holds a mirror to the world

deliberately stylize & distort.

OVERVIEW

The three styles of film: realism, classicism, and formalism. Three broad types of cinema: documentaries, fiction films, and avant-garde movies. The signified and the signifier: how form shapes content in movies. Subject matter plus treatment equal content. The shots: apparent distance of the camera from the subject. The angles: looking up, down, or at eye level. Lighting styles: high key, low key, high contrast. The symbolism of light and darkness. Color symbolism. How lenses distort the subject matter: telephotos, wide-angle, and standard lenses. Filtered reality: more distortions. Special effects. The cinematographer: the film director's main visual collaborator.

Realism and Formalism

Even before 1900, movies began to develop in two major directions: the **realistic** and the **formalistic**. In the mid-1890s in France, the Lumière brothers delighted audiences with their short movies dealing with everyday occurrences. Such films as *The Arrival of a Train* (**4–4a**) fascinated viewers precisely because they seemed to capture the flux and spontaneity of events as they were viewed in real life. At about the same time, Georges Méliès was creating a number of fantasy films that emphasized purely imagined events. Such movies as *A Trip to the Moon* (**4–4b**) were typical mixtures of whimsical narrative and trick photography. In many respects, the Lumières can be regarded as the founders of the realist tradition of cinema, and Méliès of the formalist tradition.

Realism and formalism are general rather than absolute terms. When used to suggest a tendency toward either polarity, such labels can be helpful, but in the end they're just labels. Few films are exclusively formalist in style, and fewer yet are completely realist. There is also an important difference between realism and reality, although this distinction is often forgotten. Realism is a particular *style*, whereas physical reality is the source of all the raw materials of film, both realistic and formalistic. Virtually all movie directors go to the photographable world for their subject matter, but what they do with this material—how they shape and manipulate it—is what determines their stylistic emphasis.

Generally speaking, realistic films attempt to reproduce the surface of reality with a minimum of distortion. In photographing objects and events, the filmmaker tries to suggest the richness of life itself. Both realist and formalist film directors must select (and hence, emphasize) certain details from the chaotic sprawl of reality. But the element of selectivity in realistic films is less obvious. Realists, in short, try to preserve the illusion that their film world is unmanipulated, an objective mirror of the actual world. Formalists, on the other hand, make no such pretense. They deliberately stylize and distort their raw materials so that no one would mistake a manipulated image of an object or event for the real thing. The stylization calls attention to itself: It's part of the show.

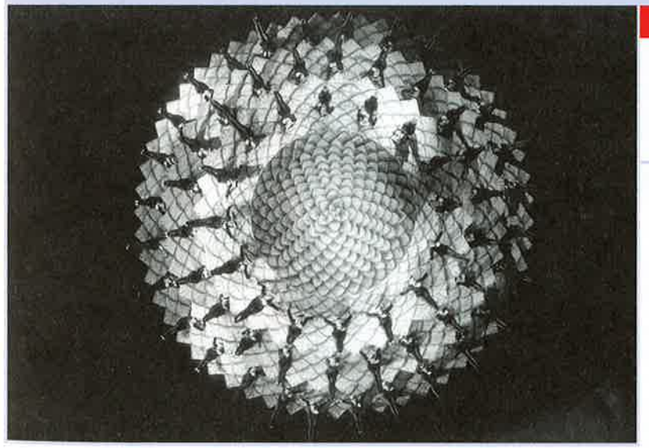
We rarely notice the style in a realistic movie because the artist tends to be self-effacing, invisible. Such filmmakers are more concerned with *what's* being shown rather than how it's manipulated. The camera is used conservatively. It's essentially a recording mechanism that reproduces the surface of tangible objects with as little commentary as possible. Some realists aim for a rough look in their images, one that doesn't prettify the materials with a self-conscious beauty of form. "If it's too pretty, it's false," is an implicit assumption. A high premium is placed on simplicity, spontaneity, and directness. This is not to suggest that these movies lack artistry, however, for at its best, the realistic cinema specializes in art that conceals art.

