Viewing Terms

A Practical Glossary for Film and TV Study

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chalkface

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Introduction

We live in a visual culture. From film and television to billboards, magazines and websites, we spend our days immersed in a sea of images and icons. The ability to decode, enjoy and evaluate visual messages is central to our daily lives. In our schools and colleges, *viewing* is now, quite properly, a part of the core curriculum. It takes its place alongside *reading* as a fundamental literacy skill.

This book is concerned with exploring one aspect of our viewing experience: the world of film and television texts. No longer confined to specialist media courses, film and TV texts are now a part of mainstream study in English, literature and cultural studies programs. As most teachers are aware, students come to such texts with great enthusiasm and a wealth of viewing experience. But the study of film and TV texts nevertheless can be challenging. One reason for difficulty, ironically, is our collective virtuosity at reading particular visual texts. Our sophistication as viewers has enabled modern film-makers and television producers to create texts that appear almost seamless. The difficulties arise when we try to explain what it is that we do to make sense of such complex tapestries.

A second cause of difficulty is that our skill as viewers is nevertheless quite narrow. Hollywood blockbusters and prime time police dramas use a limited range of film codes and styles with which we have become thoroughly familiar. Faced with something different – an early film by Eisenstein or Murnau, or a modern Bollywood musical – we are likely to find we are struggling to comprehend. Serious film study confronts us with the same challenges as serious study of literature: the need to understand not only the texts that surround us day to day but also those that preceded them; the need to make comparisons across time and culture; the need to view familiar texts from unfamiliar perspectives. Engaging with film and television texts in this way calls for different kinds of knowledge: about social and historical contexts, about the evolution of film codes and technologies, about viewing practices – and these can be challenging areas of study. Compounding their difficulty is the often complex language of screen studies, which contains a great many specialised terms.

Viewing Terms aims to help teachers and students cope with this complex terminology, and with the task of developing a broader perspective on film and television texts. It addresses a selection of key terms and concepts and makes them accessible through explanations and activities. The goal is to help students develop more sophisticated understandings of the structure and operation of screen texts – to help them acquire *concepts and skills*, not just a vocabulary. With this in mind, most terms have been treated under carefully chosen headings rather than listed as isolated definitions. The key entries relate to cornerstone concepts in study, such as *mis-en-scène*, *montage*, *suture*, *the gaze*, and refer to theoretical frameworks such as *auteur theory*, *semiotics* and *spectator theory*. Also included as major entries is a selection of more general critical concepts such as *narrative*, *gender* and *desire*. Specific technical terms, such as *tilt*, *pan*, *dolly*, are treated within the context of these entries. In addition, a Quick Reference section provides brief definitions of terms and concepts, such as *Foley artist*, *gaffer*, and *grip*. By organising information in this way, the book provides a context for the terminology readers are acquiring.

Introduction

Viewing Terms aims also to *historicise* the study of film and television. It does this in two ways. First, by building historical detail into its explanations and examples, so that readers gain an understanding of the connections between technology, economics, culture and aesthetics in film and television. And second, by foregrounding the evolution of viewership, through the concept of *viewing practices*. The emphasis on viewing as a practice reflects a belief that we cannot claim to know how texts work and what effects they have in a culture without investigating the ways in which – and the conditions under which – they are actually viewed by audiences. Throughout the book, the concepts of *viewing practices* and *audience* are deployed as reference points against which purely theoretical claims must be tested. This move is very much in line with contemporary developments in film theory, where cognitive and empirical approaches now supplement the semiotic and psychoanalytic models that prevailed in previous decades.

While a certain amount of technical information is provided, *Viewing Terms* focuses mainly on the reading and analysis of film and TV. It does not aim to teach production techniques. In spite of this focus on analysis, the book aims to avoid levering screen texts into a general 'literary' model of textual criticism. This book's goal is to help the student learn to read screen texts on their own terms and not as variations on familiar literary forms. Teachers should also note that although the book covers concepts in both film and television, the focus on television is limited to narrative genres and TV movies, which have much in common with the textual forms and practices of film. Other important television genres and functions, such as news and current affairs, reality TV, game shows and the like, cannot be fully explored in a book of this scope, though they are mentioned in passing in a number of entries.

I hope that teachers and students will find *Viewing Terms* a useful reference, and one that helps make their study of film and TV texts more purposeful and more rewarding.

Brian Moon

Topic maps

These headings do not cover all of the terms in the book. Teachers and students may wish to add to the list under each heading, or develop their own charts for other topics to explore.

Topic	Key entries	
The elements and 'grammar' of screen texts:	Sign Codes & conventions Shot Camera angle Camera distance	Camera movement Mise en scène Montage Point of view Editing
Film form and genre	Narrative Mise en scène Montage	Editing Genre
Viewing practices and audience	Audience Viewing practices Gaze	Suture Ideology Feminist theory
Cinema aesthetics	Realism Expressionism Lighting	Mise en scène Theme Values
Technical aspects of production	Shot Mise-en-scène Editing Directing	Lighting Camera distance Camera movement
Political / ideological dimensions	Ideology Subjectivity Gender Suture	Apparatus theory Feminist theory Postcolonial theory
Film theory	Film theory Auteur theory Structuralism & poststructuralism Apparatus theory Audience/spectator theory	Feminist theory Psychoanalytic theory Postcolonial theory Gender/queer theory

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Bold CAPITALS refer to main entry headings.
Terms in lower case are treated under the relevant main entry.

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