may vary considerably: one film could use an *omniscient narration*, which presents the elements of the plot from potentially any possible angle, whereas another uses a *restricted narration*, which limits what is shown and known to one or two characters.

Always ask yourself how the narrative of the film you are watching is constructed. Is it, first of all, a movie with a story line? If not, why not? Is the story told chronologically, or does the plot rearrange events in an unusual temporal order? Is there a reason for that particular plot structure? What in the story is left out in the actual plot construction? Are there reasons for including some material and omitting other material? Does the way the story is told become a prominent feature of the film, and thus, a central factor in an analysis of it? How is the narration made apparent? Is there a *voice-over*, in which a character's voice is heard

describing events and thus makes it clear that he or she is organizing the plot? Are there technical elements that give dramatic indications about the presence of a narrative perspective, such as the change from black and white to color in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or Mike Figgis's use of four different quadrants depicting four simultaneous actions on a single screen in his *Timecode* (2000)? Is the movie especially concerned with questions of time and history, which may, in turn, influence how the plot is constructed through, for instance, *flashbacks* or, more rarely, *flashforwards*? What propels the story? A mystery, as in *The Big Sleep* (1946)? A desire to reach a goal, as in *Legally Blonde* (2001)? Or is it difficult to say, as in some modern movies in which the plot seems to have no definite direction?

The various relationships among a story, its plot, and a narrative style are numerous. When most of us think of a narrative film, however, we probably have in mind what is often called a *classical narrative* (Figure 3.02). To discuss any kind of film narrative, it is useful to have

Figure 3.02 The narrative of *Casablanca* (1942) employs many of the features of classical narrative: a plot propelled by a central character (Humphrey Bogart as Rick), a realistic depiction of events, and a dramatic sense of closure (as Ilsa [Ingrid Bergman] and Rick sacrifice their love for a greater patriotic good).

some sense of this important narrative form. Usually, a classical narrative has the following:

- A plot development in which there is a logical relation between one event and another.
- A sense of closure at the end (for example, a happy or a tragic ending).
- Stories that are focused on characters.
- A narration that attempts to be more or less objective or realistic.

Not all classical narratives are the same, of course, and many fine essays are about the variations and innovations within this model. One student, for example, began his paper on Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* by observing the following:

> Bill Evans
>
> This classic mystery story does not make complete sense. It seems as if the complicated plot has lost track of the story, and frequently it is difficult to follow the logic of who killed whom and why. Nonetheless, *The Big Sleep* remains a model of classical filmmaking in the way it concentrates all the action on the main characters, Bogart and Bacall. If the plot is confused, these characters make you forget that confusion and realize that the story is about them.

In the following paragraphs, Gerald Mast looks at the narrative structure as it applies to many of Howard Hawks' films (such as *To Have and Have Not* [1944] and *His Girl Friday* [1940]). Note how Mast first places his analysis in the literary tradition of narrative and then moves to a discussion of plots constructed around the notion of "surprising inevitability."

> What is a good story? First, there is the construction of an action—not just enumerating a string of events but organizing those events into a coherent and powerful shape. The construction of a narrative action relies on a very interesting paradox, of which Hawks was well aware. On the one hand, the events in a narrative must seem to flow spontaneously, naturally, surprisingly; nothing must be expected, nothing foreseen. On the other hand, the events in a narrative must be prepared for, motivated, foreshadowed; nothing is unexpected, everything foreseen. On the one hand, everything that happens to King Lear is a surprise. On the other, everything in the play proceeds from Kent's command in the beginning to "See better, Lear." It is surprising that Emma Woodhouse discovers that it is Mr. Knightley whom she really must marry; yet everything in *Emma* points the way to this inevitable and inescapable discovery. The paradox of narrative construction is that it synthesizes the accidents of nature—which seem random—and the patterns of logic—which are fixed; the outcome of events is simultaneously inevitable yet surprising to the reader or viewer when the inevitable occurs. The narrative that is insufficiently spontaneous and surprising is familiarly condemned as contrived, overplotted, unnatural, and stilted; the narrative that is insufficiently patterned is familiarly condemned as random, wandering, arbitrary, and formless.
>
> How does Hawks' story construction relate to this paradox of surprising inevitability? In over forty years of filmmaking, collaborating with over a dozen major writers, Howard Hawks builds every story in an identical four-part structure. The first part is a prologue that either (1) establishes the conflict in a past or present close relationship of the major characters (this is the usual pattern of Ben Hecht's scripts for Hawks) or (2) initiates a conflict by the collision of two apparently opposite characters upon their initial meeting (this is the usual Furthman–Faulkner pattern). The second and third parts develop the central conflict established in the first, either by letting one of the conflicting characters or life styles dominate in the second part, then the other in the third, or by letting one of the characters work alone in the second part, then both of them together in the third. And the fourth section resolves the central conflict, often by a return to the original physical setting of the prologue, but in which setting the warring characters now see themselves and one another in a new light. Occasionally Hawks adds a very brief epilogue or "tag" to return the narrative full circle to its beginning. Whatever else one can say about this narrative structure, it gives a Hawks story the firmness of shape, the elegance, economy, and symmetry that allow surprising events to transpire within the firm logic and structure of a controlled pattern (30–31).

Not all movies are classical narratives or even narratives. A large number of independent and foreign films create narratives—sometimes referred to as *alternative narratives* or *postclassical narratives*—that are outside the classical tradition or that may intentionally confront that tradition to tell their stories in new ways, such as Joel and Ethan Coen's *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) and its wandering and sometimes surreal tale of a Greenwich Village folk singer in the 1960s. When you watch a movie that seems to avoid a traditional story line or to tell its story in an unusual or, perhaps, confusing way, ask yourself how the movie is organizing its

plot and narration and what it is trying to achieve. Do the characters seem unformed or undirected in a way that's important to the meaning of the film? Why might the narrative lack a forward linear progress? Does the narrative seem to be telling two or more stories that are difficult to connect, as in *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959), in which the story of a woman and her Nazi lover is told alongside the story of the bombing of Hiroshima? Does the movie have a confusing beginning or an unresolved conclusion? Why? How do these or other narrative strategies relate to the stories being told? About *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a writer might, after some thought, begin by observing that both stories concern World War II and are told by two lovers who have recently met; the difficulty in the narrative structure might then be related to the woman's pain in organizing and communicating her memories to someone from a completely different culture but with a similar historical crisis. Once you have learned to recognize classical narrative forms, you should be more aware of the variety of ways in which stories can be told.

Many other films are nonnarrative: They do not tell stories, or they subsume stories within organizational structures other than narrative. For instance, there are experimental films that avoid stories and instead investigate questions or aesthetic concerns unrelated to narrative, such as the abstract patterns of light and shadow on film. Avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), for example, repeats images of a shrouded woman walking and unexplained images of a key and a knife to create a film that seems more like a dream than a story. A different kind of nonnarrative film, documentary cinema may present real events, such as a typical day at a factory or a religious ritual of an American Indian tribe, without organizing those events as a story. Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bahsir* (2008) is a personal documentary describing Folman's experience of the Lebanon invasion in 1982: his interviews with former friends and soldiers struggle to determine what really happened during those traumatic events, and he stretches the boundaries of traditional documentary by recreating real people and places as animated figures and images (Figure 3.03). When viewing experimental or documentary cinema, begin with some basic questions:

- If the film does not seem organized as a story, what seems to be the model for its organization: A dream? An argument? A news report? Or some other form? How does that model suggest a way to understand the film?
- What are the formal features or organizations that stand out? A series of contrasts? Repetitions? Disconnected fragments? Or some other pattern? Why is that pattern important to the meaning of the film?

Figure 3.03 *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) is an experimental documentary that overlays real people and events with animation. The result is part diary, part essay, part newsreel, and part surreal memory.

