**Chapter 11**

Reading about Film

Critical Theories and Methods

Courtesy Everett Collection

Buster Keaton’s 1925 film Sherlock, Jr. opens with a warning never to do two things at once. Its protagonist is a motion-picture projectionist who plays detective in order to prove his romantic rival is a thief. Soon he becomes literally split in two, as he falls asleep in the projection booth and his dreaming self enters the fictional film on screen. Of course his surrogate solves the crime and gets the girl, but not before the film explores characteristics of the cinematic illusion that go beyond narrative and its components of identification, genre, and closure. As Keaton begins to sit on a bench, the film breaks verisimilitude, cutting to a street scene where the actor completes his action, only to fall down in traffic. Several additional cuts match his pratfalls while changing backgrounds: a mountaintop, a lion-infested jungle, a desert where he narrowly avoids being struck by a freight train. Such bodily vulnerability to the speed and machinery of the early twentieth century is explored in many of Keaton’s films, while viewers remain safe in our seats. The film touches on many preoccupations of film theory — the specific characteristics of the medium, the place of realism, the syntax of storytelling, and the way the movie viewer is always doing two things at once: believing in an illusion, and appreciating its craft.

Audiovisual technologies are now more prevalent and more integrated with our experience than ever before. When television was introduced in the mid-twentieth century, and later when home video and computer games became popular, predictions abounded that moviegoing would be eclipsed by the new leisure forms. However, these pronouncements on the death of cinema were premature. What is it about the film experience that resonates so meaningfully with modern life? This question, which emerged with the first projected moving images, continues to drive our thinking about mediated experiences today. Such reflection on the nature and uses of the medium is the province of film theory. The books and essays that constitute this field undertake a sustained interrogation of propositions about the nature of the medium, the features of individual films or categories of films, and the interaction between viewers and films. In this chapter, we will make explicit the issues that inform the theoretical study of film by framing these issues in terms of specific histories and positions.

KEY OBJECTIVES

▪ Explain the concept of cinematic specificity. Specify and introduce the method of formal analysis.

▪ Describe the interdisciplinary nature of film and media studies.

▪ Outline the major positions in classical film theory, from Soviet montage theory to realism.

▪ Demonstrate knowledge about the key schools of thought within contemporary film theory, including semiotics and structuralism; psychoanalysis and apparatus theory; feminist, queer, and critical race theory; cultural studies; philosophical approaches; and postmodernism.

Precisely because cinema is so accessible and familiar, the very idea of theorizing it makes some viewers skeptical. Yet the knowledge that comes with avid moviegoing can itself be the foundation of a theoretical position. Every time we go to the movies, we evaluate elements about the film beforehand: when we choose drama or comedy, we invoke genre; if we buy a ticket for the new Spielberg film, we draw on auteur theory; and if we elect, while acknowledging the dismissive quality of the term, a “chick flick,” we invoke some understanding of reception theory, which focuses on how different kinds of audiences relate to different kinds of films. When we speak of the fictional world of The Godfather (1972) [Figure 11.1] as if it were real, we invoke the concept of verisimilitude, or “having the quality of truth.” Even when we select a seat at the movie theater, implicit in our choice is an ideal vantage point from which the film illusion will be most complete.

A photo of a family dining room scene in the 1972 film The Godfather.

11.1 The Godfather (1972). Audiences’ evaluation of the verisimilitude of the world of the Corleone crime family deploys a theoretical concept in an experiential way.

As these examples suggest, every theoretical approach to cinema foregrounds some elements and relegates others to the background. Besides looking at different aspects of the experience, film theories vary in their level of analysis, selecting different features to address. Some theories regard the cinema as a mass phenomenon that needs to be approached on the institutional level, from the industry to the broad-based reception of films, while others are concerned with formal principles alone. It may be helpful to think of each theory in this chapter as part of the tool kit of the cultural critic. The toolbox metaphor implies that different theories are needed to address different questions; it also reminds us that theoretical inquiry is not only about taking something apart, but also about building models and connections. An overview such as this one cannot fully survey this diverse field. We encourage you to read these thinkers’ own words; only then will the stakes of the debates be driven home.

The Evolution of Film Theory

Before we present an overview of the history and debates of film theory, let us draw out two issues that are at the heart of the discipline and yet seemingly at odds with each other. There are elements that make the medium of film distinct as an aesthetic form or mode of communication that demands its own analytical approach. At the same time, film represents a combination of other art forms as well as commercial, artistic, and social interests and thus must also be considered from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on art history, literary theory, philosophy, and other disciplines. The excitement of studying film theory lies in the challenge of illuminating these two seemingly contradictory dimensions. Sustained critical interrogations — such as the writings by filmmakers, philosophers, and academics examined here — help us see the specificities of cinema as an aesthetic form and a social institution, as well as its commonalities with other arts and cultural experiences.

Theories of an artistic medium often begin by trying to define their object, its nature or ontology. How does cinema differ from painting or photography, for example? All use pictorial imagery, but film differs from painting because it is composed of photographic images captured with a camera, and it differs from photography in that its images are displayed to give the illusion of motion.

As a storytelling medium, cinema borrows from the novel; yet the way it associates images with emotions resembles poetry. Like music, film is a time-based performance. Each of these comparisons can and has been extended. Theorists hope that from ever more precise statements of the properties of cinema, they can share terms of analysis and point to concrete elements as the basis for interpretations.

Questions of cinema’s medium specificity and its interdisciplinary field are especially pertinent today as recent technological developments — from computer-generated imagery (CGI) to new forms of distribution and display — raise profound ontological questions about cinema. The digital image is no longer a trace of the physical contact between light and an object or referent chemically recorded on film stock; instead, the properties of the image are digitally coded and thus mutable. A computer-generated image does not have a real-world referent; in a sense the image is the thing [Figure 11.2]. Interestingly, past work in the fields of film theory and history puts us in an excellent position to make sense of what the unique properties of this new, digital medium might be. And new approaches like cognitive science, computer science, and game theory also play a key role in the study of contemporary film and media.

A photo of a scene in the 2007 film Beowulf.

11.2 Beowulf (2007). Is the nature of the film image — its ontological status — challenged by the use of performance capture and computer-generated imagery (CGI) instead of photographic imagery?

VIEWING CUE

Compare a scene from a film you have viewed either in class or on your own with a passage from the book from which it was adapted. What elements are specific to the film?

There are no clear boundaries — either chronological or intellectual — to the field of film theory. A historical overview allows us to contextualize important thinkers and to understand how key principles and terms have been defined and debated over time. Film theory, and the emerging theories that address new and related audiovisual media, will undoubtedly take on new questions in the future. Yet these concerns will be shaped by an intellectual history of considerable longevity and complexity.

Early and Classical Film Theory

In this section, we begin with the earliest reflections on film that occurred not long after the first public exhibitions by Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers. We then consider the body of work designated as classical film theory, which emerged with the maturity of the medium in the 1920s and finds a convenient endpoint with the publication of Siegfried Kracauer’s major work Theory of Film in 1960.

Early Film Theory

“Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. If you only knew how strange it is to be there,” wrote the Russian novelist Maxim Gorky after attending a film screening in 1896. When movies were new, observers searched for metaphors to describe the experience of seeing them. Struck by movies’ magical properties, viewers attempted to pinpoint what was distinctive about the medium. Some early critics considered moviegoing a social phenomenon, a new form of urban entertainment characteristic of the dawning twentieth century. Others viewed the cinema in aesthetic terms, heralding it as the “seventh art.”

While today film theory is considered part of an academic discipline, earlier writers on the topic came from many contexts and traditions, making any overview of the history of film theory a disjunctive one. A few early theorists wrote books, yet equally important theoretical contributions have been made in journals, essays, and other forms. Early writers on film might have been critics of other art forms or scholars in other disciplines. Or they might have been filmmakers who shared their ideas and excitement about the developing medium with each other in specialized publications. Some of the questions film theorists have examined since the inception of the medium include:

▪ Is cinema an art form? How does it relate to photography, painting, theater, music, and other art forms?

▪ Does film resemble language or have a language of its own?

▪ Is film’s primary responsibility to tell a story?

▪ Is film by nature a “realist” medium?

▪ What is the place of film in the modern world that fostered its development?

Two noteworthy books on movies appeared in the United States as early as the 1910s. Poet Vachel Lindsay’s The Art of the Moving Picture (1915) responded enthusiastically to the novelty and the democratizing potential of the medium. “I am the one poet who has a right to claim for his muses Blanche Sweet, Mary Pickford, and Mae Marsh,” he gushed, invoking the popular movie stars of the day. In his idiosyncratic but suggestive book, Lindsay likened film language to hieroglyphics. This metaphor of picture-writing indicated cinema’s promise of universality, which excited many early observers.

A more systematic elaboration of ideas about cinema was contributed by Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg in The Photoplay: A Psychological Study (1916). For Münsterberg, viewing films was linked to the subjective process of thinking. The properties of cinema that distinguished it from the physical reality to which its images referred were what made it of interest aesthetically and psychologically. Unlike watching a play, watching movies requires specific mental activities to make sense of cues of movement and depth. “The photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion,” wrote Münsterberg. His ideas thus emphasized the viewer’s interaction with the medium. Decades later, theories of spectatorship would do the same. While Lindsay’s work praised specific films, Münsterberg referred to the idea of the photoplay in general. In a sense, their works mark the division between criticism, which reflects on a given aesthetic object, and theory, which is broader and sometimes more abstract.

Outside the United States, much early writing about cinema came from filmmakers themselves. Although movies immediately became commercialized, they emerged, and flourished, in the context of modernist experimentation in the arts — music, writing, theater, painting, architecture, and photography. Because film was based on new technology, many considered it an exemplary art for the machine age. Film influenced new approaches to established media, such as cubism in painting and the “automatic writing” of the surrealists. In turn, filmmakers adopted avant-garde practices, and painters like Hans Richter took up filmmaking, exploring graphic and rhythmic possibilities [Figure 11.3]. Modernist intellectuals debated cinema’s aesthetic status and its relationship to the other arts.

A photo of frames of film from the 1921 abstract film Rhythmus 21.

11.3 Rhythmus 21 (1921). Frames of prominent German artist Hans Richter’s early abstract film. Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives, All Rights Reserved

In the 1910s and 1920s in France, the first avant-garde film movement, im-pressionism, was fostered by groups known as ciné-clubs and by journals dedicated to the new medium. In Cinéma, Louis Delluc coined the term photogénie to refer to a particular quality that distinguishes the filmed object from its everyday reality. Jean Epstein elaborated on this elusive concept in such poetic writings as “Bonjour Cinéma” and in his film adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s story The Fall of the House of Usher (1928) [Figure 11.4]. Germaine Dulac compared film to music in her extensive writings and lectures. Film theory and practice began to flourish during this time and would continue to develop in tandem in the period between the world wars.

A photo of a scene in the 1928 film The Fall of the House of Usher.

11.4 The Fall of the House of Usher (1928). Jean Epstein’s interest in the poetic quality of an object when filmed shares affinities with the writing of Edgar Allan Poe, whose short story he adapted in this impressionist film.

Classical Film Theories: Formalism and Realism

The intellectual interest in the medium of film and its relation to contemporary times only intensified as its technological and industrial organization, social role, and dominant styles solidified in the 1920s. Art historians joined filmmakers to produce the first full-length books on film theory. While many film theorists sought to define the specific formal elements of film and their effects, both for practical reasons and to enter into debate with traditional theories of aesthetics, others held the medium’s appeal to realism to be fundamental. Traditionally, these positions are opposed to each other as formalist and realist and linked to the reception of the very earliest films.

Stories of the presentation of the Lumière brothers’ first films at the Grand Café in Paris invariably tell how audiences shrank from the arriving train or feared they would be splashed by the waves of the sea [Figure 11.5]. Whether or not these stories are true, they characterize cinema as realist and lacking the aesthetic distance of the other arts.

A photo of a train pulling into the station in a scene from the 1896 film Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat.

11.5 Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat (1896). Whether a truthful account or a myth, audiences were said to be so frightened by the image of a life-sized train coming directly at them that they screamed and ran from their seats. The Kobal Collection/Art Resource, NY

As we shall see, for theorists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, film, like photography, was distinct because of its referential quality — its ability to refer to the world through images that resemble and record the presence of objects and sources of sounds. For formalists like Sergei Eisenstein and Béla Balázs, cinema is an art. Editing and close-ups are the basis of film’s meanings and effects; realism is only a style that uses form in a particular way. Walter Benjamin went so far as to claim that the form of film affects the sensory perception of the viewer. Although the debates between these positions became quite polemical, neither prevailed; it is the tension between the formal and realist properties of the medium that remains at the heart of film theory.

Formalist Theories

Although some theorists might postulate that cinema is defined by some ineffable essence, most would characterize it by its form. In classical film theory, formalists looked to unique properties of cinema such as camera movement and distance, shot duration and rhythm to find meaning in the work itself. Some of them correlated aspects of film like editing to the fragmented experiences of modern life. Formalism continues to be a dominant approach in film studies. Much of this work is indebted to influential theorist-filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein.

Soviet Montage Theory. As we saw in our discussion of editing in Chapter 4, the montage theory of Eisenstein and other Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s has had enormous impact on both film practice and film theory. The 1917 Russian Revolution catalyzed a group of artist-intellectuals to develop formal means to express a new social order. Stylistic innovations in graphic and set design, painting, and sculpture were synthesized in the new medium, which, with its technological base and populist reach, was celebrated as a perfect expression of modernism. Lev Kuleshov’s teaching at the state film school, where Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein were his students, put the theory of montage at the center of Soviet filmmaking (pp. 170-71). In Mother (1926) [Figure 11.6] and other films, Pudovkin used montage as a way of breaking down a scene to direct the spectator’s look and understanding. In contrast, Eisenstein’s theory of montage, outlined in one of the most significant bodies of writing in film theory, emphasized the effects of collision between shots. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov also contributed to film theory in the form of manifestos signed by the Kinoki, or “cinema-eye” group. Vertov’s avant-garde writings emphasized the new way of seeing made possible by the movie camera’s ability to overcome the limitations of the human eye. He rejected the fiction film in favor of “life caught unaware” and experimented with the possibilities of sound.

A photo of a standing woman pouring water over the head of a sitting male into a bucket in a scene from the 1926 film Mother.

11.6 Mother (1926). Like other Soviet filmmakers, Vsevolod Pudovkin emphasized the power of montage. But while Eisenstein favored dissonant effects, Pudovkin pioneered the orchestration of emotion through cutting, as in this powerful adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s novel.

Film Aesthetics. Like the Soviet montage theorists, Béla Balázs and Rudolf Arnheim championed formalist theories of film. Balázs, best known for his Theory of the Film (1952), was a Hungarian screenwriter and film critic who also worked in the Soviet Union and published his first book of film theory in 1924. Balázs argued that film was a new “form-language” that broke with the theater and the other arts by allowing for viewer identification. In watching a movie, he writes, “we look up to Juliet’s balcony with Romeo’s eyes and look down on Romeo with Juliet’s.” In particular, Balázs wrote eloquently on the power of the close-up, an element of film art impossible to approximate on stage: “by means of the close-up the camera in the days of the silent film revealed also the hidden main-springs of a life which we had thought we already knew so well” [Figure 11.7].

A photo of an extreme close-up of a female face, looking all the way to her right and showing no neck, with a dark background in the 1921 film Asta Nielsen as Hamlet.

11.7 Asta Nielsen as Hamlet (1921). Theorist Béla Balázs believed the close-up could reveal the soul onscreen and wrote eloquently about Danish silent film star Asta Nielsen’s face in close-up.

German art historian Rudolf Arnheim argued even more strongly for a formalist position in his 1933 study Film, which was later revised for English publication as Film as Art (1957). For Arnheim, the quest for film realism was a betrayal of the unique aesthetic properties of the medium that allowed it to transcend the imitation of nature. He set out to “refute the assertion that film is nothing but the feeble mechanical reproduction of real life.” For example, in his view the two-dimensionality of the screen image was not a limitation but an aesthetic parameter to be exploited by filmmakers and emphasized by theorists. Like Münsterberg, Arnheim was interested in the psychology of perception and did not value the perception of resemblance above other responses.

VIEWING CUE

In the last film you viewed for class, explore the effects of a specific element of form such as the close-up, theorized by Béla Balázs, or the two-dimensionality of the screen, emphasized by Rudolf Arnheim.

Film and Modernity. The theorist Walter Benjamin was particularly interested in how cinema participated in the transformation of our perception in the modern world. Benjamin wrote about cinema as well as photography in his famous, and complex, essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” For Benjamin, the comparison of photography and film with painting did not hinge on their relative artistic value. Rather, they differed because these new art forms did not produce unique objects with the “aura” of an original artwork. Instead, film captured, in multiple widely circulating copies, the sense of accelerated time and effortlessly traversed space typical of contemporary urban life. Benjamin regarded the distracted state of the film viewer as both a response to its formal properties and characteristic of the historical moment.

Realism

If formalist positions dominated in the 1920s, the question of realism emerged soon after as the central debate of classical film theory. The momentous technical development of synchronized sound was accompanied by new speculation on the nature of the medium: does sound allow film to fulfill a mission to reproduce the world as it is, or does sound hinder cinema’s visual expression? Realism, generally speaking, relates to mimesis, or imitation of reality, in the arts. The mimetic quality has been valued in the Western artistic tradition since ancient Greece. If the formalists saw the film screen as akin to a picture frame, the realists saw it as a window.

VIEWING CUE

From a realist position, analyze a recent film you viewed. Can you identify a scene that might support André Bazin’s ideas about the long take or Siegfried Kracauer’s ideas about photography’s power to capture the everyday?

During and after World War II, a reconsideration of realism was prompted by political events as well as by technical innovations and new filmmaking movements. One of the most prominent film critics and theorists of the 1950s and 1960s, André Bazin, saw film as quintessentially realist, a medium “in which the image is evaluated not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it.” Bazin responded directly to the formalists who preceded him, and he serves as an important predecessor of contemporary film studies in turn (Bazin’s influence through Cahiers du cinéma is discussed later in this chapter).

In his essay “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” Bazin expressed the view that cinema’s ability to capture a space and event in real time is its essence. Montage interfered with this vocation, he argued, by altering spatial and temporal relationships. He advocated instead for the use of composition in depth, made possible by deep-focus cinematography. Since all planes of the image could be kept in view, cutting between shots taken from different distances was less necessary. For Bazin, a filmmaker like Jean Renoir, who staged scenes in depth using long takes, conveyed “respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, of its duration.” Bazin saw the image as a reference not only to reality but also to the viewer’s presence — and ultimately as a means of transcending time.

Another formidable thinker on film, Siegfried Kracauer, is, like Bazin, best known for his strong advocacy of realism, though Kracauer’s position evolved over time. In the 1920s, he began writing newspaper essays in Weimar Germany amid modernist experimentation with film form. In “The Mass Ornament,” Kracauer explored the aesthetics of mass culture and the new rhythms of life it inspired [Figure 11.8], and he published his well-known From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film in 1947. In 1960, he elaborated his views on film’s capacity for realism in his major work, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality. Kracauer argued that the cinematic medium “is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality.” It was not just that film provided a window on the phenomenal world. More important, for Kracauer film was able to preserve what would otherwise meet with destruction: the momentary, the everyday, the random.

A photo of chorus girls on a circular platform organized in tiers and facing outward in a scene in the 1933 film Footlight Parade.

11.8 Footlight Parade (1933). In his writings of the 1920s and early 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer cited the almost abstract patterns of chorus girls in performance as examples of what he called “mass ornament.”

