

How to Read a Film

Rona Murray

The following guide will consider:

- German film culture
- Types of German film
- How to approach reading and studying a film

Film is an important aspect of German culture. Studying the films of any country can give you a powerful indication of what those audiences enjoy and what that society feels like at the moment to those living in it. Contemporary German films, in particular, often show you something of the history that its current population has lived through and the impact of recent social changes.

In reading any kind of film, it's useful to be aware first about the conditions of production. The budget of a film will determine its style e.g. whether it uses stars or a variety of locations or contains expensive sets and costumes. By style we also mean the complexity and variety of its shots, its use of colour and lighting or the pace and sophistication of its editing style or its soundscape. In the U.K., we're very familiar with Hollywood productions which have **high production values** i.e. they have large budgets which are clearly visible up on the screen in the quality of the sets, in their special effects and in the appearance of 'A' list stars. Certain kinds of popular German cinema will follow this model, containing German stars and high production values. Budgets in Europe are generally more limited than those available to the big Hollywood studios, so large productions are often co-productions between a group of studios (often from different countries).

A film's aesthetic may be partly determined by its budget but also the subject matter may suit different style choices. Directors may choose to work with lower production values because it suits the content of their story and their own values regarding filmmaking. If they wish, for example, to tell a story about ordinary people, they may want their audiences to feel strong empathy with the characters. If it is shot in very naturalistic light, with typical domestic settings and non-stars in the main roles, the film will appear more convincing and authentic, more like our real lives. Examining films in detail, therefore, is immediately useful because it helps us to understand the feeling the director / writer wants to convey about the story overall.

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At A-Level, you will be studying German films that were historically or socially significant, but you could also look at films which are the popular, mainstream films released in Germany. Thinking about a film in its context – social, economic, historical – is an important part of your study of German culture. This guide, therefore, is intended to help deepen your analysis of relevant German cultural questions raised by these films by increasing your understanding of the technical and structural features of film production.

‘Reading’ a Film: A General Introduction

A **close reading** of a film means spending time examining its elements and how they work together, in order to produce a detailed analysis of aspects such as narrative, theme and character. We can relate this to studying German or English Literature, where you spend time exploring the language (written words) and the structure (the way the story is ordered) to understand more fully how the author intended the story to be read.

Film analysis is very similar because you still study the structure of the story but now the language is comprised of several elements (e.g. images, sound, written text). Studying these in some detail helps to open up what the authors (director, writer, cinematographer, actors) meant to create. In Film Studies, by the way, we tend to refer to the director as the author (from ‘auteur theory’) more than any of the other contributors. This is misleading, since films are made up of all these different elements, which we call ‘film language.’ What follows is an explanation of key aspects of film language which will help you with carrying out a ‘close reading’ of the film.

Film Language

Film language can be broken down as follows. Each scene / series of scenes needs someone to think about these key, technical elements:

- Mise-en-scène
- Camerawork
- Performance
- Sound
- Editing

When you analyse the whole film, certain overarching elements which run throughout the story emerge:

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- Narrative structure
- The characters
- The film's themes
- Its genre

One useful point to note now is that the first set of elements directly contributes to creating the second. Take characters, for example. Not only is performance (the actor's voice, body etc) important but also choices in lighting (are they brightly lit / cast into shadow?) or clothing and props (are they always seen smoking nervously?). All these affect the way characters are interpreted by the audience. The following section gives a brief explanation of each key technical feature.

Mise-en-scène

A French theatrical phrase which literally means '**placed on the stage**' and in Film Studies has been used to refer to all the elements that appear within the camera frame. These, therefore, include **setting, costume, props, colour and performance**. In analysing films, remember that the production design and costume design department, the lighting specialists and the actors have all made decisions about how to present the scene to the camera. It is best to consider what the overall effect is intended to be and recognise that nothing has been left to chance.

