

Motion picture

Motion picture, also called **film** or **movie**, series of still photographs on film, projected in rapid succession onto a screen by means of light. Because of the optical phenomenon known as [persistence of vision](#), this gives the illusion of actual, smooth, and continuous movement.

The motion picture is a remarkably effective medium in conveying [drama](#) and especially in the evocation of emotion. The art of motion pictures is exceedingly complex, requiring contributions from nearly all the other arts as well as countless technical skills (for example, in [sound recording](#), [photography](#), and [optics](#)). Emerging at the end of the 19th century, this new art form became one of the most popular and influential media of the 20th century and beyond.

As a commercial venture, offering fictional narratives to large [audiences](#) in [theatres](#), the motion picture was quickly recognized as perhaps the first truly mass form of entertainment. Without losing its broad appeal, the medium also developed as a means of artistic expression in such areas as [acting](#), [directing](#), screenwriting, [cinematography](#), costume and set design, and [music](#).

Essential Characteristics Of Motion Pictures

In its short history, the art of motion pictures has frequently undergone changes that seemed fundamental, such as those resulting from the introduction of sound. It exists today

in [styles](#) that differ significantly from country to country and in forms as [diverse](#) as the documentary created by one person with a handheld [camera](#) and the multimillion-dollar epic involving hundreds of performers and technicians.

A number of factors immediately come to mind in connection with the motion-picture experience. For one thing, there is something mildly hypnotic about the [illusion](#) of movement that holds the attention and may even lower critical resistance. The accuracy of the motion-picture image is compelling because it is made by a nonhuman, scientific process. In addition, the motion picture gives what has been called a strong sense of being present; the film image always appears to be in the present tense. There is also the concrete nature of film; it appears to show actual people and things.

For a while, spectators live in the world the motion picture unfolds before them.

The sense of reality most films strive for results from a set of codes, or rules, that are implicitly accepted by viewers and confirmed through habitual filmgoing. The use of brownish lighting, filters, and props, for example, has come to signify the past in films about American life in the early 20th century (as in *The Godfather* [1972] and *Days of Heaven* [1978]). The brownish tinge that is associated with such films is a visual code intended to evoke a viewer's perceptions of an earlier era, when photographs were printed in [sepia](#), or brown, tones. Storytelling codes are even more [conspicuous](#) in their manipulation of actual reality to achieve an effect of reality. Audiences are prepared to skip over huge expanses of time in order to reach the dramatic moments of a story.

Characteristics of the medium

Four characteristics may be stressed as factors that differentiate the motion-picture medium, either in degree or in kind, from other mediums for works of art:

luminosity, movement, realism, and montage.

Luminosity

The intense brightness of the picture projected by powerful light onto a coated screen in itself transforms the most mundane element of reality. The appeal of a luminous picture is attested by efforts of advertisers to achieve luminous effects in posters and displays. The luminosity of the motion-picture image also results in a considerable range of tone, between the brightest highlight and the deepest black. In both black-and-white and colour films, the most delicate gradations in the image are therefore possible.

Movement

As a feature of the motion picture, movement is so obvious that its central importance is sometimes forgotten. The motion picture has much in common with the graphic arts, but the added dimension of movement transforms it, allowing a narrative or a drama to unfold in time in a way no other graphic art can. Both in filmmaking and in film appreciation, movement must constantly be borne in mind: composition in the motion picture is kinetic rather than static. It is not a single colour but the cumulative effect that matters, not a single situation but a developing plot. The composition within any frame, or exposure, of a motion picture is as important as the relationship of that frame to those that precede and follow it.

Realism

Another essential element of the motion-picture image is that it gives an impression of reality. Whether in a drama enacted

expressly for the camera or in a [documentary film](#) of an event at which the camera just happened to be present, this feeling of realism deriving from [motion-picture photography](#) accounts for much of the force of motion pictures. Animated films, which lack this element of photographic realism, tend to be taken as fantasies.

Cinematic realism is most fully heightened when the images are accompanied by synchronous [sound](#), whereby a second sense, hearing, ratifies what the eyes see. Although reproduced sound can be manipulated with regard to distance, timbre, clarity, and duration, in combination with photographed moving images, it forcefully brings alive its subject as present in a way unavailable to the other arts of representation.

[Montage](#)

Perhaps the most essential characteristic of the motion picture is montage, from the French *monter*, “to assemble.” Montage refers to the editing of the film, the cutting and piecing together of exposed film in a manner that best conveys the intent of the work. Montage is what distinguishes motion pictures from the performing arts, which exist only within a performance. The motion picture, by contrast, uses the performances as the raw material, which is built up as a novel or an essay or a [painting](#), studiously put together piece by piece, with an allowance for trial and error, second thoughts, and, if necessary, reshooting. The order in which the segments of film are presented can have drastically different dramatic effects.

