



UNDERSTANDING MOVIES

Seventh Edition

LOUIS GIANNETTI

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LOUIS GIANNETTI

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PREFACE

The illiterate of the 20th century will be as ignorant of the camera as of the pen.

—LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY, photographer and filmmaker

Cineliteracy is long overdue in American education, and not just at the college level. According to *The Television and Video Almanac*, the average American family watches about seven hours of television per day. That's a lot of time watching moving images. Yet, for the most part, we watch them uncritically, passively, allowing them to wash over us, rarely analyzing how they work on us, how they can shape our values. The following chapters may be of use in understanding how television and movies communicate, and the complex network of language systems they use. I entertain no grand pretense at teaching viewers how to respond to moving images; rather, I am concerned with suggesting some of the reasons people respond as they do.

In this seventh edition, I have retained the same principle of organization as the earlier editions, structuring the chapters around the realism–formalism dichotomy. Each chapter isolates the various language systems and spectrum of techniques used by filmmakers in conveying meaning. Naturally, the chapters don't pretend to be exhaustive: They're essentially starting points. They progress from the most narrow and specific aspects of cinema (photography and movement) to the most abstract and comprehensive (ideology and theory). The chapters are not tightly interdependent: They can be read out of sequence. Inevitably, such a looseness of organization involves a certain amount of overlapping, but I have tried to keep this to a minimum. Technical terms are **boldfaced** the first time they are used in each chapter, which means that they are defined in the Glossary.

Each chapter has been updated to reflect recent developments in the field. I have also included many new photos and captions, most of them from recently released movies.

The final chapter, "Synthesis: *Citizen Kane*," is a recapitulation of the main ideas of the previous chapters, applied to a single movie. The chapter can also serve as a rough model for a term paper. The VCR revolution has allowed film analysis to be much more systematic, because a movie in cassette form can

be repeated many times. In my own courses, I require my students to select a scene—preferably under three minutes—and analyze all its components according to the chapters of this book. Of course, a term paper is not likely to be as detailed as the *Citizen Kane* analysis, but the same methodology can be applied. If the chapters are read in a different sequence, the term paper can be organized in a corresponding manner. For example, many people would prefer to begin an analysis with story or theme, and then proceed to matters of style and technique. *Citizen Kane* is an ideal choice because it includes virtually every technique the medium is capable of, in addition to being one of the most critically admired films in history and a popular favorite among students.

A word about the photos in this book. Most of the illustrations are publicity photos, taken with a 35 mm still camera. They are not frame enlargements from the movie itself, for such enlargements reproduce poorly. They are generally too harshly contrasting and lacking in detail compared to the moving image on a large screen. When exactitude was necessary, as in the series from *The Seven Samurai* (9–14) or the edited sequence from *Potemkin* (4–18), I included actual blowups from the movies themselves. Most of the time, however, I preferred to use publicity photos because of their superior technical resolution.

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A number of people have helped me. Frank Hubert's creative talent as a designer is apparent on every page of this book. I would like to thank the following friends and organizations for their help, advice, and criticism: Scott Eyman, Joanna Connor, Jon Forman, Dave Wittkowsky, Marcie Goodman, the Case Western Reserve University Film Society, and my students at C.W.R.U. I'm grateful to Ingmar Bergman, who was kind enough to allow me to use the frame enlargements from *Persona*; and Akira Kurosawa, who graciously consented to my using enlargements from *The Seven Samurai*. The following scholars have helped me with their insightful critiques: Roy Armstrong II, Beaufort County Community College; Deborah Holdstein, Governors State University; Don Kunz, University of Rhode Island; Avis Meyer, Saint Louis University; Carol Schrepfer, Waubensee Community College; Helen Stritzler, Adelphi University.

