 Resource 1 - Analysing Bright Star

Guide for Analysing a Film

(Adapted from M. Goldberg, 2014)

Meaning

| Elements | Explanation/questions | Bright Star examples |
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| Themes and tropes | The broad ideas and allusions (themes) established by repetition of technical and linguistic means (tropes) through the film (for example, power and control, transcendence through romantic achievement, and so on) |  |
| Intent/message | Sometimes this is obvious. (Just because the message is obvious, doesn’t mean that the film is simple, or that there is not a contradictory subtext.)  However, the filmmakers aren’t sure of their message, or the intended message becomes clouded along the way. At other times, the filmmakers intend one message and many in the audience interpret the film differently. |  |
| Metaphor and metonymy/symbolism | Similar to literary interpretation, only consider all aspects of the film – linguistic, visual, aural.  Metaphors are elements that represent more than their literal meaning (for example, the rose petals in American Beauty).  Metonyms are elements that are similar or the same (for example, in the final scene of The Grapes of Wrath, Tom Joad represents the lonely battle of activists and Ma represents the resilience of “the people”; or when a part of the whole – such as a close-up of a woman’s leg represents women as sexual objects).  Metaphors and metonyms only gain relevance if they are repeated in significant ways or connected with the larger meaning of the film. (Avoid simplistic equations such as the white table symbolises A; the high angle shot of a character symbolised B). |  |
| Subtext | The often numerous messages a film conveys beneath the surface; sometimes intended, often unintended, and sometimes conveying a different or contradictory message than the intended message.  Look especially for ironies, contradictions, interesting juxtapositions, or if something initially doesn’t seem to “make sense”.  Subtext is usually developed through the use of figurative elements like metaphor and metonymy. |  |

Basic elements of film

| Elements | Explanation/questions | Bright Star examples |
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| Title/opening credits | Titles are chosen carefully – consider alternatives and why this title was chosen; consider ambiguities in the title (“His Girl Friday”, a film with a strong, independent female protagonist).  The opening credits establish a tone, and often are used to foreshadow events, themes, or metaphors – pay careful attention from the beginning. |  |
| Story/plot/narrative | The narrative provides the basic structure by which a feature film is understood. (Most documentaries also have narratives.)  The narrative consists of the story and the plot.  The story consists of all of the information conveyed by the film (either directly or by inference) assembled in chronological order to communicate the overall sense of what occurred in the film.  The diegesis is the entire world of the story. A film’s diegesis may have a different logic than the “real” world.  Diegetic elements are found explicitly or implicitly in the world of the story; non- or extra-diegetic elements (the soundtrack, the title, a voice-over, an audience’s expectations of a star’s persona) are outside the story.  The plot provides the cause and effect relations that cue the audience and create suspense, surprise, and fulfil expectations. While dialogue provides a good deal of information, pay attention to all the other audio and visual clues that convey information about the narrative.  In considering the narrative structure, note whether the film follows a standard chronological narrative or not, and how time is used.  What are the key moments and how are they established?  What are the climaxes and anticlimaxes?  How far ahead is the audience in understanding what is happening to the characters than the characters themselves are?  What propels the story forward?  What is the pace of the narrative?  How do earlier parts of the narrative set up later parts?  Where are the key emotive moments when the audience is frightened, enraged, enraptured, feeling vindicated, and so forth, and how has the narrative helped to establish these feelings?  Is it a change of knowledge (when characters or the audience become aware of new information) which shifts the hierarchy of knowledge (the relative amount of knowledge characters and the audience have)?  Does the narrative have a coherent unity, or does it leave the audience feeling unfulfilled or confused? |  |
| Motivation | “Justification given in the film for the presence of an element. This may appeal to the viewer’s knowledge of the real world, to genre conventions, to narrative causality, or to a stylistic pattern within the film.” (Bordwell, Thompson) Discovering the underlying motivation of the narrative often helps explain why audience expectations are fulfilled (or if poorly motivated, unfulfilled). |  |
| Motif | The repetition of an element in ways that acquire symbolic meaning for the element.  A motif can be a technical feature (a shot angle, a lighting set up), a sound or piece of dialogue or music, or an object. |  |
| Parallelism | Two or more scenes that are similar to each other but which gain meaning because of their differences. |  |
| Characterisation | Who are the central characters?  How are minor characters used?  Are characters thinly or fully drawn, and why?  Who in the audience is meant to relate to which characters, and what sort of emotion (fear, pleasure, anxiety) are audience members meant to feel because of the identification?  Is there a clear or ambivalent hero/heroine or villain?  What values do the characters represent, and do they change during the film?  Are the characters meant to play a particular “type” and do they play against type at any time? |  |
| Point of view | Is the film in general told from a particular character’s point of view, or is it “objective”?  Is the film’s perspective primarily intellectual or emotional, visionary or “realistic”?  Within the film, is a particular shot viewed from a character’s point of view (“subjective shot”), and how does the camera technically reinforce the point of view?  Who is the audience meant to be focusing on at a particular moment? |  |