Characters

Characters are another common topic for analysis in literature, drama, and film. They are the individuals who populate narrative and nonnarrative films. Whether they are the main characters or minor characters, they normally focus the action, and often, the themes of a movie (Figure 3.04). Often, a discussion of film concentrates exclusively on what happens to the characters or how they change. *My Dinner with André* (1981), which films the dinner conversation between two men, could more accurately be described as being about two characters telling stories than as being a story about two characters. Both mainstream movies, such as *12 Years A Slave* and more experimental films, such as *Crumb* (1994), focus their narratives almost exclusively on the biography of their main character, a free man kidnapped and sold into slavery (in the first case) and underground cartoonist Robert Crumb (in the second). Keep in mind that an analysis of characters in a movie can be boring or seem simpleminded if you approach them as if they are merely reflections of real people or if you blur the difference between the real historical person, the actor playing the role, and the character. Yet if you remain attuned to the variety in character types and constructions, you can begin to see subtleties and complications in how characters function and what they mean in different films. As an exercise, choose three different

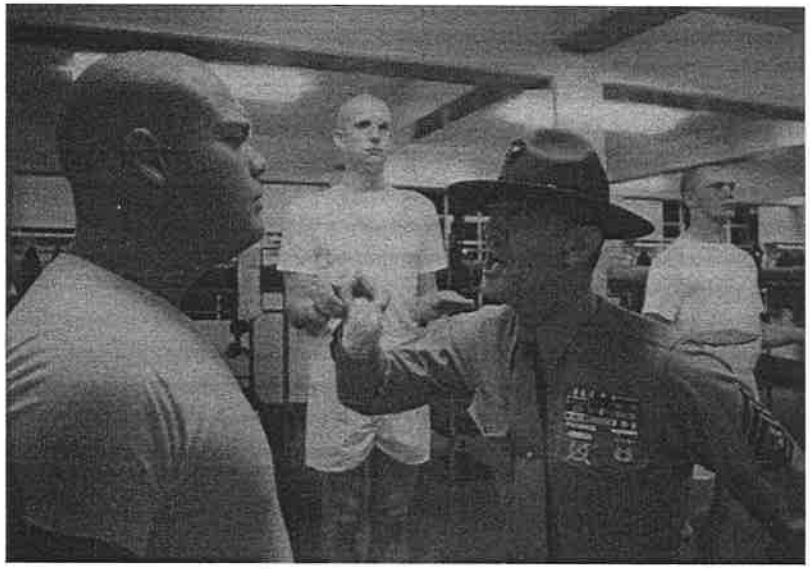

Figure 3.04 Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) presents characters in a more extreme and disturbing way than in many films. It follows the development of young men who, drafted to become soldiers during the Vietnam War, are transformed into killing machines.

characters—those portrayed by Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*, and Meryl Streep in *August: Osage County* (2013), for example—and try to describe how and why those characters are so different.

You can begin an analysis of characters by asking yourself if those characters seem or are meant to seem realistic. What makes them realistic? Are they defined by their clothes, their conversation, or something else? If they are not realistic, why not, and why are they meant to seem strange or fantastic? Do the characters seem to fit the setting of the story? Does the movie focus mainly on one or two characters, as in *The Big Sleep*, or on many, as in *Gosford Park* (2001), in which there does not seem to be a central character? Do the characters change, and if so, in what ways? What values do the characters seem to represent? What do they say about such matters as independence, sexuality, and political belief?

Normally, we take characters for granted, and these are a sampling of the kinds of questions you can begin to direct at characters to make more sense of them and determine why they are important.

Point of View

Like narrative, *point of view* is a term that film shares with the literary and visual arts. In the broadest sense, it refers to the position from which something is seen and, by implication, the way that point of view determines what you see. In the simplest sense, the point of view is purely physical. My point of view regarding a house across the street will, for example, be different if I am looking from the rooftop of my house or from the basement window. In a more sophisticated sense, point of view can be psychological or cultural. For example, a child's point of view about a dentist's office will probably not be the same as an adult's.

In the same way, we can talk about the point of view that the camera has in relationship to a person or action or even the point of view that a narrative directs at its subject (Figure 3.05). Usually, movies use an objective point of view so that most of what is shown is not confined to any one person's perspective. In *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or *Gandhi* (1982), the audience sees scenes and events (for example, the Battle of Atlanta, epic encounters in India) that are supposedly objective in their

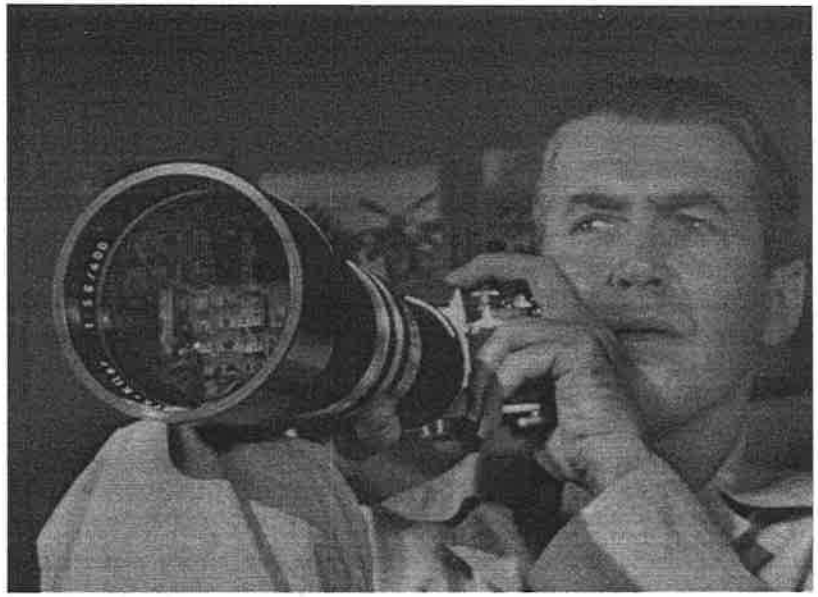

Figure 3.05 Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1945) is a film explicitly organized around the point of view of a photographer confined to a wheelchair. As he and his girlfriend watch the secret lives of his New York neighbors, he discovers both the power and the dangers of a point of view.

scope and accuracy, beyond the knowledge or perspective of any one person. In specific scenes, however, that audience may be aware that they are seeing another character only through Rhett Butler's or Gandhi's eyes, and in these cases, the camera is recreating that individual's more subjective point of view.

Some movies experiment with the possibilities of point of view: In *Apocalypse Now* (1979), we seem to see the whole story from Captain Willard's (Martin Sheen's) point of view; he introduces the story as something that has already happened to him, but despite this indication of historical objectivity, many of the scenes recreate his personal, nightmarish perspective on the war in Vietnam.

Point of view is a central term in writing about films because films are basically about seeing the world in a certain way. Pay attention to point of view by using these two general guidelines:

1. Observe how and when the camera creates the point of view of a character.
2. Notice if the story is told mostly from an objective point of view or from the subjective perspective of one person.

Ask yourself in what ways the point of view is determining what you see. Does it limit or control your vision in any way? What can you tell about the characters whose eyes you see through? Are they aggressive? Suspicious? Clever? In love?

Writing Cue

Consider the shape of the narrative of a film you watch for class. Write a paragraph about what stands out as most important to it: The construction of the plot? The development of a character? Or the narrative point of view? Support your points with evidence from the film.

Comparative Essays and Adaptations

Because the movies incorporate the traditions of books, plays, and even sculpture and painting, terms such as *narrative*, *character*, and *point of view* are not only useful, but also necessary in analyzing film. Often, these terms provide the basis for a comparative essay that examines a book and its adaptation as a film, or especially in recent years, the adaptation of video games as in films such as *Tron: Legacy* (2010), *Max Payne* (2008), and *Resident Evil* (2002). Other kinds of comparative essays may contrast different versions of the same movie or a group of films by the same director.

When you write a comparative essay of this kind, be sensitive to and careful not only about how these terms connect different art forms, but also about how they highlight differences. Be aware of how the film medium may change the message or meaning of the original book, play, or game. Look, for instance, at how a literary or artistic trope is translated successfully into a movie, as well as at what may be lost; consider how a film adapted from a video game alters or makes use of the way a viewer interacts with the images and sounds. Finally, take into consideration how other social and historical factors may play an important role in the comparison and contrast of different works. The popular Indian adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), for instance, features extraordinary textual changes (including the addition of musical numbers), and a smart comparative analysis would clearly need to examine the South Asian cultural and historical context that influences that adaptation. Less obviously perhaps would be a comparison of Jane Campion's adaptation (1996) of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), in which the gender difference of the female filmmaker and the male author may well be as important as their historical distance in comparing and understanding the two works. Likewise, Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) provides a variety of entryways into a productive comparison with F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel: the lavish contemporary music track, the use of three-dimensional (3D) technology, or the casting of Leonardo DiCaprio as Jay Gatsby could each illuminate both the connections and differences between the two works.