Useful questions to consider are:

- Is there an intention to create mood through the use of colour in the scene?
- How are all the elements (figures, props) composed in the film frame? Is something given emphasis by occupying the centre? How might foreground and background elements relate to each other?
- Overall, does the production design lean towards creating a sense of realism (of creating a world that looks familiar) or is it hyper-real or expressionistic (with exaggerated features)? Either of these styles – **realist or expressionist** – may strongly link to the themes in or the genre of the film.

Mise-en-scène: Mini Case Study 1

In *Barbara* (2012 Dir: Christian Petzold), the world of East Germany has been evoked by the use of old-fashioned laboratory equipment (Figure 1) in the hospital. Barbara, however, is smoking western cigarettes, something her fellow doctor notices immediately. Small details in the props, then, tell us about the world these characters inhabit (the East is less advanced and somehow living in the past) and about the character themselves (Barbara has connections to the West).

An interesting point here, and in Petzold's film *Yella* (2008), is that these are relatively unstaged locations that they have found in the former East at the time of shooting. This tells us that less has changed for parts of Germany since unification than might be expected.



Figure 1 *Barbara* (2012)

Mise-en-scène: Mini Case Study 2

Das Leben der Anderen (2006) uses setting and props to contrast the life of the Stasi spy with his subject, the subversive writer. The film is very **expressionistic** in its use of colour (Figure 2). In this film, the cold, emotionless world of the Stasi spy is emphasised through the greys and browns in the mise-en-scène and his flat and offices are bare, cold places. The writer's flat, by contrast, is comfortably cluttered with warm colours (yellow, orange) in clothes and furnishings to emphasise it is a place of warmth and friendship. (Lighting filters also play their part here to accentuate this contrast – see camerawork.)

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Figure 2 *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006)

Camerawork

It is useful to be aware of how shots have been constructed because of the way that they position the spectator e.g. we might be very close to the action or a long way away from a character. A camera may also move (**track**) to follow the action or circle (**dolly**) around a character. One key question is whether we are placed close to a character so that we are encouraged to read their facial expressions / sense their thoughts or to track a particular character. Together with **screen time** (how much of the film they appear in), this influences how we feel about them. For example, a character we are placed close to – and who we follow for a large amount of the film – stimulates feelings of empathy / sympathy towards them as we seem to know them and know their feelings. Directors can manipulate this as well. Sometimes, a character treated in this way is not sympathetic or appealing. Since we are used to the convention above, this creates some confusion in audience response when we don't feel as sympathetic as we feel we should do.

Lighting and colour are also important aspects of cinematography. Linked closely to use of colour *mise-en-scène*, it can work in a similar way to create mood, suggest something about a character or a location. Think of the horror genre, where the use of **low-key** lighting creates strong contrasts between areas of light and dark – and, therefore, constructs the eerie, unnerving shadows out of which anything might emerge.

Camera framing is also worth considering. In drawing the box around a scene – what has a director/cinematographer kept in or left out? How are those key elements in the frame arranged? What is in the foreground or the background? What is central? And, outside that box, what is suggested as **off-screen**

space just outside the frame? The use of **low** or **high angles** can affect how powerful an object or person appears on screen.

Other cinematography issues include **film stock**. How does a film shot in black and white compare to one in colour? The former often connotes a feeling of realism, because of its strong associations with documentary work.

Useful questions to consider are:

- As with production design, does the use of lighting aim to create very naturalistic scenes? (This is done by using **high-key** lighting techniques, ones which fill in the shadows.) Does it aim to create a world we recognise or one which seems alien or exaggerated in some way?
- What mood does lighting and colour aim to create?
- Where is the **viewer placed** by the camera? Are we close or far from the action? Are we frustratingly removed from a key piece of action, unable to understand exactly what is going on? Who, in the frame, appears to motivate camera movement? A character that appears to **draw the movement of the camera** immediately becomes more powerful or dominant in terms of a scene's dynamics.