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LOUIS GIANNETTI
Cleveland, Ohio

In Memoriam
Lynn R. Jones
1939–1970

*Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heav'n so fine
That all the world will be in love with Night
And pay no worship to the garish Sun.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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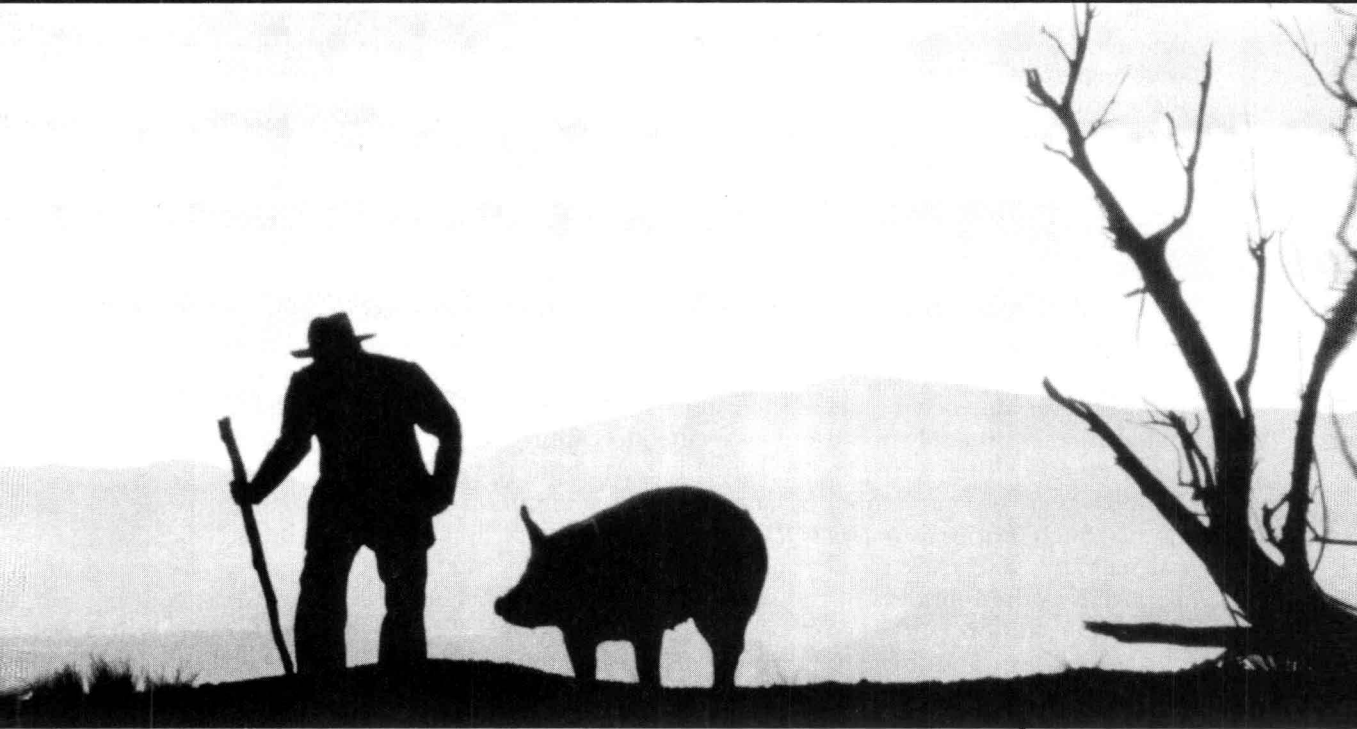
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PHOTOGRAPHY

1



Universal City Studios

A photograph is by no means a complete and whole reflection of reality: the photographic picture represents only one or another selection from the sum of physical attributes of the object photographed.

—VLADIMIR NILSEN

SUMMARY

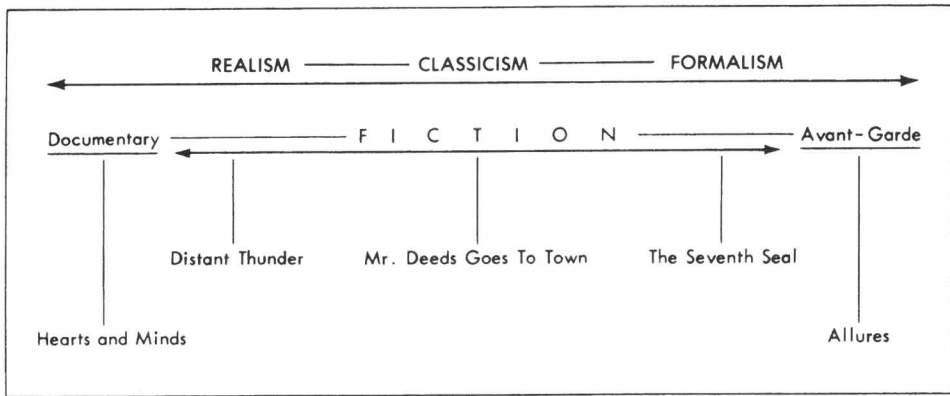
The three styles of film: realism, classicism, and formalism. Three broad types of cinema: documentaries, fiction films, and avant-garde movies. The signified and the signifier: how form shapes content in movies. Subject matter plus treatment equal content. The shots: apparent distance of the camera from the subject. The angles: looking up, down, or at eye level. Lighting styles: high key, low key, high contrast. The symbolism of light and darkness. Color symbolism. How lenses distort the subject matter: telephotos, wide-angle, and standard lenses. Filtered reality: more distortions. Special effects and the optical printer. The cinematographer: the film director's main visual collaborator.

