"How Do You Quote a Movie?" OR:
A Crash Course on Writing About Film

Needless to say, writing about film, a visual and aural medium, is not the same as writing about the written word. In fact, quoting actual text, the technique we use most often to give evidence when writing about written works, is simply impossible. The only thing you can "quote" from a film is actual dialogue, i.e. what one character says to him/herself or others. We can quote song lyrics, but can't include snippets of the tune itself. We can relate what the characters are saying, but can't insert a still of their facial expression at the time. These non-textual elements must somehow be converted into written form in a paper. To do this, we must *paraphrase*, or express/interpret what is happening on screen in our own words. The question is: what is there about film beyond the story it tells us? Just like with a novel, film has both content *and* form. The following are aspects of form that occur in combination only within the medium of film:

Narrative Form

This quality is what film shares with written literature. It refers to a type of organization in which the parts of the film relate to each other through a series of causally related events occurring in a specific time and place. Narrative form includes concepts of story and plot development; range and depth of narration; structuring devices; cause-effect relations; characters and their motivations, etc. Note that plot time, story time, and screen time are usually not the same!

`Example 1:` James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), despite its futuristic setting, follows a familiar narrative form often employed in historical films about the American "frontier." Like Kevin Costner's character Lt. Dunbar in the popular film *Dances With Wolves* (1990), Sam Worthington's Jake Sully leaves behind his identity as a colonizer to join the community of the oppressed colonized, in this case the extraterrestrial Na'vi. And like Lt. Dunbar, who comes to call the Sioux "his people," Jake Sully too must at the climax of the film make a difficult choice between his human identity and his place among the Na'vi.

Mise-en-Scene

This term, French for "what is placed in the scene," is borrowed from the theater and refers to all the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed. It includes settings and props, lighting, costumes and make-up, and "figure behavior" (i.e. how the actors/animated characters move/behave).

`Example 2:` In *Avatar*, the landscape and the tall, lanky bodies of the Na'vi are all computer-generated, and to a very realistic degree. There is only one moment in the film where this suspension of disbelief breaks down, and it is precisely during the most important interaction between the live action human actors and the computer-generated Na'vi. When Zoe Saldana's Neytiri realizes that she must rescue her lover's human body in order to save him, there is a visually awkward moment when she must cradle Jake Sully's diminutive body in her arms and look him in the face. Out of its usual context, her body looks large and rubbery, and her sympathetic recognition of Jake's true identity comes off as uncomfortable and strained.

Cinematography

Like photography and painting, the film camera (well, the person operating it) pays attention to how the image is composed. Cinematography is a general term for all the manipulations of the film strip by the camera in the shooting phase *and* by the laboratory in the developing phase. The basic element of cinematography is the *shot*. It also includes issues having to do with mobility of the camera and the frame (e.g. *tracking shot*, *pan*, *tilt*) as well as the distance and angle of the camera in relation to the object (*long shot*, *close-up*, *straight-on angle*, *high angle*, etc.).

`Example 3:` In an animated film, such as much of *Avatar* is, cinematography obviously takes on a different meaning. However, the degree of realism of the computer-generated characters is such that the Na'vi are filmed much in the same fashion as their human counterparts. For example, Neytiri and the other Na'vi have sufficiently expressive faces that they also have frequent close-up reaction shots. On the other hand, the Na'vi are larger, stronger and faster than humans, and this is often communicated by showing them in long shots, moving quickly and gracefully over Pandora's terrain. The gap in ability between human and alien is also reinforced by numerous shots from Jake Sully's perspective as he discovers the superhuman abilities of his new Na'vi body.

Editing

This issue is rather unique to film, and involves the coordination of one shot with the next. The *cut* is the most common form of joining shots (i.e. the film is actually cut and spliced back together), but *fades*, *dissolves*, and *wipes* are also possible (these you do with camera technology, generally). Editing profoundly affects spatial and temporal relationships in a film; *continuity editing*, designed to provide the viewer with a transparent, easy-to-follow viewing experience, is the most conventional/common style of editing.

`Example 4:` A prominent feature of science fiction films is their action sequences, and *Avatar* is no exception. Indeed, final battle scene is a stellar example of its genre. The cross-cutting techniques are familiar: the typical cross-cutting pattern is in place as we alternate between the spaceship-bound human attacking force and the struggling Na'vi trying to fight back. What is striking is that despite the rapid cuts to diverse battle scenes, each shot communicates and preserves the complexity of the entirely computer-generated Pandoran space in which the battle is occurring.

Of course, as you can see even in the brief examples above, these four categories do not have to be dealt with separately. More often than not, more than one element will come into play as you make your observation. Just as they work together in the film, so too may they work together in your prose. For more details, consult some of the sources Holly has put together!