Whatever line of argument a comparative essay takes, detailed formal evidence is critical. To compare *Apocalypse Now* and Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1898), a writer may thus choose to begin with a comparison of the subjective point of view that describes the journey of one Marlow—Captain Willard—through Vietnam and the journey of the other Marlow into Africa. That comparison will be much sharper and more revealing, however, if the writer can show how certain literary techniques (for example, long sentences full of repetitions) create one point of view and how certain film techniques (the use of light and shadow or exaggerated mise-en-scènes, for instance) create the other. These film techniques are the subject of the rest of this chapter.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND REALISM

The mise-en-scène, a French term roughly translated as "what is put into the scene" (put before the camera), refers to all those properties of a cinematic image that exist independently of camera position,

camera movement, and editing (although a viewer will see these different dimensions united in one image). Mise-en-scène includes lighting, costumes, sets, the quality of the acting, and other shapes and characters in the scene. Many writers mistakenly believe that these theatrical features are a somewhat unsophisticated topic for analysis because they appear to be more a part of a dramatic tradition than of a cinematic tradition. Evaluating the performance of an actor may, for some, seem much less important than analyzing the narrative or the camera work. Yet for many other perceptive critics, the tools and terms of mise-en-scène are the keys to some of the most important features of any movie.

Realism

The major reason that we tend to overlook or undervalue mise-en-scène in the movies is the powerful illusion of realism that is at the heart of the film medium. In many movies, we often presume that what is put into the scene is simply what is there; it consequently cannot be analyzed as we would analyze the construction of a plot. We accept the Philadelphia setting of Jonathan Demme's 1993 movie *Philadelphia* as merely the background that was chosen for the battle between a prestigious law firm and a young associate discovered to be HIV-positive. But comparing the affluent setting of that film with, say, the mise-en-scène of Philadelphia in the 1976-movie *Rocky* (set in the ethnic neighborhoods of South Philadelphia) or in the 1995-movie *Twelve Monkeys* (set in a Philadelphia of urban squalor and decay) should make it clear that the realism of a place is malleable. The illusion of realism, in short, is a kind of mise-en-scène that makes us believe that the images are of an everyday world that is simply "there"—one we know and are familiar with. Or as the Italian neorealist screenwriter Cesare Zavattini argued in 1953, the cinema "must tell reality as if it were a story; there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen" (quoted in Williams 29).

You must learn, however, to be suspicious of realism in the movies because it can distract you from the many interesting possibilities that mise-en-scène analysis offers. Watching a documentary from another country or an old movie once considered realistic, you recognize how relative your sense of realism is and how, even when the filmmaker may not acknowledge it, the reality of a movie is constructed for a purpose. Simply putting a camera in front of a scene, as one writer has noted, changes the most realistic situation into a kind of theatrical setting. Asked to look more closely at the realism of *Philadelphia*, one student thus

corrected her original perception and observed how the mise-en-scène of *Philadelphia* was not just where the central character lived and worked:

Cecilia A. Graham

> The choice of the city of Philadelphia as the setting for the film of the same name clearly evokes connotations that are central to understanding this movie. Because the city itself has historically been referred to as the City of Brotherly Love, *Philadelphia* uses its urban backdrop to set, somewhat ironically, a tale of a gay man whose physical love of a "brother" generates only fear and loathing from the "brothers" in his law firm. At the same time, the mise-en-scène of Philadelphia becomes strangely anonymous in this movie. Most of the action of the movie takes place before the sumptuous modern skyscrapers in a business district that could be any business district and in plush offices whose picture windows show a glittering backdrop of only lights and other buildings. This Philadelphia is, finally, a place without much identity, depth, or individuality, and that seems an appropriate mise-en-scène for a film that largely sanitizes the suffering and confusion of a man battling HIV and an extremely narrow-minded society.

Whether the movie is a documentary or a realistic Hollywood film, a practiced eye might begin an analysis by asking basic questions about the realism of the film and how it is used. Why does the movie try to seem realistic? How does it try to create a realistic scene? What is included, and what is left out? What realistic details in the mise-en-scène relate to the actions of the characters or themes of the movie: the clothing, the homes, the props, or the outdoor world? The mise-en-scène of realistic films should be treated with the same analytical sense you might direct at a stage play, in which costumes and sets are never selected casually.

Elements of Mise-en-Scène

In any film, from the most realistic to the most theatrical, there are specific properties of the mise-en-scène to direct your attention to and from which good paper topics will come.

Settings and *sets* refer to the location or the construction of a location where a scene is filmed. In some movies, you will notice immediately how important the setting and sets are. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), for example, the expressionistic set design may be far more interesting to some viewers than the characters or structure of the story: The sets are obviously painted buildings and streets whose distorted angles and shapes are meant to suggest the mental imbalance and social chaos of the characters. One might make the same case for a movie such as *Alien* (1979), in which the elaborately twisted passageways of the spaceship and the mysterious construction in which the characters discover the alien eggs reverberate with a symbolic significance associated with women and motherhood. Hitchcock uses his settings more ironically, as commentaries on the plot and characters. During the climactic closing of *North by Northwest* (1959), for instance, the hero and the heroine climb across the gigantic faces of the presidents on Mount Rushmore; in a movie so much about US security and government, this use of setting is not only spectacular, but is also central to the themes of the movie. The settings in these and other cases are much more than background, and a writer interested in the use of sets and settings like these should start with these questions:

- Do the objects and props in the setting, whether natural ones (such as rivers and trees) or artificial ones (such as paintings and buildings), have a special significance that relates to the characters or story?
- Does the arrangement of objects, props, and characters within that setting have some significance? (For example, are they crowded together? Do inanimate objects seem to have a life, as they do in a Chaplin movie?)

Although most good films give the setting and its objects nearly as much meaning as the characters, films differ greatly in how they use their settings in relation to characters and stories. Sets and settings may suggest a historical realism, as in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) (Figure 3.06); provide images of a character's mind, as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*; describe the central theme of the film, as does the centrality of the house/home in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944); or become as complex and important as the story or characters themselves, as, perhaps, in *The Truman Show* (1998), in which the main character (Truman Burbank/Jim Carrey) discovers that his life is a television show and that he lives and works on a television set (Figure 3.07). In writing about setting, however, one must do more than just describe it: One must seek to discover its significance in relation to the major themes of the film or to other aspects of the film (its system of

Figure 3.06 *Zero Dark Thirty* is a contemporary film about the killing of Osama Bin Laden that relies on a high degree of historical realism to make its mise-en-scène accurate and convincing.

production or its historical period, for instance). Such a focus will help explain why the setting and the way it is constructed are important.

Use the same rule of thumb in discussing other elements of the mise-en-scène. Whether your interest is acting styles, costumes, or lighting, precise description must be coupled with a sense of why they are important and how they add to the meaning of the movie—that is, how they can become part of a topic for analysis. We all know that an actor is the individual who plays the part of a character in a movie. But *acting style*—how an actor plays a part—differs considerably from film to film and from one decade to the next. When looked at thoughtfully, acting style is a challenging topic to address or a target for focusing an analysis of a specific movie. A writer might, for instance, compare the acting style in an Italian neorealist movie such as *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948), in which some of the actors were people chosen precisely because they had no acting experience, with the mannered style of a British or US actor, such as Maggie Smith, whose notion of a realistic performance includes a great deal of studied artifice. The Danish director Carl Dreyer said, "There is no greater experience in a studio than to witness the expression of a sensitive face under the mysterious power of inspiration," and it is precisely that kind of performance that he solicited from Renée Falconetti in the famous close-ups of his *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). In the

Figure 3.07 In *King of Comedy*, Bernhard's performance as Marsha dramatizes how actors and their styles can make bodies and gestures a dynamic part of the mise-en-scène.

following paragraph, James Naremore describes, with exemplary sense of details, the remarkable acting style of Sandra Bernhard as Marsha in *The King of Comedy* (1982):

> Bernhard is in fact a club comic, and in many ways she relies on the conventional devices of clowns. She lacks the symmetrical face of "serious" actors like Fonda or Streep, so she pushes her features into grotesque extremes—poking out her lips or curling them up against her long nose, frowning or letting her jaw hang lax. When she moves, she is all angles, a gangling stick figure who looks like an anorexic bobbysoxer; when she speaks, her voice pitches up to the register of a New York teenager on the verge of hysteria. Nevertheless she inflects her exaggerated behavior in ways quite different from old-fashioned zanies like Fanny Brice or Martha Raye. Hers is a comedy of neurosis, a mingling of anxiety and laughter, and she behaves as if the whole weight of an Oedipal scenario were on her shoulders (282)

Costumes, as we all know, are the clothes the characters wear. Like other aspects of the mise-en-scène, they vary along a spectrum from realistic to extravagant; often, they provide a writer with the key to a character's identity. James Bond often wears a tuxedo, but Sylvester Stallone's Rocky prefers to wear as little as possible. In both cases, we

learn something about the character from the costume. Some films, such as *Tootsie* (1982) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), are largely about costuming and changing appearances through dress and makeup, and both films are about how men dress like women to confront or deal with conventional attitudes about sexual roles. White hats no longer necessarily indicate a good character, but you should continue to question why characters look and dress the way they do. Do their costumes suggest how they view themselves, or how they wish to be viewed by others? Does a character change clothing, as in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), when John Travolta becomes a different person by donning his dancing clothes at night? Do those changes tell you anything about the personality or the society? Is there a special feature of a costume, such as the baseball glove that identifies Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape* (1962), that helps you analyze that character? Again, do not take the costumes of the mise-en-scène for granted.