Postwar Film Culture and Criticism

Film theorists’ interest in cinematic realism was shaped by the devastating events of World War II and its aftermath. Kracauer’s experience as a German Jewish refugee influenced his views on cinema as a kind of historical evidence. Bazin, an activist Catholic and member of the French Resistance, invested film with similar redemptive properties. For example, Bazin valued the postwar Italian neorealist movement, exemplified in films like Germany Year Zero (1948) with its location shooting and amateur actors [Figure 11.9], because it demonstrated what Bazin called “faith in reality.”

A photo of a scene in the 1948 film Germany Year Zero in which a man is crossing a street with war-damaged buildings in the background.

11.9 Germany Year Zero (1948). For André Bazin, Roberto Rossellini’s film, set on location in postwar Berlin, puts its “faith in reality.”

In the period of recovery from the trauma and destruction of the war, neorealism led a vigorous international film culture. Art cinema was supported by film festivals and journals. Film theory could not have taken hold had it not been for the flurry of filmmaking and lively debates of this period.

Film Journals

Postwar film culture was fostered in an international array of film journals. One of the most famous of these, Cahiers du cinéma, was co-founded by Bazin in 1951 [Figure 11.10]. Under Bazin’s mentorship, the magazine published the criticism of the young cineastes — François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard [Figure 11.11], Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol — who would shape the French New Wave (see Chapter 10, pp. 364-65). These writers were getting much of their film education at the Cinémathèque Française, where Henri Langlois screened an eclectic menu of world film — including the hundreds of American studio films that could not be released in France during the Vichy period. The writings of the Cahiers critics, and the films that they went on to make, energized world film culture and lay the groundwork for the emergence of the discipline of film studies in universities.

A photo of an international film journal that reads: Cahiers Du Cinéma No. 1 Revue Du Cinéma et Du Télécinéma Avril 1951.

11.10 Cahiers du cinéma. The journal, with its iconic yellow cover, introduced auteur theory in the 1950s. The Granger Collection, NY

A photo of Jean-Luc Godard examining frames of film he holds up in front of him.

11.11 Jean-Luc Godard. From his feature debut Breathless (1960) to the honorary Academy Award for lifetime achievement that he refused in 2010, Godard is an auteur whose persona is as distinctive as the innovative sounds and images of his many films. Mary Evans/Ronald Grant/Everett Collection (10403111)

Rival journals in France, Positif and Cinéthique, also flourished, and the polemics among them catalyzed film enthusiasts. Publications like Movie in England and the English-language Cahiers du cinéma, edited by Andrew Sarris in New York, disseminated French criticism and ideas like auteur theory. In the United States, Film Culture was at the heart of the avant-garde New American cinema movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and the University of California’s Film Quarterly, published under that title since 1958, introduced many key ideas of film theory.

After the cultural upheaval provoked by general strikes in France in May 1968, Cahiers du cinéma became both more political and more theoretical. In its pages, films from Hiroshima, mon amour (1959) to Young Mr. Lincoln (1939) were analyzed in depth. In the 1970s, writers for the British journal Screen introduced the Marxist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic language and ideas from France that would permeate Anglo-American cinema studies for more than a decade. Film publishing was not limited to periodicals. Monographs and series on individual directors, specific decades of film production, national cinemas, and genres proliferated. Many of these “little books” — low-cost, portable texts — combined the popular and the scholarly and encouraged the development of academic publishing in the field.

Auteur Theory

The ideas that emerged from this intense cultivation of film culture informed both criticism and theory. Auteur theory, which asserts that a film bears the creative imprint of one individual (typically the director), emerged in the 1950s when specific directors were vocally championed by the French critics. The retention of the French term “auteur” in English marks this origin. Cahiers du cinéma promoted what its writers called “la politique des auteurs,” a “policy” or doctrine of singling out for praise certain filmmakers, such as Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, Samuel Fuller, and Robert Bresson, whose distinct styles made their films immediately identifiable. European art cinema was in its ascendance, with such figures as Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni fitting the definition of an auteur as an autonomous writer-director. Yet Cahiers du cinéma’s concept of authorship was also applied to a group of filmmakers for whom the idea of such conscious and consistent creative artistry seemed less appropriate: directors working in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system.

VIEWING CUE

Look at several issues of one of the journals mentioned in this section. Characterize the publication’s perspective on film culture, giving concrete examples.

Critics argued that Hollywood auteurs such as Raoul Walsh and Howard Hawks left their signature on their films in the form of characteristic motifs or striking compositions, defying studio constraints on artistic autonomy in favor of market considerations. Debates arose over whether a particular director should be classified a true auteur or a mere metteur en scène — French for “director,” derived from theatrical usage — a label that conveyed technical competence without a strong individual vision. In America, la politique des auteurs was popularized by Andrew Sarris in Film Culture and the Village Voice. In his 1968 collection The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968, Sarris lists his “pantheon,” including Hawks, Chaplin, Welles, and John Ford. At the same time, he deflates the reputations of Academy Award winners like William Wyler. In Sarris’s hierarchy of Hollywood talent, the judgment of the critic prevails in assigning relative status to a wide array of directors based on their personal signature. Like that of the French critics, Sarris’s work depends on a deep cinephilia, or love of cinema, and an almost exhaustive knowledge of the films — major and minor — released throughout the previous several decades. Sarris’s rendering of the phrase la politique des auteurs as “auteur theory” in English is somewhat misleading; it is less a fully worked-out theory than a critical method, and the political connotation is lost in translation.

However, the auteurist approach tends to minimize the fact that cinema is a collaborative, commercial, and highly technologically mediated form. Making a film is not as personal as authoring a poem, and because so many individuals usually contribute to a film, it can be hard to assign credit to a single authorial vision, especially in studio-produced work. Critic Pauline Kael counters Sarris’s position in one famous instance, asserting that writer Herman Mankiewicz rather than Orson Welles should be credited for coming up with Citizen Kane’s (1941) original structure and that cinematographer Gregg Toland’s work is what distinguishes the film’s look. In commercial cinema, a producer, studio, or franchise may be more important than a director. Today a director credit such as “a J.J. Abrams film” may be a matter of contractual obligations and financial arrangements. Film theorist Timothy Corrigan discusses the contemporary use of the director as brand as “the commerce of auteurism.”

Genre Theory

In film, genre criticism, like auteur theory, was invigorated by the film culture of post–World War II France when American films that had not been released during that country’s occupation by Germany were finally exhibited all at once, making commonalities easy to identify. Like auteur criticism, genre criticism also depends on cinephilia — making generalizations based on only a few films would be imprudent. Sometimes genre criticism was considered at odds with auteurism: geniuses could not make run-of-the-mill, formulaic films — or if they did, it was an exception in their oeuvre. But auteurist approaches essentially developed in tandem with genre perspectives — it can be argued that the mark of the auteur on a genre is what distinguishes his or her work. This is certainly the case with John Ford and the western.

Auteur criticism might also praise the handling of disparate genres by a particularly gifted auteur. Critic Robin Wood looks at the elaboration of Hawksian themes in both Howard Hawks’s male adventure films and his screwball comedies and finds them to be related to the same concerns [Figure 11.12]. Similarly, a contemporary auteur such as Quentin Tarantino is known for his self-conscious use of martial arts, blaxploitation, and crime film genres; and Ridley Scott made an utterly original film in Blade Runner (1982) while respecting science fiction conventions [Figure 11.13]. The positive critical view toward popular cinema, especially Hollywood movies, that auteurism began to bring about in the 1950s was carried on through genre criticism more directly.

A photo of a scene in the 1940 film His Girl Friday.

11.12 His Girl Friday (1940). Howard Hawks made classics in disparate genres, including westerns, musicals, adventure films, and comedies such as this one.

A photo of a scene in the 1982 film Bladerunner.

11.13 Blade Runner (1982). The convergence of auteurist and genre criticism is apparent in assessments of Ridley Scott’s science fiction film.

Different genres work out different cultural questions or problems; hence their emergence and decline in particular periods. Critic Thomas Schatz, in his 1981 book Hollywood Genres, for example, sees musicals as celebrating cultural integration, often symbolized by the couple coming together, whereas westerns require the establishment of a home, one that the wandering hero cannot himself enjoy.

Contemporary Film Theory

By the 1970s, film studies had become an established discipline, with strong footholds in English and art history programs as well as its own academic departments, societies, and journals. During this time, the vocabulary of film theory became very specialized. Theorists became interested in a more systematic approach to cinema than was offered by the often subjective and impressionistic legacy of film criticism. More recently, online journals, blogs, and streaming sites have helped democratize film theory, reflecting a greater engagement between the public and the scholarly film community, and reconnecting with the discipline’s origins in a wider film culture.

The following overview of contemporary film theory is organized according to major critical schools within the discipline. There are important interrelationships among these schools, and often one set of questions grows out of another. For example, when feminist film theory looks at our unconscious identification with characters onscreen, it overlaps with psychoanalytic theory. When it looks at how some genres are associated with female viewers, it overlaps with cultural studies. However, establishing the evolution of and broad outlines for each area of contemporary film theory is a useful way to raise questions for further study.

Structuralism and Semiotics

In a 1968 essay, French literary critic Roland Barthes declared “the death of the author,” arguing that the artist’s conscious intention and biography should be set aside in favor of an analysis of the formal qualities of the work itself. Auteur theory had extended the cultural prestige of the literary author to filmmakers; now literary critics were calling the traditional notion of authorial genius into question. These new perspectives had their roots in structuralism, an approach to linguistics and anthropology that, when extended to literary and filmic narratives, looks for common structures rather than originality.

Structuralism was widely influential in French thought of the 1960s; its origins lie in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early part of the twentieth century. Because of this influence, film theorists, like thinkers in other disciplines, compared the medium to language. For Saussure, linguistics was the most exemplary case of a new science of signs he called semiology, which would also include pictures, gestures, and a wide range of other systems of communication. Semiology or semiotics is the study of signs and signification. It posits that meaning is constructed and communicated through the selection, ordering, and interpretation of signs. A sign, for Saussure, is composed of a signifier, the spoken or written word, picture, or gesture, and a signified, the mental concept it evokes. Together, the signifier “c-a-t” and the signified mental image of a domesticated feline form a sign, and the two parts cannot be imagined without each other. In a particular instance, the sign “cat” might refer to a specific tabby, which would be its referent. The gap between the referent and the sign, and the distinction between the signifier and the signified, allow for the analyst to isolate general rules or codes that apply to specific instances of communication or messages. The code of language, for example, allows English speakers and listeners to share the meaning of the word “winter” as one of four seasons, its denotation. Cultural codes, however, are responsible for the connotations of cold and snow.

For late-nineteenth-century American philosopher C. S. Peirce, who coined the term “semiotics,” there are three varieties of signs. A word is a symbolic sign, with an arbitrary relationship to its referent assigned by language, which originates in culture. Photography and film, in contrast, are iconic signs, meaning they signify their referents through a relationship of resemblance. Finally, since photographic images are a product of a process in which light, when reflected from an object, produces an image that is fixed by the chemical emulsion on film, these images are also indexical signs, Peirce’s third type of sign. In other words, a direct causal relationship exists between the sign and the object depicted — a relationship that can be likened to pointing or indicating, implied by the word “index.” An indexical sign like a footprint indicates that a person has walked in a particular path; a weathervane points in the direction the wind blows.

Therefore, pictures, especially photographs and film or video images, are seen to have a stronger identification with their referents than do words, which are connected to what they designate by convention only. In René Magritte’s famous painting The Treachery of Images, the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”) seem absurd because we take them to refer to what is unmistakably a picture of a pipe. But a picture of a pipe is not a real pipe you would hold and use to smoke tobacco, merely its iconic sign. There is no essential nature of an object that is captured in a sign, of whatever kind. Semiotics stresses language as human invention and social convention. The scientific methodology devised by linguistics to describe these conventions has been useful to theorists attempting to approach cinema systematically, rather than relying on subjective evaluations such as beauty and truth. Semiotic methods of formal analysis are based on these attempts. Theorists identify how cinematic codes such as camera movement and lighting create meaningful patterns in specific films and across genres.

The legacy of linguistics has also been felt in theories of film narrative. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss titled his important 1957 work Structural Anthropology, building on Saussure’s structural linguistics. Lévi-Strauss studied thousands of myths and discovered that they share basic structures that profoundly shape cultural life. Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp noticed a similar unity in his study of folktales. There are a limited number of what he called character functions and plot elements and certain kinds of plot events always occur in the same order. From hundreds of tales he discerned basic plots; interestingly, these are echoed in many other narrative forms.

Narratology, the study of narrative forms, is a branch of structuralism that encompasses stories of all kinds, including films. Are there a limited number of basic plots available to filmmakers? Are genres like myths? Because movies are so formulaic and so strikingly similar to myths and folktales even when not explicitly based on them, narratological studies had fruitful results. The characters in the Star Wars series, for example, closely match the heroes, antiheroes, magical helpers, princesses, and witches of the folktales Propp studied [Figure 11.14].

A photo of the Star Wars characters standing on the steps of a castle in a scene from the 1977 film Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope.

11.14 Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope (1977). George Lucas acknowledged the influence of mythologist Joseph Campbell in the plot of the first Star Wars movie. Narratologists would recognize the dramatis personae of the hero, the helper, and the princess in the film’s main characters.

The linguists known as the Russian formalists, contemporaries of Sergei Eisenstein and Vladimir Propp, have contributed the important distinction between syuzhet (plot) and fabula (story) to the study of narrative. Syuzhet refers to the way events are arranged in the actual tale or film, and fabula refers to the chronologically ordered sequence of events as we rationally reconstruct it. For example, a detective story’s syuzhet follows the detective’s progress through the investigation. Its fabula commences with the circumstances leading up to the committing of the crime.

VIEWING CUE

bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

Watch the online clip of The Wizard of Oz (1939) and consider how its plot resembles a fairy tale.

Viewing Cue: A photo of a scene in the 1939 film The Wizard of Oz.

Structuralist theorists reduce narrative to its most basic form: an opening situation is disrupted, a hero takes action as a result, and a new equilibrium is reached at the end. The novel, the distinctive middle-class cultural form of the nineteenth century, gave that hero psychological depth within a realistic field of action. The novel’s basic narrative form was adopted by motion pictures, whose realist capacity is great. Along with certain avant-garde filmmakers, film theorists drawing on structuralism and semiotics, and reaching back to the formalist positions of classical film theory, challenged the idea of classical narrative form as “the norm” and realism as cinema’s primary mode.

Ideological Critique

As tools of contemporary film theory, structuralism and semiotics were brought to bear on both the content and the form of film as an ideological critique of the naturalization of social conventions and the mystification of how things work. For example, a structuralist reading of the musical Singin’ in the Rain (1952) that is critical of its ideological message would show how both the technology and the labor involved in making a Hollywood film are subordinated to the film’s romance plot. This form of ideological critique is derived from Marxist theory. Marxism is most immediately understood as a political and economic discourse, one that looks at history and society in terms of unequal class relations. But French thought, catalyzed by the radical social disruptions, political protests, and intellectual currents of the late 1960s, brought Marxism to bear on cultural forms like film.

Louis Althusser approaches the traditional Marxist question of the nature of ideology — a systematic set of beliefs that is not necessarily conscious — with a new explanation of how people come to accept ideas and conditions contrary to their interests. Althusser defines ideology as “the imaginary representation of the real relations in which we live.” According to him, real relations, such as paid work that contributes to the profits of others, disempower working people in the interests of the ruling class, and our imaginary representations — that this is the way things are supposed to be, according to narratives such as the evening news and Hollywood genre films — make this powerlessness seem inevitable and tolerable.

For the critics at Cahiers du cinéma, film is an important test of Althusser’s theories about ideology because it affects viewers’ beliefs on an unconscious level. In their 1969 editorial for the journal, Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni examine varieties of film practice and classify films in seven categories (a–g) according to their relationship with the “dominant ideology.” Category “a” films were those Comolli and Narboni perceived as most politically and formally consistent with the dominant ideology. Category “b” films include those that broke with the dominant ideology, not only on the level of content (for example, films that portrayed decolonization and the conflict over U.S. involvement in Vietnam), but also on the level of form (for example, experimental films that disturb easy viewing processes).

VIEWING CUE

Does the film you are watching put forth a clear ideological position? Are there ways to see conflicting positions in it?

But Comolli and Narboni’s editorial sets an even more lasting agenda for film theory in their practice of ideological critique. In their list of categories of films to study, they use “e” to designate Hollywood films that seem to uphold the status quo but register, in their formal excesses or internal contradictions, the stresses and strains of trying to make the dominant ideology seem inevitable. Careful viewers can read these codes and see the film as a representation of or argument about the social world rather than as an unchangeable reality. Soon, other critics followed Comolli and Narboni’s lead in reading films in this way. For example, studio-era auteur Douglas Sirk’s 1950s melodramas, including All That Heaven Allows (1955), were considered too color-coordinated, his characters too hysterical, and their environments too crammed with artificial commodities to be taken at face value [Figure 11.15]. These glossy surfaces were seen to be cracking under the brittle hypocrisies characterizing the prosperous, Eisenhower-era America they depicted: anti-Communist hysteria, repression of civil rights movements, and the enforcement of gender roles and sexual codes that had been challenged during the war. Sirk’s films are what these critics called “progressive texts”; the uneasy feeling they leave us with is itself a critique of dominant ideology. This subtle, and sometimes wishful, approach is known as “symptomatic reading,” a fruitful legacy of Althusser’s ideological critique in contemporary film theory.

A photo of a man and woman conversing at a gathering in the foreground with others around them in the scene from the 1955 film All That Heaven Allows.

11.15 All That Heaven Allows (1955). Critics regarded Douglas Sirk’s melodramas as “progressive texts” whose formal excesses and improbable situations showed the cracks in Eisenhower-era America’s facade of prosperity and social consensus.

Poststructuralism

As the term implies, poststructuralism is the intellectual development that derived from structuralism and in some sense supplanted it. Poststructuralism questions the rational methodology and fixed definitions that structuralists bring to their various objects of study and includes many distinct areas of thought, from psychoanalytic to postcolonial and feminist theory. Poststructuralism is a position of critique, asking us to reconsider the truths and hierarchies we take for granted. For example, our implicit standard that a satisfying film ties up all its loose ends is a structuralist position that posits closure as a basic narrative element. Poststructuralism counters that closure is a relative quality and stresses the open-endedness of stories: what if we daydream about the characters we have been introduced to or pick up on the relationship between a film and topical events?

Poststructuralism is a great deal messier than structuralism as an intellectual movement. Whereas structuralism attempted to be systematic by looking for transhistorical common patterns into which specific data would fit, poststructuralism questions structuralism’s assumption of objectivity and the disregard for cultural and historical context. A shorthand definition might be: structuralism + subjectivity = poststructuralism. Most of contemporary film theory is poststructuralist in orientation; we explore aspects of the intersection of subjectivity with film structures. This is done through psychoanalysis, which was elaborated in terms of apparatus theory and theories of spectatorship.

Signs and Meaning in Persepolis (2007)

See also: Waking Life (2001), Waltz with Bashir (2008)

FILM IN FOCUS

bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a clip from Persepolis, see the Film Experience LaunchPad.

The film version of Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir Persepolis (Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Parranaud, 2007) features black-and-white cel animation with simple black-outlined forms and decorative patterning against flat gray-shaded backgrounds. The film’s formal style is correlated meaningfully with its themes of coming-of-age, exile, and cultural difference, as well as its fable-like tone of wry humor. Signs including color, voice, clothing, and text communicate dimensions of Marjane’s experience and the narrator’s feminist and diasporan perspective. The film’s seeming simplicity is enriched by a semiotic analysis.

