

The Art of Watching Films

FOURTH EDITION

JOSEPH M. BOGGS



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Joseph M. Boggs

Western Kentucky University



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To Nancye . . .

Who makes it all worthwhile

and

To the junior partners (listed alphabetically according to height):

Leslie, Scotty, Sam, and Kevin

Preface

The teaching of film has changed tremendously since 1978, when the first edition of this book was published. At that time, film appreciation was generally taught by means of a 16mm projector in the classroom, and the films that students could study were limited to what they could see in local theaters or on network television. Since then, VCR and cable revolutions have changed our options as film teachers and students' options as film watchers. A VCR or a laser-disc player makes watching films an incredibly easy, enjoyable, and rewarding experience. During the time a movie is in our possession, it is ours to study like a book. We can watch it as many times as we like and study it sequence by sequence, shot by shot, and even frame by frame. The ability to view a single scene over and over can lead to a much deeper understanding of the art of filmmaking than can be acquired by just watching movies from beginning to end in a theater or classroom.

APPROACH AND ORGANIZATION

The assumption underlying this text is that there is an art to watching films. The development of special skills and the use of certain techniques and technology can sharpen and enhance the film experience. My aim is not to transform ordinary filmgoers into expert movie critics. Rather, my aim is to help students become more aware of the complexity of film art, more sensitive to its nuances, textures, and rhythms, and more perceptive in "reading" its multilayered blend of image, sound, color, and motion.

The analytical approach that I use is by no means the only valid approach, but it offers one distinct advantage over others: It is teachable. Emotional and intuitive approaches are highly subjective and thus difficult to use in class. Helping students develop their critical thinking skills, in contrast, offers them a rational framework that can support the study of films as diverse as *On the Waterfront*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Forrest Gump*.

In its formal organization and intent, *The Art of Watching Films* is as straightforward as possible. Since its subject is primarily narrative film, the text first establishes a foundation for understanding theme and story (Chapters 2 and 3), then moves on to discuss the dramatic and cinematic elements that filmmakers use to “tell” the film story (Chapters 4–11). With an understanding of these basic film elements established, Chapter 12 provides a framework for integrating knowledge of all these elements into an analysis of the whole film. Subsequent chapters (Chapters 13–16) explore major specialized concerns and problems of film analysis.

My primary goal is to challenge students to sharpen their powers of observation, help them to develop the skills and habits of perceptive watching, and encourage them to discover complex aspects of film art that they might otherwise overlook. I designed this text to complement any film studied, to function as a treasure map to aid students in finding the riches embodied in the real “text” of any film course—the films themselves.

FEATURES

Color An entire chapter on color (Chapter 7), illustrated in color, highlights the element of the film experience that critics often overlook and filmgoers often take for granted. The chapter discusses in some depth the creative function of color in the modern film, providing a basic understanding of filmmakers’ uses of color and a starting point from which students can explore complex, subtle, and very human responses to color film.

Video Exercises and Study Questions Two kinds of end-of-chapter assignments give film appreciation a hands-on immediacy. Assuming that most students have at least limited access to a VCR, I have devised video exercises for more than half of the chapters of the text. To view the section of film dealt with in each exercise, set the VCR counter at “0000” (or the real-time counter at 0:00:00) at the very end of the studio logo, just as the “movie proper” begins (the “movie proper” includes such things as “Paramount Pictures Presents,” opening credits, and the main title). Then fast-forward until the numbers given in the exercise appear.

Designed to engender either class discussion or written response, the study questions help students organize their thoughts and focus their attention on the very heart of a film. The questions also increase students’ involvement in the film

experience, encouraging them to participate actively in an exciting quest rather than responding passively to the surface details.

Test Examples and Illustrations Detailed examples help students comprehend basic concepts or techniques. Because *The Art of Watching Films* is aimed at beginners, most of the examples are taken from films that are contemporary rather than classic, American rather than international, and commercially successful rather than esoteric.

