

A color photograph of a man, Stephen Prince, running on a dirt path. He is wearing a red baseball cap, a blue and white checkered short-sleeved shirt, and khaki pants. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows trees and a white building in the distance.

STEPHEN PRINCE

MOVIES
AND
MEANING

AN
INTRODUCTION
TO FILM



*M*ovies and *M*eaning

An Introduction to Film

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Allyn and Bacon
Boston London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore



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A Viacom Company
Needham Heights, MA 02194

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Prince, Stephen, 1955-

Movies and meaning : an introduction to film / by Stephen
Prince.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-02-396806-0 (alk. paper)

1. Motion pictures. I. Title.

PN1994.P676 1995

791.43--dc20

95-43380

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 01 00 99 98 97 96

Preface



This book is designed to give students an in-depth introduction to the motion picture medium. Virtually everyone reading the book knows about the pleasures that movies can offer, the ways they can thrill, amuse, sadden, and excite the emotions. But, however strong their love for movies, most viewers lack a detailed knowledge of the medium. This book assumes no prior knowledge of film on the part of the reader. The text is organized around three basic questions: how movies express meanings, how viewers understand those meanings, and how cinema functions globally as both an art and a business.

Most introductory film textbooks concentrate on the first question and tend to minimize or disregard the other two questions. A special feature of this book is the attention given to the ways viewers respond to the elements of film structure and the attention given to cinema as a global business as well as an art. To fully understand the medium of cinema, students need to know what filmmakers do with the tools of their craft, how viewers respond to the audiovisual designs those tools create, and how cinema functions as both an art *and* a business.

Each of the textbook's three guiding questions opens up a series of topics. The first question—how do movies express meaning?—asks what filmmakers do and how they do it. The basic tools of filmmaking include cinematography, production design, the actor's performance, editing, sound design, and narrative structure. Each of these areas contributes to the overall design of a film, and, by manipulating these tools, filmmakers are able to express a range of meanings.

The second question—how do viewers understand films?—asks about what viewers do when watching movies. How do viewers interpret the effects filmmakers create? How do filmmakers anticipate and build on the likely ways viewers will react to certain kinds of stories and audiovisual designs? What makes movies understandable to viewers in the first place? How can filmmakers facilitate the viewer's ability to understand and interpret the images on screen?

To talk only about what filmmakers do to create meaning on screen is to leave out a crucial part of the picture. One also needs to know what viewers do with the movies they watch because, without viewers, there are no meanings in film. The

medium of cinema depends on a contract between filmmaker and viewer. Together, they co-create the film experience.

Accordingly, the text examines how filmmakers create images and sounds and also looks closely at the mechanisms and processes by which viewers make sense of those images and sounds on screen. Where appropriate, the chapters discuss the viewer's *interpretive* contribution to the screen experience, the ways that viewers actively look for patterns in the images and sounds on screen and link them in ways that have meaning for them. The viewer's interpretive contribution refers to the ways viewers actively process and interpret audiovisual information in cinema. Viewers do this by applying to the screen aspects of their real-life visual, personal, and social experiences as well as their knowledge of motion picture conventions and style.

The third question—how does cinema operate as an international medium?—asks about the dual capacity in which cinema functions as both an art and a business on a global scale. To pretend that the cinema is mainly an art or medium of creative expression distorts the understanding of its nature, because it is also a business. In some ways, it is more fundamentally a business than an art. The way it operates as a business in a global context influences the production of certain kinds and styles of film. Cinema is an international medium, operating in a global economy and with films created by directors representing a diverse range of countries and cultures.

The focus throughout the text is on narrative filmmaking and on fictional narrative in particular, since these include the most popular forms of filmmaking, those seen by the largest audiences, and are what most people mean when they talk about “the movies.” Throughout the text, boxes extend the major topics of discussion into more specialized areas and supplement film examples with brief profiles of major directors. The reader will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the medium of cinema by exploring these boxes. Each chapter ends with a few suggested readings to direct the interested reader's attention to more intensive discussions of issues raised in the chapter. Boldface terms throughout the text designate items defined in the glossary.