REALISM AND FORMALISM

Even before the turn of the last century, movies began to develop in two major directions: the **realistic** and the **formalistic**. In the mid-1890s in France, the Lumière brothers delighted audiences with their short movies dealing with everyday occurrences. Such films as *The Arrival of a Train* (4-2) fascinated viewers precisely because they seemed to capture the flux and spontaneity of events as they were viewed in real life. At about the same time, Georges Méliès was creating a number of fantasy films that emphasized purely imagined events. Such movies as *A Trip to the Moon* (4-3) were typical mixtures of whimsical narrative and trick photography. In many respects, the Lumières can be regarded as the founders of the realist tradition of cinema, and Méliès of the formalist tradition.

Realism and formalism are general rather than absolute terms. When used to suggest a tendency toward either polarity, such labels can be helpful, but in the end they're just labels. Few films are exclusively formalist in style, and fewer yet are completely realist. There is also an important difference between realism and reality, although this distinction is often forgotten. Realism is a particular *style*, whereas physical reality is the source of all the raw materials of film, both realistic and formalistic. Virtually all movie directors go to the photographable world for their subject matter, but what they do with this material—how they shape and manipulate it—is what determines their stylistic emphasis.

Generally speaking, realistic films attempt to reproduce the surface of reality with a minimum of distortion. In photographing objects and events, the filmmaker tries to suggest the copiousness of life itself. Both realist and formalist film directors must select (and hence, emphasize) certain details from the chaotic sprawl of reality. But the element of selectivity in realistic films is less obvious. Realists, in short, try to preserve the illusion that their film world is unmanipulated, an objective mirror of the actual world. Formalists, on the other hand, make no such pretense. They deliberately stylize and distort their raw materials so that only the very naive would mistake a manipulated image of an object or event for the real thing.



1-1. Classification chart of styles and types of film.

Critics and scholars categorize movies according to a variety of criteria, few of them definitive. Two of the most common methods of classification are by style and by type. The three principal styles—realism, classicism, and formalism—might be regarded as a continuous spectrum of possibilities, rather than airtight categories. Similarly, the three types of movies—documentaries, fiction, and avant-garde films—are also terms of convenience, for they often overlap. Realistic films like *Distant Thunder* can shade into the documentary; formalist movies like *The Seventh Seal* have a personal quality suggesting the traditional domain of the avant-garde. Most fiction films, especially those produced in America, tend to conform to the classical paradigm. Classical cinema can be viewed as an intermediate style that avoids the extremes of realism and formalism—though most movies in the classical form lean toward one or the other style.

We rarely notice the style in a realistic movie; the artist tends to be self-effacing. Such filmmakers are more concerned with *what's* being shown rather than how it's manipulated. The camera is used conservatively. It's essentially a recording mechanism that reproduces the surface of tangible objects with as little commentary as possible. Some realists aim for a rough look in their images, one that doesn't prettify the materials with a self-conscious beauty of form. "If it's too pretty, it's false," is an implicit assumption. A high premium is placed on simplicity, spontaneity, and directness. This is not to suggest that these movies lack artistry, however, for at its best, the realistic cinema specializes in art that conceals art.

Formalist movies are stylistically flamboyant. Their directors are concerned with expressing their unabashedly subjective experience of reality, not how other people might see it. Formalists are often referred to as **expressionists**, because their self-expression is at least as important as the subject matter itself. Expressionists are often concerned with spiritual and psychological truths, which they feel can be conveyed best by distorting the surface of the material world. The camera is used as a method of commenting on the subject matter, a way of emphasizing its essential rather than its objective nature. Formalist movies have a high degree of manipulation, of re-forming of reality. But it's precisely this "deformed" imagery that can be so artistically striking in such films.