Persepolis is the story of Marjane, who as a child in Tehran witnessed repression under the Shah and later under the Islamic Republic and during the Iran/Iraq war. She left home for schooling in Europe, and although she returned for a time to Iran and attended art school there, the adult Marjane lives and works as a writer and artist in France, far from her family. From a structuralist perspective, hers is a tale of a banished heir conquering a series of obstacles. Yet the ending remains open, and gender, culture, and politics give the story its unique texture.

The film begins with the adult Marjane in an airport, a place that signifies transit and conveys the feeling of being neither here nor there. Significantly, the present-day scenes are the only ones in the film to use color. A Western viewer might expect this to connote the vibrancy of life in democratic Europe compared to the drabness of theocratic Iran. Instead, pale figures appear against monochromatic backgrounds. Marjane’s red coat connotes that the scene is happening “now.” It signals the character’s interiority or “voice” without a word being spoken.

An animated film is rich with examples of symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs. Animation is an iconic language of resemblance. We compare Marjane’s image with that of a blond, green-eyed woman in the ladies’ room and recognize similarities and differences in these icons. When Marjane covers her head with a scarf in preparation for a flight to Tehran, the red lips of the other woman purse in distaste. Cultural signs of clothing and gesture are easily read here, as well as in the next image of Marjane slumped and somewhat incongruously smoking a cigarette, as the headscarf is worn as a symbol of female modesty. Voiceover narration, dialogue, and titles engage the symbolic code of language to amplify or counterpoint what is visible in the image. The child Marji scampers past as the adult Marjane’s voiceover begins [Figure 11.16]. Bruce Lee and Adidas are young Marjane’s favorites, we learn: the signs “Iran” and “popular culture” are juxtaposed quite naturally. Because the film was made in France, there is an added level of symbolic signification involved in translation. The title “Téhéran 1978” comes up, connoting not only that the film is arranged in a flashback — we construct the linear fabula from the order of events presented by the syuzhet — but also that a greater history is about to impinge on Marji’s story. The Islamic Revolution occurs in 1979.

A photo of a scene in which a color drawing of a woman is sitting and smoking a cigarette, and we also see her in black and white as a smiling child in the 2007 animated film Persepolis.

11.16 Persepolis (2007). Waiting for a plane back to Tehran, Marjane remembers her childhood there. The animated images become black-and-white as a sign of the transition from present to past.

Marji’s parents explain that while at first the Revolution promised freedom from British and American influence over the country, these principles were later betrayed by an oppressive regime. The headscarf, celebrated by the Revolution as a symbol of Iranian identity, soon becomes an unwelcome restriction of Marji’s freedom [Figure 11.17]. Persepolis’s often stark but layered images of rebellion, war, and torture are not the indexical, photographic ones of objective history. Instead, the silhouette of a figure in a gas mask is the stuff of childhood nightmares [Figure 11.18]. And the intricately decorated images of Marji’s fantasies and the stories her family tells her are evocative of Persian traditional art. All of the film’s images, in fact, bear the traces of distance — living in exile, dwelling in memory. At the same time, because the movie was made with traditional rather than digital animation, it points to the artist’s own hand — the images are in this way indexical. One very clear sign of Satrapi’s personal presence in her artwork is the mole she always includes on representations of her adult face. A trace of her work, an iconic representation of her face, the mark is a symbol of her identity, rendered in black and white and all the shades of gray in between.

A black and white photo of a scene in in the 2007 animated film Persepolis.

11.17 Persepolis (2007). Two female “Guardians of the Revolution” berate Marji for her punk clothing.

A scene of four silhouettes prowling through haze, wearing gas masks and helmets, and carrying weapons in the 2007 animated film Persepolis.

11.18 Persepolis (2007). Marjane Satrapi’s graphic style evokes a child’s memory of the Iran/Iraq war.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic theory comes into play in describing the psychic processes we undergo when experiencing the film illusion. When we watch films in a movie theater, we are immobile and surrounded in darkness and become absorbed in a larger-than-life image. Identification, desire, disavowal: these are some of the processes that are activated as we watch a film.

Film theory was greatly affected by the ways French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described human subjectivity, as images were central to his account. In his teachings from the 1950s through his death in 1981, Lacan spoke of three domains of psychic experience: the “imaginary realm” deals in images; the “symbolic realm” is the domain of language, and the “real” is experienced as a trauma that cannot be directly represented. Lacanian film theorists are struck by the fact that the human subject relates to pictures (the imaginary) in a particularly powerful way, rooted in one of the earliest images to leave an impression on us, our own reflection in the mirror. In the mirror stage, the infant comes to recognize himself or herself as a human individual, but this recognition is also a “misrecognition,” because it is routed through an image that is an illusion.

Lacanian film theorists like Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz liken this early sense of self, which is both powerful and illusory, to the experience of viewing a film and “believing” in its world. Moreover, films are peopled with stars and characters with physical powers superior to ours and with whom we identify [Figure 11.19]. While the symbolic and the real also come into play in our encounters with movies, it is the imaginary that accounts for their power. This dimension of the film experience was elaborated by analogy with the viewing process itself.

A photo of a scene in the 2006 film Casino Royale.

11.19 Casino Royale (2006). Daniel Craig’s character James Bond represents an idealized object of identification, an aspect of spectatorship highlighted in psychoanalytic film theory.

Apparatus Theory

In Plato’s ancient parable of the cave, people chained underground watching shadows on the wall could not know that what they saw was not real. Film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry saw the cinema as similar to the cave, an ideological mechanism based in a physical set of technologies, with the power to convince us that an illusion is real. He used Althusser’s term “apparatus” to argue that the arrangement of equipment, such as the hidden projector and the illuminated screen, influences our unconscious receptivity to the image and to ideology — as if we too were trapped in Plato’s cave.

Apparatus theory explores the values built into film technology through the particular context of its historical development. The camera’s monocular (single-eyed) perspective is based on the values of human-scaled Renaissance art, in which the viewer stands at the point where perspective lines converge. Apparatus theory asserts that this position is not neutral but embodies Western cultural values like anthropocentrism (human-centeredness), individualism, possessiveness, and the elevation of the visual over other senses. A culture that did not put the possessive individual at the center of representation — a culture that equally valued animals and people, for example, or senses other than sight in the arts — might never have developed the technology of photography.

The film viewer is in the same position as the camera that filmed the image and can thus imagine himself or herself as the originator or possessor of the illusion on the screen. This sense of one’s self is double-edged. According to poststructuralism, an individual who stands in front of a Renaissance painting or watches a classical Hollywood movie is “subjected” to the apparatus’s positioning and is granted his or her “subjectivity” or sense of self only in these predetermined conditions.

Theorists argue that subjects are constituted through language or through other acts of signification (meaning-making), such as film. For example, the word “I” has no definite meaning until it is used by someone in a conversation, and its meaning shifts as each speaker in the conversation uses “I” to refer to himself or herself. As viewers cannot “talk back” when they watch a movie (as they can with video games, Web sites, and interactive films), they can be said to be constituted as the object of the film’s address: they are meant to laugh, cry, or put clues together as the film unfolds.

Spectatorship

How subjects interact with films and with the cinematic apparatus is addressed through the theory of spectatorship. Spectatorship has been a concern in film theory since Münsterberg, who used psychology to explain the mind’s role in making sense of movies. In the poststructuralist theory of the 1970s, spectatorship stood at the convergence of theories of language and subjectivity, psychoanalysis, and ideological critique.

VIEWING CUE

Consider your experience as a spectator of the film screened most recently for class. Did you relate to the point of view of a particular character or was your perspective more omnipotent? Were you aware of the apparatus (the camera, the projection)?

Christian Metz was one of the most prolific and influential contemporary promoters of spectatorship theory. In his influential book The Imaginary Signifier (1977), he argues that film’s strong perceptual presence — giant images projected in a dark room, immersive sound — makes it an almost hallucinatory experience. Going to the movies gratifies our voyeurism (looking without being seen ourselves) and plays to our unconscious self-image of power. It is as if what’s on the screen is made possible by our presence. The work of Metz and other French theorists appeared in translation in the English journal Screen in the early 1970s, and the psychoanalytic theory of spectatorship is sometimes known as “screen theory.”

Theories of Gender and Sexuality

The poststructuralist account of spectatorship and subjectivity remains abstract if given only in general terms. In psychoanalytic theory, subjectivity is constructed as gendered. Theories of gender and sexuality have been integral to film theory’s exploration of how subjectivity is engaged by and constructed in cinema.

Feminist Film Theory

As feminism began to have wide social and intellectual currency during the 1970s, commentators noted ways that the female image is treated differently from the male image in film. In advertising, pornography, and painting, the objectification of the female image seems to solicit a possessive, implicitly male gaze [Figure 11.20]. In film, feminist critics note, the spectator is envisioned in a similarly gendered way. “Is the gaze male?” asks E. Ann Kaplan in an essay of the same title, noting that vision is often associated with ownership and power — typically seen as male — in our culture.

A photo of a scene in the 1956 film And God Created Woman.

11.20 And God Created Woman (1956). Brigitte Bardot’s character exemplifies what Laura Mulvey calls woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.”

British theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published in Screen in 1975, is one of the most important essays in contemporary film theory. Arguing that psychoanalysis offers a compelling account of how the difference between the sexes is culturally determined, Mulvey observes that the glamorous and desirable female image in film is also a potentially threatening vision of difference, or otherness, for male viewers. Hollywood films repeat a pattern of visual mastery of the woman as “Other” by attributing the onscreen gaze to a male character who can cover for the camera’s voyeurism — its capacity for looking without being seen — and stand in for the male viewer. Film narratives also tend to domesticate or otherwise tame the woman, Mulvey shows, offering analyses of Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958) and Rear Window (1954), whose stories are driven by voyeurism and female makeovers. Essentially, Mulvey argues that the standard dichotomy in Hollywood film is: “woman as image/man as bearer of the look.”

In her own films, Mulvey champions “a political use of psychoanalysis” and a style of filmmaking that would “free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space” so that it cannot be ignored through assimilation to the viewer’s or characters’ perspective. In their film Riddles of the Sphinx (1977), Mulvey and Peter Wollen use 360-degree pans, with the camera positioned at about waist level, to emulate the circularity of a young mother’s rhythms of work and to avoid objectifying her body in a centered, still image [Figure 11.21]. The film deliberately sets out to destroy conventional visual pleasure and narrative satisfaction. Like many theorists of this period, Mulvey and Wollen believed in making spectators think about what they were seeing.

A close-up photo of a woman standing at a sink washing a bowl with the camera behind her at waist level in a scene from the 1977 film Riddles of the Sphinx.

11.21 Riddles of the Sphinx (1977). Laura Mulvey puts her own theories about images of women into practice in a film made with Peter Wollen.

Building on Mulvey’s provocative argument, other feminist critics raise the question of female spectatorship. If narrative cinema so successfully positions the viewer to take up a male gaze, why are women historically often the most enthusiastic film viewers? One way to approach this question is to consider films produced with a female audience in mind. During Hollywood’s heyday, “women’s pictures” featured female stars who had a strong appeal to women, such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. At first glance, women’s pleasure in these films seems self-defeating: what these heroines seem to do best is suffer. However, feminists argue that a film like Now, Voyager (1942) enables female spectators to explore their own dissatisfaction with their lives by fantasizing a more fulfilling version of that existence. The movie shows Davis as a dowdy spinster taking control of her life — through psychoanalytic treatment, romance, and new clothes!

Today’s commercial films aimed at women are not that different from those of the 1940s. Many feminist critics argue that women’s pleasure in these complicated, mixed-message movies should be taken seriously. Because film is a mass medium, it will never radically challenge existing power relations, but if it speaks to women’s dilemmas, it is doing more than much official culture does. Sometimes filmmakers succeed in evoking these emotions and mass cultural traditions in more reflexive and satisfying ways, such as in Pedro Almodóvar’s revisiting of maternal melodramas in All About My Mother (1999) and Volver (2006) [Figure 11.22].

A photo of a scene showing a tearful woman hugging a girl in the 2006 film Volver.

11.22 Volver (2006). Pedro Almodóvar revisits the Hollywood genre of the maternal melodrama in this family story, empowering his female characters.

Overall, feminism has had more of an impact on the relatively young discipline of film theory than on many more established ones. Arguably, gender in film cannot be ignored. As Mulvey’s work suggests, cinema — certainly entertainment film but also the avant-garde — depends on the stylized images of women for its appeal. Moreover, the cinema, because it is part of the fabric of daily life, necessarily comments on the everyday, private sphere of gender relations. Feminism’s significant inroads in film theory have laid the groundwork for related, though not always parallel, critiques of cinema’s deployment of sexuality, race, and national identity.

Queer Theory

Feminist and psychoanalytic theory stress that unconscious processes such as desire and identification are at play when we go to the movies. Like cinema itself, however, psychoanalysis historically concentrates on heterosexual scenarios (such as the Oedipus complex) and pathologizes gays and lesbians (as cases of “arrested development,” for example). Queer film theory critiques and supplements feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, allowing for more flexible ways of seeing and experiencing visual pleasure than are accounted for by the binary opposites of male versus female, seeing versus seen, and being versus desiring that are the basis of Mulvey’s influential model of spectatorship.

Queer theory challenged Mulvey’s assumption that the position of desire is male, and the desired one, female, essentially equating gender difference with sexual desire. The gender of a member of the audience need not correspond with that of the character he or she finds most absorbing or most alluring. Mulvey cites Marlene Dietrich as an example of a “fetish” or mask for the male spectator’s desire, but Mulvey does not remark on the lesbian connotations of the star’s image. Dietrich cross-dressed for songs in many films and even kissed a woman on the lips in her first American movie, Morocco (1930) [Figure 11.23]. Dietrich’s gender bending is more than theoretical. Her onscreen style borrowed directly from the fashions of the lesbian and gay subculture of Weimar-era Germany, where her career began. Dietrich thus appealed on many different levels to lesbian and gay viewers, as well as to heterosexual women and men. In fact, this multiplicity could be seen more generally as a key to cinema’s mass appeal. The theory of gender performativity — the idea that there is no essential content to gender, only a set of cues and codes that must be repeatedly enacted and can be changed — is well illustrated in Dietrich’s persona.

A photo of Marlene Dietrich being kissed by an unidentifiable person wearing a man’s suit and top hat in a club scene from the 1930 film Morocco.

11.23 Morocco (1930). Queer theorists interpret Marlene Dietrich — here kissing a woman — in a different way than feminist theorist Laura Mulvey does in her influential essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

Although movies tend to conform to the dominant values of a society — in this case, to heterosexuality as the norm — they also make unconscious appeals to our fantasies, which may not be as conformist, and the term “queer” captures this anti-normative potential. Moreover, films leave room for viewers’ own interpretations and appropriations, such as when fan writers continue the adventures of particular mainstream characters or celebrities and share them on the Internet. Spectators positioned at the margins, such as gay men and lesbians, often “read against the grain” for cues of performance or mise-en-scène that suggest a different story from the one onscreen, one with more relevance to their lives. An interest in stars may extend beyond any particular film they are cast in and ignore those films’ required romantic outcomes. Queer theory allows for interpretations that value style over content, and ambiguity over certainty.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies scrutinizes aspects of cinema embedded in the everyday lives of individuals or groups at particular historical junctures and in particular social contexts; it does not analyze individual texts in isolation or theorize about spectatorship in the abstract. The interest in audiences’ experience of cultural forms responds to Marxist approaches like that of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose essay “The Culture Industry” argued that mass culture duped its viewers, churning out movies in the same manner as new cars or brands of toothpaste, with only superficial differences among the products. A useful way of understanding the fresh approach that cultural studies takes lies in a shift in the very definition of “culture.” Instead of defining culture as great works produced by transcendent artists and appreciated by knowledgeable patrons, cultural studies uses an anthropological definition: culture as a way of life, including social structures and habits. In other words, it is how movies are encountered, understood, and “used” in daily experience that interests cultural studies scholars. We will look at a few key approaches within cultural studies: reception theory, star studies, and race and representation.

Reception Theory

Reception theory focuses on how a film is received by audiences, rather than on who made a film or on its formal features or thematic content. Proponents of this approach focus on a work’s meaning only as it is achieved in its reception. This implies a theory of audiences as active rather than passive. One obvious example is participatory viewing practices, including the costumes and call-and-response of fans in The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) viewings [Figure 11.24].

A photo of a man and woman dancing in costume at an outdoor showing of the 1975 film The Rocky Horror Picture Show.

11.24 The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975). Participatory audiences and repeat viewers are studied by reception theory. © Allen Eyestone/Palm Beach Post/Zuma Press

Reception theory also recognizes that films from the past may be received by today’s audiences in entirely new ways, like rooting for the Native Americans rather than the cowboys or enjoying a supporting character’s subversive wit rather than investing in the romance of a pair of bland leads.

Beyond the idiosyncrasies of personal history and circumstances, aspects of each viewer’s cultural identity — for instance, age, ethnicity, and educational background — can predispose us toward particular kinds of reception. The homoerotic subtext of Rebel Without a Cause (1955) is likely to be more salient to an audience knowledgeable about the gay subcultural following of actors James Dean and Sal Mineo [Figure 11.25]. Such an audience is referred to as an interpretive community because its members share particular knowledge, or cultural competence, through which a film is experienced and interpreted, and their responses are known as situated responses.

A photo of an nighttime scene from the 1955 film Rebel Without a Cause.

11.25 Rebel Without a Cause (1955). Subcultural knowledge about actor Sal Mineo’s gay identity reinforces the film’s homoerotic subtext about Plato’s feelings for Jim Stark, played by James Dean.

The panoply of West African–derived hairstyles in Daughters of the Dust (1991) is more likely to be enjoyed and recognized by black women than by other audience members; indeed, filmmaker Julie Dash intended this special gratification as part of the movie’s address, its vision of its ideal audience. Theorists see these multiple ways of interacting with a text as confirmation that individuals actively make meaning even in response to otherwise homogenous mass media.

The methodologies associated with reception theory include comparing and contrasting reviews drawn from different periodicals, countries, or decades; conducting detailed interviews with viewers; tracking commodity tie-ins, the goods that are marketed with the “brand name” of a particular film or characters; and studying fan activity on the Internet. Given the multitude of possible approaches, it’s no surprise that reception studies has a wide scope.

VIEWING CUE

Conduct a reception study of the film you just viewed by surveying your classmates about which characters and situations they responded to most favorably. Compare and contrast their opinions with those of film reviewers.

Reception studies differs from theories of spectatorship in that it deals with actual audiences rather than a hypothetical subject constructed by the text. While spectatorship is concerned with the unconscious patterns evoked by a particular text or by the process of film viewing in the abstract, reception studies addresses both actual responses to movies and the behavior of groups. British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall has argued that groups respond to mass culture from their different positions of social empowerment. They may react from the position the text slots them into — the dominant reading; offer a negotiated reading that accommodates different realities; or reject the framework in which a dominant message is conveyed through an oppositional reading. Reception studies thus suggests that social identity considerably complicates the picture of subjectivity offered in poststructuralist film theory.

Star Studies

An important component of reception is our response to stars, performers who become recognizable through their films or who bring celebrity to their roles. In addition to analyzing how a star’s image is composed from various elements — film appearances, promotion, publicity, and critical commentary — theorists are interested in how audience reception helps define a star’s cultural meaning. Although one of the most pervasive aspects of cinema, stars may seem one of the least likely topics to be considered in a theoretical approach — after all, stars are the province of entertainment news, tabloid journalism, fan Web sites, and online chats. But these familiar and ephemeral sources such as fan magazines have an important place in cultural studies, as do the responses of fans themselves. One understands a film in relationship to what one knows of its stars outside the world of the film’s fiction. From Judy Garland to Lindsay Lohan, stars with troubled offscreen lives are perceived differently in wholesome onscreen roles [Figures 11.26a and 11.26b].