About the Photographs

Photographic illustrations in the chapters utilize production stills and frame enlargements. Production stills are made by an on-set photographer during the course of a film's production, and they only *approximate* the actual shots and compositions of the film. To exactly reproduce the actual images viewers see when watching a film, frame enlargements must be used. All photographs in the text that are frame enlargements are labelled as such. The reader will note that, in general, the production stills look sharper and richer than the frame enlargements, which tend to be softer and grayer. But for the purposes of teaching, where an exact reference to a film's images is necessary, frame enlargements are required, and they are used here in that context. The reader seeing a frame enlargement can be confident that, with respect to all matters of camera perspective, she or he is seeing the exact frame as it appears in the film.

About the Text

Chapters 1 through 6 focus closely on the basic elements of creative design in motion pictures—the camera, cinematography, production design, the actor’s performance, editing, sound, and narrative. Chapter 1 explains the concept of film structure and how camera position, angle, lens, and movement may be used to achieve a variety of visual designs and meanings in cinema. Chapter 2 extends this discussion of the camera by exploring cinematography, one of the components of *mise-en-scene*, a term that designates the collective contributions of cinematography, production design, and performance style. Chapter 2 studies how filmmakers use light and color to achieve effects on screen and how viewers interpret those effects.

Chapter 3 examines the areas of production design (this includes costume design, set design, and use of mattes and miniature models) and acting, considered in terms of the unique characteristics of film acting and how the performer becomes part of a film’s total visual design or *mise-en-scene*.

Chapter 4 examines film editing. What is editing, what are the principles of continuity editing (the most commonly used system in filmmaking), and what are some alternatives to continuity editing? How do viewers draw inferences and interpretations across shots?

Chapter 5 discusses an often-overlooked filmmaking tool—sound design. How do filmmakers design their soundtracks, how do they manipulate sound, and how does sound combine with images in ways that enrich those images? How do viewers interpret sound in relation to images?

Chapter 6 examines the nature of narrative in film. What is film narrative, what are its elements, how do filmmakers organize those elements, and how do viewers contribute to the narrative experience?

These six chapters closely examine the basic tools of the filmmaker’s art and how viewers respond to the audiovisual designs those tools create. The focus of Chapters 7 through 11 expands to cover larger issues of cinematic design, of art and business in a global context, and of film criticism and theory.

Chapter 7 looks at how films construct different types of “reality” on screen. The representation of screen reality—the ways movies persuade viewers that what they are seeing is “real”—varies considerably across different categories of film and involves differing kinds of manipulations by filmmakers and assumptions by viewers. Four basic types of screen reality are explored.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine motion pictures in a world context. Chapter 8 studies the impact of popular American commercial filmmaking upon world markets and the ways the American industry is organized to compete aggressively in overseas markets. It also traces the connections between blockbuster films—so important in today’s industry—and the world market. Chapter 9 examines explicit international alternatives to the Hollywood model of popular commercial moviemaking. These alternatives are discussed in terms of *auteur* directors and national, new-wave film styles.

Chapters 10 and 11 discuss film criticism, interpretation, and film theory. These areas are the logical end-point of an introduction to film. Chapter 10 explores the

nature of film criticism, what it is and what it does, and how film critics create that criticism. Chapter 11 examines theories about the nature of cinema, surveys the most important theories, and discusses their strengths and weaknesses.

When the reader has finished *Movies and Meaning*, he or she will have a comprehensive understanding of three major, central issues of film study: (1) how filmmakers achieve their effects; (2) how viewers make sense out of what they see on screen; and (3) how cinema operates as both an art and a business in a global context. Above all, it is the author's hope that students will finish this book wiser about the cinema and with greater affection for it, an affection strengthened by knowledge of its secrets.