Lighting describes the various ways a character or an object or a scene can be illuminated, either by natural sunlight or from artificial sources (such as lamps). It allows a filmmaker to direct a viewer's attention in a certain way or to create a certain atmosphere. We all recognize large distinctions, such as the difference between the bright lighting of an outdoor scene in a western and the shadowy darkness used in the alleyways of a gangster film. We probably notice that, in the first case, the lighting creates a feeling of clarity and optimism, and in the second, a feeling of oppression and gloom. A more demanding task would be to note and comment on the more subtle gradations and patterns of lighting that do not dramatically call attention to themselves. In Bertrand Tavernier's *Sunday in the Country* (1984), for instance, the softly lit interiors and exteriors seem to recreate the lighting found in impressionist paintings or, more exactly, the atmospheric lighting found in the 1930s' cinema of Jean Renoir, thus resurrecting a vision of the world that the painter grandfather in that movie knows is fading. In Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1978), some scenes use low light (candlelight, in fact) to emphasize the grotesquely isolated faces of characters who are cut off from one another and from the world that exists in the darkness around them. Whether you notice the lighting immediately or not, be prepared to look for patterns of light and shadows. Are there important graphic patterns (such as sharp shadows), created to highlight a scene or a group of scenes in a movie? Does the lighting or coloring seem totally natural or unusually artificial? Some experimental films make the entire subject of the film the artistic manipulation of light, but any intelligent narrative movie uses lighting with as much a sense of its possibilities and purpose as a painting does (Figure 3.08).

Figure 3.08 In *Avatar* (2009), spectacular lighting techniques and 3D graphics are the heart of the movie.

Mise-en-scène, then, is about the theatrics of space as that space is constructed for the camera. This use of space—how it is arranged and how the actors and objects relate within it—can generate exciting topics and commentary on film. The balance or imbalance that relates figures or various planes in the mise-en-scène sometimes says more about that action than does the dialogue: Is, for instance, one character always positioned above another? Is one always in shadows? Likewise, in comparing two sets or settings in a film, you may discover important themes that would otherwise not be noticed: Do catastrophes, for instance, occur only in the city, or only on land? A cinematic mise-en-scène is different from, but as complex as, a theatrical mise-en-scène, and a writer about film should aim for the same acuteness and subtlety demonstrated in the following analysis of the mise-en-scène (specifically the setting) in Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923):

> Mise-en-scène functions, not in isolated moments, but in relation to the narrative system of the entire film. *Our Hospitality*, like most of Buster Keaton's films, exemplifies how mise-en-scène can economically advance the narrative and create a pattern of motifs. And since the film is a comedy, we shall find that the mise-en-scène also creates gags. *Our Hospitality*, then, exemplifies what we shall find in our study of every film technique: an individual element will almost always have several functions, not just one.
>
> Consider, for example, how the settings function within the narrative of *Our Hospitality*. They help divide the film into scenes and

contrast those scenes. The film begins with a prologue showing how the feud between the McKays and the Canfields results in the deaths of the young Canfield and the husband of the McKay family. We see the McKays living in a shack and are left in suspense about the fate of the baby, Willie. Willie's mother flees with her son from their southern home to the North (action narrated to us mainly by an intertitle). The main action begins years later, with the grown-up Willie living in New York. There are a number of gags concerning early nineteenth-century life in the metropolis, contrasting sharply with the prologue scene. We are led to wonder how this locale will relate to the southern scenes, and soon Willie receives word that he has inherited his parents' home in the South. A series of amusing short scenes follows as he takes a primitive train back to his birthplace. Here Keaton uses real landscapes, but by laying the railroad tracks in different ways, he exploits the landscapes for surprising and unusual comic effects. The rest of the film deals with Willie's movements in the southern town and in the vicinity. On the day of his arrival he wanders around and gets into a number of comic situations. That night he stays in the Canfield house itself, since the law of hospitality has made it the only safe place for him. And, finally, an extended chase occurs the next day, moving through the countryside and back to the Canfield house for the end of the feud. Thus the action depends heavily on shifts of setting that establish Willie's two journeys, as baby and as man, and later his wanderings around to escape his enemies' pursuit. The narration is relatively unrestricted once Willie reaches the South, moving between him and members of the Canfield family. We usually know more about where they are than Willie does, and the narrative generates suspense by showing them coming toward the places where Willie is hiding.

Specific settings fulfill distinct narrative functions. The McKay "estate," which Willie envisions as a mansion, turns out to be a tumbledown shack. The McKay place is paralleled to (contrasted with) the Canfields' palatial plantation home. In narrative terms the Canfield home gains even more functional importance when the Canfield father forbids his sons to kill Willie on the premises: "our code of honor forbids us to shoot him while he is a guest in our house." (Once Willie overhears this, he determines never to leave.) Thus, ironically, the home of Willie's enemies becomes the only safe spot in town, and many scenes are organized around the Canfield brothers' attempts to lure Willie out. At the end of the film another setting takes on significance: the meadows, mountains, river banks, rapids, and waterfalls across which the Canfields pursue Willie. Finally, the feud ends back in the Canfield house itself, with Willie now welcomed as the daughter's

husband. The pattern of development is clear: from the opening shoot-out at the McKay house that breaks up Willie's home, to the final scene in the Canfield house with Willie becoming part of a new family. In such ways every setting becomes highly motivated by the narrative's system of causes and effects, parallels and contrasts, and overall development (Bordwell and Thompson 142–43).

COMPOSITION AND THE IMAGE

In any movie, it is the camera that eventually films a mise-en-scène: When you watch a movie, you see not only the setting, actors, and lighting, but also all these elements as they are recorded and then projected. The composition of a scene through the film image is what distinguishes film from drama, and it is another important dimension of the movies that a good writer should be able to discuss. When you watch a home video, you might first recognize a party with you and your friends. However, with a closer look, you might also comment on how the images, because of the angles or coloring, make some of those friends look taller or darker than they really are. In the same way, a film image may influence the way you see a scene or a character in that scene. The student who begins by writing, "The scene had three characters..." will seem less attentive and perceptive than the student who begins, "The visual angle on the scene made the three characters appear..." This section considers some of the terminology you can use to discuss these compositional features.

The Shot

The *shot* is the single image you see on the screen before the film cuts to a different image. Unlike a photograph, a single shot can include a variety of action or movement, and the frame that contains the image may even move. One shot may show a cowboy at a bar and then magnify the figure by moving the camera closer. When the image switches to another position and point of view on the cowboy—say, from the opposite side of the bar—the film has cut to a second shot. In writing about film, you should be sensitive to the two primary dimensions of the shot:

- Its photographic properties.
- Its moving frame.

The *photographic properties* of a shot are the qualities of the film image that are found in any photograph, plus the speed at which the scene is filmed. These properties include tone, film speed, and the

various perspectives created by the image. *Tone* refers to the range and texture of the colors in a film image. A movie such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) uses a Technicolor scheme full of primary reds and yellows to suggest a fantasy world different from the black-and-white Kansas. Some films, such as Michel Hazanavicius's *The Artist* (2011), use black-and-white tones to suggest an older movie genre or past historical period, as George Clooney does in his film about Edward R. Murrow's black-and-white television broadcasts of the 1950s. Woody Allen in *Zelig* (1983) tells a story with intentionally grainy black-and-white tones to make parts of his modern movie look like an old documentary, and in *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg occasionally disrupts a horrific story in black and white with the fleeting glimpse of a child's bright red coat. Ask if the colors are realistic. If not, why not? Is there a pattern in the way a film uses a particular color or group of colors? Does the film use colors symbolically, as Ingmar Bergman uses red in *Cries and Whispers* (1972) to suggest both violence and passion? If the movie is in black and white, how does the black and white add to the movie, especially if the filmmaker could have used color? How do the colors and tones relate to the themes of the film?