Camerawork: Mini Case Study 1

In *Abscheid von Gestern* (1966 Dir: Alexander Kluge), made as part of the New German Cinema wave of the 1960s, the shooting style is much less formal or composed as part of the director's intention to imply that this is an authentic story about this young girl's struggle to survive. In Figure 3, her face is not central to the frame and people come and go on the street behind her. This increases a sense of her as one of the anonymous crowd of ordinary people in the city. The use of black and white, a budgetary decision as well as an artistic one for a young filmmaker, adds to the documentary feel of the film because audiences then (and now) were very familiar with that kind of film stock in documentary films. It might also link Kluge's film to those of the influential French New Wave or Italian Neo-Realism, both of which shot their revolutionary films in black and white film stock.

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Figure 3 *Abschied von Gestern* (1966)

Camerawork: Mini Case Study 2

In *Good Bye Lenin* (2003 Dir: Wolfgang Becker), Alex tries to keep former East Germany alive for his mother who is seriously ill. He avoids the shock to her of reunification by pretending it has not happened. (The film is an example of what became known as **Ostalgie**, a certain kind of sentimental longing to return to the previous state once it was gone.) As he stages a Communist Party-style birthday celebration in her bedroom, a huge banner advert for Coca-Cola is being unfurled in the background, comically demonstrating that all his efforts at pretence are pointless (Figure 4).



Figure 4 *Good Bye Lenin* (2003)

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Performance

Although performance is often included within *mise-en-scène*, it is worth considering separately because German cinema has produced some quite distinct acting styles. German Expressionism, for example, evolved as a film movement after the First World War and reflected in its film style the angst and self-torment that characterised the German psyche in this period. This is visible in the acting performances, which reflected the inner turmoil felt with frequent staccato, violent actions.

Theatricality can be found in melodramas such as those by Rainer Werner Fassbinder where the acting styles reflect the intense experiences that those characters are enduring. Other films, such as Wim Wenders' *Im Lauf der Zeit* (1976), show actors using a very naturalistic, understated performance as part of the tale of ordinary people leading ordinary lives.

Stars and star value are part of considering performance. Klaus Kinski worked with Werner Herzog in a famously combustible relationship but which produced riveting, dramatic central characters on screen. Marlene Dietrich's performances in the films of Josef von Sternberg, such as *Der Blaue Engel* (1930), are very formal and stilted particularly in their speech delivery which lends a feeling of irony to her attitude (to the male characters around her or to her situation). This style means that Dietrich's women characters powerfully dominate the film narrative.

Useful questions to consider are:

- How is the **inner state** of a character conveyed through the actor's physical performance? What gestures do they use to construct the personality? What tones of voice?
- Is a performance theatrical, **expressive** or **naturalistic**, even minimalist? How much **dialogue** is used to convey character?
- If a character's interiority and psychological state remains difficult or indecipherable, what purpose might this serve?

Performance: Mini Case Study 1

In *Fitzcarraldo* (Dir: Herzog 1982), Kinski plays a man in the grip of an obsession to bring opera to his remote Peruvian home. To do this, he must make money by harvesting rubber, only accessible by heaving his hired boat over a mountain. He does this, with the help of the area's native population when most of his crew has deserted. Kinski's performance portrays the extreme madness but also the grandeur and bravery of such an obsessive man with a feeling he remains just in control throughout the film (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Klaus Kinski in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982)

Performance: Mini Case Study 2

The theatrical performances of German Expressionism, as in *Nosferatu* (1922 Dir: F.W. Murnau) are expressionistic and exaggerated. The vampire's threat is conveyed through his rigid body and his blank facial expression (Figure 6). A million miles away, perhaps, from the appearance of the actors in *Gespenster* (2003 Dir: Christian Petzold). Look more closely at Figure 7, however, and you will notice how the central character slouches and holds her arms awkwardly (connoting how she is generally shy and, here, feeling caught between the demands of the other two women).



Figure 6 *Nosferatu* (1922)



Figure 7 *Gespenster* (2005)

Sound

Sound is often unfairly ignored in film analysis. As well as **dialogue** (which communicates plot and character), other aspects of sound contribute to constructing the world of the film, the mood or convey something of a **character's interior world** without using **voiceover** or dialogue.