A photo of Lindsay Lohan sitting in a classroom in a scene from the 2004 film Mean Girls.

(a)

A photo of Lindsay Lohan and another young woman walking outside in “real life.”

(b)

11.26a and 11.26b Lindsay Lohan’s wholesome character in Mean Girls (2004) contrasts with contemporary viewers’ knowledge of her troubled offscreen life. 11.26b: Jean Baptiste Lacroix/WireImage

Beyond the range of roles that a star becomes familiar for playing, other discourses about stars — including promotion (studio-arranged exposure such as Web sites and television appearances), publicity (romances, scandals, and political involvement), and commentary (critical evaluations and awards) — help construct their images. Star images become “texts” to be read in their own right. Sean Penn’s promise as a teen star was associated with his acting rather than his looks. His volatile marriage to Madonna and his arrest for assaulting a photographer; his major film roles (a condemned man in Dead Man Walking, 1995; his Oscar-winning role in Milk, 2008); his work as an independent director (Into the Wild, 2007); and his outspoken politics and humanitarian work around Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti construct him as an individualist, even an “outlaw,” a persona that carries connotations of “authenticity” [Figure 11.27]. Even when a particular star is billed as “just an ordinary guy,” like Tom Hanks, or “the girl next door,” like Emma Stone or 1950s star Doris Day, this image is carefully orchestrated.

A photo of actor Sean Penn wearing a tux and waving to the crowd.

11.27 Sean Penn. Penn’s maverick star image is composed of the ensemble of his film roles over time, critical assessments, publicity, and other public activities; star studies analyze the cultural significance and function of celebrities. Hubert Boesl/dpa/Landov

We will never have access to the star as a real person. Instead, we experience his or her constructed image in relation to cultural codes (including age, race, class, gender, religion, fashion, and more) and according to filmic codes (genre, acting, and even lighting). For example, the silent film star Lillian Gish was sometimes lit from above as she stood on a white sheet. The reflected light enhanced her pallor and the radiance of her blond hair, connoting a virginal whiteness that was an important component of her star image in her films with D. W. Griffith. Stars are often considered the embodiment of types. For example, John Wayne connotes rugged individualism; Sandra Bullock, spunky decency; Morgan Freeman, quiet dignity; Will Ferrell, manic mayhem. Heath Ledger’s star image gained new dimensions from his performance as the Joker in The Dark Knight (2008) and his premature death before that film’s release.

We also construct our own identities and communities through stars whom we will never know, and this is not necessarily a negative aspect of the phenomenon. Young girls who patterned themselves after plucky singing star Deanna Durbin in the 1940s, Madonna in the 1980s, or Idina Menzel’s characters incorporated the quality of independence these stars embodied, and identified themselves in solidarity, rather than in competition, with other girls who shared their appreciation. According to critic Richard Dyer, a basic conflict between the ordinary and the extraordinary is at the root of the star phenomenon. Stars are not better people than the rest of us, which facilitates our identification with them. And yet they remain a breed apart.

Star discourse is a particularly revealing and useful critical approach to cinema because it is based in our everyday experience as fans. We have many immediate and unexamined responses to stars, from crushes to antipathies. But we also appreciate stars in nuanced ways that yield considerable critical understanding. Cultural studies of stars often begins with viewer testimonials, taking them not at face value but using them as a starting point for a more sociological analysis. What ethnic groups are represented in a nation’s most popular stars? Do popular female stars transgress the boundaries of what is considered proper female behavior? Are people of color limited to supporting roles? Stars are powerful forces for understanding what is important to a culture at any given moment.

Race and Representation

The concept of race — for race is not an objective fact but a socially constructed category based on historical experiences and valuations of perceived difference — intersects with the film experience on many different levels, including questions of spectatorship and reception, and many different theoretical approaches can illuminate these issues. Cultural studies models can address such topics as stereotypes and how they are received by diverse audiences, and how discourses of imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism are embedded in film stories, genres, and star images. It is helpful to distinguish in this area two senses of the term “representation”: (1) the aesthetic sense, whereby we may speak of representations of African Americans in the films of Spike Lee versus those of Gone with the Wind (1939), for example, and (2) the political sense of standing for a group of people, as an elected representative does. Both senses are at play in the cinematic representation of race. In addition, theories of exile and homeland, cultural hybridity and diaspora, and the global and the intercultural have added to the store of explanatory frames we have for looking at race and representation in cinema.

VIEWING CUE

Research the star of the film you are about to watch for class. What does your previous knowledge of this star bring to your viewing? Is the role at odds with his or her established image?

Identification across race is a fraught and often obligatory process for nonwhite viewers because of the historical lack of racial diversity onscreen. Cinematic history reinforces the assumption of a white, Western spectator-subject. In classical Hollywood films, nonwhite characters are relegated to the periphery of the action as villainous or comic or sometimes noble, but always secondary, characters. Colonialism, the assumed primacy of Western values, peoples, and power over people from other parts of the globe, pervades such genres as the western and the adventure film. In the musical The King and I (1956), one white Englishwoman proves to be a match for the Siamese king and his entire court [Figure 11.28]. In Unthinking Eurocentrism (1994), theorists Robert Stam and Ella Shohat show how a Western gaze and voice are reproduced in such popular films as the Indiana Jones series (1981–2008), in which non-Western cultures provide colorful backgrounds for the exploits of a Western hero. They also discuss how non-dominant cultures are marginalized by casting, when white actors play other races [Figure 11.29], and even by sound, when everyone speaks English in films set in another country or when jazz scores are used in films in which all the characters are white.

A photo of a woman pointing to a world map in front of a group of children in a scene from the 1956 musical The King and I.

11.28 The King and I (1956). Colonialism becomes a charming musical romance told from a white Englishwoman’s perspective.

A photo of Gandhi leading a group of people in a scene from the 1982 film Gandhi.

11.29 Gandhi (1982). White British actor Ben Kingsley plays the Indian populist leader.

But Stam and Shohat’s examples show that American cinema often reflects a multicultural society in other ways. The importance of the western as a genre, or of the plantation as a motif, gives evidence of a cultural preoccupation with racial difference and conflicts. Although stereotyped in such film representations, people of color stand at the center of the nation’s definition of itself. Recent Hollywood films, from dramas like Crash (2004) to animated films like Rio (2011), often incorporate multiculturalism as part of the very definition of America.

The increasing success of filmmakers of color in the United States has paralleled theoretical explorations of alternative aesthetics. The trickster figure of West African tradition, which appears in To Sleep with Anger (1990) by Charles Burnett and in Zajota and the Boogie Spirit (1989) by Ayoka Chenzira, is an expression of the identification of these African American filmmakers with the diaspora, a scattered community of people who share an original homeland.

Finally, aesthetic expressions of politics are a major concern in postcolonial cinemas that have emerged around the world. Third Cinema, discussed in Chapter 10, is one such example. These works often use narrative forms more in keeping with specific cultural traditions or political ideas than the linear cause-and-effect structures of Hollywood films. Humberto Solás’s Lucía (1968), for instance, uses a three-part structure to link the fates of three Cuban women in different historical moments [Figure 11.30].

A photo of a small group of women shouting and raising their arms in a scene from the 1968 film Lucía.

11.30 Lucía (1968). Humberto Solás’s film uses formal innovation to reflect on Cuban history through the stories of three women.

By arguing that there is room for agency and divergence in our reception experiences, and in increasing the kinds of films and related cinematic phenomena that are deemed worthy of theoretical attention, critics associated with cultural studies take apart the unity and inevitability that characterized poststructuralist film theory in the 1970s. With roots in sociology, cultural studies also takes a broader approach to contemporary media than film studies based in the humanities often do. This wider scope has opened up space to address the distinctiveness of television and new media, as well as the many social and economic transactions that surround cinema today, from the viewing of works on cable, DVD, or the Internet to the incorporation of movie franchises into our daily lives.

Film and Philosophy

While cultural studies critics reject the overt formalism as well as the abstractions of 1970s film theory, film philosophers critique the same dominant school for its lack of empirical support and theoretical rigor.

To some extent, all film theory is related to philosophy and characterized by a search for underlying principles and a logical argument. However, some film theorists identify more strongly than others with philosophical methods. In Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory (1991), Noël Carroll carefully and gleefully debunks the analogy of film to dreams; other scholars point out the flawed reasoning in using linguistic models to describe sounds and images. David Bordwell, one of the most prolific and well-respected film scholars, advocates a cognitivist approach to the medium in which our response to film is measured in terms of rational evaluation of visual and narrative cues. Based in psychological research, cognitivism advocates verifiable scientific approaches. Rejecting analysis that invokes unconscious fantasy or employs idiosyncratic interpretation, cognitivism claims that we respond to the moving image with the same perceptual processes we use to respond to visual stimuli in the world — adjusting film images for lack of depth, perceiving the identity of objects that are moving and changing in time. Not simply a backlash against the obscure terminology and French-influenced syntax of poststructuralist theory, cognitive film theory argues for a less metaphorical, more scientific, and historically verifiable definition and practice of film studies.

Phenomenology, which stresses that any act of perception involves a mutuality of viewer and viewed, has also had a profound effect on film theory. Jacques Lacan and Christian Metz derived their emphasis on the gaze from phenomenologists, but the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious diverged from the more embodied consciousness that phenomenology described. Vivian Sobchack uses the phenomenology of perception to account for the film experience as a reciprocal relationship between viewer and screen, also distinguishing between the different phenomenologies of film and television viewing.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has made a distinctive contribution to recent film theory, building on the semiotics of C. S. Peirce and the work of philosopher Henri Bergson on time and duration. More than the writings of almost any other film theorist, Deleuze’s work must be studied on its own terms because he develops ideas through specific interrelated terminology. But the investment is rewarding. In his two books on cinema, Deleuze distinguishes between two types of cinema that correspond roughly to two historical periods.

The “movement image,” prevalent in the cinema of the early twentieth century, reflects what might be called a cause-and-effect view of the world. The physical comedy of Buster Keaton and the collision at the heart of Sergei Eisenstein’s montage represent action and a linear or dialectical forward movement that provoke a response in the viewer. In contrast, the “time image” is displayed in films by such masters as the neorealist Roberto Rossellini and the more metaphorical Michelangelo Antonioni, both working in the wake of the disillusionment and uncertainty of postwar Italy. In such movies, images and sounds do not give clear signals of spatial connection or logical sequence; instead, they represent the open-endedness of time and the potentiality of thought [Figure 11.31].

A photo of a woman standing behind a man in a windy, outdoor scene in the 1960 film L’Avventura.

11.31 L’Avventura (1960). According to philosopher Gilles Deleuze, this classic art film presents “a direct image of time,” in part through its unpredictable editing patterns.

Deleuze’s philosophy of film goes beyond the specific films and directors he uses as examples to suggest new ways of imagining the relationship between images and the world: referentiality, the idea that filmic images refer to actual objects, events, or phenomena, is no longer a basic tenet of film theory. For Deleuze, the film image is not a representation of the world; it is an experience of movement or time itself. For other thinkers, referentiality is no longer a tenet of film theory because neither film nor the world is what it used to be.

Postmodernism and New Media

Obviously, film is no longer the only medium that organizes our audiovisual experience. At least since the 1940s, when television was rapidly adopted into U.S. homes, other moving-image media have challenged cinema’s dominance, and many predict that digital media will soon replace film stock. However, such developments also suggest that this book’s title is more apt than ever before: film has so thoroughly transformed our overall experience that it has prepared us for the integration of digital media and other image technologies in our lives. Rather than defining film more narrowly in the digital era, we can think of it more broadly.

Clueless about Contemporary Film Theory? (1995)

See also: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)

FILM IN FOCUS

bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a clip from Clueless, see the Film Experience LaunchPad.

Theory will be present in all the sites that a culture uses for debate and conversation, including popular films. Although the title of the 1995 film Clueless would seem to disclaim any form of knowledge whatsoever, many theoretical issues are raised by the film. Clueless helps “clue us in” to the concerns of postmodern cinema and is of particular interest to feminist and cultural studies critics.

Clueless takes place in Los Angeles, a city whose freeways, location, cultural diversity, entertainment industry, commercial and artistic gems of pastiche architecture, and rampant consumerism have made it exemplary for theorists of postmodernism. The film’s main character, played by Alicia Silverstone, is a high school student, and thus marginal in terms of social power. But as a blond, white, rich girl, she represents the relative power of consumerism. A “remake” or update of Jane Austen’s novel Emma, the film could be considered a nostalgic but inauthentic citation of the culture of another era. The main character’s name, Cher, is another citation, this time of the “inauthentic” culture of the recent past (pop star Cher is known for her costumes and physical transformations).

The multiculturalism of postmodern Los Angeles is signaled by Cher’s group of school friends. Yet this is a tongue-in-cheek depiction because Cher’s African American best friend, Dionne, is as fabulously wealthy as she is: the girls are worlds apart in socioeconomic terms from Cher’s Latina housekeeper, for example.

The film opens with a montage of fresh-faced teenagers, and with postmodern irony Cher’s voiceover compares what we have just seen to an acne-product commercial. The definition of identity as a matter of surface appearance is underscored in the next set of images: Cher “tries on” different outfits using a computer program containing simulations of the ample contents of her closet [Figure 11.32]. While Cher does undergo a transformation in character during the course of the film, she nevertheless understands social problems in commodity-culture terms: she donates her skis to the homeless. And it is while window-shopping that Cher finally realizes what she truly wants. Bits of the film’s action replay in her mind, a thorough confusion of “real” and cinematic perception that perfectly illustrates what Anne Friedberg calls postmodernism’s “mobilized virtual gaze.”

A photo of a scene in the 2007 film Clueless.

11.32 Clueless (1995). Postmodern style and attitude characterize a film that found a welcome reception among young audiences, especially young women.

Admittedly, the description thus far makes the film seem as if it is concerned only with the trivial. But feminist theorists point out that women’s consignment to the domestic sphere with its “trivial” concerns of shopping and romance has a direct effect on the public sphere, which was as true in Jane Austen’s day as it is in our own. Cher’s ostensibly minor concerns have important consequences in her world, and by portraying her subjectivity through her voiceover and her optical point of view, the film gives her perspective validity. Clueless was directed by a woman, Amy Heckerling, who has specialized in youth genre films that pay special attention to young women’s perspectives; Austen, too, was consigned to a circumscribed genre within which she made enduring works of art.

Viewers might find Clueless’s romantic ending predictable, even disappointing, in that it undermines what has so far been the film’s most important relationship — the one between Cher and Dionne and the other girls — by conflating plot closure with heterosexual coupling. But in fact, the film winks at the happily-ever-after convention, ending with a wedding and suggesting for a moment that it is Cher’s. “As if!” her voiceover exclaims: two schoolteachers she helped fix up are getting married. She escapes the strictures of the plot with postmodern irony.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Clueless is its reception. It successfully addressed a teenage interpretive community, both in and outside the United States, which quickly adopted the film’s styles in fashion and slang. Young women’s “use” of the film was generally positive. Clueless validated and enabled (coded) communication among young girls, who, far from being treated yet again as know-nothings, were now the only ones fully “clued in.” Their multiple viewings made for an open-ended text; Clueless sums up the complexity of postmodern simulation in a succinct “as if!”

This predominance of visual media is characteristic of the culture of postmodernism. As we have mentioned, the term “modernism” refers both to a group of artistic movements (from atonal music to cubist painting to montage filmmaking) and to the period in which those movements emerged and to which they responded (generally, the first half of the twentieth century). Postmodernism also has two primary definitions:

1. In architecture, art, music, and film, postmodernism incorporates many other styles through fragments or references in a practice known as pastiche.

2. Historically, postmodernism is the cultural period in which political, cultural, and economic shifts challenged the tenets of modernism, including its belief in the possibility of critiquing the world through art, the division of high and low culture, and the genius and independent identity of the artist.

The most important thinkers on postmodernism have addressed both aspects of this definition. Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism historically as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” referring to the period in postwar economic history when advertising and consumerism, multinational conglomerates, and globalization of financing and services took over from industrial production and circulation of goods. Stylistically, postmodern cinema represents history as nostalgia, as if the past were nothing more than a movie style.

For Jean Baudrillard, the triumph of the image in our cultural age is so complete that we live in a simulacrum, a copy without an original, of which Disneyland is one of his most illuminating examples. In The Matrix (1999) and its sequels, the characters’ belief that they live in the “real world” is mistaken: the city, food, intimate relationships, and physical struggles are all computer-generated [Figure 11.33]. This lack of referentiality is frightening in that it represents the absence of any overarching certainty to ground postmodern fragmentation. But on the hopeful side, the “real” is now open to change. When The Matrix shows a (fake) book written by Baudrillard, the film is both making an in-joke and illustrating postmodernism’s feeling that there is nothing new in the world.

A photo of a scene in the 1999 film The Matrix.

11.33 The Matrix (1999). “What is the matrix?” the film’s ad campaign asked. Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard is quoted in the film.

It is no accident that the postmodern world is most vividly presented in a movie because movies themselves are simulations. Film theorist Anne Friedberg notes that the way we consume film images can be generalized to a society characterized by image consumption and mobility. The variety of “looks” one finds by window-shopping or identifying with other characters at the movies has a positive side. The postmodern breakdown of singular identity has as its corollary a recognition of identities formerly relegated to the margins. Postmodernism also recognizes the reality of today’s increasing globalization. New technologies make the flow of images even easier — from Hollywood to the rest of the world of course, but also from formerly peripheral cinemas to U.S. audiences, and between local cultures.

Our survey of the history of contemporary film theory evokes the auspicious institutional climate of the academic discipline of film studies in Anglo-American universities, which has consolidated and developed ideas from France and elsewhere since the late 1960s. This story of the origins of contemporary film theory can be told fairly smoothly, and that should make us suspicious. Fields of knowledge advance by active questioning and dissent. As we have noted, cultural studies and cognitivism have challenged the orthodoxies that began to emerge in film theory by the 1970s, and their pluralism and skepticism add a welcome perspective on ideas that might otherwise become rote and ossified, simply “applied” to new cases.

The challenges posed by the digital image to film since the 1990s go beyond technological and economic ones: they are also intellectual. As we discuss earlier in the chapter, the photographic basis of the medium, long considered key to cinematic specificity, is no longer what defines cinema. While in some ways new technology can be seen as merely enhancing the film experience as we have known it (for example, the return of 3-D technologies), in other ways it alters both the medium and our experience of it (for example, the puzzles, interactivity, and convergence culture of video games). Scholars continue to draw on the legacies of previous inquiries in film theory in order to identify the salient questions our contemporary audiovisual experience raises and to develop tools with which to address those questions.

CONCEPTS AT WORK

This chapter has aimed to demystify the field of film theory, which is not to imply that readers will not have to struggle with theory or do some work to understand film on a more abstract plane. Because film theory is a notoriously difficult discourse, any summary gives it much more continuity than it actually warrants. The film journals in which filmmakers like Eisenstein or Louis Delluc debated the new medium are not unlike film blogs that today consider the future of cinema in an age of media convergence. In reading and picking apart theorists’ work, it is important to recall that referring to “theory” in the abstract is misleading. In reviewing Stuart Hall’s approach to reception theory or Fredric Jameson’s definition of postmodernism, we look at concrete responses to intellectual challenges. The term “theory” is a useful, shorthand way to refer to a body of knowledge and a set of questions. We study this corpus to gain historical perspective — on how realist theory grew from the effects of World War II, for example; to acquire tools for decoding our experiences of particular films — like the close analysis of formalism; and above all to comprehend the hold that movies have on our imaginations and desires.

▪ Consider whether cinematic specificity is affected by watching films across platforms.

▪ Think of insights from other academic disciplines or artistic pursuits that seem to be missing from this account of film theory, and consider what we might learn from these new approaches.

