A Short List of Film Terms (adapted from Carnegie Mellon University)

Part of being a good film student is knowing the language of film. Here is a brief introduction to some of the most common terms you will run across in film analysis. It is by no means comprehensive, but it should give you some basic terms to use when speaking and writing about film.

narrative – A narrative loosely means a story. A narrative film generally tells a fictional story.

documentary – Usually used to describe a nonfiction film.

plot - Refers to all aspects of the narrative that we see on screen. For example, in the film *Jaws,* Chief Brody's talking to the town council on screen would be part of the plot.

story - Refers to all aspects of the narrative that we do not see on screen; these aspects may include events before, during, or even after the plot of the film. In *Jaws,* for instance, Chief Brody had been a police officer in the city prior to the film's beginning; this information is part of the story but not part of the plot.

diegesis - Refers to the narrative that we see on screen—the world that the characters inhabit as much as the plot of the film. The adjective *diegetic* refers to something the characters in the film could perceive, whereas *nondiegetic* refers to something they could not. For example, if a character in a film hears a siren wailing, that's a *diegetic* sound. But the film's soundtrack is usually something the characters don't hear, although the audience does. So that's called a *nondiegetic* sound.

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point of view – The perspective from which a narrative is told or how a shot is framed to reflect a character's viewpoint. (See point of view shot below).

mise-en-scène - Refers to everything in the frame of the film, which would include lighting, set, props, and the staging and movement of actors. The term derives from the theater, where it is used in a similar way.

setting - Like the literary term, this word refers to the time and place of the film. The setting for *The Usual Suspects*, for instance, is New York and Los Angeles at a time contemporary with the film's year of release (in this case, 1995).

set - This term refers to the actual construction in which the actors are filmed. In *The Usual Suspects*, for instance, a set might be the interrogation room in the film. Sets are usually built for a film, as opposed to shooting on location, where a scene is shot in the actual place in which it occurs in the film. If a film crew shot on location in Venice, Italy, for instance, they might actually be shooting the scene in gondolas on the canals. **Set** is also used generally, however, as

a designation for the place where a film is being shot. (So even in location shooting, the director would be “on the set” of his or her film every time he or she went to the place where the crew was shooting for that day.)

prop - Another term borrowed from theater. A prop is generally any object on a set, though clearly the objects that characters will touch become more important. A trumpet, for instance, might be part of the backdrop in a music store scene, but if a character is going to play the trumpet, the prop takes on more importance.

costumes - What the characters are wearing. Bear in mind that even if a character is wearing contemporary clothing (in some cases, the actors’ own clothing), that clothing is still considered a costume.

lighting - This term refers to the way in which lights are used for a given film. Lighting, in conjunction with the camera, sets the visual look for a film. The **key light** is the main light used for a scene; **back light** refers to a secondary source, usually placed behind the actors; and **fill** refers to a light placed to the side of the actors.

shot (and **close-up** v. **long shot**) - Generally, the smallest unit of unbroken film—can last from a few seconds to several minutes. The camera can move within a shot, but the second that the film makes a transition to another shot, the previous shot has ended. Alternatively, when used with certain adjectives, **shot** also refers to the distance from the camera to the subject, almost always the actor. In a **long shot** (or a **wide shot**), one can see the entire body of the actor and other elements in the scene; in a **medium shot**, one can see the actor from the waist up; in a **close-up**, one can see only the actor’s face. You might also see an **extreme close-up**

pan - The movement of a stationary camera on a horizontal axis. A camera on a tripod that moves from left to right (following a parade, for instance), would be panning.

tilt - The movement of a stationary camera on a vertical axis. A camera on a tripod that moves up and down (following a plane landing, for instance), would be performing a tilt.

tracking shot - The movement of the shot when the camera is no longer stationary. The term refers to the tracks that cameras were once rolled on when creating one of these shots.

handheld shot - Refers to a shot where the camera is held by the camera operator. Hand-held shots are often associated with a certain look, which is shaky, and most people associate the hand- held shot with a kind of documentary realism.

crane shot - A shot taken from a crane. You often see these shots at the beginning of a scene (using it as an establishing shot) or the end of a scene. The end of a movie, in fact, often uses a crane shot.