Acknowledgments

Writing a book of this size and scope presents numerous challenges. The chief issue is to find the right approach for an introduction to a medium as extensive as the cinema and that now encompasses a century of creative development. The approach adopted here is accessible for the reader and easy to understand while honoring the complexity of the medium. Without oversimplifying the medium or the issues involved in cinema study, considerable effort has been spent to make the writing style appropriate for the general reader.

For their valuable assistance in helping me find the right blend of topics, concepts, relevant film examples, and style of presentation, I must thank my careful editors who helped guide this text toward completion. The project really began at the prompting of Kevin Davis at Macmillan who was very enthusiastic about producing a new film textbook and urged me forward despite my initial hesitation over what seemed a daunting task. I must also thank Macmillan's excellent development editor, Linda Montgomery.

At Allyn and Bacon, Joe Opiela helped steer the text toward completion. Joe was an especially good interpreter of the readers' reports. He made valuable suggestions for bringing the text into line with their recommendations. His support is greatly appreciated.

The photo program is a key feature of this text. My thanks go to Terry Geeskin of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Stills Archive and to the staff at Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store.

Most of the photos in this text are frame enlargements from the actual films under study. Edd Sewell kindly taught me how to use a darkroom. My thanks to Gerry Scheeler for the loan of lights and camera equipment and thanks also to Carl Plantinga and Richard Dillard for their support. A special thanks to Eric Poe Miller and Grant Corley for designing the figures used in the text.

Quotations from Pauline Kael's review of *Last Tango in Paris*, originally published in *The New Yorker*, are used with permission of E. P. Dutton, publisher. Quotations from "Dead Again or A-Live Again: Postmodern or Postmortem?" are used with permission of University of Texas Press, publisher. A special thanks to the essay's authors, Marcia Landy and Lucy Fischer, for their kind permission to reprint portions of their essay.

As always, Bob Denton, my department chair, came through with whatever resources or support I requested. His help and friendship have been a great boost to my scholarship over the past six years.

Thanks, also, to Teresa Darvalics for her valuable manuscript assistance and to Elizabeth Thomas for her help and for everything else. Finally, special thanks to Marjorie Payne, my editorial and production editor, for a close and careful reading of the manuscript and for the outstanding visual design she gave the book. She took exceptionally good care of the author's work.