Film speed is the rate at which the film is shot; it is most obvious in instances of slow or fast motion. Action in slow or fast motion usually indicates a change in the nature of what is happening or how the audience is supposed to perceive what is happening. Sometimes, slow motion is used to indicate that the action is part of a character's dream; sometimes, fast motion is a way of commenting comically on a scene—when, for instance, action on an assembly line suddenly moves at superhuman speed. It is easy to note when the speed of the film is no longer normal; be prepared to examine why these moments are singled out by the filmmaker. In Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1982), David Bowie confronts his Japanese adversary with two kisses that are filmed in slow motion; it is clear that this is Oshima's way of underlining this shattering climax in their relationship. Keep in mind, however, that many older silent movies were filmed and printed at the rate of sixteen frames per second, and their action may look faster when shown at the modern standard of twenty-four frames per second.

The *perspective* of the image refers to the kind of spatial relationship an image establishes between the different objects and figures it is photographing. These different relationships are the products of different kinds of lenses and the way those lenses are used. Thus, one movie may constantly present scenes with a great deal of *depth* or *deep focus* so that the audience can see characters in the background as sharply as it sees characters in the foreground. Another movie (often an older one) may wish to isolate or highlight only certain characters or events in the image,

and it consequently uses a *shallow focus* that will clearly show only one plane in the image, such as the man with a gun who stands in the foreground apart from the blurry crowd in the background. Much less commonly seen is the odd moment of *rack focus*, when the focus is quickly changed, or pulled, from one figure or object to another within the same shot, as when the image switches focus from the face of a man talking to a piano falling out the window in the background.

Still other kinds of perspective relationships can be used in creating an image, but even while you are learning these other technical terms, you can begin to analyze perspective relationships by asking some basic questions: Who or what is in focus in an image, and why? Do the images create a world with depth, or does that world seem unusually flat? How would you describe the space in a particular image? Is it crowded? Open? Wide? Distorted? When a specific wide-screen image drowns the characters in space, what does this say about them and their world? Make the power of the image itself come alive in your writing. Make the subject of your essays not just what you see, but also how the image makes you see people and things in a certain way and in a certain relationship to one another. Here is an example in which a student briefly looks at color across the different spaces of the Wachowskis's *The Matrix* (1999):

N. Singerpanz

In *The Matrix* (1999), Neo (Keanu Reeves) passes between multiple realities and dream worlds. He is a hacker, spending most of his time in front of the green glow of a computer screen. When he discovers his "real world" is nothing more than a computer program, the hues of the film suddenly shift. Earth becomes a scarred and dark landscape ruled by machines, and humans are forced to live deep underground. When Neo awakes in this new world, the once luminous green codes of the computerized matrix become the muted grays and blues of the subterranean lifestyle.

These blues and grays serve to embody the cold, lifeless reality of a futuristic apocalypse. The battle has been lost, and Neo's companions are only the stragglers lucky enough to have survived. But this muted color palette works on a sliding scale. It is softened to imitate skin tones, telling the audience that even this lonely, cold reality is more human than the reality of a slave in the more colorful matrix. Or it takes on harsher tones, suggesting the desperation and alienation of this lost world. At one point the traitor in the group, Cypher, enjoys a visually and sumptuously rich steak dinner in the matrix, only to return to a harsh reality with cold blues and dark grays.

Bright colors such as red and yellow and the emotions they reflect (happiness, excitement, passion) are reserved for the matrix world. While Neo is training in the matrix, he's distracted by a beautiful woman in a red dress. But when he turns around to look at her, the woman has transformed into an enemy agent holding a gun to his head. The colors of happiness and hope are just that and nothing more: a fleeting hue, a distraction from the dark urgency of their situation.

When Neo trains with his mentor Morpheus and when he is eventually englightened about his dual worlds, the sickly green that defines the matrix fades away. These scenes—Neo's dojo training, his last phone call to end the film—are an indication that Neo is learning to accept and manipulate the matrix and its colors, rather than become lost in the green code that haunted him as a hacker.

The *frame* of the movie image forms its border and contains the mise-en-scène. Many movies, such as Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937) and Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, fill their mise-en-scène with the internal frames of windows or doorways or stage sets to call attention to the importance of frames and point of view in the story. Almost every film, though, must maintain a certain consciousness about the frame of the movie screen and the frame of the camera (Figure 3.09). A wide-screen frame is especially suited to catching the open spaces of a western or the vast stellar spaces of sci-fi films. The smaller standard frame is, perhaps, best suited to more personal interior dramas or genres like the melodrama, to which a small frame can contribute a sense of anything from domestic comfort and closeness to claustrophobia. Through the course of a film, there will be a number of other more particular questions to ask about the framing:

- What is the *angle* at which the camera frame represents the action? Does it create a *high angle*, viewing its subject from above, or a *low angle*, viewing the action from below? When

Figure 3.09 How does the composition of this shot from *The Avengers* (2012) work to communicate specific emotions and provoke certain responses?

a conversation between two people is shot through a group of alternating high angles and low angles, it could mean that one character is tall and the other is short; it could also say that one of the two is the more dominant personality.

- Does the height of the frame correspond to a normal relationship to the people and objects before the camera; that is, are they at eye level, more or less? Or does the camera seem to be placed at an odd height, too high or too low? At the beginning of *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), for instance, the camera is positioned at ground level to capture James Dean's desperate and pathetic embrace of a small toy as he crumbles to the ground.
- Does the camera frame ever seem unbalanced in relation to the space and action (called a *canted frame*)? If so, why does this occur when it does? Is it recreating the perspective of a character looking at the action from an odd angle so that the buildings appear diagonal rather than vertical? Is it meant to recreate the perspective of a drunk, or might it be a more subtle way of commenting, for instance, on a community that lacks harmony and balance?
- What kind of distance does the frame maintain from its subject? Does the film use many close-ups (for instance, showing just the characters' faces), medium shots (showing most of a character's body), or long shots (showing full bodies from a distance)? Perhaps a scene uses a series of these shots, beginning with a long shot of a man on the street, then showing a medium shot of him looking in a store window, and concluding with a close-up of his surprised face as he sees something in the window. Does the movie develop a more elaborate combination of these that might be interpreted according to some meaningful pattern: close-ups for love scenes and long shots for battle scenes, for instance?
- Besides describing and containing the action, does the frame suggest other action or space outside its borders? Do important events or sounds occur outside the borders of the frame—in *offscreen space*? What is the significance of this offscreen space or its relation to what is seen within the frame? Is offscreen space used for comic effect, as in Keaton's movie *The General* (1927), in which we discover that the wheel he is sitting on is part of a train located outside the frame and about to move? Or does it have a serious meaning, as in Robert Bresson's films, in which offscreen space suggests a type of spiritual reality his characters are unable to grasp or understand because it is literally beyond the frame of their world?

Within one scene, any of these compositions may change as the camera creates a *moving frame* by altering its position in relation to the object being filmed. A romantic close-up of two lovers whispering, for example, may suddenly change its meaning if the camera frame moves backward and makes them part of a long shot full of spectators: What was at first romantic has become, through the movement of the frame, comic. This kind of framing action, called *reframing*, can be done in ways that rely entirely on the movement of the frame, not on the editing of images through cuts (see pp. 67–73).

When the frame moves to high, overhead *crane shots*, which look down on the action, we all realize there has been a dramatic change in perspective: The film may be emphasizing the smallness of the character in relation to the rest of his or her space, or it may be revealing other action, such as the approach of the cavalry on the other side of the mountain range. When the frame moves up and down, *tilting* from one position, it may simply be following the point of view of a character who is looking up and down, but it may also be a way of making a statement about high and low objects (about, for instance, the tourist who feels overwhelmed by the skyscrapers of New York City). Another kind of mobile frame is the *pan*, in which the frame moves from side to side without a change in the position of the camera or the point from which the scene is viewed: Surveying the street before him, a character may look slowly from left to right, and the camera may pan to recreate the continuous movement of his gaze. In contrast, a *tracking* or *dolly shot* is

not stationary but follows or intrudes on the action by moving the position of the camera (often on small tracks) and thus taking the frame forward, backward, or around the subject. During a cocktail-party scene, the film may recreate the roving intimacy of the gathering by using a dolly shot that follows a character through the crowd. If this action is achieved by a *handheld shot*, in which the camera is carried by the camera operator, the shot may be jerkier (and may, in some ways, seem more realistic).

