

## C. HOW TO VIEW A FILM

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The film historian Christian Metz once said: "Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand." Indeed, since the film image may resemble very much the image of reality as we see it every day, it is easy to mistake representation for reality. Therefore, when we turn to analyzing a film, it is important to focus on how a specific film *constructs* a certain reality: how does it produce meaning on the visual as well as the narrative level? And how does it engage the viewer in producing a certain meaning? Understanding film as a *system of signs*, here is a set of questions that helps us break down that system.

### 1. Questions Concerning Narrative and Dramatic Development

What does the film's title signify or suggest? What are the film's major narrative units? In what time sequence are they presented (chronological, juggled, with flashbacks/projections; is there a narrative frame)? Are there substantial time gaps between scenes? Are there subplots that comment on the main plot? Is the story presented uninterrupted, or is the story interrupted by songs, chorus, narrator, direct address to the audience (i.e., is the illusion of the film broken)? What are the main locations of the film? In what relationship do they stand to one another? What characters are associated with the different locales? Are characters rounded or flat? What motivates their actions (freedom, money, justice, love, fear)? Does the film give reasons for their acting in certain ways? How is their character revealed to us? Can certain characters be grouped together? Which characters change in the course of the film? How is change brought about? How is the final outcome of the film anticipated? Are there early

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"How to View a Film," from *A User's Guide to German Cultural Studies*, ed. Scott Denham, Irene Kacandes, and Jonathan Petropoulos (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), may be reproduced as needed.

signs of what is to come (e.g., foreshadowing)? Are all the strands of the plot resolved, or are there loose ends? What main oppositions are explored in the film?

### 2. Questions Concerning the Historical and Sociological Context

What is the relationship of the historical time depicted in the film to the time in which it was made? Does the film deal with a conflict still unresolved in our time and culture? Does it consciously present itself as a social statement? Does the film intend to take on controversial matters in a provocative way? Does it offer fictional alternatives to set patterns, or does it merely reaffirm the status quo? To what sort of audience does the film cater? How does the film deal with issues of gender? Do gender roles seem natural or constructed? Do men influence narrative action more than women? Is the female body a particular point of focus? Does the film assume a male spectator? a female spectator? How does the film deal with issues of race and ethnicity? Does the film reaffirm or challenge stereotypical representations of race?

### 3. Questions Concerning Form and Style

A film introduces its formal trajectory during the first ten shots: it is therefore important to focus on the opening sequence: what expectations does the title of the film arouse (e.g., regarding genre or style)? What do we know about the film beforehand (ads, posters, stars, trailers)? How does the credit sequence lead us into the film (if at all)? What are the signals given during the opening sequence regarding: location; perspective (who is looking at whom?); movement of characters; dialog (who speaks first? to whom? what?); camera movement (outside-inside, from above or below); camera distance (long, medium, or close shot); camera stasis (long or short takes); camera angle (high or low, straight on); lighting (high key, low key, flat); editing (do images flow? are there interruptions?); music (diegetic or nondiegetic); noise and sound? Are there certain images or sounds associated with certain characters? Do certain stylistic and technical devices recur? Do they develop in their repetition? Does the film follow certain conventions (national, generic, historical)? Does it try to play with or subvert our expectations? Does the film quote other films, books, songs, or texts? How likely is it that the audience will "get" these references? Is the film a literary adaptation? How does the film compare to other films by the same director? What is the "realism" of the film: does it aim to construct the impression of the real world, or does it foreground a sense of itself as a framed view of things? Is the film self-reflexive (does it turn back on itself and comment on its working as a fictional product)?