Formalist movies are stylistically flamboyant. Their directors are concerned with expressing their subjective experience of reality, not how other people might see it. Formalists are often referred to as **expressionists**, because their self-expression is at least as

1–1a ***Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (U.S.A., 2003),** directed by Peter Weir. *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

Realism and Formalism. Critics and theorists have championed film as the most realistic of all the arts in capturing how an experience actually looks and sounds, like this thrilling re-creation of a ferocious battle at sea during the Napoleonic Wars. A stage director would have to suggest the battle symbolically, with stylized lighting and off-stage sound effects. A novelist would have to re-create the event with words, a painter with pigments brushstroked onto a flat canvas. But a film director can create the event with much greater credibility by plunging the camera (a proxy for us) in the middle of the most terrifying ordeals without actually putting us in harm's way. In short, film realism is more like "being there" than any other artistic medium or any other style of presentation. Audiences can experience the thrills without facing any of the dangers. As early as 1910, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy realized that this fledgling new art form would surpass the magnificent achievements of 19th-century literary realism: "This little clinking contraption with the revolving handle will make a revolution in our life—in the life of writers. It is a direct attack on the old methods of literary art. This swift change of scene, this blending of emotion and experience—it is much better than the heavy, long-drawn-out kind of writing to which we are accustomed. It is closer to life."

Dames presents us with another type of experience entirely. The choreographies of Busby Berkeley are triumphs of artifice, far removed from the real world. Depression-weary audiences flocked to movies like this precisely to get away from everyday reality. They wanted magic and enchantment, not reminders of their real-life problems. Berkeley's style was the most formalized of all choreographers. He liberated the camera from the narrow confines of the proscenium arch, soaring overhead, even swirling amongst the dancers, and juxtaposing shots from a variety of vantage points throughout the musical numbers. He often photographed his dancers from unusual angles, like this **bird's-eye** shot. Sometimes he didn't even bother using dancers at all, preferring a uniform contingent of good-looking young women who are used primarily as semi-abstract visual units, like bits of glass in a shifting kaleidoscope of formal patterns. Audiences were enchanted. *(Twentieth Century Fox/Universal Studios/Miramax Films)*



1–1b ***Dames* (U.S.A., 1934),** choreographed by Busby Berkeley, directed by Ray Enright. *(Warner Bros.)*

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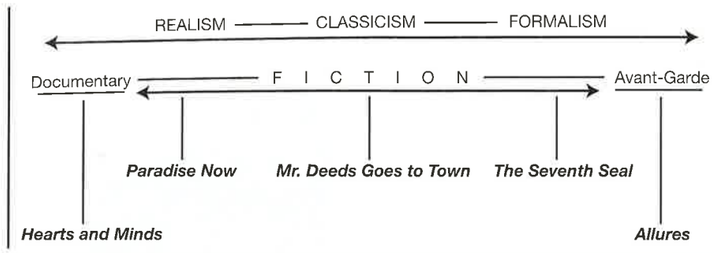
Classification chart of styles and types of film.



Critics and scholars categorize movies according to a variety of criteria. Two of the most common methods of classification are by style and by type. The three principal styles—realism, classicism, and formalism—might be regarded as a continuous spectrum of possibilities, rather than airtight categories. Similarly, the three types of movies—documentaries, fiction, and **avant-garde** films—are also terms of convenience, for they often overlap. Realistic films like *Paradise Now* (**1–4**) can shade into the documentary. Formalist movies like *The Seventh Seal* (**1–6**) have a personal quality suggesting the traditional domain of the avant-garde. Most fiction films, especially those produced in America, tend to conform to the **classical paradigm**. Classical cinema can be viewed as an intermediate style that avoids the extremes of realism and formalism—though most movies in the classical form lean toward one or the other style.

1–3 ***Hearts and Minds* (U.S.A., 1975),** directed by Peter Davis.