▪ How might the formalist and realist film theorists debate the return of 3-D technology?

▪ Consider how debates about race and representation raised by a film like 12 Years a Slave (2013) could be reframed by drawing on film theory.

Activities

▪ Do a shot-by-shot analysis of the opening sequence of a film. What codes — of lighting, camera movement, framing, or figure movement — are used to create meaning?

▪ Compare reviews of a film from a number of different sources (and periods, if relevant). Pay particular attention to the time and place each review appeared. What does the range of reviews tell you about the film’s reception context(s)?

**Chapter 12**

Writing a Film Essay

Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis

Columbia/The Kobal Collection/Art Resource

In Spike Jonze’s 2002 Adaptation, Charlie Kaufman is a writer in crisis. Faced with the challenge of adapting Susan Orlean’s The Orchid Thief for the screen, he finds himself paralyzed by extreme writer’s block. While his twin brother Donald blithely forges ahead with his own screenplay, Charlie can only stare in dismay at a blank page, unable to even begin to write. After a series of hilarious, strange, and tragic encounters in Hollywood, New York, and the Florida Everglades, Charlie discovers that “change is not a choice” and that a writer must first and foremost follow his passion by writing about what he loves. Writing is often complex and difficult, with many stages and strategies, but Charlie’s lesson for writers of films may also be good advice for writers about film: find a passion and a love to propel your writing.

Writers can be found everywhere in films and film history. In modern movies alone, famous and not-so-famous writers populate and drive many kinds of stories about many kinds of experiences. Mishima (1985) describes the intense blend of radically conservative politics and restless creativity in the life of Japanese author Yukio Mishima. In Central Station (1998), a middle-aged woman, Dora, sets up a stand in the middle of a crowded railroad station where illiterate people go to have her write letters to their friends and loved ones. And in Ruby Sparks (2012), a young novelist overcomes writer’s block by creating a woman character who the next day comes to life and begins a romantic relationship with him [Figure 12.1]. As with other arts and cultural activities, movies inspire a common and fundamental human need to explain one’s feelings about and responses to a significant experience. In this chapter, we will see how writing about film develops from these needs and inspirations, and we will show how it can become a rich extension of our fundamental film experiences.

A photo of a woman sitting at a typewriter directly facing the camera in a scene from the 2012 film Ruby Sparks.

12.1 Ruby Sparks (2012). The power of writing can even transform your world.

KEY OBJECTIVES

▪ Describe the difference between reviews and critical essays.

▪ Practice taking notes on films and organizing those notes.

▪ Choose a topic and develop it into a thesis and argument for a paper.

▪ Conduct research and integrate sources.

▪ Acquire the skills to turn your work into a polished essay.

Writing about film has been a significant part of film culture since the beginning of movies. Almost simultaneously with the arrival of the cinema, writers debated the function and value of this new art form. In the first few decades of film history, film critics such as Vachel Lindsay in his 1915 book The Art of the Moving Picture and Dorothy Richardson in the 1920s art magazine Close Up wrote passionately about movies. Since then, movie reviews, scholarly essays, and philosophical books — by writers including James Agee, Pauline Kael, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Umberto Eco — have debated the achievements of individual films and the cultural importance of movies in general.

Writing an Analytical Film Essay

Writing extends the complex relationship we have with films by challenging us to articulate our feelings and ideas and to communicate our responses convincingly. In 1915, early reviewers and critics often focused on the dangerous or uplifting effects that movies might have on women or children. In the 1960s, film was frequently discussed in terms of its political impact or social meaning. Today’s writers focus on a range of topics — from characters, stars, and stories to new film technologies or historical questions, such as how 1930s censorship influenced film content or how 1950s teenage audiences encouraged the making of certain kinds of films.

Personal Opinion and Objectivity

Writing about a film usually involves a play between subject matter and meaning. The subject matter of a film is the material that directly or indirectly comprises the film, whereas the meaning is the interpretation a writer discovers within that material. In Wes Anderson’s Moonrise Kingdom (2012), for instance, the subject matter describes the flight of Sam and Suzy from their New England town, their budding romance on the small island where the two hide, and the search for them by the confused and panicky townspeople. The subject matter’s meaning, however, is more complicated than any simple description; the meaning depends on the film’s luxurious style and clever organization, the historical and cultural significance of those techniques as they capture the 1960s, and the experience and thinking of the viewer responding to the film today. Other films certainly use similar subject matter about discontented youth fleeing an older generation, but Moonrise Kingdom creates and elicits more specific meanings for those who have seen it. For some writers, this tale of love and escape weaves subtle and often complex points about youth, passion, and fantasy [Figure 12.2]. For other writers, the film transforms its subject matter into a wistful piece of nostalgia about a lost era.

A photo of actors and child actors in animal costumes on a stage set of Noah’s Ark in a scene from the 2012 film Moonrise Kingdom.

12.2 Moonrise Kingdom (2012). Discovering the more complex meaning behind a deceptively simple subject matter requires interpretation of style and knowledge of context.

Useful and insightful writing always balances personal opinion with critical objectivity. Whereas an opinion is indicative of a more personal response, critical objectivity refers to a more detached response, one that offers judgments based on facts and evidence with which others would, or could, agree. An essay that hides behind too many opinions — constantly stating “I feel” or “In my opinion” — will seem unreliable and too personal to have any value for others. Writing about Moonrise Kingdom, for example, a writer may attempt to hide behind a lack of certainty about the meaning: “In my opinion, Sam and Suzy’s flight is very ambiguous. There doesn’t seem to be much reason or motivation behind it but perhaps love and passion are, I think, never easy to understand” [Figure 12.3]. Conversely, flat descriptive statements fail to interest readers in an essay’s argument and often miss the subtleties of a film: “The reason for Sam and Suzy’s flight is unclear and confusing.” Balancing opinion and critical objectivity, as in the following passage, results in writing that engages and convinces the reader that your insights could be useful revelations for most viewers of the film:

A photo of a scene in the 2012 film Moonrise Kingdom.

12.3 Moonrise Kingdom (2012). Is the interpretation of the flight of Sam and Suzy a matter of opinion or simply part of the complex vision of the film?

VIEWING CUE

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Watch the clip of Moonrise Kingdom online. What subjective claims might a writer make about this section of the film? What objective claims might a writer make?

Viewing Cue: A photo of a girl looking through binoculars out a window directly toward the camera in a scene from the 2012 film Moonrise Kingdom.

Sam and Suzy’s flight in Moonrise Kingdom is unexpected, dramatic, and powerful, a combination that disturbs and confuses me, as it probably does most viewers. This confusion about their motives is, however, part of the strange and mysterious beauty of the film because it asks us to recognize a central theme: the possibility that love and passion can open the world in wonderfully fantastic ways.

Identifying Your Readers

Knowing or anticipating your readers can guide a writer in balancing opinion and objectivity. If we think of writing about film as an extension of conversations or arguments we have with friends about a film, we realize that the terms and tone of these discussions change with different people. A conversation between two knowledgeable fans of World War II films would likely presume that they have both seen many of the same films and know a great deal about special effects. Their discussion might thus get quickly to the finer points about how the famous battle between the Japanese and the Americans was portrayed in Letters from Iwo Jima (2006), told from the perspective of Japanese soldiers [Figure 12.4]. In talking about Of Gods and Men (2010) with an American film buff, an Algerian student might have to provide some cultural and historical background about the religious beliefs of Islam, the rise of various sects, and the Trappist monks who live in northern Africa.

A photo of three soldiers in the background and a superior in the foreground of a cave from a scene in the 2006 film Letters from Iwo Jima.

12.4 Letters from Iwo Jima (2006). Director Clint Eastwood portrays one of World War II’s fiercest battles from the perspective of the Japanese.

Possessing an awareness of your readers is like knowing the person you are talking with: it helps determine the amount of basic information you need to provide, the level of complexity of the discussion, and the kind of language you should use. The following four questions are useful guidelines in gearing your essay to certain readers: (1) how familiar are your readers with the film being discussed? (2) what is your readers’ level of interest in the film? (3) what do your readers know about the film’s historical and cultural contexts? and (4) how familiar are your readers with the terminology of film criticism and theory?

For most critical essays, anticipating your readers’ knowledge of the film means assuming they have seen the film at least once and thus do not require an extensive plot summary. Such readers are not primarily concerned with whether a movie is good or bad or with other general observations. Rather, they want to be enlightened about a specific dimension of the film (such as the opening shot) or about a complicated or puzzling issue in the film. For instance, how the different cityscapes in The Bourne Ultimatum (2007) carry specific thematic points important to the action of the film might be something most viewers have noticed but few would have thought about [Figures 12.5a and 12.5b]. An effective writer works to convince readers that their interests can be deepened and enriched by following the writer’s argument about a film.

A photo of a cityscape from the 2007 film The Bourne Ultimatum.

(a)

A photo of a cityscape from the 2007 film The Bourne Ultimatum.

(b)

12.5a and 12.5b The Bourne Ultimatum (2007). The various cityscapes through which Jason Bourne travels might be the basis of an argument about the film.

VIEWING CUE

As you prepare to write an analytical essay about a film you have seen in class, consider your readers. What defines them? What are their interests? What do they need or want to know about the film?

Knowledge of a film’s historical and critical contexts refers to how much your readers know about the place and time of the film’s appearance. If the film was made in the United States in the 1920s, would information about that period help your readers better understand the film? Finally, determining your readers’ level of familiarity with the terminology of film criticism and theory allows you to choose language that can efficiently and clearly communicate your argument. Can you assume that a term like “continuity editing” will be easily understood, or do you need to define it? In making these decisions, keep in mind that overly simplistic language or dense jargon can equally undermine your analysis.

In most college-level film courses, your audience will be not only your professor but also your peers: intelligent individuals who have seen the film and who share information and knowledge about film criticism, but who are not necessarily experts. For this audience, you can concentrate on a particular theme or sequence that may have been overlooked by a critical viewer. Note that your writing style and choice of words should be more rigorous and academic than in the typical movie review.

Elements of the Analytical Film Essay

Two common forms of film writing are film reviews and analytical essays. Aimed at a general audience that has not seen the film, a film review tends to be a short essay that describes the plot of a movie, provides useful background information (about the actors and the director, for example), and pronounces a clear evaluation of the film to guide its readers. In contrast, the analytical essay, distinguished by its intended audience and the level of its critical language, is the most common kind of writing done by film students and scholars. It typically focuses on a particular feature or theme of a film, provides an interpretation of that material, and then gives a careful analysis to prove or demonstrate that interpretation. Unlike the writer of a movie review for a magazine, the writer of an analytical essay presumes that readers know the film and do not require an extensive plot summary or background information. Although a clear and engaging style is the goal of any kind of writing about film, the writer of an analytical essay often chooses words and terms that can effectively communicate complex ideas.

Consider this passage from a hypothetical essay about O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000), written for a college film course [Figure 12.6]. Whereas a newspaper review might summarize the plot, offer some background information, and employ more casual language, note how this analytical essay concentrates on a specific and perhaps less obvious argument:

A photo of three men wearing striped prison uniforms and walking up a country road in a scene from the 2000 film Brother, Where Art Thou?

12.6 O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000). Three escaped convicts are the focus for a precise analysis.

Joel and Ethan Coen’s O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) is much more than a musical comedy loosely structured around The Odyssey. Woven through the distinctive soundtrack, the plot set in Depression-era America, and the comic exaggerations of its characters is a sharp ideological critique of race and class in modern America. Regularly mistaken to be African Americans, the three escaped convicts, Everett, Pete, and Delmar, learn quickly that their lower-class white status binds them most importantly to the fate of the black men and women they encounter, and from this predicament the film explores the economic and political power structures that then and now make poverty color-blind. Two sequences in particular dramatize this less noticed but more provocative dimension of the film: the arrival of the prisoners at a church to see a movie (a direct reference to Preston Sturges’s film Sullivan’s Travels, in which the Coens found the title for their movie) and the Ku Klux Klan rally where the fugitives rescue their black comrade Tommy.

Here the essay’s focus is relatively refined and sophisticated. It assumes its readers have seen and know the film, and it concentrates not on general information, but on a specific thesis about race and class [Figure 12.7]. Along with its choice of a polemical thesis, this critical essay employs terms suited to academic writing, such as “ideological critique.”

A photo of a black man being led straight toward the camera by the Ku Klux Klan in a scene from the 2000 film Brother, Where Art Thou?

12.7 O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000). An analytical paper on race and class in this comic film can be shaped around two specific sequences, the first about the arrival of the prisoners in a black church and the second about their witnessing a Ku Klux Klan rally.

Preparing to Write about a Film

Despite some common ground, an effective film essay does differ from a casual conversation or a debate about a movie. Few writers can dash off a perceptive commentary on a film with little preparation or revision. Instead, most writers gain considerably from anticipating what they will write about and later reviewing carefully what they have written. Few could watch The Sorrow and the Pity (1972), a powerful documentary about fascism in France during World War II, and then immediately type a brilliant paper on Marcel Ophüls’s use of documentary strategies to expose certain myths about French history or the French Resistance. Like all good writers, you must follow certain steps in preparing to write an essay: ask questions, take notes, and select a topic.

Asking Questions

First, try to identify your own interests before you view the film. Ask yourself: How does the film relate to my own background and experiences? What have I heard about the film? Am I drawn to technology or to questions about gender? To a particular filmmaker or period in movie history? To a certain national cinema? In what direction of inquiry does my interest point? In Howard Hawks’s 1938 Bringing Up Baby, Katharine Hepburn plays an audacious heiress, Susan, whose pet leopard Baby becomes the foil in her zany relationship with a bumbling paleontologist, David, played by Cary Grant [Figure 12.8]. Perhaps you’ve seen other films by Hawks, like His Girl Friday (1940), or other films with Hepburn, like The Philadelphia Story (1940). Might you consider comparing the two Hawks films or Hepburn’s two different roles?

A nighttime photo of Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in a scene from the 1938 film Bringing Up Baby.

12.8 Bringing Up Baby (1938). Katharine Hepburn’s role as an audacious heiress involved with a blundering paleontologist could start a writer’s critical thinking about the film.

VIEWING CUE

Before viewing your next film, jot down three or four questions you want to direct at the film. During the film, write down three or four more about specific shots or scenes. Later, attempt to answer all of your questions as precisely as possible.

This sort of preparation is not meant to preclude your being drawn to new ideas and in unexpected directions when you view the film. Surprising discoveries are certainly one of the bonuses of approaching films with an open mind. While watching In the Bedroom (2001), one viewer might become puzzled by how the film seems to suddenly change direction: after depicting the excruciating pain of two parents who have lost a son, the movie then becomes a revenge tale in which the father seeks out and murders his son’s killer. For the viewer, what seems at first a slow meditation on inexpressible grief becomes a tense thriller. How do the two parts work together? Does loss always require retribution? Does violence always beget violence? By asking these kinds of questions, you can intellectually interact with a film, sharpening your responses and shaping the direction of your essay.

Taking Notes

Note taking, an essential part of writing about film, stimulates critical thinking and generates precise and productive observations. Whereas most students find it natural to take notes on a biology experiment or on their reading of a Shakespeare play, annotating a film is both awkward and unnatural; it is difficult to write while watching a movie in a darkened room, and most films ask that we constantly attend to them so that we do not miss information that passes quickly. Note taking is, however, absolutely necessary to writing about film because a good analytical essay must include concrete evidence to support its argument — and precise notes provide that support. The three general rules for annotating a film are (1) take notes on the unusual — events or formal elements that stand out in the film; (2) take notes on events or techniques that recur with regularity; and (3) take notes on oppositions that appear in the film.

VIEWING CUE

Which events, sounds, or shots in the film you just viewed stand out as unusual? As most important? As examples of a pattern of repetition? Describe clearly and concretely one or two events, sounds, or shots from the film.

For instance, most viewers of Bringing Up Baby would agree that the sequence involving David and Susan at the local jail, with Hepburn pretending to be a hardened gangster’s moll, stands out as one of the funniest and most unusual moments in the film. Equally important, however, are those actions or images whose repetitions suggest a recurring theme or pattern, such as David’s repeatedly losing his clothes or glasses. Oppositions can be equally illuminating, such as the contrast between the rival women: the goofy Susan and David’s staid fiancée, his scientific assistant.

Each writer develops his or her own shorthand for taking notes on films. The trick is to jot down information about the story or characters that seems significant while also recording visual, audio, or other formal details. Some common abbreviations for visual compositions include the following:

es: establishing shot

ha: high angle

ct: cut

cu: close-up

mcu: medium close-up

la: low angle

trs: tracking shot

ls: long shot

ds: diegetic sound

ps: pan shot

mls: medium long shot

nds: nondiegetic sound

vo: voiceover

More specific camera movements and directions can often be re-created with arrows and lines that graph the actions or directions. The following drawings suggest the movements of the camera:

low camera angle

high camera angle

tracking shot

For example, part of the jailhouse sequence in Bringing Up Baby [Figures 12.9 and 12.10] might be annotated as follows to indicate cuts, camera movements, or angles.

A photo of a smiling Katharine Hepburn behind bars with an older man outside the jail cell talking to her in a scene from the 1938 film Bringing Up Baby.

12.9 Bringing Up Baby (1938). “Swinging Door Susie” engages the sheriff . . .

A photo of Cary Grant in a jail cell in a scene from the 1938 film Bringing Up Baby.

12.10 Bringing Up Baby (1938). . . . and baffles her cellmate, David.

Later, these notes would be filled in, perhaps by again reviewing the sequence for more details — for example, pieces of the hilarious monologue of “Swinging Door Susie.” Drawings of shots can supplement such details. Critical comments or observations might also be added — for instance, about how the organization of the shot composition and editing provides the contrast between the officious and tongue-tied sheriff and the zany and loquacious Susan.

Selecting a Topic

After taking and reviewing your notes on the film, you need to choose the topic for the paper. Because there are so many dimensions of a film to write about — character, story, music, editing — selecting a manageable topic can prove daunting. Even a lengthy essay will suffer if it attempts to address too many issues. Narrowing your topic will allow you to investigate the issues fully and carefully, resulting in better writing. In a five- or six-page essay, a topic such as “fast-talking comedy in Bringing Up Baby” would probably need to rely on generalities and large claims, whereas “gender, order, and disorder in the jailhouse” would be a more focused and manageable topic. Although good critical analysis usually considers different features of a film, we can distinguish two sets of topics for writing about film: formal and contextual. Formal topics concentrate on forms and ideas within a film, including character analysis, narrative analysis, and stylistic analysis. Contextual topics, which relate a film to other films or to surrounding issues, include comparative analysis and historical or cultural analysis.

Formal Topics

In general, there are three types of formal topics: 1) a character analysis focuses its argument on a single character or on the interactions between two or more characters; 2) a narrative analysis deals with a topic that relates to the story and its construction; and 3) a stylistic analysis concentrates on a variety of topics that involve the formal arrangements of image and sound, such as shot composition, editing, and the use of sound.

Although writing a character analysis may appear easier to do than other kinds of analyses, a good essay about a character requires subtlety and eloquence. Rather than write about a central character, like Susan in Bringing Up Baby or the tormented musician Johnny Cash in Walk the Line (2005) [Figure 12.11], an essay might concentrate on a minor character, such as Susan’s aristocratic aunt or Cash’s wife Alicia.

A close-up photo of Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash performing in a scene from the 2005 film Walk the Line.

12.11 Walk the Line (2005). Character analysis of a primary role, the tormented musician Johnny Cash, played by Joaquin Phoenix, risks the obvious.