Most realists would claim that their major concern is with *content* rather than *form* or technique. The subject matter is always supreme, and anything that distracts from the content is viewed with suspicion. In its most extreme form, the realistic cinema tends toward documentary, with its emphasis on photographing actual events and people (1–2). The formalist cinema, on the other hand, tends to emphasize technique and expressiveness. The most extreme example of this style of filmmaking is found in the avant-garde cinema (1–6).

1–2. *Hearts and Minds* (U.S.A., 1975), directed by Peter Davis.

The emotional impact of a documentary image usually derives from its truth rather than its beauty. Davis's indictment of America's devastation of Vietnam consists primarily of TV newsreel footage. This photo shows some Vietnamese children running from an accidental bombing raid on their community, their clothes literally burned off their bodies by napalm. "First they bomb as much as they please," a Vietnamese observes, "then they film it." It was images such as these that eventually turned the majority of Americans against the war. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, Third World filmmakers, have pointed out, "Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the System finds indigestible." Paradoxically, in no country except the United States would such self-damning footage be allowed on the public airwaves—which are controlled, or at least regulated, by governments. No other country has a First Amendment. (Warner Bros.)



Some of these movies are totally abstract; pure forms (that is, nonrepresentational colors, lines, and shapes) constitute the only content. Most fiction films fall somewhere between these two extremes, in a mode critics refer to as **classical cinema** (1–4).

Even the terms *form* and *content* aren't so clear-cut as they may sometimes seem. In fact, in many respects the terms are synonymous, although they can certainly be useful in suggesting a degree of emphasis. The form of a shot—the way in which a subject is photographed—is its true content, not necessarily what the subject is perceived to be in reality. The communications theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that the content of one medium is actually another medium. For example, a photograph (visual image) depicting a man

1–3. *Distant Thunder* (India, 1973), directed by Satyajit Ray.

In most realistic films, there is a close correspondence of the images to everyday reality. This criterion of value necessarily involves a comparison between the internal world of the movie with the external milieu that the filmmaker has chosen to explore. The realistic cinema tends to deal with people from the lower social echelons and often explores moral issues. The artist rarely intrudes on the materials, however, preferring to let them speak for themselves. Rather than focusing on extraordinary events, realism tends to emphasize the basic experiences of life. It is a style that excels in making us feel the humanity of others. Beauty of form is often sacrificed to capture the texture of reality as it's ordinarily perceived. Realistic images often seem unmanipulated, haphazard in their design. They frequently convey an intimate snapshot quality—people caught unawares. Generally, the story materials are loosely organized and include many details that don't necessarily forward the plot but are offered for their own sake, to heighten the sense of authenticity. (*Cinema 5*)



eating an apple (taste) involves two different mediums: Each communicates information—content—in a different way. A verbal description of the photograph of the man eating the apple would involve yet another medium (language), which communicates information in yet another manner. In each case, the precise information is determined by the medium, although superficially all three have the same content.

In literature, the naive separation of form and content is called “the heresy of paraphrase.” For example, the content of *Hamlet* can be found in a college outline, yet no one would seriously suggest that the play and outline are the same “except in form.” To paraphrase artistic information is inevitably to change its content as well as its form. Artistry can never be gauged by subject matter alone. The manner of its presentation—its forms—is the true content of paintings, literature, and plays. The same applies to movies.

1-4. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (U.S.A., 1936), with Gary Cooper (with tuba), directed by Frank Capra.

Classical cinema avoids the extremes of realism and formalism in favor of a slightly stylized presentation that has at least a surface plausibility. Movies in this form are often handsomely mounted, but the style rarely calls attention to itself. The images are determined by their relevance to the story and characters, rather than a desire for authenticity or formal beauty alone. The implicit ideal is a functional, invisible style: The pictorial elements are subordinated to the presentation of characters in action. Classical cinema is story oriented. The narrative line is seldom allowed to wander, nor is it broken up by authorial intrusions. A high premium is placed on the entertainment value of the story, which is often shaped to conform to the conventions of a popular genre. Often the characters are played by stars rather than unknown players, and their roles are sometimes tailored to showcase their personal charms. The human materials are paramount in the classical cinema. The characters are generally appealing and slightly romanticized. The audience is encouraged to identify with their values and goals. (Columbia Pictures)