The emotional impact of a documentary image usually derives from its truth rather than its beauty. Davis's indictment of America's devastation of Vietnam consists primarily of TV newsreel footage. This photo shows some Vietnamese children running from an accidental bombing raid on their community, their clothes literally burned off their bodies by napalm. "First they bomb as much as they please," a Vietnamese observes, "then they film it." It was images such as these that eventually turned the majority of Americans against the war. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, Third World filmmakers, have pointed out, "Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes, or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something that the System finds indigestible." Paradoxically, in no country except the United States would such self-damning footage be allowed on the public airwaves—which are controlled, or at least regulated, by governments. No other country has a First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of expression. *(Warner Bros.)*

1–4 ***Paradise Now* (Palestinian Territories, 2005),** with Kais Nashef and Ali Suliman, directed by Hany Abu-Assad.

Like most realistic movies, the motto of this film might well be: "This is the way things really are." There is a close correspondence of the images to everyday reality. This trait necessarily involves a comparison between the internal world of the movie with the external milieu that the filmmaker has chosen to explore. The realistic cinema tends to deal with people from the lower social echelons and often explores moral issues. The artist rarely intrudes on the materials, however, preferring to let them speak for themselves. Realism tends to emphasize the basic experiences of life. It is a style that excels in making us feel the humanity of others. Beauty of form is often sacrificed to capture the texture of reality as it's ordinarily perceived. Realistic images often seem unmanipulated, haphazard in their design. They frequently convey an intimate snapshot quality—people caught unawares. Generally, the story materials are loosely organized and include many details that don't necessarily forward the plot but are offered for their own sake, to heighten the sense of authenticity. *Paradise Now* is about the final hours of two Palestinian auto mechanics, friends since childhood, who have volunteered to be suicide bombers, commonly referred to as "martyrs" in the Islamic world. Here they are being wired up with explosives before crossing over to their target in Israel. They have their doubts about their mission, though for the sake of solidarity, they keep their worries mostly to themselves. When they ask what happens after the explosions, their guide says, "You will be met by two angels." "Are you sure?" asks the anxious bomber. "Absolutely," the guide replies. *(Warner Independent Pictures)*

important as the subject matter itself. Expressionists are often concerned with spiritual and psychological truths, which they feel can be conveyed best by distorting the surface of the material world. The camera is used as a method of commenting on the subject matter, a way of emphasizing its essential rather than its objective nature. Formalist movies have a high degree of manipulation, a stylization of reality.

elements of reality, not bound by reality.

Most realists would claim that their major concern is with *content* rather than *form* or technique. The subject matter is always supreme, and anything that distracts from the content is viewed with suspicion. In its most extreme form, the realistic cinema tends toward documentary, with its emphasis on photographing actual events and people (**1–3**). The formalist cinema, on the other hand, tends to emphasize technique and expressiveness. The most extreme example of this style of filmmaking is found in the avant-garde cinema (**1–7**). Some of these movies are totally abstract; pure forms (that is, nonrepresentational colors, lines, and shapes) constitute the only content. Most fiction films fall somewhere between these two extremes, in a mode critics refer to as **classical cinema** (**1–5**).

Even the terms *form* and *content* aren't as clear-cut as they may sometimes seem. As the filmmaker and author Vladimir Nilsen pointed out: "A photograph is by no means a complete and whole reflection of reality: the photographic picture represents only one or another selection from the sum of physical attributes of the object photographed." The form of a shot—the way in which a subject is photographed—is its true content, not necessarily what the subject is perceived to be in reality. The communications theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that the content of one medium is actually another medium. For example, a photograph (visual image) depicting a man eating an apple (taste) involves two different mediums: Each communicates information—content—in a different way. A verbal description of the photograph of the man eating the apple would involve yet another medium (language), which communicates information in yet another manner.

1–5 ***Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (U.S.A., 1936),** with Gary Cooper (with tuba), directed by Frank Capra.