Similarly, a narrative analysis should usually be refined so that the paper addresses, for instance, the relationship between the beginning and the end of a film or the way a voiceover comments on and directs the story. In The Shawshank Redemption (1994), the narrative concentrates largely on Andy Dufresne, condemned to prison for murdering his wife and her lover, but the complexity of his story becomes richer and more nuanced as it is filtered through the voiceover commentary of his prison comrade “Red” Redding. The relationship of the two creates in effect a second narrative line that interacts with the prison story.

Analysis, Audience, and Minority Report (2002)

FILM IN FOCUS

bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a clip from Minority Report, see the Film Experience LaunchPad.

Minority Report initially attracted audiences through the reputation of one of the most prolific and acclaimed directors in the world, Steven Spielberg, and one of the most popular stars in the world, Tom Cruise. Some viewers may enjoy the film because it recalls and elaborates on themes from other Spielberg films, or because it features a successful and complex performance by Cruise. Others may be intrigued by its variations on the sci-fi thriller genre. Any of these pathways could be developed into a provocative essay about the film, but only if those perspectives and ideas can be substantiated or proven useful, true, and important — that is, only if they can be shown to have objective accuracy. One such viewer decides to write a review of Minority Report for his college newspaper in anticipation of the film’s upcoming appearance at the college art house. Because the film is more than ten years old, the writer presumes that many of his potential readers have not yet seen it and need both information and balanced opinions. He proceeds with a clear sense of what his readers already know, don’t know, and need to know about the film.

Background information on the director and film help provide context for readers.

Minority Report is probably not one of the best-known or most commonly discussed films by celebrity director Steven Spielberg. Most of us will likely associate Spielberg with well-known and wildly popular thrillers like Jaws (1975) and Jurassic Park (1993) or historical blockbusters such as Saving Private Ryan (1998) and Lincoln (2012). Although Minority Report features megastar Tom Cruise, it is a quirkier and edgier movie than most of Spielberg’s other films. Based on a novel by Philip K. Dick and part of a sci-fi heritage that extends from Blade Runner (1982) through Inception (2010), this futuristic story, set in 2054, is perhaps Spielberg’s darkest and most complex effort.

Reviews should still have a point of view. Here the writer argues that the film is most engaging through the drama of its futuristic technology.

While some of you may dash out to see this 2002 movie for the big-screen projection of Cruise as John Anderton, the real star of the film is the depiction of future technology and how it may change our world. Anderton is a police officer whose unit oversees three human “pre-cogs” linked to advanced computer technologies that allow the Pre-Crime Division to foresee and stop future murders. Everyone assumes this technological surveillance system is flawless and foolproof, as it keeps Washington, D.C., free of all crime for several years. With a rather ingenious variation on the wrongly accused protagonist, however, Anderton discovers that he has himself been identified as a future murderer, which is when the plot suddenly takes off. Pursued by and pursuing the technological forces that define this future world (including mechanical spiders that invade any space and identify people by reading their eyes), Anderton weaves his way through a society that moves at incredible technological speeds and leaves no place to hide from its new powers to see seemingly into every corner of the world and individual minds.

Like the Jason Bourne movies of this same period, Minority Report is a fast-paced thriller in which Cruise as Anderton is both criminal and detective. More, though, than his flight to discover the truth about a crime and to redeem himself, the film provides a timely reflection on new technologies and our perhaps misguided trust of them. The danger in this Spielberg world is not sharks, German soldiers, or stubborn congressmen but the powerful technologies that can control our lives today.

The same writer later chooses to compose the following critical essay about Minority Report for a film history course. In this case, his readers are his professor and the other students in the class, readers who are familiar with the film and have even read other material about it. Note this student’s inclusion of images from the film. These images do not serve merely as a visual embellishment for the paper but as concrete and precise evidence in support of his argument.

Even a short critical essay benefits from demonstrating some familiarity with other writings about film, as the first paragraph moves toward a sharp and sometimes polemical thesis.

In the critical essays and reviews about Minority Report, viewers regularly praise the ingenious and elaborate plot and stunning cinematography that captures the blue tints of futuristic film noir. John Anderton, an officer in the Pre-Crime Division of 2054 Washington, D.C., orchestrates the visions of three “pre-cogs” through a complex computer system that can foresee murders and so allow the police to stop them. When this seemingly infallible network accuses Anderton of a future crime, the system splits open, launching Anderton on a mission to save himself and to find the truth about lost “minority reports” that will expose the fallibility of the system. A surveillance film about sight and seeing with cutting-edge technologies and new media velocities [Figure MR.1], Minority Report remains nonetheless Spielberg’s typical family melodrama with its narrative of finding a way back home.

A photo of a scene in the 2002 film Minority Report.

MR.1 Minority Report (2002). A thesis identifies an argument about sight, new technologies, and lost families.

At the heart of the film is an anxious and often excruciating drama about sight and seeing. The “pre-cogs” threesome foresees the future as a dramatic indication of how sight can now overcome conventional boundaries of time, and the surveillance technologies that suffuse the society describe astonishing ways that boundaries of space dissolve before the new technologies for seeing. In the midst of his flight, for example, Anderton hides in a decrepit apartment building, where the pursuing police release mechanical “identification spiders.” At the start of the sequence, a precisely filmed series of images reveals the various private spaces in the building, the release of the spiders, and their eerily rapid invasion of the different apartments. Once inside they open the most sensitive human interior, methodically lifting eyelids and taking electronic snapshots of the eyes as a way to identify the individuals [Figure MR.2]. Although Anderton escapes this onslaught by remaining submerged in a tub of water, he realizes that he must transplant his eyes as a way to remain unseen. Temporarily blind and carrying his own eyes in his pocket, Anderton searches for a truth that, despite the wonders of so much visionary technology and speed, can only be discovered, as a drug dealer points out, in the “world of the blind.” Indeed, in this film, to see with insight into a world of visual deception becomes the critical challenge of survival.

A close-up, computer-generated photo of a head and its face with mouth open and a bright light shining in the left eye in a scene from the 2002 film Minority Report.

MR.2 Minority Report (2002). Identification spiders eerily describe how futuristic technologies see into the most private spaces.

The writer concentrates on one or two scenes that can be analyzed in detail.

The writer’s careful analysis of the details shows how they lead to a complex and subtle interpretation that viewers may have missed.

Even as seeing grows more difficult and layered across so many different visions and technologies, Minority Report remains, as in most Spielberg films, essentially about family — overcoming bad families and reestablishing good families. From the start, Anderton is a traumatized father and husband whose child had been mysteriously abducted and whose wife has subsequently left him. As a displacement of that trauma, he passionately immerses himself in the Pre-Crime Division, where he reinvents his lost family through a new father figure, Director Lamar Burgess. At the climactic conclusion of the film, however, Anderton — with the help of his pre-cog companion Agatha — must confront this father figure. He projects a blurry montage that reveals a lost visual sequence that exposes Burgess’s murder of Agatha’s mother. Cutting between a dinner honoring Burgess, Agatha’s struggle to mentally project those images, and the shocking display of those images on a screen at the banquet, the sequence recovers a lost past and creates an alternative film within the master surveillance film. In one sense, one cinematic vision of events replaces another, transforming the good father into the evil father who murdered a caring mother. If Anderton’s original devotion to the visual wonders of Pre-Crime is, in large part, a response to the traumatic loss of his family, his discovery of new eyes and a new way of seeing through a blinded futuristic landscape leads directly to the dissolution of his spurious father and the myth of his Pre-Crime family.

The writer expands his interpretation to show how it resonates through the entire film.

In the coda that concludes the film, the family units lost to technology have been restored. A rainy blue-tinted image slowly tracks across John’s glassy apartment and moves in to show John and his now-pregnant wife reunited. The image then cuts to the three pre-cogs intensely absorbed in books: the camera tracks through and out of a cabin on a bucolic lake where the pre-cogs now “find relief from their gifts,” an earlier world where high-tech visuals have been replaced with a rustic simplicity [Figure MR.3]. As with most Spielberg films, all the social, political, and technological threats to a traditional family have, apparently, been successfully dismissed as that family is re-projected into the past.

A photo of a young woman reading a book in a cabin, and two others in the far background are also reading books in a scene from the 2002 film Minority Report.

MR.3 Minority Report (2002). In the end, the film reestablishes the image of a peaceful family in a prelapsarian world.

A paper that deals with a stylistic topic will be more controllable and incisive if, for instance, it isolates a particular group of shots or identifies a single sound motif that recurs in the film. One student may find a topic for a paper by examining the role of the various narrators in Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line (1998). Another student may choose to look more carefully at repeated editing patterns in Battleship Potemkin (1925) or at the use of framing in Yasujiro Ozu’s Tokyo Story (1953). Any one of these topics will grow more interesting and insightful if you continue to ask questions during the writing process: How is the character David in Bringing Up Baby shaped by costuming or shot composition? How do the various narrators in The Thin Red Line reflect different attitudes about war?

Contextual Topics

Contextual topics usually focus on comparative analysis or cultural analysis. A comparative analysis evaluates features or elements of two or more different films or perhaps a film and its literary source. A comparative analysis might thus contrast Susan in Bringing Up Baby with one or more heroines in more recent films, such as Julia Child in Julie & Julia (2009) [Figure 12.12]. A comparative analysis always calls for some common ground in order to link what you are comparing and contrasting.

A photo of a fishmonger standing at the counter next to Meryl Streep as Julia Child in a scene from the 2009 film Julie & Julia.

12.12 Julie & Julia (2009). The endearing and sassy Julia Child, as played by Meryl Streep, becomes a rich subject of a comparative analysis.

Conversely, cultural analysis investigates topics that relate a film to its place in history, society, or culture. Such a topic might examine historical contexts or debates that surround the film and help explain it — for example, in Bringing Up Baby, the social status of women or the importance of class in 1938 America. With historical or cultural analysis, the pertinence of the topic to understanding the film is crucial. In our example, the role of women is obviously important; the historical status of leopards probably is not.

Once a topic has been selected (the more specific, the better), the writer should view the film again. This second viewing allows the writer to refine and build on those initial notes, now that he or she has a topic in mind. The writer who comes to Bringing Up Baby with a vague interest in how it portrays the battle of the sexes might, after seeing the film again, find that he or she wishes to refocus the topic on how the leopard becomes a metaphor for that battle.

Elements of a Film Essay

VIEWING CUE

Sketch an argument for your essay. What is the logic of its development? What conclusions do you foresee making?

Whether your chosen topic is a formal analysis of a sequence of shots or a comparison of a novel with its filmic adaptation, it will need to include a clear thesis statement, argument, and evidence to support your claims. Although different audiences may interpret all or part of a movie somewhat differently, a valid and interesting argument distinguishes itself by how well the analysis of evidence supports the thesis statement. Without good evidence, precise analysis, and logical argument, an essay will appear to be simply one viewer’s impression or opinion.

Thesis Statement

VIEWING CUE

Write a precise thesis statement. Is your thesis specific enough, or does it need refinement? Is it sufficiently interesting to encourage readers to continue reading your essay?

Perhaps the most important element in a good analytical essay is the thesis statement, a short statement (often a single sentence) that succinctly describes the interpretation and argument of the paper and anticipates each stage of the argument. The remainder of the essay should prove and support that thesis with evidence. As a significantly refined version of the topic, the thesis statement articulates clearly the writer’s critical perspective as an insightful argument about the film; it should indicate what is at stake in the argument and perhaps how that argument is important to understanding the film. A weak thesis statement introduces the essay vaguely and generally: “The Coen brothers’ Inside Llewyn Davis (2013) describes a search for an identity.” A strong thesis anticipates each stage of the argument that will follow in the paper: “The Coen brothers’ Inside Llewyn Davis describes a search for an identity lost in 1961 New York City; a cat named Ulysses signals the path of that search as a circular odyssey about getting home to one’s own self.” Usually a thesis statement, which often appears in the first paragraph of the essay, undergoes various revisions during the writing process. Having a working thesis, a rough version of a thesis, in mind as you begin your first draft, however, will help anchor your argument. In its final form, a precise and assertive thesis statement is likely to engage readers’ interest in the essay.

As with most films, Steven Soderbergh’s Traffic (2000) and Stephen Frears’s My Beautiful Laundrette (1985) both offer a wide variety of topics that could be developed into specific arguments and thesis statements. For Traffic, a film about the drug trade that flows from Mexico into various U.S. communities, one student writer considers analyzing either the cinéma vérité camera movements used in the Mexican settings or the transformation of the central character, a U.S. drug czar who sees his daughter destroyed by heroin [Figure 12.13].

A photo of a daughter leaning against a door and staring ahead, while her father holds out drug paraphernalia in a scene from the 2000 film Traffic.

12.13 Traffic (2000). A character destroyed by drug abuse presents an abundance of issues for analytical writing.

For My Beautiful Laundrette, a contemporary romance between a young Pakistani man and a male friend involved with right-wing British gangs, the writer weighs the advantages of two possible topics: the developing sexual relationship of the two main characters or the mise-en-scène of the laundrette where the climactic scenes take place [Figure 12.14]. After reflecting on these topics and seeing the films again, the student opts for the second film and develops a thesis statement that demonstrates a clear and specific direction: “My Beautiful Laundrette looks at contemporary British politics from numerous angles: family politics, sexual politics, racial politics, and economic politics. In the end, these various motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic, the mise-en-scène of the laundrette.” As clear and intelligent as it is, this proposed thesis statement will probably be revised for the final draft of the paper as the writing will certainly generate new insights and possibly new issues — perhaps to concentrate on only three of those angles or perhaps to argue that the politics of family, sex, and race in the film are all related to economics.

A photo of two women and a man talking in a laundrette in a scene from the 1985 film My Beautiful Laundrette.

12.14 My Beautiful Laundrette (1985). The climactic mise-en-scène of the laundrette suggests an argument about politics in the U.K.

Outline and Topic Sentences

VIEWING CUE

Formulate a specific interpretation for the film you are writing about. Why is that interpretation important? What new light does it shed on the film for your readers?

Preparing an outline results in a valuable blueprint of an essay, allowing the writer to see and examine the different parts and overall development of the argument as it proceeds out of a strong thesis. An outline can consist of a simple list of ideas to address or shots and scenes to highlight — such as “weak father figures,” “house squatting as metaphor for identity,” and “description of the laundrette” — or a more complete (and more useful) list that includes subheadings and perhaps full sentences, which can be used as topic sentences in the essay.

Here is an excerpt from the detailed outline prepared by the student working on the essay about My Beautiful Laundrette.

The Politics of Laundry in My Beautiful Laundrette

Working Thesis: My Beautiful Laundrette looks at contemporary British politics from numerous angles: family politics, sexual politics, racial politics, and economic politics. In the end, these various motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic, the mise-en-scène of the laundrette.

I.

Family politics: the most immediate and complicated type

A. Fathers and authority

B. Family traditions and repression

II.

Sexual politics: underpins family situations in way that exposes hypocrisy

A. Heterosexual politics: Nasser, his wife, and his mistress Rachel

B. Feminist politics: Tania, Nasser’s daughter

C. Gay politics: Johnny and Omar

III.

Racial politics: nearly lost in this drama is the way they permeate all other relationships

A. Johnny, race, and right-wing politics (National Front)

B. Papa, race, and left-wing politics

IV.

Economic politics: where the other confrontations are — presumably and ironically — resolved

A. Papa as businessman

B. Salim as drug dealer

C. Johnny and Omar as laundry entrepreneurs

V.

Political motifs: coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic — the mise-en-scène of the laundrette

A. Detailed description of mise-en-scène of laundrette

B. Pragmatic meets fantasy

C. Analysis of climactic gathering

VIEWING CUE

Create a detailed outline of your essay. Does your outline include subsections that can later be developed with details and evidence from the film?

As this example illustrates, a detailed outline allows the writer to review the structure of the essay and note any problems with the scope or logic of the argument or with the transitions from one section to another. At this stage, the topic should be focused on a specific thesis whose parts develop as logical steps in the body of the paper — with each of the five topic sentences reflecting the working thesis and its development from one point to the next.

Whether or not you work from an outline, a clear organization and structure — most notably, coherent paragraphs introduced and linked by topic sentences — are paramount for an effective essay. Well-developed paragraphs, which tend to consist of several sentences, demand coherence and evidence. Critical to a good paragraph is the topic sentence, usually the first sentence, which announces the central idea to which all other sentences within the paragraph are related. The remainder of the paragraph develops the idea stated in the topic sentence and provides evidence from the film as support.

In this excerpt from the essay on My Beautiful Laundrette, note how the strong and lucid topic sentence opening the paragraph is then supported by evidence:

In My Beautiful Laundrette, the drama of the characters is invariably about space, territory, and most important, the idea of home. Although most of the characters are driven by the idea that, as one character puts it, “people should make up their minds where they want to live,” places and homes are never more than shifting locations, foreign territory where one lives uncomfortably. In the first sequence, Salim and a henchman evict Johnny and another squatter from an abandoned tenement, and for the rest of the film the metaphor of squatting describes the characters’ unstable and temporary relations to the places in which they live and with which they interact. In this sense, “home” is at best a dream and usually just a temporary convenience. Nasser’s daughter Tania wants to be anywhere but with her family, and she is willing to have either Johnny or Omar as a lover, depending on who will take her away from her home. In the end, Nasser watches from a window as a medium shot shows Tania being visually swept off the platform by a series of trains that rush off the screen, on her way to another home that she will define for herself.

Following the topic of home as a key space in the film, the paragraph cogently traces its repetition through the experiences of the different characters, illustrating how it anchors and differentiates their lives and works as a central metaphor in the film.

Revising, Formatting, and Proofreading

A completed first draft of an essay is not a completed essay. The final stage in writing about film requires at least one revision of the paper, with special attention to manuscript format and proofreading. Last-minute corrections should be kept to a minimum and should be clear and simple.

VIEWING CUE

In your draft, look for consistent errors and trouble spots that you need to pay special attention to during revision.

A good revision begins by reading the essay with fresh eyes, achieved best by allowing time away from the first draft — at least a few hours and at best a few days — before returning to work on the revision. A revision should examine, clarify, and rewrite word choices, sentence structures, paragraphs, the logic and organization, and the coherence of the ideas; it should improve the presentation and the efficiency of the argument and analysis. In addition, carefully check the manuscript format, including margins, title position, footnotes, and other mechanics. Typically, the format for a film essay should follow guidelines from the Modern Language Association.

Once your final revision is completed, proofreading — checking the revision for grammatical and structural errors, typos, or omissions that can be easily corrected — is essential. With any kind of writing, the presentation helps determine how your reader views your work, and an accurate, professional look will promote an accurate, professional reading of it. Typographical mistakes and other small goofs do not ruin a good essay, but they do undermine it by creating an impression of carelessness. Keeping a checklist of these mechanics in mind can alleviate much of the anxiety about writing, providing a working framework that leads to stronger and more interesting essays.

Writer’s Checklist

VIEWING CUE

After writing your first draft, revise your thesis statement to reflect changes in your thinking. Be sure to sharpen your thesis statement to better describe your argument.

As you grow more confident as a writer, you will be able to write about films in a fluid motion: watching the film, taking some notes, sketching an outline, and writing the first draft and final essay. Even the most competent writers, however, pause to reflect on their work by consulting a checklist like this one.

1. Review your notes, filling in details where you can. Ideally, view the film one more time.

2. Try to summarize the most important themes or motifs in the film.

3. Formulate a working thesis and an argument for the essay.

4. Outline the argument. If possible, use full sentences for headings because they can then become your topic sentences.

5. Develop the central idea of each paragraph using details from the film that support that paragraph’s topic sentence.

6. Rewrite your thesis statement to reflect any changes or refinements in your thinking that occurred while you were writing your first draft.

7. If you are writing a research essay, be sure to use the correct documentation format for in-text citations and the Works Cited list (see pp. 453–55).