Because frames imply a perspective on the world or on certain characters, their mobility or lack of it can point to the foundation of the world you see in those frames. Is it an active world you are seeing, or one that seems rigid and static? The complexities of that world are often revealed as the frames move and change, and the more exactly you can note these frames, the more incisive your analysis will be. Try, at some point, to base your analysis of a character or a situation exclusively on the framing action that describes them. What patterns can you see? Does this character always look at the world through close-ups that track through crowds and situations, without ever getting a larger perspective on them? Does that consistent way of framing the action suggest that he or she participates but never really sees the whole picture?

Remember that frames and their actions have no universal meaning. Just as colors do not have unchanging symbolic value, camera angles and movements do not have to mean the same thing in different movies. Low-angle shots do not always signify dominance, nor do high-angle shots always suggest oppression (as is sometimes thought). Although in one movie, a low-angle shot may remind the viewer that a weak character is being looked at by a stronger, more dangerous person, in another movie that low-angle shot may be used to describe the wonder of a child looking at a person he or she loves. If you begin by noting visual details carefully, you can reflect on how particular framing actions work in specific films and on how they provoke certain questions about those films and their themes. An endless series of close-ups means one thing in a movie made for US television, where it may underline the importance of the individual character, and another thing in a European art film, where it may suggest the unknowable quality of the human face. In a Yasujirô Ozu film, the low height of the director's frame may be meant to suggest the more relaxed, meditative perspective of a Japanese person looking at the world from the floor of a tatami room, but the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman claims that the low height of her frames occurs because she is short! The lesson should be clear: Do not simply describe technical details and expect them to be self-explanatory. Rather, put them to work to convey an idea about the various ways that frames and their points of view operate and what they mean in specific films, in specific cultures, and at specific times.

The Edited Image

In the simplest sense, editing is the linking of two different shots (in older films, the product of splicing together two different pieces of film, but today produced by linking different digital images). Usually, the editing follows some logic of development (for example, an image of a woman and then the object she is looking at) or is meant to make a statement of some sort (an image of an egotistical czar and then one of a peacock). Recall the cowboy at the bar: When a long shot shows him at the bar and then slowly tracks in closer to capture him close up, this is reframing within a single shot. But if, after that first image, the camera stops and moves to another position (maybe a low angle on the other side of the bar), that reframed long shot has now been edited into two shots. The break between the two images is a *cut*.

A shot can be held on the screen for any length of time, the result being a certain *editing pace* or *rhythm*. Because the pace of the editing is relative, we should try to note why and how a film or part of a film is edited according to a certain rhythm. We expect a chase scene to be rapidly edited (with lots of quick cuts and brief shots), but to make us comically aware of our expectations about editing, that chase scene could be edited with slow rhythms and few cuts. As an exercise, observe exactly how long a single image remains on the screen in any movie and then reflect on why the filmmaker cuts to another angle or image at that point. Does the director use mostly *long takes*, shots that remain on a scene or object for an unusually long time (as Terrence Malick did in *The Thin Red Line* [1999] when he held the image on grassy fields or the branches of trees for mystically long periods)? Or does the film cut rapidly from one image to another, as in chase sequences in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007)? Does the pace of the editing change with the scene, for example, by using quick cuts on the streets and slow, long takes inside the home?

In the larger sense, *editing* refers to how shots are built into larger pieces of a movie and, hence, larger units of meaning. A series of shots can thus be carefully joined to create a single *scene*, which is usually an action confined to one place and time: for example, in Campion's *The Piano* (1993), the scene in which Ada (Holly Hunter) arrives on a remote beach in nineteenth-century New Zealand, or in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the scene in which the officers inspect the rotten meat. The latter begins with a group of angry sailors gathered on deck around a piece of maggot-infested meat; the ship's surgeon inspects the meat, which is shown in close-up, and announces that the maggots are simply dead flies; the scene ends as another officer disperses the outraged sailors.

When these shots describe significantly more action and more time and more than one location, the interwoven and unified group of shots or scenes that results is often called a *sequence*. In *The Piano*, the beach scene becomes part of a larger arrival sequence when Ada is met and led through the jungle to her future home; in *The Battleship Potemkin*, the scenes that dramatize the sailors' mounting discontent make those scenes part of a complicated sequence leading to their rebellion. As part of the previous exercise, see if you can now mark off sections of a film that show how shots can be edited into complex relationships that create unified scenes or sequences.

Most of us pay little conscious attention to editing because we know and enjoy most the *continuity editing* of classical cinema. This editing style is appropriately called *invisible editing*, because the filmmaker, not wanting the editing to distract from the story, avoids cuts and transitions between images that would be too obvious. Through various means, the filmmaker attempts to hide the film editing so that we view the images as a continuous picture. Thus, even though *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is a skillfully and stylishly edited movie—carefully balancing Sam Spade's entrances and exits and his keen method of noticing the details in a room—we view it as a continuous action in which obtrusive cuts would seem out of place.

Yet, continuity editing depends on some highly crafted editing techniques, techniques that, when analyzed, reveal important points about the characters and story. *Establishing shots*, for instance, are the shots that begin a scene or sequence as a way of locating a scene clearly in a certain place before dividing that sequence into more detailed shots. *Casablanca* begins with a series of establishing shots that describe the city on the map, the kind of people in the city, and, finally, the outside of Rick's cabaret. Only then does the film move inside to begin its story about Rick. The *shot/reverse-shot*, or *shot/countershot*, pattern is also a fundamental part of continuity editing. With this technique, an exchange between two characters (or a character and an object) is edited to appear logical and natural by cutting from the person speaking or looking to the object or person being addressed or seen; for instance, a shot shows Bogart asking Bergman a question and then cuts to her responding. When considering a film that uses continuity editing, a writer can begin, as with realism itself, by questioning the basic purposes of the techniques used:

- Are there larger implications concerning the world and society in the "continuity"? Is the movie trying to create a sense of a logical or safe world? Do establishing shots, for instance, indicate that the characters (and the audience) know where they are and should feel at home? Does the continuity help establish, as in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), a sense of logical inevitability, a feeling that events and relationships have to move toward a natural conclusion, that Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn) and D. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) will remarry?
- Has the continuity editing been adjusted to fit a genre or to create certain emotional responses? Do road movies have fewer cuts and more long takes? In westerns, do the shot/reverse-shot patterns involve people and things more than people and other people?
- When the editing presents a fundamentally continuous and unified world, are there times when that continuity is disrupted? If so, why? In *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), for instance, Orson Welles regularly disrupts the viewer's sense of space and time through the questionable reliability of the narrator, Michael O'Hara, and through visual distortions, such as in the hall of mirrors at the end of the movie. In this case, the disrupting images and editing imply the collapse of a world incapable of maintaining old certainties.
- Does the shot/reverse-shot pattern in a particular sequence tell you anything about the characters involved or how they see the world and each other? Are considerably more shots given to one person or the other? Does the editing create a pattern in which one character's eyes never meet the other's?
- How would you distinguish between the continuity editing of an older, classic movie such as *Scarface* (1932) and that of a more modern Hollywood film such as *Salt* (2010)? Does one use more long takes and the other more quick cuts? How would you differentiate between the continuity editing in a European movie such as *The Rules of the Game* (1939) and a US movie of the same period, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)? Does the first rely more on a moving frame to emphasize the world around the characters and the second more on smooth editing techniques that emphasize the characters themselves?

Continuity editing can also use more noticeable and stylized methods, which are often associated with older movies. These include the following:

- *Fade-in* or *fade-out*: An image is darkened or lightened so that it appears or disappears.

- *Iris-in* or *iris-out*: The new image appears as an expanding circle in the middle of the old image, or the old image becomes a contracting circle that disappears into the new image.
- *Wipe*: A line moves across an image to gradually clear one shot and introduce another.
- *Dissolve*: A new shot is briefly superimposed on the fading old shot.

When these techniques are used in a movie, ask what they are meant to achieve. Used in older movies, they create logical transitions from one time or place to another. In a D. W. Griffith film, a fade might be saying, "Later that same day," as the shot reveals the same kitchen in the evening; a wipe could suggest, "In another part of town," when the interior of the courthouse is wiped off by a line across the image and a Chinese opium den appears on the other side of the line. When watching an older film, ask if one technique is used for one kind of linkage (for example, a wipe connecting different places) and another technique for other situations (a dissolve indicating changes in time). When analyzing modern movies, ask why the editor would choose these older continuity devices. Does Woody Allen use irises just for a humorous effect because they are so unusual in a contemporary movie? In *The Cotton Club* (1984), are the wipes simply a reference to the 1920s, when the story takes place, or are they a dramatic means of emphasizing the passage of time and history—one of the main themes of the film?