Taking **diegetic sound** (sound which appears to be generated from the film story world), background sound indicates the world people inhabit and brings that alive. For example, think of the electronic noises emanating from the machines in a typical spacecraft in the science fiction genre. This also settles the viewer very quickly into the expected genre since sound (like *mise-en-scène* or character type) can be a convention of a particular story style.

Non-diegetic sound such as music is sound which could not come out of the story space. Music is the most common and is generally used to establish a mood or establish a location. A traditional folk song on the soundtrack would indicate a rough idea of where the story was placed and also represent a particular kind of rural society, or be associated with a particular character or event (e.g. a musical theme played as a murderer enters). This last example is called a motif or leitmotif and its repetition can create anticipation of an event in the audience.

Useful questions to consider are:

- What kind of use does a particular film make of diegetic or non-diegetic sound? Does a film which only utilises diegetic sound tend to make the story world feel more realistic because of the absence of the persuasive, emotional soundtrack?
- If it appears, **how is voiceover used**? Does allowing the viewer to hear a character's internal thoughts bring us closer to that character? Do we trust this character – who is telling us their story – to be a **reliable narrator**?

Sound: Mini case study 1

In *Gegen die Wand* (2004), director-writer Fatih Akin makes use of traditional Turkish music throughout this story of Turkish-German immigrant families in Germany (Hamburg). The two protagonists marry so that the woman can escape her stifling home life. The film is punctuated throughout by musical interludes (Figure 8) provided by a traditional Turkish musical group and singer on the banks of the Bosphorus in Istanbul (the strait of water dividing Europe and Asia).



Figure 8 *Gegen die Wand* (2004)

These traditional songs represent the culture that the main protagonists arise out of, even as they live very modern lives in Germany. The second part of the story takes place in Istanbul and explores the power of cultural roots for each of the main characters. The audience, whatever their background, understands this power which the music has represented throughout the film.

Sound: Mini case study 2

Lichter is a story about the borderlands between Germany and other countries and follows several parallel stories of people forced to try to find a way across the border. In several sequences, there is a movement into different languages. In the sequence illustrated below (Figure 9), a police interview of an illegal

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immigrant moves from Polish to English to German. As the language keeps changing throughout the film, the unsettled nature of these people's lives is accentuated.



Figure 9 *Lichter* (2003)

Editing

Called 'the invisible art', editing (and editors) has suffered from being underrated in the film production process. In fact, this is the crucial point in construction of the story – its length, its order and its rhythm. Editing involves creating relationships between time and space in the story e.g. **parallel narratives** allow the audience to see two stories (which are usually connected) unfold alongside each other; creating a story in **flashback** establishes the likely conclusion of the story. Editing can construct useful juxtapositions. This means it can place images and sound side by side to link or contrast them. In **continuity editing**, the idea is to encourage the viewer to forget that the film is cutting and create a world they are completely engaged with. In **montage editing**, the images may contrast more obviously one to another so that the viewer is aware the film is cutting and moving them perhaps between different spaces or time periods. Continuity editing is the most common in mainstream cinema and encourages a feeling that the story world is 'real' (for the length of the film). Montage editing techniques may be utilised deliberately to make the viewer aware they are watching a film as part of a more **expressionistic** style. The alienation caused by this may be a way the filmmaker encourages us to think about the characters or the themes with greater objectivity.

Useful questions to consider are:

- How does editing determine the pace of the action? Does the story (or a particular sequence) appear to move fast or slow? How does this affect the viewing experience?
- Does a film contain any moments where you feel acutely aware that it is cutting and perhaps juxtaposing different images together? Why has this been done? Does it tell you anything more about a character or about a theme?