Expressive Elements Of Motion Pictures

Many observers have seen in films a means of expression comparable to [language](#). The language of motion pictures, however, is not the language of words, even though spoken [dialogue](#) has been an [integral](#) part of motion pictures since the late 1920s, and written captions were usually required to explain the action before that. It is primarily in the qualities of its images and sounds that the expressivity of the cinema must be sought.

Various codes of expression have, nevertheless, been shown to operate naturally or to have been inculcated, and their effects can be calculated. Such codes and effects occur in all aspects of moviemaking and can most readily be categorized into those affecting [cinematography](#), editing, [sound](#), the [script](#), acting, and design.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC EXPRESSION

The filmmaker has a number of ways of modifying the [camera's](#) neutrality and thereby the “reality” that is conveyed to the audience. It is largely by means of these devices that the motion picture becomes such an expressive medium. Several of these expressive techniques should be emphasized.

1. First, there is **framing**—that is, carefully selecting what will be included within each frame of the film and what will be excluded.
2. Second, there is **scale, the size and placement** of a particular object or a part of a scene in relation to the rest, a relationship that is determined by the placement of the camera.

3. Third is **camera movement**, or the lack of it, during shooting.
4. Fourth, there are the peculiar advantages of either **colour or black-and-white photography** that can be exploited.
5. Finally, through the cinematographer's skill and knowledge of laboratory processes, other highly expressive techniques can be achieved.

Framing

The process of framing is intended to eliminate what is unessential in the motion picture, to direct the spectator's attention to what is important, and to give it special meaning and force. Each frame of film, which corresponds in shape to the image projected on the screen, forms the basis for a graphic composition in the same way that the frame of a painting encloses the area in which the painting must be organized.

Scale

Since scale in the cinema constantly changes from shot to shot, the spectator can easily be deceived about the size of objects. Scale may have a marked effect on the emotional tone of a scene. In the distance an actor may seem lonely, remote, helpless, pathetic; close up he may appear powerful, threatening, bestial. The scale of shots for artistic purposes ranges from an extreme long shot (the widest view on the smallest scale), with houses or ships appearing as tiny dots on the horizon; through medium shots, two shots (i.e., a shot of convenient size to include two actors), and others; to the extreme close-up, with part of a face, an eye, or a fist filling the screen (the most restricted view on the largest scale). Telescopic or microscopic shots beyond these extremes are often of scientific rather than artistic interest.

Different scales are occasionally juxtaposed in a single shot to produce an unmistakable dramatic or rhetorical effect.

As has been noted, the camera exaggerates perspective, and this exaggeration adds to the dramatic effect.

Scale is affected by what precedes and follows. The close-up has its most dramatic impact coming after long or medium shots, and after many close-ups it is a relief to escape to the middle or far distance.

Shooting angle and point of view

Another element in motion-picture language is the shooting angle. In common language, the phrases “to look up to” and “to look down on” have connotations of admiration and condescension in addition to their obvious reference to physical viewpoint. In one sense or another, children, dogs, and beggars are often looked down upon, while the preacher in his pulpit, the judge on the bench, and the policeman on his horse are looked up to. Even a slight upward or downward angle of a camera is enough to express a mood of inferiority or superiority.

Upward or downward shooting angles lead to questions of objectivity and subjectivity. In most motion pictures, both for variety and for breadth of treatment, the camera’s viewpoint switches from one character to another and sometimes is associated with none of the characters but merely looks on. The camera may take the viewpoint of the heroine, looking with dismay at the villain as he breaks into her room; in this case, an upward camera angle gives a subjective impression of her fear.

Camera movement

Framing, scale, and shooting angle are all greatly modified by the use of camera movement. Filmmakers began experimenting with camera movement almost immediately after the motion-picture camera was developed. In 1897 photographers employed by Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière floated a *cinématographe*, the combination camera-projector devised by the French

brothers, in a gondola through Venice to give viewers all over the world a dynamic view of that much-painted city.

One of the simplest and most common movements is to turn, or **pan** (from the word *panorama*), the camera horizontally so that it sweeps around the scene. It can also be tilted up or down in a vertical panning shot or in a diagonal pan, as when it follows an actor up a stairway. Panning was possible quite early in film history, but methods of physically conveying the camera itself through a scene developed more slowly. Initially the camera was mounted on a dolly, truck, or other hand-propelled wheeled vehicle to facilitate smooth movement. Later, tracks were laid for the dolly or truck to ride on, providing even smoother, more effortless motion. **Trucking**, dollying, and tracking can even be combined with panning in a complex movement that may require the adjustment of focus or aperture en route. One such camera movement that is often used imitates the gaze of a traveler who turns in a moving automobile or train to focus on a stationary point of interest.

Editing

The process of trimming and piecing together lengths of film in order to make an artistically concise and complete motion picture is certainly the most obvious technique of film language and the one most often discussed. The terms *editing*, *cutting*, and *montage* are often applied interchangeably to the process. In montage the emphasis is on the juxtaposition of ideas resulting from this process; cutting stresses the physical work with the actual strips of film; and editing encompasses both.

Editing permits highly dramatic effects that could never be staged in a single shot.