More than 400 images from contemporary and classic films illustrate key points in the text. Extensive, informative captions strengthen the link between the visual and textual examples.

Writing About Film Many instructors ask students to respond in writing to a film—to give formal structure and an essayist’s logic to their own critical responses. In Appendix A are guidelines for writing a film analysis and two sample student papers. The first is a lengthy, complete analysis of John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, showing how a student might approach a paper assigned as a major class project. The second is a shorter, simpler paper focusing on important techniques employed in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*. Both illustrate the types of analysis that you can expect students using this text and a VCR for multiple viewings to write. So that students can grasp the interrelationship of the text, film, and finished paper, I have noted in the margins of both papers the pages in *The Art of Watching Films* that helped each student writer.

New to this edition is a sample “clip test,” provided in Appendix B, that shows students how to describe what is being conveyed by the film elements and techniques used in a short film clip.

Controversy The text introduces students to controversial issues that profoundly affect the films we see, such as colorization (Chapter 16), and the cinematic liberties taken in fact-based films like *Mississippi Burning*, *Lean on Me*, *Hoffa*, and *JFK* (Chapter 13).

NEW TO THIS EDITION

In addition to the expanded appendix material on writing about film, I have made other changes that I hope will make this edition even more teachable.

Reorganization, Expansion, and Current Topics A major reorganization created a more logical and balanced text structure; I divided a single large chapter previously titled “Visual Elements” into three separate chapters: “Visual Design,” “Cinematography,” and “Editing and Special Effects.” I expanded significantly the discussions of production design, cinematography, and editing, and I added brief discussions of costume design and makeup artistry.

Up-to-date topics include computer-generated imaging and its contribution to special-effects films like *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator 2*, the recent phenomenon of the “director’s edition,” and the important implications of new technology like HDTV (high-definition television) and wide-screen TV formats.

Films for Study At the end of each chapter, I have provided a list of films illustrating the concepts or techniques covered in the chapter. These films can be used for pertinent outside assignments or to stimulate class discussion. Most are available on videocassette and readily available from rental sources.

New Critical Perspectives Brief discussions of new critical perspectives (Marxist, feminist, and others) allow the classroom instructor to explain how the making and judging of films has changed over the past two decades and provide a springboard for further discussion.

INSTRUCTOR’S RESOURCE MANUAL

Accompanying the text is a manual containing a complete set of test items, suggestions for handling certain teaching problems in class, a list of film and videotape rental sources, and other resources. The test items are also available as computer files suitable for IBM-compatible and Macintosh computers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the most important contributors to the success of *The Art of Watching Films* is my long-time friend Dennis Petrie, professor of English at Tri-State University. His role in shaping this text began with sound advice on the manuscript of the first edition, then still very much a work-in-progress. As a loyal user of the text, he has continued to provide insights that have significantly influenced subsequent editions, including this one.

Much of the credit for this fourth edition must go to my son Michael, whose name should perhaps be listed as co-author. Michael traveled great distances to spend long weekends helping me research, organize, and write most of the major revisions. His energy and enthusiasm provided the momentum essential for completing the task.

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Film Analysis

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The cinema is a work of art when motion conforms to a perceptible rhythm with pause and pace and where all aspects of the continuous image relate to the whole.

—Josef von Sternberg, Director

THE UNIQUENESS OF FILM

The tremendous expense involved in producing motion pictures reminds us that film is both an industry and an art form. Each film is the child of a turbulent marriage between businesspeople and artists. Yet despite an ongoing battle between aesthetic and commercial considerations, film is recognized as a unique and powerful art form on a par with painting, sculpture, music, literature, and drama.

