

Formalism and Realism in the Cinema

The first school of thought to defend film as an art form were the formalists. Formalists argue that film's specific property is its inability to perfectly imitate normal visual experience of reality. Formalists believe that these limitations define the expressive potential of film and offer the filmmaker the opportunity to manipulate and distort our everyday experience of reality for artistic ends.

A filmmaker is therefore in a position to express his/her unique vision of the world, made possible by film's specific properties – editing, fast and slow motion, the use of low and high camera angles, etc. It is these specific properties that distinguish film from the other arts and define film as an art.

Realists believe that by means of its automatic mechanical recording of events, film does indeed perfectly imitate our normal visual experience of reality. In polar opposition to the formalists, realists argue that it is film's ability to imitate reality that defines film as an art form. Film's specific property is its photographic representation of reality

To realists such as the French film critic Andre Bazin, the long take and deep focus camera shots as the elements of film style that realize film's specific property to imitate reality. By allowing for a number of actions to be composed in the same shot, deep focus cinematography dispenses with the need for editing and supports the use of long takes. Using these two techniques, filmmakers are able to maintain the spatial and temporal unity of a scene, thus imitating reality (in the eyes of the realists).

These two different approaches date from the very earliest days of filmmaking. The Lumiere brothers' set up their film camera to record real life events such as a train pulling into a station or workers leaving a factory. Just a few years later, the French film pioneer and magician George Melies used special effects and stop motion camera tricks to create spectacular fantasy sequences in short films such as A Trip to the Moon (1902).