Mise-en-scene

(Everything going on within the frame outside of editing and sound)

| Elements | Explanation/questions | Bright Star examples |
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| Setting and sets | Is the scene shot in a studio sound stage or “on location”?  How is the setting integrated into the action, both the larger background and particular props?  How is the setting used in composing the shot (verticals and horizontals, windows and doors, the ever popular slats of shades, mirrors, and so on)?  How do particular settings (vast mountain ranges, cluttered urban setting) function as signs in order to convey narrative and ideological information? How are colours used? |  |
| Acting style | Is the style more obviously mannered (“classical”); intense and psychologically driven (“method”); less affectations and more “natural”?  Do particular actors have their own recognisable style or type, and how do the filmmakers use the audience’s expectations, either by reaffirming or challenging these expectations?  What expectations do “stars” bring to their roles?  Do they fulfil or challenge these expectations (playing against type)? |  |
| Costumes | Note contrasts between characters, changes within film; use of colours. This also includes physiques, hair styles, and so on. |  |
| Lighting | Key Light – main lighting, usually placed at a 45 degree angle between camera and subject.  Fill Light – auxiliary lights, usually from the side of the subject, which softens or eliminates shadows and illuminates areas not covered by the Key Light.  High Key Lighting is when all the lights are on (typical of musicals and comedies).  Low Key Lighting is when one or more of the fill lighting is eliminated, creating more opportunity for shadows.  High contrast lighting refers to sharp contrast between light and dark; low contrast refers to shades of grey.  Hard lighting creates a harsh light; soft lighting creates a muted, usually more forgiving lighting. “Hard” characters often get hard lighting, and visa versa.  Highlighting or spotlighting – pencil-thin beams of light used to illuminate certain parts of a subject, often eyes or other facial features.  Backlighting – placing the main source of light behind the subject, silhouetting it, and directing the light toward the camera.  Toplighting – lighting from above. Lighting and camera angle are the key means of creating shadows and shadings in black and white films, which are important elements of the overall mise-en-scene when conveying meaning.  All of the above terms are bipolar, when in fact many lighting setups lie somewhere in between.  Diffuser/filter – a gelatin plate that is placed in front of light to change the effect. (Whether to cast a shadow or soften the light, for instance.) |  |

Cinematography

| Elements | Explanation/questions | Bright Star examples |
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| Cinematography | The camera work that records the mise-en-scene between edits.  Each shot represents many choices made by the filmmakers.  Why have they made these choices? What do these choices represent? |  |
| Tone | Are the colours bright, sharp colours? Grainy, black and white? Or hazy?  If black and white when colour was available, why would the filmmakers make this choice? |  |
| Film speed | Is slow or fast motion used, or both, and why? |  |
| Camera angle | The angle at which the camera is pointed at the subject: low (shot from below), high (shot from above), or eye-level (includes extreme low and high angle shots). This creates the angle of vision – the point of view – for the audience, and is often used to establish character’s level of power and control (high angle shots can make character seem diminished), but there are many other uses as well.   * Tracking, panning and tilt – Tracking shot moves the camera either sideways or in and out. The camera can be mounted on a “dolly”, “handheld” to create a jerkier effect, mounted on a crane and moved in all directions within a limited range, or in a helicopter, train, car, plane, and so forth for other effects. Panning swings the camera horizontally, tilt swings it vertically. These effects are often used simultaneously. * Angle of view/lens – The angle of the shot created by the lens. A wide angle lens presents broad views of subjects, and makes possible large depth of field (many planes of action) as well as a deep focus shot. A normal lens (35mm) can only focus on one plane at a time. A telephoto lens has a very narrow angle of views which acts like a telescope to focus faraway subjects and flattens the view. * Focus – “Shallow focus” uses sharp focus on the characters or things in one area of the shot and soft (blurred) focus in the rest. “Deep focus” brings out the detail in all areas of the shot. “Focus in” gradually “zooms” in on the subject, “focus out” gradually “zooms” out (these are known as “focus pulls”). Rack focus is an extremely fast focus pull that changes focus from one image/character to another by changing the focus to a different plane. * Shot distance – full shot, three-quarters shot, mid- or half-shot, close-up and extreme close-up for shots of bodies; (extreme) long-shot, mid-shot, (extreme) close-up to describe more general shots. Can be used to create sense of isolation (extreme long shot of character in a desert) or great pain, anger or joy (extreme close-up of character’s face). Choice of lens (see above) can create strange effects (wide angle close-up extends and distorts image at the edges, like a funhouse mirror; telephoto lens used in long shots flatten distances and puts background out of focus). * Frame – the border that contains the image. Can be “open” (with characters moving in and out); “moving” (using focus, tracking, panning); “canted” (at odd angles, unbalanced shot composition). * Shot composition – the relation of the elements of mise-en-scene to the frame. Small frames used with close-ups can create sense of claustrophobia, often enhanced by the set (low ceilings, numerous props and furnishings) and lighting. The set can also be used to frame the shot in other ways (lamps, flags, and so forth on either side; a bed out-of-focus at the bottom of the frame) as can characters (as signs of intimidation, marginality, support, and so on). These types of shots are unbalanced. Look also for shots that are perfectly symmetrical. |  |

