The Elements of Film Form

To analyze and write or talk about movies, we need to start with a clear understanding of filmic components are used to tell the story. So let's begin by establishing a vocabulary of the five basic elements of film form – literary design, visual design, cinematography, editing, and sound design.

1 - Literary design consists of the story ideas and the script. The story ideas include the characters and their actions in the story, the setting of the story, and any background story or subtext. The script includes the dialog and some broad actions for the characters. (Some may refer to this element as narrative design, a broader term for storytelling. As we will see through closer viewing, however, all the elements of film form are used for storytelling.)

clip from The Social Network  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFFtpd8VNN0

Here is a clip from The Social Network. Aaron Sorkin wrote the screenplay based on the book by Ben Mezrich. Take notice of the dialog.

Here is a section of the script from Wes Anderson’s Moonrise Kingdom. Notice how the setting and the characters are described. Dialog and character actions are included. As a director, Jarmusch also included elements that are not usually found in a script. One of these is INSERT, a description of a close up shot that will be filmed.
2 - **Visual design** consists of what we see on screen/inside the frame, a very broad category of components.

- **Performance** includes the actor’s mannerisms, expressions, and movement.
- **Blocking** is the arrangement of actors and props before the camera. Blocking also includes how the actors move around the set during the scene.
- **Lighting** includes the amount of light, the specific areas that are illuminated, the shadows, and the quality of light as in soft or harsh. The lighting can contribute to perception, meaning, and mood.
- **Hair and makeup** of the actors adds to the storytelling. This also includes special effects makeup like wounds, blood or fake teeth. Somebody has to make those zombies look real.
- **Costume** is what the actors wear. Period films will try to create the look of the time with costumes.
- **Set design** consists primarily of the how the room or space is set up as well as furniture and props.

* Color is an important factor in lighting, costume, and set design.

All of these visual components are sometimes referred to as **mise-en-scène**. (pronounced as mee-zan-sen, French for “put on stage”).

clip from Heath Ledger’s performance in *The Dark Knight*  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8PxG5zvgOM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8PxG5zvgOM)

Heath Ledger’s performance in *The Dark Knight* was critically acclaimed. Take note of the expressions, the mannerisms, and the inflection he brings to the scene.

[Promotional still for Edward Scissorhands](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8PxG5zvgOM)

In this promotional photograph for *Edward Scissorhands*, we can see how costume, hair, and makeup are key to the character.
still from 2001: A Space Odyssey

In this still shot from 2001: A Space Odyssey we see the environment of a spacecraft created through set design. The spacecraft is represented as donut-shaped so the set is built on a curve and the camera is turned sideways to create the illusion the actors move around the outer wall of the ship.

3 - Cinematography deals with the choices that are made for the camera – the placement of the camera, the camera angle toward the subject, the lens choice, and the camera movement. Each of these choices has an affect on the recorded image and how the viewer perceives (consciously or unconsciously) that image.

frame from The Hurt Locker

In this frame from a shot in The Hurt Locker the cinematographer used a wide angle lens for the shot. The wide angle lens shows more of the cereal aisle in the background and more of it is in focus. This lens choice accentuates the main character’s abrupt transition from a war zone with life and death decisions to civilian life with a multitude of trivial decisions.
This is a single shot from Goodfellas using a steadicam to allow the camera to move along with the characters through the scene. It creates a feeling that the viewer is moving with the characters and emphasizes the privileged aspect of the main character.

**4 - Editing** is the sequencing of the shots in the film. Editors decide on the order and the duration of shots, the visual transitions from scene to scene, and visual effects. The editors have two major contributions to the story. The first is the sequencing of shots in terms of how the audience “reads” the film. *Cutting from an actor delivering a line of dialog to another actor reacting to what was said.* The second is the pacing of the film which helps establish the overall feeling or mood. For example, fast cuts from one shot to another create excitement or tension. Longer duration shots allow the audience to take in more of the visual detail.

This is a clip from Sergi Eisenstien’s 1925 film Battleship Potempkin is referred to as the Odessa Steps sequence. Eisenstein was an early Russian filmmaker most famous for his montage theory of editing. This approach holds that the “collision” between different shots is an illustration of the idea of thesis and antithesis. In other words showing the contrast between two opposing views.

In this clip from Sherlock the editor uses a series of quick cuts from one shot to the next. This editing echoes the quick, analytic mind of the main character as he takes in “clues” from another character.

**5 - Sound design** deals with the sound components, what we hear in the film. Dialog editing, sound effects, and music contribute to the story. Mood, environment, character, time and place are just a few of the story aspects that can be established or emphasized with sound.

This short describes many of the aspects that went into the creation of the sound track for *The Hobbit*. Notice how the creative process is collaborative and involves a variety of sound specialists.