POV shot - Stands for "Point of View" shot. In this kind of shot, we are looking through the eyes of a character and seeing exactly what that character is seeing, giving a subjective view of the scene rather than an objective one.

high-angle shot, **low-angle shot** - These terms refer to camera placement. If a camera is looking down on an actor from a high vantage, it is a high-angle shot; these shots often make a character look smaller and more vulnerable. If a camera is placed very low to the ground and looks "up" at actors, it is a low-angle shot. Such shots can make characters look larger-than-life.

take (and **short** v. **long take**) - Generally, a take refers to the time a shot is begun to the time it stops. On a film set, a director might have to go through several takes before settling on the shot he or she wants (you have probably seen this in films before, with the clapboard and someone shouting "Take 12"--meaning they have done this shot eleven times before this one). A **short tak**e might be one or two seconds long, although contemporary films continue to use shorter and shorter takes of less than a single second. A **long take** would refer to a single unbroken shot that lasts for a larger amount of time--thirty seconds, for instance.

frame – In film analysis, the **frame** usually means the four sides of the film as it is being projected. We can talk about what's inside the frame and what's left out.

screen - Often used to refer to what we see within the frame. On-screen action, for instance, is something we can see, whereas off-screen action might be something we hear but which takes place outside the frame. Screen also refers to the actual physical screen on which we project a film.

shallow/soft focus – Focus refers to how clear the shot is. With shallow or soft focus, the main or background image might appear blurry; this can add a soft or dream-like feel to the shot.

deep focus - Refers to a shot in which everything, including the background, is in focus. This type of shot is much more difficult to achieve, since the entire set must be adequately lit, designed, etc.

editing - Refers to the way that individual shots are connected to one another to make the film.

montage - Usually refers to a series of shots edited together to show a longer activity evolving in a shorter amount of time. A sports film, for instance, might have a training montage, where the character becomes much better at the sport (the film might condense three months of training, for instance, into a two-minute montage of jogging, lifting weights, etc.).

transition - Fefers to the way a shot moves from one to the next. Films use several different kinds of transitions, including:

- **cut** - simply splicing one shot to the next. The most common kind of transitions, cuts are used extensively in editing.

• **dissolve** - when one shot "bleeds" into another. In other words, the end of the first shot is still visible as the second shot becomes visible. Dissolves are often (but not always) used to show a smaller amount of time passing than a fade in or fade out.

• **fade in**, **fade out** - Going from black (nothing on the screen) to a shot (fade in), or going from a shot to black (fade out). These transitions usually (but not always) connote a larger amount of time passing or might also be used to signal a break in the narrative (the end of an act, for instance).

• **wipe** - one shot "wipes" across the screen and replaces another. You do not see wipes used overly often in contemporary films, although some directors use them often (the *Star Wars* films use wipes consistently).

scene - A series of shots that form a cohesive unit of narrative. For instance, in *Rear Window*, we might discuss the **scene** where Grace Kelly kids Jimmy Stewart about not marrying her yet. Films have both acts and scenes, like theater, although they are often less obvious because there are rarely intermissions or accompanying programs in film. Screenwriters typically use acts when writing a film. Scholars, however, almost never discuss an **act** of a film, whereas **scene** is used extensively.

establishing shot - Refers to the shot at a beginning of a film or scene that establishes location and often time. For instance, if the setting of a film is 1940s Occupied France, the film might open with a shot of the Eiffel Tower with two Gestapo soldiers in the foreground.

zoom-in, zoom-out - Using certain lenses, the camera can move more closely into a subject (the zoom-in) or pull back (the zoom- out).

sound - Everything we hear from the audio track of the film.

music - Any music that comes from the audio track. Music might be diegetic (a song on the radio of a car a character is driving) or nondiegetic (scary music when a villain appears on screen).