8. Revise your essay, checking for such problems as vague or illogical organization, and proofread for surface errors in spelling and grammar.

9. Select a title that reflects the main argument of your paper.

10. Print out the essay and correct any remaining typographical errors.

Researching the Movies

While in some critical film essays writers aim simply to convey a personal response to a film based on critical distance and careful reflection, in other essays they might want or need to use research in order to sharpen and develop their interpretation of a film. Research enables writers to identify significant issues surrounding a film and to contribute their opinions and ideas to the ongoing critical dialogue about it. A student intending to write about Jean Cocteau’s Orpheus (1950), for example, may be intrigued by the film but uncertain about his or her specific argument. With some reading and research about Cocteau, his relation to the surrealist movement, and his work as a poet and painter, the student discovers a more specific argument about the complicated role of poetry in the film and the relevance of the Orpheus myth to Cocteau’s vision of the modern artist [Figure 12.15].

A photo of a man with the side of his head against a mirror resulting in the illusion of two heads side by side in a scene from the 1950 film Orpheus.

12.15 Orpheus (1950). Researching this film may also mean researching the poetry of the surrealist movement.

Distinguishing Research Materials

Whether limited or extensive, research helps determine why your essay is important and what critical questions are at stake in writing it. Research is also a dialogue with other opinions and writings — they help distinguish or support your ideas about a film or group of films. Various kinds of materials qualify as research sources for a film essay, including primary, secondary, and Internet resources.

Primary Research

Primary research sources — such as 16mm films, videotapes, DVDs, and film scripts — have a direct relationship with the original film. Some of these materials are readily available in libraries, including the many classic scripts now published as books; others, such as 16mm films, can be far more difficult to locate, except in film archives. A student planning to write a research essay on Don Siegel’s Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) might first view a 16mm or DVD projection of that film, and then access other primary sources, such as a script, as follow-ups to the first screening [Figure 12.16]. With primary sources, however, keep in mind that they may approximate, but not duplicate exactly, the look of a film when seen in a theater. Videotapes and DVDs may format images differently from the format used in theatrical screenings, while scripts may represent a simple blueprint from which the actual film dialogue deviates.

A close-up photo of a man lying on his back with only head and neck showing and a woman in the background of a scene from the 1956 film Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

12.16 Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956). Watching a film closely and following its script allow you to analyze it with precision and depth.

Secondary Research

Secondary research sources — including books, critical articles, Web sites, supplementary DVD materials, and newspaper reviews — contain ideas or information from outside sources such as film critics or scholars. The student researching Invasion of the Body Snatchers might include film reviews published at the time of release, scholarly essays on Siegel’s work, and perhaps a book on 1950s American cinema. Even in our electronic age, libraries and their databases remain the most reliable places to find solid secondary materials. Check such databases as the Humanities International Index, LexisNexis, and Comindex for essays and books on your subject, and don’t underestimate the more conventional approach of exploring the library’s shelves. Annual bibliographic indexes and their electronic versions identify journal articles and books that may support and broaden your thinking, including especially The Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature, the MLA International Bibliography, and the Film Literature Index. Once you have a topic and a working thesis, you can search for sources relevant to your topic and argument. After checking general categories like “film,” “cinema,” and “movies,” a more precise topic, such as “contemporary Australian cinema” or “sound technology and the movies,” will lead you more quickly to pertinent research materials.

In addition to databases and bibliographic indexes, specialized encyclopedias, which identify important topics and figures in film studies, are useful resources for initiating research on a film. Examples include Ephraim Katz’s The Film Encyclopedia, Pam Cook’s The Cinema Book, Leonard Maltin’s The Whole Film Sourcebook, Ginette Vincendeau’s Encyclopedia of European Cinema, David Thomson’s The New Biographical Dictionary of Film, Leslie Halliwell and John Walker’s Halliwell’s Filmgoer’s and Video Viewer’s Companion, and Amy Unterburger’s The St. James Women Filmmaker’s Encyclopedia. Film guides such as these provide factual information about and short introductions to a subject. The entries typically do not offer the sort of detailed analysis or arguments required for a good research paper, but they can suggest pertinent information and issues that can lead you to more research and a refined argument.

Internet Sources

The Internet offers useful discussion groups, access to various library and media catalogs, and numerous other information sites. However, with so many Web sites available, the writer must be careful to consult the three kinds of reputable Internet sources for film studies:

VIEWING CUE

Locate at least five secondary research sources for your essay topic. What are the most recent books on the film or topic? Find at least two relevant scholarly articles on this topic.

▪ Sites and databases that provide basic facts about a film and the individuals involved with that film, including biographical facts about the director, the running time of a film, and its year of release

▪ Sites that offer reviews or essays from academic film journals, such as Film Comment, Jump Cut, and Sight and Sound

▪ Film-specific sites that provide information ranging from production facts to reviews and interviews. Almost every major film now has its own Web site, as do the studios and distributors

While the Internet is an important source of information of all kinds, film researchers and writers must be cautious about the quality of the material found there. For one thing, it can be difficult to determine the authenticity of some Internet-based information. Unlike material published in academic journals or books, Internet essays and articles may not have been through a review process to determine their value. Virtually anyone can post on a Web site any opinion or “facts,” often without substantial evidence. When using the Internet for research, therefore, writers need to differentiate substantial and useful material from chat and frivolous commentary. Especially with Internet sources, there are three important rules to follow.

▪ Determine the quality of the Internet source. Does it provide reliable information and a carefully evaluated argument supported by research? Is the source a refereed publication (one whose material is evaluated by experts) or a reputable institution? Is its information supported by references to other research? What are the credentials of the authors?

▪ Define your search as precisely as possible. Instead of just the title of a film, focus your search on, for example, “lighting in Double Indemnity” or “politics and Iranian cinema.” Pursue your topic through the advanced search option.

▪ Explore links to other sites. Does your research link you to sites on other films by the same director or to such related issues as the film genre or the country in which the film was made?

Here is a short list of Web sites useful for film research:

▪ American Film Institute (www.afi.com): recent industry news, events, educational seminars, and reviews.

▪ Berkeley Film Studies Resources (www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/filmstudies): a growing collection of online bibliographies and sources for film and media studies.

▪ Cinema Sites (www.cinema-sites.com): a comprehensive listing of links to hundreds of sites.

▪ The Criterion Collection (www.criterion.com): DVD distributor of well-known masterpieces of international art cinema, Hollywood classics, and often overlooked gems from film history.

Interpretation, Argument, and Evidence in Rashomon (1950)

See also: Citizen Kane (1941); The Usual Suspects (1995); Inception (2010)

VIEWING CUE

bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a clip from Rashomon, see the Film Experience LaunchPad.

After reviewing his notes on Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon, a student writer considers some possible topics. He begins by thinking about the film’s unusual narrative structure: Three men, including a priest, seek shelter from a rainstorm under an ancient city gate. They hear the tale of a murder and rape through four different points of view — those of a bandit, the woman, the ghost of the dead man, and a woodcutter. The narrative tension in the film, the writer realizes, develops around the discrepancies in these competing points of view; the result is a dark ambiguity about the truth of this violent and tragic event. After seeing the film again and trying to refine his thinking about it, the writer develops the following thesis:

In Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon, four different perspectives present four different versions of the truth about a violent attack. After we have seen and heard these various perspectives and have been presented with the evidence, the opening confusion of the three men is even more pervasive, setting the stage for the only possible response to a world defined by egotism and uncertainty: compassion.

The student’s next step is to sketch an outline, one in which he uses topic sentences to mark the development of the argument and the places where key evidence will appear.

Rashomon: Beyond Understanding and Evidence

Thesis statement: Rashomon is a drama of evidence and interpretation.

I.

Central to this film is the drama of interpretation and evidence.

A. Four accounts of same horrifying event

B. The opening focus on evidence

II.

Although more evidence appears through the perspective of the different witnesses, that evidence does not always agree and seems to befuddle a clear interpretation.

A. Overlaps and inconsistencies in describing the facts

B. The dagger as key piece of evidence

III.

The heart of the fragmented narratives of Rashomon is the egotism that fashions the various perspectives.

A. The bandit’s violent sexual desire and the crime

B. His story of conquest and surrender

IV.

Both the wife’s and the husband’s perspectives are likewise mostly about themselves.

A. The wife’s tale of a helpless woman

B. The husband’s tale of honor and self-sacrifice

V.

The woodcutter’s narrative is more problematic, but equally locked into its own needs for self-justification and protection.

A. His revised vision: a base and cowardly world

B. His acknowledging stealing the evidence of the dagger

VI.

Each of these perspectives is distorted by the ethical failures of the individuals telling them, indicating the horrifying indeterminacy of a world determined by isolated egos, as well as the corruption of these perspectives by human egotism.

A. Natural disaster and moral depravity

B. Editing and shot compositions add to confusion, disorientation, and failure to see facts and events clearly.

VII.

Although the humane conclusion of the film seems unexpected (and somewhat sentimental), its unexpectedness is what makes the film so engaged with modern times.

After writing his first draft, the writer sets the paper aside for three days before undertaking a careful revision. He proofreads a printed version of the essay and then submits his final copy, which follows.

Fred Stillman

Professor White

Film 101

10 Feb. 2015

Beyond Understanding and Evidence:

The Surprise of Compassion in Rashomon

A brief summary of the film is followed by a concise thesis that maps out the main points of the paper’s argument.

The setting that opens and closes Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon is the collapsed Rashomon gate in the ancient city of Kyoto. Amidst a torrential rainstorm, a woodcutter, a commoner, and a priest huddle together, and the first recounts a horrifying tale of rape, murder, and possibly suicide told through four different perspectives that structure the narrative of the film. Seen through the eyes of a criminal, the female victim, the dead husband, and a woodcutter, each of these perspectives offers a contrasting version of events and the truth of what happened, and each introduces pieces of evidence to support that particular version. Despite having heard these witnesses, however, the priest can only murmur, “I don’t understand.” At the film’s conclusion, moreover, the uncertainty of the men is more pervasive than ever, setting the stage for the only possible response to a world defined by egotism and uncertainty: compassion.

The initial topic sentence introduces the first part of the argument.

Rashomon is a drama of evidence and interpretation. As the priest and woodcutter explain to the commoner, the original staging of the different testimonies was a police court trying to gather evidence about a horrible crime in which a noblewoman and her husband were attacked in the wilderness — she was raped and he was killed. Appropriately, the first point of view presented is that of the woodcutter, who follows a trail of evidence through the woods — a woman’s hat, a man’s hat, a belt, and an amulet case — to the sudden discovery of the dead body of the samurai nobleman, his stiffened arms and hands stretched grotesquely toward the horrified woodcutter in a low-angle shot [Figure R.1]. Shortly thereafter, a man describes how he captured the bandit Tajomaru, emphasizing the discovered evidence of the samurai’s horse as well as “seventeen arrows” and a “Korean sword” found on the criminal. Yet this seemingly incontestable claim and evidence become subject to doubt when the bandit suddenly denounces and denies the man’s interpretation of certain details.

A photo of the woodcutter’s face discovering a corpse in the woods, with the stiffened arms and hands sticking up in the foreground in a scene from the 1950 film Rashomon.

R.1 Rashomon (1950). The woodcutter’s perspective sheds light on the mystery of a horrifying death.

Although more evidence is given through the perspective of the other witnesses, that evidence does not always agree, and it seems to befuddle a clear interpretation. Most important, the significance of a pearl-handled dagger, the weapon that supposedly killed the husband, changes dramatically in the different narratives, acting as an evidential marker to distinguish the interpretations of events.

Focused on the shifting place of the dagger, the center of the fragmented narratives of Rashomon becomes the egotism that informs each perspective. Or more exactly, each version becomes more about the personal desire and greed of the person explaining what happened than about the factual events and evidence. What initiates the horrendous crime is the violent sexual desire of the bandit, who happens to witness — in a sharp-shot/reverse-shot exchange beginning with his awakening eyes — the exposed face and feet of the wife. After that, his entire account emphasizes greed and desire: he deceives and entraps the nobleman by suggesting he will sell him riches from an old tomb, and his leering gaze at the young woman turns quickly to a brutal sexual attack. Not surprisingly, in the bandit’s version, his desires and demands fulfill the woman, and she becomes the mirror image of his greed and lust when she ecstatically surrenders to his assault. At this moment, the critical object, the dagger, drops passively from her hand, according to the bandit, who claims to then kill the husband “honestly.”

Excellent visual detail indicates that the writer’s interpretation is grounded in film form and not just content.

Both the wife’s and the husband’s perspectives are likewise mostly about themselves. From the beginning, she appears discreet and demure, partly hidden by veils and white makeup and barely moving as she rides her horse through the forest. In her account, she becomes a “poor helpless woman” whose husband turns viciously on her after the assault. Unable to bear his hateful stare, she claims to have fainted — only to later discover her dagger in her husband’s chest. The husband’s narrative, in contrast, paints a picture of his suffering devotion and lost honor, weeping from the grave as he recounts killing himself with the controversial dagger. Light and shadow fill the images of this account, suggesting an ambiguity and lack of certainty even in this testimony by a dead man.

Finally, the woodcutter’s narrative is more problematic, but equally locked into its own needs for self-justification and protection. After introducing the story at the beginning of the film, he returns to offer a final version that reveals deceptions and lies in his first account. Now he admits to having witnessed the entire scene. His subsequent description of the part-clownish, part-terrified fighting of the two men shows a world that is fundamentally base and cowardly, a reflection of his own base and cowardly position in failing to intervene or fully disclose the truth of what he saw. Most disturbing perhaps, he tacitly acknowledges stealing the crucial piece of evidence, the dagger, in order to sell it for personal gain.

That each of these perspectives is distorted by different degrees of ethical failure on the part of the individual indicates the source of the horrifying indeterminacy and chaos of this world [Figure R.2]. This is a world described by the priest in the opening as full of “war, earthquake, wind, fire, famine, plague . . . each year full of disaster . . . hundreds of men dying like animals.” Stylistically, the stunning editing and shot compositions of Rashomon dramatize this world of confusion and disorientation, in which seeing and understanding seem to constantly combat each other. Witnesses are introduced with a wipe that crosses the screen in one direction or the other, almost violently wiping out the perspective of the preceding account. Within the different accounts, rapid tracks and flash pans re-create the desperately unsettled struggle to discover facts through perspectives that dart across surfaces blocked by branches and leaves.

A photo of three men: one standing looking down, the other slightly bent looking at the man standing, and a third seated looking down in a scene from the 1950 film Rashomon.

R.2 Rashomon (1950). The listeners are left trying to make meaning in a chaotic world.

Within all this moral darkness and despair, however, the conclusion of Rashomon suggests a possible way out of the terror and blindness that results from so much visual and narrative ambiguity. In this final sequence, the threesome who tell and hear that tale of violence discover an abandoned baby in the ruins of the gate. The commoner urges them to steal the baby’s blankets and clothing because “you can’t live unless you’re what you call selfish.” At this point, a dramatic turn occurs: in a head-to-head confrontation in the rain, the commoner accuses the woodcutter of hiding his theft of that crucial piece of evidence, the dagger. In dazed silence, the priest and the woodcutter stand against a wall. As the rain stops, the commoner suddenly insists on taking the child home with him to his already crowded family. Despite his shame about his selfishness and despite the missing evidence of the stolen dagger, a glimmer of human value returns to the world. Compassion overcomes the evidence of mistakes, and as they all depart, the sun gleams through the clouds and the saved child becomes the emblem of a new future. During this sequence, the priest shouts the fundamental truth so often lost in this violent courtroom: “If men don’t trust each other, then the world becomes a hell.”

The conclusion recalls the main points of the argument and expands it to claim a broader meaning for the film.

Although this conclusion seems unexpected (and somewhat sentimental), its unexpectedness is what makes the film so engaged with modern times. Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard uses the term “leap of faith” to describe the only possibility for a spiritual faith in modern times. What his term implies is that both spiritual and human faith — the grounds for ethical behavior — often occur despite the evidence before our eyes and despite the failure of human reason to understand it. As in Rashomon, truth and morality may need to leap over the confusion of facts and logic in order simply to do what is right.

VIEWING CUE

Search the Internet for information about your film and topic, and locate at least one useful source. What distinguishes this source from other online information about your topic?

▪ EarlyCinema.com (www.earlycinema.com/resources/index.html): a solid introduction to the filmmakers, technologies, and social environments for early cinema, including suggestions for further research.

▪ Film Literature Index (webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/fli/index.jsp): an index, with more than two thousand subject heads, of the publications in 150 film and media journals.

▪ Film-Philosophy (www.film-philosophy.com/): an international journal that features a wide range of book reviews, theoretical essays, and sophisticated analyses of individual films.

▪ FilmSound.org (www.filmsound.org): covers all topics related to film sound — including definitions of terms, links to scholarly articles, and interviews with sound designers — and is useful for students and practitioners.

▪ Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com): complete credits, plot summaries, links to reviews, and background information on individual films.

▪ Kino International: The Best in World Cinema (www.kino.com): DVD distributor of many of the most important films from throughout film history and around the world.

▪ Library of Congress Motion Picture & Television Reading Room (www.loc.gov/rr/mopic/ndlmps.html): the library’s catalog, the national Film Registry preservation list, and the American Memory Collection of online early films.

▪ Offscreen (www.offscreen.com): an extremely well-organized online film journal that covers genres, directors, and individual films, along with reviews of festivals and other journals.

▪ Oxford Bibliographies Online (www.oxfordbibliographiesonline.com): annotated and regularly updated bibliographies on a wide variety of topics in film and media studies.

▪ Society for Cinema and Media Studies (www.cmstudies.org/): academic society dedicated to the scholarly study of film, television, and new media.

▪ UbuWeb (www.ubu.com/): allows users to download rare and remarkable documents from literary, film, video, and music history, such as a Dadaist magazine from 1917 or a documentary on Andy Warhol.

▪ Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular (www.vectorsjournal.org): a cutting-edge journal that combines scholarship and analysis with new design and delivery technologies.

▪ Yale University Library Film Studies Research Guide (http://guides.library.yale.edu/film/): an introductory guide to conducting library and Internet research in film studies.

Using Film Images in Your Paper

With computer and Internet technologies, writers can now easily capture film images from a DVD or streaming video and incorporate them in a critical essay to illustrate a part of an argument and analysis. Being able to “quote” from a film to support an interpretation or insight can be quite important since such images can provide the evidence that underpins a strong argument.

VIEWING CUE

Locate areas in your essay where an image might improve your argument. Are there technical aspects, such as the use of lighting or types of camera movements, that could be further explained with an illustration?

Many instructors prefer that students avoid using images because often these images function simply as ornaments and distractions from the real work of the writing. Therefore, if film images are used in an essay, they should be used judiciously to support a key point in the argument. As with the example from the paper on Minority Report (pp. 438–40), use a specific image or series of images that illustrates important visual information (about image composition or editing, for example) that your text discusses. If useful, provide a short caption that encapsulates what you wish your reader to see in the images.

Using and Documenting Sources

Writers gather research material in a variety of ways: some record paragraphs and phrases on handwritten note cards, while others prefer to type that material directly into their computers, allowing them to sort, move, and insert text easily. In either case, the bibliographic information for quotations should be double-checked for accuracy. It should include all of the publication data required for the Works Cited list (and sometimes the Works Consulted section) of your research paper. Just as sloppy technical errors — such as a boom microphone appearing in a frame — can undermine a film’s look and effect, inaccurate or careless source documentation can make a research paper look amateurish.

VIEWING CUE

How will you collect the research you need to formulate and present your argument? What sources will you use? Keep a detailed list of each for later documentation.