Besides recognizing the techniques of continuity editing, you should learn to recognize, make sense of, and analyze how films undermine or challenge your expectations about continuity editing. Especially in more contemporary films, begin to notice when a film breaks with the standards of continuity editing and begin to ask questions such as the following:

- Why are there so few establishing shots in a particular movie? Is it difficult to say where an action takes place because the scene begins with a close-up of a character or inside an unidentified room? Do the characters seem to share our disorientation? Is this disorientation related to the themes of the film?
- Why is the temporal continuity within a film broken up in such a confusing fashion? Does the editing use a number of *jump cuts*, in which a continuous shot is suddenly broken and the image jumps to new figures or another background or even the same background but at a different time? As a character discusses her life, for instance, the monologue may be broken in places, while the light in the room changes with each jump cut to indicate the passage of time. Is the filmmaker trying to make us more aware of the passage of time, or is he or she commenting ironically on this character's boring life story?
- Why is there no point of view with which we can identify? Does this have something to do with the lack of shot/reverse-shot scenes that would allow us to identify with the perspective of a character? Does the filmmaker, as Werner Herzog often does in his films, force his audience to remain detached from the ordinary people and to identify instead with animals, lunatics, or dwarfs? Does the film contain images that seem to have no place in the story? A movie about war may inexplicably cut to an image of a cherry tree, time and time again. Is it a symbol? Is it part of a character's memory? Why is the continuity of the action broken by this unexplained image?

In these cases, the editing calls attention to itself, and the trade-off for that obtrusiveness is an initial confusion about why the editing has upset the usual perception of the world. When that confusion leads to larger questions (and, perhaps, to answers) about the themes and the historical context of the film, the writer is beginning to sketch a paper topic. After thinking about a Herzog movie, one student realized his paper would discuss how Herzog's unconventional editing, particularly his undermining of a shot/reverse-shot exchange, is part of an effort to move the audience outside the logical patterns that have traditionally placed human society at the center of the world, part of Herzog's vision of a natural world that is more important than individual men and women.

In recent decades, editing has entered the digital age, leaving behind the older, more laborious, and more expensive processes of editing images by hand on a Moviola or later on a flatbed editing table. Now editing is almost exclusively accomplished through computer-based nonlinear digital editing systems. With *digital nonlinear editing*, images are stored on the hard drives of high-capacity computers so that editors of movies today can quickly and easily access both sound bits and images and combine and recombine those in different relationships. Digital filmmaking theoretically allows a shot to last an almost unlimited amount of time and can create the kind of nonstop immediacy and randomness seen in a film such as *Cloverfield* (2008), a fictional movie about a monster's invasion of New York City recorded

on a character's digital camera. Besides these fairly obvious effects, consider other ways nonlinear digital editing can shape a film. Has digital editing created new relationships between music and image in some contemporary films? Has the longer duration of the digital image encouraged more creative and dynamic compositions within the frame rather than between edited frames? How has digital filmmaking and editing impacted recent documentaries?

When examining both traditional and contemporary editing strategies and the relationships between shots, begin with some general guidelines about what to look for but adapt them to deal with concrete and specific uses and variations in each film.

First, observe how the editing of the shots establishes certain relationships between the objects and actions. Does the editing establish connections or oppositions among the people, things, and actions being shown? In *The Last Laugh* (1924), the doorman is frequently linked to the image of the revolving door, and the identification of the two predicts the reversal of the man's good fortune. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a prehistoric ape tosses a bone into the air, which then becomes the image of a spaceship. This famous *match-on-action*—two images being edited together as parallel actions or motions—crystallizes thousands of years of human development propelled by violence and the need to conquer people and territory.

Second, accustom yourself to noticing more abstract relationships between images. This is a more difficult practice, but, as the example from Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* shows (see pp. 31–35), these more abstract aspects of editing can be brilliantly used for certain effects. Does the direction and movement of the figures in the different images match when these shots are connected, creating, for example, a kind of visual and emotional force driving in a single direction? Are graphic contrasts or similarities created through the use of space in the different shots, for example, by alternating large and small spaces? Does the editing set up certain rhythms by strictly controlling the length of each shot? (Although most of us know best the accelerated rhythms of a chase sequence, the editing can fashion many other kinds of rhythms.) Remember, these formal patterns have no final and universal meaning in themselves, and their evolution through film history is not independent of other historical questions. Although editing can be seen as a formal way of organizing images in time and space, more than just formal or technical issues are usually involved. Look precisely at editing, but let it lead you to think more about how and what films mean. In the following student essay, the writer examined a short sequence in *Citizen Kane* (1941) and related the editing and the composition of the image to a specific theme:

Richardson 1

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Film Studies 104
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Editing Breakfast in *Citizen Kane*

Soon after Charles Foster Kane marries Emily, the woman of his dreams who is brought back from Europe like one of his statues, their marriage begins to collapse. The severity and intensity of this collapse are captured in one 2-minute sequence, which remains one of the most striking examples of Welles's evocative and economical editing in *Citizen Kane*.

The sequence begins with a medium two-shot of Kane and Emily in relatively warm light. Their conversation is teasing and intimate, visually reinforced by a shot/reverse-shot exchange of loving looks: He tells her she is beautiful, and when she complains about his having to leave for his newspaper office, he says he will call and change his appointments. That exchange is followed by five more short shot/reverse-shot pairs, and in each, the eyes of the couple grow increasingly suspicious and severe. The conversations are progressively hostile and clipped, and the newspaper becomes both a visual and a verbal symbol of their growing division. In the first scene of this middle section, she complains, "Charles, if I didn't trust you.... What do you do on a newspaper in the middle of the night?" In the third, Emily pleads with him to stop attacking her uncle, the president, in his newspaper. By the fifth, he is not even allowing her to finish her sentence:

EMILY: Really, Charles, people have a right to expect....
CHARLES: What I care to give them.

Through the entire sequence, the changes in the clothing and other aspects of the mise-en-scène indicate that the passage of time is also a passage away from emotional intimacy. Kane changes from a romantic tuxedo to a business suit. Their setting alters from an unobstructed and close space to an obstructed space cluttered with plants, flowers, and newspapers.

The succinct logic of the editing is then powerfully concluded with a shot/reverse-shot and then another two-shot. In the shot/reverse-shot, the eyes no longer meet or match, since they are now both reading separate newspapers—he, his own (*The Inquirer*), she, the rival (*The Chronicle*). Formally balancing the opening of the sequence, the medium-long two-shot has much colder and darker lighting. The two former lovers are placed conspicuously at opposite sides of the frame.

The real time that this sequence describes is probably many years. Yet, through a rigorous and creative use of an edited space and a series of conversations within that space, Welles depicts more than just the synopsis of a failed marriage. Linking the six encounters, appropriately, with flash pans, he also tells a succinct and cinematic version of the entire tale of *Citizen Kane*: of how Kane's greatest desires seem to turn to dust almost immediately after he achieves them and of how he consequently becomes a man always alienated in the great spaces that surround him.

Writing Cue

Identify the most important formal feature in a film you've just seen: Lighting? Editing? Sound? Or some other feature of the movie? Explain in a paragraph why that feature is central to understanding the film.

SOUND

In *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), two basketball-playing buddies—Sidney Deane (Wesley Snipes) and Billy Hoyle (Woody Harrelson)—listen to a Jimi Hendrix tune on their car radio. Although they are both listening attentively, Sidney scolds Billy by pointing out, "You're listening, but you're not hearing

it." In a similar sense, many moviegoers listen to films but in most cases have not learned to hear them. What this common failure means to new and curious students of the movies is that many topics and problems having to do with film sound have only recently begun to be addressed and are waiting for good ears to take them up. If students with an interest in music and sound direct and concentrate that interest on a movie or a specific group of movies, they will tackle some original and provocative material.

Keep in mind that for more than thirty years, until 1927, silent films obviously did not have the technological resources to develop *synchronous sound* that could record and match sound with the filmed image. In fact, however, these so-called silent films were surrounded by orchestral and other musical accompaniments and sound effects in the theater. Not only do these films sometimes have complex relationships between the images and the scores that accompanied them, but they also offer students rich analytical opportunities in exploring the creative ways that (1) sound and silence can be implied or suggested and (2) intertitles adapt literary descriptions and dialogue to film.