Montage

| Elements | Explanation/questions | Bright Star examples |
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| Montage | Editing (“cuts”) within scenes and in the film in general, creating continuities and discontinuities, juxtapositions, and narrative structure. The standard Hollywood practice is to make cuts “invisible”, and thus they are often difficult to pick up within a scene. “Montage” is also the term used for a series of quick cuts from a variety of locations that cohere narratively or thematically (the baptism scene in ‘The Godfather I’ is a good example). “Accelerated montage” is what it sounds like (the prison escape scene in ‘His Girl Friday’).   * Editing pace – within a sequence, from long takes (the opening credits of ‘The Graduate’) to “accelerated montage” (the chase scene of ‘Bullit’); within the film in general, to establish overall tone. Since the “natural” state of a Hollywood film movement, long takes coupled with a still camera can be used to increase intensity of a shot, make the audience uncomfortable, and so on. * Establishing shot – initial shot in a scene that establishes location, characters, and purpose of the scene. * Shot/counter shot – standard device used during dialogue between two characters; often starts with a “two-shot” of the two characters, then moves back and forth. Combined with camera angle, shot distance, and pace to establish point of view. Note when this standard device is not used, and for what purpose. Note when the person speaking is not viewed, or only their back is viewed. * Reaction shot – quick cut to pick up character’s reaction to an event. Lack of reaction shot when it seems logical should be noted. * Jump cut – a cut that occurs within a scene (rather than between scenes) that removes part of a shot. This shot is often done for effect by making the cut obvious and disrupting the invisible editing of Hollywood style. * Freeze frame – a freeze shot, which is achieved by printing a single frame many times in succession to give the illusion of a still photograph. * Crosscutting – a shot inserted in a scene to show action happening elsewhere at the same time. * Cutaway – a cut within a shot to a location that links the action of the shot and condenses time (for example, a reaction shot of a woman watching a man climb some stairs, cutting out a flight in between the shots). * Match cut – a cut in which two shots are linked by visual, aural, or metaphorical parallelism. * Scenes – An end of a scene is usually marked by a number of possible devices, including fade-ins and fade-outs (which may include a quick cut or a fade to black – note the length of time the blackout is maintained, which often implies significance of preceding scene, or else a long passage of time); wipe (a line moves across the screen, usually used in older fields); dissolve (a new shot briefly superimposed on an old shot), often used to express continuity or connections (for example, the “stump scene” in ‘Shane’). * Sequence – a series of scenes that fit together narratively or representationally. * Accelerated montage – a series of quick cuts that relate a variety of shots from different locations into a coherent story. |  |

Sound

| Elements | Explanation/questions | Bright Star examples |
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| Aural and oral | Sometimes non-dialogue sound is the hardest element to pick out and analyse, yet is often extremely important and subject to just as much of the filmmakers’ focus as other elements.  Note how sound it used – to underscore emotions, to alert the audience to an upcoming event, as an ironic counterpoint, and so on. Carefully created and edited sounds (including the use of silences) creates rich aural images the same way that mise-en-scene, shot composition, and montage create visual images. Note that sound is both part of the mise-en-scene and is a separate category of editing (since the audio track is separate from the video track). Direct sound refers to sound that is recorded at the time the scene is shot (usually dialogue, although audio inserts are possible. All audio inserts would be post-synchronous sound.)   * Post-synchronous sound refers to sound that is recorded and placed on the film audio track after the scene is shot (virtually all scores). Most non-dialogue sounds are inserted after production (for example, footsteps), as well as a fair amount of dialogue that is either inserted when characters are not shown speaking onscreen, or simply pasted over sections that are deemed to need improvement. * Diegetic sound is heard within the film’s diegesis (dialogue, a shot from a gun on screen). * Off-screen sound appears within the film’s diegesis but not within the frame (extending off-screen space). * Non-diegetic sound is heart outside of the film’s diegesis (such as film scores and voice-overs). A pop song that seems to be part of a soundtrack but is found to be coming from, say, a car radio, is a diegetic sound and is an element worth noting. * Simultaneous sound is heard at the same time the action happens on screen. * Non-simultaneous sound is heard before or after the action happens on-screen. |  |
| Dialogue | Is it overlapping, mumbled, very soft or loud?  Who dominates or controls the dialogue?  How does the dialogue contribute to the characterisation and meaning of the film? |  |
| Sound effects | This refers to both the effects themselves (a doorbell ringing) and the manipulation of the sound (stereo effects which move sounds across the sound spectrum, or balance sounds on one side or the other; filterning and manipulating sounds). |  |
| Score | The background music used throughout the film. The score often maintains and manipulates a similar theme at various times and is often used in relation to the narrative structure.  Particular motifs or themes may be used in relation to particular characters. |  |