Editing: Mini case study 1



Figure 10 *Lola rennt* (1998)

Lola rennt (1998) repeats a sequence of events in Lola's life three times as she races against the clock to find 100,000 Marks for her boyfriend Manni, to save him from being killed by the mob boss he works for. In each, the timing of her run alters due to different obstacles. Edited at a very fast pace, often fitted to a sequence of music like a music video, the film also uses **montage sequences** including **flash forwards** or to represent Lola's thought processes. It also moves between live action and animation (as in Figure 10) to reference videogame aesthetics and to entertain with the more cartoonish look. The overall effect is to

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create a film which appears hyper-realistic and stylised. However Lola's narrative quest, her dominance of screen time and her interactions with other characters still makes her a sympathetic protagonist.

Editing: Mini case study 2

Fritz Lang's science fiction epic, *Metropolis* (1927), contains parallel narratives which take place at the same time but in different diegetic spaces. Whilst the workers toil below ground, the industrialist's son relaxes with his friends in his luxurious estate above ground. In fact, these separate story strands will gradually come together as the industrialist's son, Freder, discovers the workers' conditions under the earth and falls in love with the angelic Maria, who is working for their liberation. Meanwhile, an evil scientist brings his robot-woman to life in his laboratory, who (at the industrialist's request) will replace Maria and spread mayhem (Figure 11). Lang's film will explore themes relating to capitalism and freedom directly through the interaction of these different stories and sets of people.



Figure 11 *Metropolis* (1927)

Some Notes on Narrative

Using the techniques above, you will find it easy to decode character representations and some of the thematic ideas the films present.

For narrative structure, some further areas to consider are:

- Does the film contain a **quest structure** i.e. is a lead character given something to search for at the beginning? Do they achieve that quest? Who acts as a helper in that journey? Is there a readily identifiable villain?
- Is there **disruption to everyday life** at or near the beginning of the film? Is this part of sending the protagonist away on their quest? Once the disruption is taken care of, does the situation reach a **new status quo** or **equilibrium**, return to the **old situation** or **remain unresolved**?

These aspects – of a journey / progression and of a disruption which is resolved – are part of conventional film structures. We are very familiar with them and, therefore, when a film **breaks these conventions** we can feel uncomfortable. For example, a narrative that remains unresolved or unfinished can create a feeling of dissatisfaction (maybe even anxiety) in the audience. It is also, however, a marker of realism since an unresolved story is much more like our experience of real life.

Film Genre

Conventional film genres, such as horror, thriller, comedy, romance, can be applied to German films and identified by studying the features we have looked at above. In addition, you might want to consider film genres / sub-genres more associated with German film culture in particular. These would include:

- The Heimat film
- The historical drama (especially those films which consider Germany's troubled past)

Or film styles / genres strongly associated with an individual director:

- Rainer Werner Fassbinder and melodrama

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- Werner Herzog and documentary

There are also particular film styles adopted by a number of directors, which arguably equate to a form of film genre, such as:

- German Expressionism
- The New Objectivity

A key question to refer to for film genre is to consider how far the film is **conventional** or **unconventional** in the way it uses the generic elements. As with changes to narrative conventions, genre patterns create advance expectations in us as audience members. It's worth remembering that, like other European countries, Germany's film culture will reflect its own history, its own film history (including specific film genres and film styles) as well as influences from abroad.

Mini Case Study: *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974)

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's feature film (Figure 10) explores the relationship between an aging widow, Emmi and Ali, a *Gastarbeiter* (foreign immigrant worker) from Morocco.



Figure 6 *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974)

Fassbinder uses the structure of a melodrama, as developed in the work of filmmakers such as Douglas Sirk in Hollywood. This particular form of melodrama focuses on domestic stories, often with a female central protagonist and explores family and romantic relationships. Sirk's films (such as *All that Heaven Allows* (1955)) can to be seen as containing critique of American society and its prejudices and constraints on

individuals. Similarly, Fassbinder's film explores racial prejudice in Germany against these *Gastarbeiter* through an unconventional love story where Fassbinder replaces the typical romantic couple with this unexpected pairing. His critique of prejudice is further emphasised by the unresolved, ambiguous ending which leaves the questions raised by the film still open – and, therefore, asked directly to the audience.