THREE STYLES OF FILM

Filmmakers and critics have created three categories of film styles in which to place the work of all filmmakers, providing a convenient way to classify movies in which storytelling is the primary interest (other types are documentaries, which we don’t cover in this class).

**1) REALISM**

In most realistic films, there is a close correspondence of the images to everyday reality, a comparison between the internal world of the movie to the external reality that the filmmaker has chosen to explore. This style tends to deal with people from the lower social echelons (classes) and often explores moral issues. The director rarely intrudes on the materials, preferring to let them speak for themselves. Pictorial beauty is often sacrificed for reality. This style excels in making us feel the humanity of others.

Examples: Ronald Joffe’s *City of Joy*, Alan Parker’s *Midnight Express*, Steven Soderberg’s *Traffic*, Steven Speilberg’s *Schindler’s List*.

**2) FORMALISM**

Largely, a director’s cinema. Authorial intrusions are common, especially through a high degree of manipulation in the narrative materials and the stylized visual presentation. The story is exploited as a vehicle for the filmmaker’s personal obsessions. Fidelity to objective reality is rarely a relevant criterion of value.

The most artificial of genres – musicals, thrillers, science fiction, and fantasy films – generally fit this formalist classification. Most movies of this sort deal with extraordinary characters and events, such as the cat-and-mouse game played out in Ridley Scott’s *Alien*. This style excels in dealing with ideas – political (John Frankenhemier’s *The Manchurian Candidate*), religious (Richard Brook’s *Elmer Gantry*), or philosophical (the Washowski brothers’s *The Matrix*).

This style is often the chosen medium of propagandistic artists (John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* or Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* or *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*).

Its texture is deeply symbolic with feelings expressed through forms such as outlandish sets or dramatic lighting effects.

Most of the great directors of the cinema are formalists: Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Steven Speilberg (especially in his science fiction films), George Stevens, to name a few.

**3) CLASSICAL**

This style is the compromise between the two stylistic cinema opposites. 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 in which the pictorial elements are subordinated to the presentation of characters in action. In other words, the characters in action are more important than the pictorial elements.

Classical cinema is story oriented. The narration 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 unknowns, and their roles are sometimes tailored to showcase their personal charms. The human materials are paramount. The characters are generally appealing and slightly romanticized (idealized). The audience is encouraged to identify with their values and goals.

Most movies fall into this style. Examples: almost all romantic comedies, all of Cecil B. DeMille epics, Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*, Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility*, Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*, to name a few.