Integrating research material into the text of your paper requires both logic and rhetoric. Sometimes research can be used to describe how your argument differs from prevailing positions on a film or an issue. In this case, the writer frequently identifies one or more opposing positions as a way of highlighting how the essay will distinguish itself: “While Annette Michelson has claimed that Kuleshov’s films are best understood as part of a debate with Eisenstein, this paper argues that the French films of Jean Epstein are equally important to Kuleshov’s development.” Conversely, research can be used to support and validate a point or a part of the overall argument: “Both Patrice Petro and Judith Mayne have produced complex feminist readings of silent-era German films that support my interpretation of Mädchen in Uniform (1931).” Yet another possibility is to use research sources to back up the validity of facts or critical frameworks necessary for introducing an argument: “In The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition, Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky convincingly show that Russian cinema after 1985 returned to the center of the world stage, an argument that will provide the background for my claims about the importance of Little Vera (1989) in Europe and America.”

Direct Quotations and Paraphrasing

VIEWING CUE

As you prepare to integrate research into your essay, think about a particular quote or critical position you will argue against. What factual or historical material will support your argument? Note passages you can use to bolster a central part of your essay.

Once research material has been gathered, selected, and integrated into an essay, all of the sources used must be properly documented. There are two kinds of research material that require documentation: (1) direct quotation from a secondary source, and (2) paraphrase, in which the writer puts the idea or observation from another source into his or her own words. When information is considered common knowledge and is well known to most people, there is no need to document where you found it. If, however, there is any doubt about whether the observation is common knowledge, always document the source so as to avoid any suspicion of plagiarism. For example, a critic’s remark that Ousmane Sembène is one of Africa’s premier filmmakers and that his films work in a realist tradition would be considered common knowledge by many seasoned filmgoers. But a writer new to Sembène’s work may feel more comfortable documenting the source of that information and, like all writers, should never risk the charge of plagiarism. Quotations of dialogue from a film usually do not require documentation.

Documentation Format

There are various documentation formats for listing authors, titles, and publication data. Here we will describe the format advocated by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and widely used in the humanities. (See the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed. [2009].) The primary components of the MLA format are in-text citations and the Works Cited list. An in-text citation is required wherever the writer refers to, or quotes from, a research source within the essay’s text. The in-text citation includes the author’s name and the page number, enclosed in parentheses. Note that “p.” and “pp.” are not used.

Filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas “appropriated home-movie style as a formal manifestation of a spontaneous, untampered form of filmmaking” (Zimmerman 146).

When the author’s name appears in the discussion that introduces the quotation, only the page number or numbers are given.

As Patricia Zimmerman has noted, filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas “appropriated home-movie style as a formal manifestation of a spontaneous, untampered form of filmmaking” (146).

The same citation formats are used whether the material is quoted directly or paraphrased.

Much of the American avant-garde movement experimented not so much with the techniques of modern art but with the spontaneous actions associated with home movies (Zimmerman 146).

When you use two or more sources by the same author in your essay, you must distinguish among them by including an abbreviated version of the title. The title can be part of the introductory text, as in “Zimmerman writes in Reel Families . . .” or in the parenthetical citation: “(Zimmerman, Reel Families 146).” Each source cited in the text must also appear in the Works Cited section with full bibliographic detail.

Another type of annotation is the content note or explanatory note, which may or may not include secondary sources. These notes offer background information on the topic being discussed or on related issues, suggest related readings, or offer an aside. They should be placed on a separate page after the text (but before the Works Cited list) or as footnotes at the bottom of the page. Thus a writer discussing horror films and Brian De Palma’s Carrie (1976) might include this text and content note:

Although Carrie focuses on female anxiety and violence, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific audience for this film.1

1Especially since Psycho, horror films seem fixated on violence against women, but there is good reason to consider how both female and male audiences identify with these films. An important discussion of this issue is Carol Clover’s Men, Women, and Chain Saws (3-21).

Full documentation for every source cited in your essay should be included in the Works Cited section, positioned on a separate page immediately after the last page of the essay text. Sources that have been consulted, but not cited in the text or notes of the essay, can be included in an optional Works Consulted section, which follows on a separate page after the Works Cited list. (Note that for reasons of space, we do not show the Works Cited and Works Consulted sections as separate pages in the essay beginning on p. 456.) Punctuation of the different entries must be absolutely correct. Titles should be typed either in italics or underlined, according to your instructor’s preference. Finally, the end of each entry should indicate the medium of the publication as either “Print,” “Web,” or other (such as “DVD” or “Performance”).

Examples of some of the most common types of Works Cited entries follow.

Book by One Author

Zimmerman, Patricia. Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. Print.

Book by More Than One Author

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. Print.

Edited Book

Cook, Pam, and Mieke Bernink, eds. The Cinema Book. 2nd ed. London: British Film Institute, 1999. Print.

Article in an Anthology of Film Criticism

Gaines, Jane. “Dream/Factory.” Reinventing Film Studies. Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000. 100-13. Print.

Journal Article

Spivak, Gayatri. “In Praise of Sammy and Rosie Get Laid.” Critical Quarterly 31.2 (1989): 80-88. Print.

Article in Daily or Weekly Periodical

Corliss, Richard. “Suddenly Shakespeare.” Time 4 Nov. 1996: 88-90. Print.

Interview (Printed)

Seberg, Jean. Interview by Mark Rappaport. “I, Jean Seberg.” Film Quarterly 55.1 (2001): 2-13. Print.

Article in an Online Journal (including Access Date)

Include the URL (in angle brackets) after the access date only if your instructor requires it or readers would need it to find the Web site.

Firshing, Robert. “Italian Horror in the Seventies.” Images Journal 8 Nov. 2001. Web. 23 July 2011.

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Magnolia: The Official Movie Page. 1999. New Line Productions. 14 Nov. 2003. Web. 12 May 2011.

A Videocassette or DVD

Always identify whether you are referencing a videocassette or a DVD. Include the director, main performers, and original release date of the film, followed by the video/DVD distributor and year.

Fearless. Dir. Peter Weir. Perf. Jeff Bridges, Isabella Rossellini, Rosie Perez. 1993. Warner Home Video, 1999. DVD.

Always remember to keep in mind that plagiarism — using sources without giving the proper credit to them — is one of the most serious offenses in writing and research. For more information on attribution formats for other types of sources, consult the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed. (2009).

From Research to Writing about The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

See also: Spellbound (1945); Eyes Without a Face (1960); The Silence of the Lambs (1991)

FILM IN FOCUS

bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a clip from The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, see the Film Experience LaunchPad.

Responding to the strange look and feel of this silent film from Germany and looking for some basic information, a student writer might start his research by examining the introductory material in David Cook’s History of Narrative Film (2003). In the index, he checks various headings, such as “German cinema” and “Weimar cinema,” as well as the title of the film and the name of its director, Robert Wiene. Next, he searches the Internet by entering the title of the film in a search engine, which results in dozens of different Web sites. Although much of the Internet information is too general, he keeps a list of his Web sources and their bibliographic details, noting one particular site that provides early reviews of the film. Even this preliminary research starts to shape his thinking about a topic involving the period known as the Weimar era.

Following this preliminary work, the writer then checks the databases at his college library for more substantial critical books and essays on the Weimar period in German history. This initial search leads him to dozens of books and critical articles, but he decides to concentrate on books that deal with films made during the Weimar period; he discovers numerous scholarly studies devoted to this particular film culture and even whole books devoted to The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. He reads and takes notes on appropriate sections of well-known books, such as Siegfried Kracauer’s From Caligari to Hitler (1947) and Lotte Eisner’s The Haunted Screen (1973). He also consults two fairly recent scholarly books, Mike Budd’s edited collection “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari”: Texts, Contexts, Histories (1990) and Thomas Elsaesser’s Weimar Cinema and After (2000).

Armed with information about how the Weimar era became the prelude to fascism and the rise of Hitler, the writer realizes he needs to refine his topic so that he has a more focused thesis. He reviews the film on DVD and realizes that the violence and horror seem connected to the social context of a prefascist Germany. As his thesis about social violence begins to take shape, he returns to the library, where he finds a good recent study of film violence, Stephen Prince’s edited collection, Screening Violence (2000).

With each step, the writer makes notes, double-checks quotations for accuracy, and makes certain to record accurate bibliographic information on all the sources he consults. As he formulates his thesis statement and constructs an outline, he tries to indicate where the different parts of his research would be most effective in directing and supporting his argument. His final essay, reproduced here, clearly demonstrates the important contribution that careful research makes to writing about film.

Steven Thompson

Professor Corrigan

Film Criticism 101

10 Dec. 2014

History, Violence, and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

Background research clearly sets up the writer’s argument.

The thesis statement announces the argument.

In his detailed study of The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), Mike Budd identifies the complex cultural history of the film’s arrival in the United States. When the film premiered in New York on April 3, 1921, it followed a well-crafted promotion and distribution campaign that stressed Dr. Caligari’s novelty, global appeal, and generic formulas. One 1921 poster identifies the film as “a mystery story that holds the public in suspense every minute,” while another describes it as “thrilling, fantastic, bizarre, gripping.” However accurate these descriptions may be, these promotions, as Budd notes, intentionally present the film “out of context, [with] its origins both cultural and national deliberately obscured” (56–58). That obfuscation has continued to dog The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari in the many decades since its initial release, so that American and other viewers have remained less attuned to the specific historical and social realities dramatized in the film than to the psychological mysteries played out in its thrills, fantasies, and horror. Exploring the social drama of Dr. Caligari reconnects the film more concretely to its original German context and makes clear that this film is about national unrest and violence, both of which are far more historically tangible than the usually acknowledged fantasy of the film’s madmen and monsters.

This summary paragraph assumes readers know the film, but refreshes their memory of its story and plot.

A content note provides additional information about a point raised in the text.

The film’s story tells of the hypnotist Dr. Caligari, who comes to a town with a carnival [Figure CDC.1]. In his sideshow act, Caligari presents Cesare, a somnambulist who can supposedly see the future. At the same time, a series of murders occurs in the town. Francis, a student who discovers that Caligari and Cesare are behind the killings, pursues Caligari to an insane asylum. The final twist occurs when the narrative shifts its perspective and we discover the truth: Francis has been the narrator of the tale, he is in fact the mad patient in the asylum, and Caligari is the kind director of the hospital allowing Francis to tell his delusional tale.1

A black and white photo of Dr. Caligari in which his face is all we see against a black background in a scene from the 1920 film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

CDC.1 The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920). The malevolence or benevolence of Caligari is left to the viewer to determine.

This image shows a main character, followed by a caption that identifies a key question in the film and the student’s argument about that character.

While watching this film, many (if not most) viewers understandably fixate on the exaggerated sets and backdrop paintings. These factors, together with the twisted narrative that turns the story into the vision of a madman, place this film squarely in the cultural and aesthetic tradition of expressionism, a movement in which unconscious or unseen forces create a world distorted by personal fears, desires, and anxieties. According to this position, Cesare acts out the evil unconscious of Caligari, while the violence and chaos associated with that unconscious spread through the entire community.

This overview of a major scholarly position establishes the writer’s authority and prepares readers for what will distinguish his argument.

Many critics have, in fact, made intelligent connections between the psychological underpinnings of expressionism and the German society that, bereft of so many fathers after the devastation of World War I, gravitated toward malevolent authority figures. Most famously, Siegfried Kracauer’s From Caligari to Hitler offers the most direct statement of Dr. Caligari as the unconscious of a social history predicting the imminent arrival of fascism [Figure CDC.2]. He writes that Caligari becomes “a premonition of Hitler” (72):

A photo of Dr. Caligari in which he wears a suit under his cape and a top hat in a scene from the 1920 film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

CDC.2 The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920). Is the doctor’s persona a premonition of Hitler?

A succinct quotation sums up a complex critical viewpoint. Because it is more than four lines in length, the quotation is presented without quotation marks in an indented block format.

Whether intentionally or not, Caligari exposes the soul wavering between tyranny and chaos, and facing a desperate situation: any escape from tyranny seems to throw it into a state of utter confusion. Quite logically, the film spreads an all-pervading atmosphere of horror. Like the Nazi world, that of Caligari overflows with sinister portents, acts of terror and outbursts of panic. (74)

Against the backdrop of these other critical positions, the writer reasserts and develops his thesis.

The writer refines and focuses his thesis as three motifs in the film.

Although Dr. Caligari certainly responds to readings like this, which see the film as part of an expressionist aesthetic or a projection of the unconscious of the German masses around 1920, the more concrete social realities informing the film frequently get overlooked. In The Weimar Republic Sourcebook, Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg have assembled a compendium of documents on this period in German history, and many of the topics for this cultural history of Germany from 1918 to 1930 could act as a social blueprint for the thematic history that permeates Dr. Caligari. Three topics stand out as especially pertinent: the traumatic legacy of war (creating a fatherless generation), economic upheaval and social instabilities (that rattled almost every social institution at the time), and the rise of fascism (through repressive authority figures). With traces of each of these three motifs throughout the film, Dr. Caligari becomes, from one angle, a study of social violence within the interpersonal relationships and the cultural institutions of Weimar Germany.

A strong topic sentence presents the first motif, supported by a secondary source.

An exact quotation from the film’s dialogue provides supporting evidence for the writer’s claim.

At the heart of Dr. Caligari is a social melodrama concentrated on conscious sexual activities that quickly turn violent. According to Thomas Elsaesser, “It is essentially the tale of a suitor who is ignored or turned down” (184). The threesome at the center of the story — Francis, Alan, and Jane — suggests both male bonds and a heterosexual romance that moves toward the conventional outcome of marriage. However, like Jane’s anxious worry over “her father’s long absence,” each member of this standard social group seems physically and emotionally handicapped by a missing parental or patriarchal figure. Essential to the plot is the rivalry that creates a tension among the three characters, with Alan and Francis competing for the affections of Jane. That seemingly normal and playful tension, however, turns dark when Cesare becomes a stand-in for the simmering violence implicit in this group, murdering Francis’s rival Alan and seducing and abducting Jane. In the midst of these events, the dazed Jane can only mutter that “we queens may never choose as our hearts dictate,” and Francis goes mad [Figure CDC.3]. If heterosexual melodramas take many forms through history and in different cultures, here a common love triangle suddenly and inexplicitly erupts with unusual violence, suggesting that the problem may be less about Caligari and Cesare than about the enormous social stress and strain within this fundamental social grouping.

A black and white photo of a woman in which her face and headpiece are all we see against a black background in a scene from the 1920 film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

CDC.3 The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920). A romance gone awry becomes a sign of simmering violence.

A smooth transition is made from the previous paragraph to the second motif about “social institutions,” analyzed here as three different “social spaces.”

Visual details strengthen the argument.

The violent stress and strain of this heterosexual drama spreads and appears through every social institution in Dr. Caligari. If the home is where the melodrama explodes, the film identifies this violence with three other social spaces: the city government, the carnival, and the mental hospital. With the first, an officious town clerk is murdered on a whim for enforcing restrictions that annoy Dr. Caligari. With the second, entertainment turns ominously threatening when a sideshow amusement tells Alan, “You die at dawn.” With the third, a traditional institution for healing becomes a prison to subjugate or control human beings who have lost all ability to interact socially. In each case — and most notably in the hospital where the narrative pretends to return to a normal world — the visual disturbances of the graphically twisted walls and out-of-kilter windows become a measure of not merely an unbalanced expressionistic mind but, more importantly, of the social violence that surrounds all individuals as part of the institutions in which they must live.

The third motif builds on a more general secondary source on “screen violence.”

If violence has always been an ingredient and attraction of films, the brand of social violence in Dr. Caligari is clearly linked to a specific time and place, a Weimar Germany from which the Nazi regime would soon spring. In “Graphic Violence in the Cinema” from Screening Violence, Stephen Prince correctly argues that “screen violence is deeply embedded in the history and functioning of cinema” and the “appeal of violence in the cinema — for filmmakers and viewers — is tied to the medium’s inherently visceral properties” (2).

Although Prince claims that “screen violence in earlier periods was generally more genteel and indirect” (2), there is nothing genteel about the social violence of Dr. Caligari, even if it lacks the physical excess of contemporary movies. With the crucial insights of historical hindsight, this violence should not be relegated merely to the unconscious and the psychological distortions of dark fantasies, but should be recognized as the shadow of a historical and social reality. In its original historical context, the melodramatic violence in the relationship of Alan, Francis, and Jane maps a frustrating and often desperate problem with heterosexual romance in a fatherless Germany, while the troubled, anxious, and repressive interactions at town halls, carnivals, and hospitals refer to a real political and structural crisis in the social arenas of post-World War I Germany. If the social violence of Dr. Caligari seems tame (to modern eyes accustomed to Technicolor bloodbaths), there is no doubt that such violence reverberates with more extensive, if less intensive, implications for the state of German society in 1920.

The assertive conclusion restates the central thesis.

Many viewers without a precise sense of German history and Caligari’s original cultural context can still appreciate its dark tale, striking visual effects, and unsettling frame tale. The psychological dimension that permeates this murder mystery is, moreover, an undeniable and critical component to its disturbing plot and expressionistic mise-en-scène. Yet, in the wake of World War I, the nightmarish violence of the film resonates with particular historical and social meaning that cannot be explained as fantasy. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari will always be a specific cultural space whose violence remains historically tangible.

Note

1. In A History of Narrative Film, David Cook notes that it was the great German director Fritz Lang who urged this frame tale: “Lang correctly thought that the reality frame would heighten the expressionistic elements of the mise-en-scène” (110).

Works Cited

The Works Cited list starts on a new page at the end of the research essay.

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CONCEPTS AT WORK

Writing about film is one of the most refined ways for a viewer to see and think about movies. No surprise then that so many movies as different as Adaptation, Mishima, and Ruby Sparks are fascinated by writers as the subject of a film. Demonstrated with the different responses to Moonrise Kingdom and the different kinds of readers for an essay on Minority Report, important preliminary steps in this kind of writing include identifying an audience, balancing subjective and objective perspectives, taking notes, and sketching an outline that develops a particular argument and interpretation. As with the paper on My Beautiful Laundrette, the actual writing requires a clear and detailed thesis, strong topic sentences, and concrete evidence from the film, and is always followed by a series of revisions of first drafts that work to clarify the argument, its ideas, and its presentation. Careful proofreading then follows final revision, double-checking mechanics such as spelling and punctuation. Finally, look again at the research paper on The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari to remind yourself of both why research can be crucial to a strong critical paper and how that research can be pursued and integrated into the writing. Whatever the writing assignment, consistently recall these key guidelines:

▪ Identify the presumed readers of your essay, considering, as the writer about Minority Report did, if those readers may or may not be familiar with the film you’re analyzing.

▪ Work to make your personal point of view or opinion part of a convincing and more objective analysis.

▪ Before you start writing, aim to create a detailed outline as did the writer about My Beautiful Laundrette. Do your intended topic sentences line up with your working thesis? Is that thesis appropriately specific?

▪ Do you support the development of the argument with detailed evidence from the film — including perhaps some formal analysis?

▪ If the essay requires some research, have you approached this as a kind of intellectual conversation or dialogue with other writers or critics, so that that research is smoothly integrated, as in the essay on The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, into your own argument?

Activities

▪ Practice taking detailed and productive notes on a film. Select one key scene in a film you viewed recently to annotate as precisely as possible. Describe the position of the characters, camera, and frame. Note any sounds, including dialogue. Support your description with a rough sketch.

▪ Many filmmakers, such as François Truffaut and Peter Bogdanovich, have also worked as fine film critics and scholars, and much of the work of making a film — research, planning, organizing, and revising — can resemble the work of writing a critical essay. In fact, film can work like a critical essay — as a commentary on, or interpretation of, another film. Try making a short video or film that comments on or interprets a film. Does this method offer new critical or analytical possibilities that writing does not? Does it lack some of the powers of traditional critical writing?