In theory, sound can be used and edited with as much complexity and intelligence as images can. Certainly, sound has many dimensions and uses in film. It can be described according to pitch, loudness, or timbre; it can figure in a film as *direct sound* (recorded when the image is being shot) or *postdubbed sound* (sound and dialogue added later in the studio). Movie sound can take the form of dialogue, music, or noise (thunder or a car screeching to a halt), any or all of these sounds being naturally or artificially produced. Film sound can have a multitude of relations to the image and the narrative: most broadly, its source may be an object or action in the image, thus as *onscreen* or *synchronous sound*, or its source may be outside the film frame as *offscreen* or *asynchronous sound*. Whether offscreen or onscreen, *diegetic sound* has its source in the narrative world of the film (such as when a character breaks into song), whereas *nondiegetic sound* has its source outside that world (such as in the background music of an orchestral score during a romantic scene). It can even precede or follow the image to which it is linked as a *sound bridge* (when a character's remark, for example, forms a bridge into the next image).

As with the analysis of visual details in a film, a precise vocabulary and terminology always advance the analysis of film sound, and some useful technical terms for discussing film sound include the following:

- *Sound continuity* describes the scoring and mixing of sound to create a unified atmosphere or tone in a scene or sequence.
- *Sound montage* composes different pieces of sound to create disjunctions and unexpected relations between those sounds.

- *Ambient sound* describes the background noises or music that surround the main action and dialogue.
- *Overlapping dialogue* is a simultaneous mixing and overlapping of characters' speech.
- *Voice-off* originates in a speaker who was or will be seen onscreen but is not at the time the voice is heard.
- *Voice-over* is the voice of a narrator or commentator who typically is not part of the story or diegesis and cannot be heard by the characters. In conventional documentaries, this transcendent voice is often referred to as "the voice of God."
- *Narrative cueing* is the use of a sound or piece of music to support a moment or motif in the story, such as a romantic violin motif when two characters meet. When these cues are sudden and especially dramatic, they are sometimes called *stingers*.

Throughout film history, one can find movies in which the sound alone would make a major topic for analysis. A well-known example, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), sets up a complex opposition between the graceful music of Bach on the sound track and the tormented story of Bach's physical and financial troubles. Francis Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) recounts the story of a man who specializes in sound surveillance, who tries to discover the truth through sound alone, and who finally loses all faith in the visual world (Figure 3.10). Some of the most fascinating and provocative uses of sound are found in films of the early 1930s, when sound was first being introduced into the movies. In one early sound film, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935), Hitchcock employs sound as a central element in the plot: At a critical moment, he creates a dramatic *sound match* by connecting a woman's scream and the whistle of a locomotive to link disparate images.

To write about sound, one must first learn to attend to sound—truly to hear it. This does not mean that the more obvious or dramatic uses of sound in film—in movies with the lavish and complex sound tracks found in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007) or in films organized around musical performances such as *Shut Up and Play the Hits* (2012), Dylan Southern's account of the last-ever LCD Soundsystem concert—cannot inspire good essays. They certainly can (Figures 3.11). But because a good essay is one that reveals intuitive, careful, and discriminating thinking, a good essay on sound will often attend to what might normally escape a normal viewer and listener.

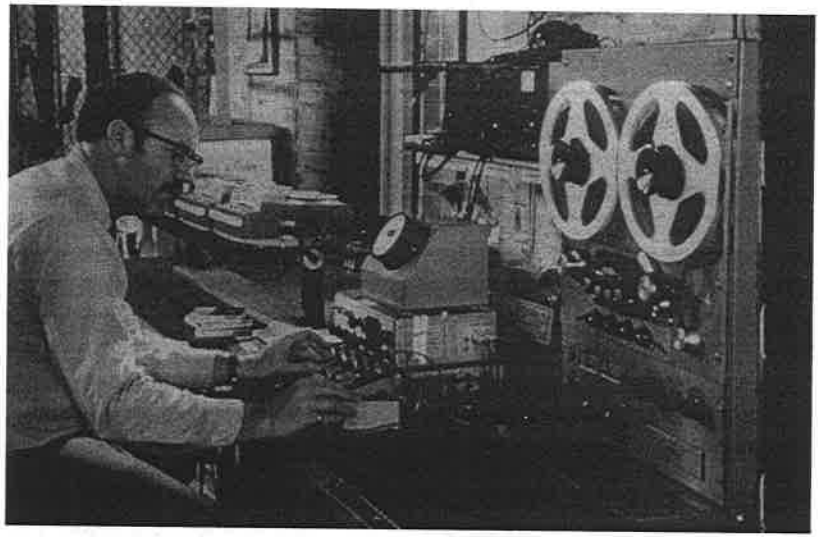

Figure 3.10 In *The Conversation*, sound identifies a primary theme in the film and its complex soundscape.

A writer about sound in film might therefore begin by bluntly asking the following:

- What is the relation of the sound to the image in specific scenes or sequences? How might the answer to that question be refined to reveal the aims, achievements, or even failures of sound in the movie?
- Is the sound used to link images, or does the sound have the conventional role of beginning and terminating with the image?
- Does sound ever become more important than the image, and what is the reason for this unusual strategy?
- Do the musical numbers in a musical have any special relation to the narrative structure (for instance, do they occur when the characters need to escape into fantasy)?
- Why does the dialogue of the characters overlap or seem mumbled in some recent movies so that it is difficult to understand the characters? Does the dialogue serve some other purpose than to help tell the story?
- What role does silence play in this movie?
- Are there sound motifs that identify the characters or actions?

Figure 3.11 ...*In There Will Be Blood* (2007), the complex soundscape creates a would of pounding and explosive violence.

- Does the rhythm of the sound support or serve as counterpoint to the rhythm of the editing?
- If you had to pick three key sound sequences from this movie, which would they be, and why?

These questions are only a sample of the many inquiries that movie sound and particular movies might inspire. Listen to all film sound and write about it with the same curiosity and suspicion exhibited by the characters in Jean-Luc Godard's *Every Man for Himself* (1980), who continually hear background music and wonder where it is coming from and why. Here a renown French filmmaker (and early innovator with sound), René Clair, writing in 1929, detailed one of the first successes with sound in the cinema:

> Of all the films now showing in London, *Broadway Melody* is having the greatest success. This new American film represents the sum total of all the progress achieved in sound films since the appearance of *The Jazz Singer* two years ago. For anyone who has some knowledge of the complicated technique of sound recording, this film is a marvel. Harry Beaumont, the director, and his collaborators (of whom there are about fifteen, mentioned by name in the credit titles, quite apart from the actors) seem to delight in playing with all the difficulties of visual and sound recording. The actors move, walk, run, talk, shout, and whisper, and their movements and voices are reproduced with a flexibility which would seem miraculous if we did not know that science and meticulous organization have many other miracles in store for us. In this film, nothing is left to chance. Its makers have worked with the precision of engineers, and their achievement is a lesson to those who still imagine that the creation of a film can take place under conditions of chaos known as inspiration.
>
> In *Broadway Melody*, the talking film has for the first time found an appropriate form: it is neither theater nor cinema, but something altogether new. The immobility of planes, that curse of talking films, has gone. The camera is as mobile, the angles are as varied as in a good silent film. The acting is first-rate, and Bessie Love talking manages to surpass the silent Bessie Love whom we so loved in the past. The sound effects are used with great intelligence, and if some of them still seem superfluous, others deserve to be cited as examples.
>
> For instance, we hear the noise of a door being slammed and a car driving off while we are shown Bessie Love's anguished face watching from a window the departure which we do not see. This short scene in which the whole effect is concentrated on the actress's face, and which the silent cinema would have had to break up in several visual fragments, owes its excellence to the "unity of place" achieved through sound. In another scene we see Bessie Love lying thoughtful and sad; we feel that she is on the verge of tears; but her face disappears in the shadow of a fade-out, and from the screen, now black, emerges a single sob.
>
> In these two instances the sound, at an opportune moment, has replaced the shot. It is by this economy of means that the sound film will most probably secure original effects (93–94).

ANIMATION, 3D, AND NEW MEDIA

In recent years and as part of the larger digital revolution, new media and new technologies have become a major part of film and media cultures that extend or cross the borders of traditional narrative cinema. Although animated films have been a part of film history since its beginning—to take one important example—digital animation processes developed and refined in the last fifteen years have generated a renaissance of animated movies—from *Toy Story* (1995) to *Monsters University* (2013)—capable of creating more elaborate and sophisticated images than ever before. One result of the expanding vision of animated cinema has been the development of narratives with bilevel addresses whose stories can speak at once to children and adults, especially apparent in Japanese anime films such as the two *Ghost in the Shell* films 1996, 2004). Yet, whether