As a form of expression, the motion picture is similar to other artistic media, for the basic properties of other media are woven into its own rich fabric. Film employs the compositional elements of the visual arts: line, form, mass, volume, and texture. Like painting and photography, film exploits the subtle interplay of light and shadow. Like sculpture, film manipulates three-dimensional space. But, like pantomime, film focuses on *moving* images, and as in dance, the moving images in film have rhythm. The complex rhythms of film resemble those of music and poetry, and like poetry in particular, film communicates through imagery, metaphor, and symbol. Like the drama, film communicates visually *and* verbally: visually, through action and gesture; verbally, through dialogue. Finally, like the novel, film expands or compresses time and space, traveling back and forth freely within their wide borders.

Despite these similarities, film is unique, set apart from all other media by its quality of free and constant motion. The continuous interplay of sight, sound, and motion allows film to transcend the static limitations of painting and sculpture—in the complexity of its sensual appeal as well as in its ability to communicate simultaneously on several levels. Film even surpasses drama in its unique capacity for revealing various points of view, portraying action, manipulating time, and conveying a boundless sense of space. Unlike the stage play, film can provide a continuous, unbroken flow, which blurs and minimizes transitions without compromising the story's unity. Unlike the novel and the poem, film communicates directly, not through abstract symbols like words on a page but through concrete images and sounds. What's more, film can treat an almost infinite array of subjects:

It is impossible to conceive of anything which the eye might behold or the ear hear, in actuality or imagination, which could not be represented in the medium of film. From the poles to the equator, from the Grand Canyon to the minutest flaw in a piece of steel, from the whistling flight of a bullet to the slow growth of a flower, from the flicker of thought across an almost impassive face to the frenzied ravings of a madman, there is no point in space, no degree of magnitude or speed of movement within the apprehension of man which is not within reach of the film.¹

Film is unlimited not only in its choice of subject but also in its approach to that material. A film's mood and treatment can range from the lyric to the epic. In

point of view, a film can cover the full spectrum from the purely objective to the intensely subjective; in depth, it can focus on the surface realities and the purely sensual, or it can delve into the intellectual and philosophical. A film can look to the remote past or probe the distant future; it can make a few seconds seem like hours or compress a century into minutes. Film can run the gamut of feeling from the most fragile, tender, and beautiful to the most brutal, violent, and repulsive (Fig. 1.1).

Of even greater importance than film's unlimited range in subject matter and treatment, however, is the overwhelming sense of reality it can convey. The continuous stream of sight, sound, and motion creates a here-and-now excitement that immerses the viewer in the cinematic experience. Thus, through film, fantasy assumes the shape and emotional impact of reality. The technological history of film can in fact be viewed as an ongoing evolution toward greater realism, toward erasing the border between art and nature. The motion picture has progressed step by step from drawings, to photographs, to projected images, to sound, to color, to wide screen, to 3-D. Attempts have even been made to add the sense of smell to the film experience by releasing fragrances throughout the theater. Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* depicted a theater of the future where a complex electrical apparatus at each seat provided tactile "images" to match the visuals:

Going to the Feelies this evening, Henry? . . . I hear the new one at the Alhambra is first-rate. There's a love scene on a bearskin rug; they say it's marvellous. Every hair of the bear reproduced. The most amazing tactual effects.²

Although Huxley's "Feelies" have not yet become reality, the motion picture has succeeded, through Cinerama and other wide-screen or curved-screen projection techniques, in intensifying our experience to a remarkable degree. In fact, by creating images that are larger than life, films have sometimes been made to seem more real than reality. A cartoon published shortly after the first Cinerama film (*This Is Cinerama*, 1952) was released illustrates the effectiveness of this device. The cartoon pictures a man groping for a seat during the famous roller-coaster sequence. As he moves across a row of seats, a seated spectator, in a panic, grabs his arm and screams hysterically, "Sit down, you fool! You'll have us all killed!" Anyone who has seen *This Is Cinerama* knows the cartoon is no exaggeration.

DIFFICULTIES OF FILM ANALYSIS

The properties that make film the most powerful and realistic of the arts also make analysis difficult. A motion picture moves continuously in time and space. Once frozen, a film is no longer a "motion" picture, and the unique property of

2. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper, 1946), p. 23.