Classical cinema avoids the extremes of realism and formalism in favor of a slightly stylized presentation that has at least a surface plausibility. Movies in this form are often handsomely mounted, but the style rarely calls attention to itself. The images are determined by their relevance to the story and characters, rather than a desire for authenticity or formal beauty alone. The implicit ideal is a functional, invisible style: The pictorial elements are subordinated to the presentation of characters in action. Classical cinema is story oriented. The narrative line is seldom allowed to wander, nor is it broken up by authorial intrusions. A high premium is placed on the entertainment value of the story, which is often shaped to conform to the conventions of a popular genre. Often the characters are played by stars rather than unknown players, and their roles are sometimes tailored to showcase their personal charms. The human materials are paramount in the classical cinema. The characters are generally appealing and slightly romanticized. The audience is encouraged to identify with their values and goals. *(Columbia Pictures)*

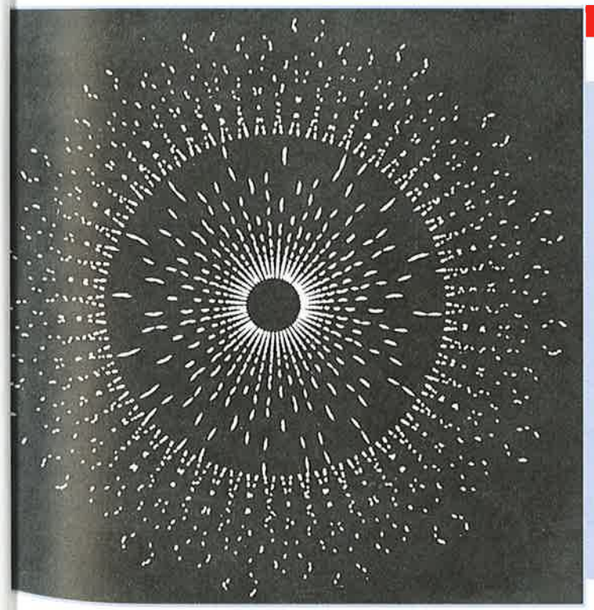
In each case, the precise information is determined by the medium, although superficially all three have the same content.

The great French critic André Bazin noted, "One way of understanding better what a film is trying to say is to know how it is saying it." The American critic Herman G. Weinberg expressed the matter succinctly: "The way a story is told is part of that story. You can tell the same story badly or well; you can also tell it well enough or magnificently. It depends on who is telling the story."

Realism and *realistic* are much overtaxed terms, both in life and in movies. We use these terms to express so many different ideas. For example, people often praise the "realism" of the boxing matches in *Raging Bull.* What they really mean is that these scenes are powerful, intense, and vivid. These traits owe very little to realism as a style. In fact, the boxing matches are extremely stylized. The images are often photographed in dreamy slow motion, with lyrical crane shots, weird accompanying sound effects (like hissing

1–6 ***The Seventh Seal* (Sweden, 1957),** with Bengt Ekerot and Max von Sydow, cinematography by Gunnar Fischer, directed by Ingmar Bergman.

The formalist cinema is largely a director's cinema: We're often aware of the personality of the filmmaker. There is a high degree of manipulation in the narrative materials, and the visual presentation is stylized. The story is exploited as a vehicle for the filmmaker's personal obsessions. Formalists are not much concerned with how realistic their images are, but with their beauty or power. The most artificial genres—musicals, sci-fi, fantasy films—are generally classified as formalist. Most movies of this sort deal with extraordinary characters and events—such as this mortal game of chess between a medieval knight and the figure of Death. This style of cinema excels in dealing with ideas—political, religious, philosophical—and is often the chosen medium of propagandistic artists. Its texture is densely symbolic: Feelings are expressed through forms, like the dramatic high-contrast lighting of this shot. Most of the great stylists of the cinema are formalists. *(Janus Films)*



1–7 ***Allures* (U.S.A., 1961),** directed by Jordan Belson.

In the avant-garde cinema, subject matter is often suppressed in favor of abstraction and an emphasis on formal beauty for its own sake. Like many artists in this idiom, Belson began as a painter and was attracted to film because of its temporal and kinetic dimensions. He was strongly influenced by such European avant-garde artists as Hans Richter, who championed the "absolute film"—a graphic cinema of pure forms divorced from a recognizable subject matter. Belson's works are inspired by philosophical concepts derived primarily from Asian religions. For example, this image could represent a stylized eyeball, or it could be seen as a Mandala design, the Tibetan Buddhist symbol of the universe. But these are essentially private sources and are rarely presented explicitly in films themselves. Form is the true content of Belson's movies. His animated images are mostly geometrical shapes, dissolving and contracting circles of light, and kinetic swirls. His patterns expand, congeal, flicker, and split off into other shapes, only to re-form and explode again, like a spectacular fireworks display. It is a cinema of uncompromising self-expression—personal, often inaccessible, and iconoclastic. *(Pyramid Films)*

1–8a ***Raging Bull* (U.S.A., 1980),** with Robert De Niro, directed by Martin Scorsese.

Realism and formalism are best used as *stylistic* terms rather than terms to describe the nature of the subject matter. For example, although the story of *Raging Bull* is based on actual events, the boxing matches in the film are stylized. In this photo, the badly bruised Jake La Motta resembles an agonized warrior, crucified against the ropes of the ring. The camera floats toward him in lyrical slow motion while the soft focus obliterates his consciousness of the arena.

In *Constantine,* on the other hand, the special effects are so realistic they almost convince us that the impossible is possible. Based on the comic book *Hellblazer,* the film contains many scenes of supernatural events. In this episode, for example, the protagonist travels to hell, just beneath the landscape of Los Angeles, a place inhabited by demons and angels. In short, it's quite possible to present fantasy materials in a realistic style. It's equally possible to present reality-based materials in an expressionistic style. *(United Artists)*

1–8b ***Constantine* (U.S.A., 2005),** with Keanu Reeves, directed by Francis Lawrence. *(Warner Bros.)*

sounds and jungle screams), staccato editing in both the images and the sound. True, the subject matter is based on actual life—the brief boxing career of the American middleweight champion of the 1940s, Jake La Motta. But the stylistic treatment of these biographical materials is extravagantly subjective (**1–8a**). At the opposite extreme, the special effects in *Constantine* (**1–8b**) are so uncannily realistic that we would swear they were real if we didn't know better.

Form and content are best used as relative terms. They are useful concepts for temporarily isolating specific aspects of a movie for the purposes of closer examination. Such a separation is artificial, of course, yet this technique can yield more detailed insights into the work of art as a whole.

The Shots

The **shots** are defined by the amount of subject matter that's included within the **frame** of the screen. In actual practice, however, shot designations vary considerably. A **medium shot** for one director might be considered a **close-up** by another. Furthermore, the longer the shot, the less precise are the designations. In general, shots are determined on the basis of how much of the human figure is in view. The shot is not necessarily defined by the distance between the camera and the object photographed, for in some instances certain lenses distort distances. For example, a **telephoto lens** can produce a close-up on the screen, yet the camera in such shots is generally quite distant from the subject matter.

Although there are many different kinds of shots in the cinema, most of them are subsumed under the six basic categories: (1) the **extreme long shot,** (2) the **long shot,** (3) the **full shot,** (4) the medium shot, (5) the close-up, and (6) the **extreme close-up.** The **deep-focus shot** is usually a variation of the long shot (**1–9b**).

1–9a ***The Polar Express* (U.S.A., 2004),** directed by Robert Zemeckis.

In this traveling extreme long shot, the camera swirls out in space as the fragile train puffs and strains and chugs up a steep mountain top. Shots from this distance reduce human beings to grainlike specks of light in a cosmic landscape. *(Warner Bros.)*

1–9b ***Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (U.S.A., 1994),** with Robert De Niro (under wraps) and Kenneth Branagh, directed by Branagh.

The long shot encompasses roughly the same amount of space as the staging area of a large theater. Setting can dominate characters unless they're located near the foreground. Lighting a long shot is usually costly, time consuming, and labor intensive, especially if it's in deep focus, like this shot. The laboratory had to be moody and scary, yet still sufficiently clear to enable us to see back into the "depth" of the set. Note how the lighting is layered, punctuated with patches of gloom and accusatory shafts of light from above. To complicate matters, whenever a director cuts to closer shots, the lighting has to be adjusted accordingly so that the transitions between cuts appear smooth and unobtrusive. Anyone who has ever visited a movie set knows that people are waiting most of the time—usually for the director of photography (D.P.) to announce that the lighting is finally ready and the scene can now be photographed. *(TriStar Pictures)*