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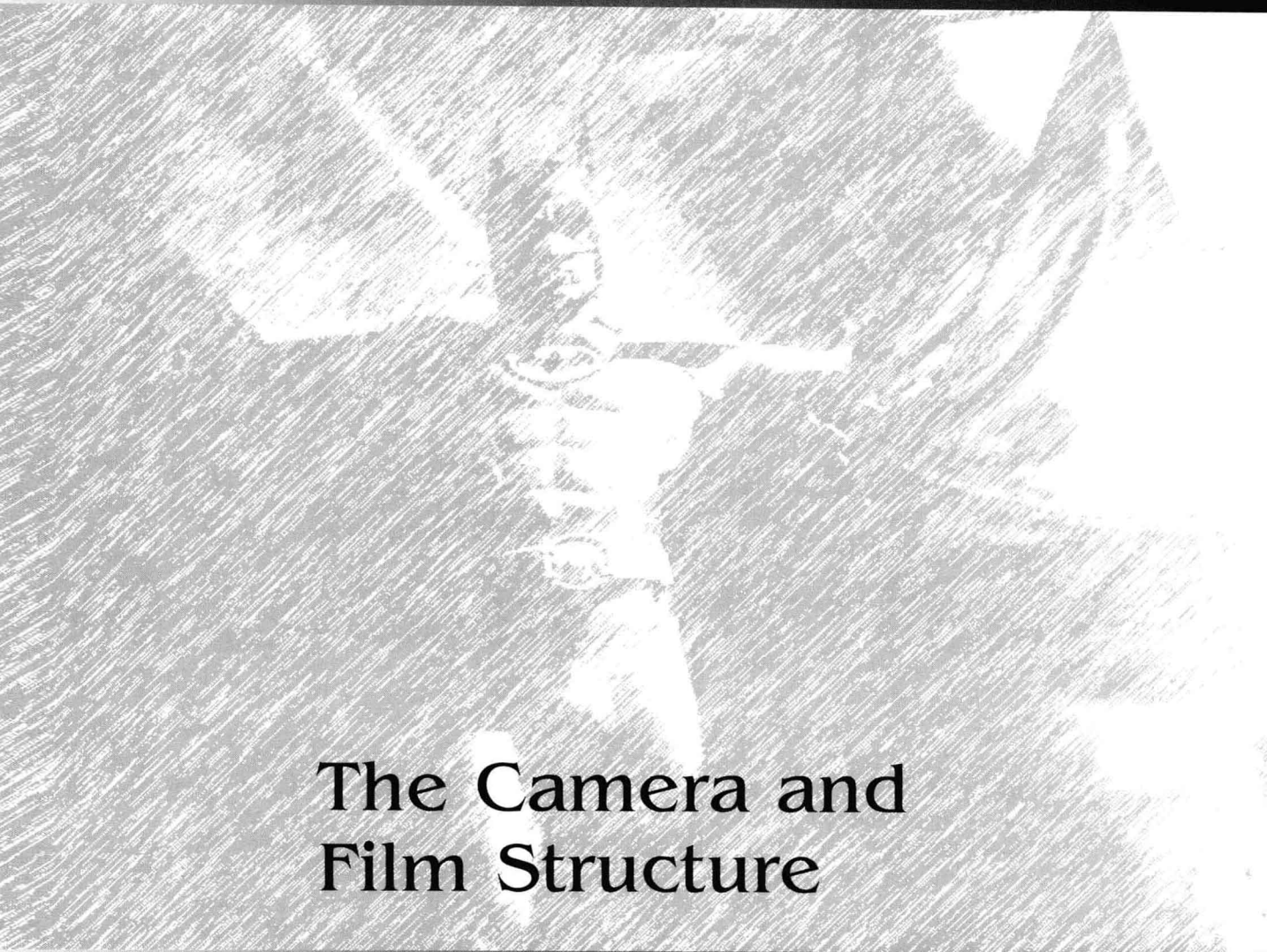
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Chapter 1



The Camera and Film Structure



Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- explain the nature of film structure and its relation to the ways movies express meaning
- describe the relation between film structure and the cinema's properties of time and space
- distinguish the three basic camera positions and their expressive functions
- describe how camera position can clarify the meaning of an actor's facial expression and gestures
- distinguish the three basic camera angles and describe the ways they influence viewer response
- differentiate telephoto, wide angle, and zoom lenses and explain their optical effects
- explain the three basic categories of camera movement and their expressive functions
- explain how a film's structural design is shaped by a filmmaker's choices about how to use the tools of style
- describe the relation between the camera's view of things and human perception
- explain how the camera creates images that both correspond with, and transform, the viewer's visual experience

Key Terms and Concepts

structure
running time
feature films
story time
internal structural time
frame
composition
wide screen
letterboxed
panned-and-scanned
camera position
long shot

medium shot
close-up
establishing shot
normal lens
telephoto lenses
wide-angle lenses
angle of view
depth of field
zoom lens
motion parallax
motion perspective
pan and tilt shots

dolly or tracking shots
boom or crane shots
suspense
surprise
subjective shot
rack focusing
production values
shutter
persistence of vision
flicker fusion
phi phenomena
beta movement

The shark in *Jaws* (1975) and the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993) thrill moviegoers throughout the world. What excites viewers about these films, though, is much more than the sum of their special effects. These films thrill because they are made to do so. Without always being aware of it, viewers respond to the design of a film's creative elements—camerawork, lighting, sound, editing. These are elements of film structure. To understand how movies express meaning, one must begin by understanding their structural design.

This chapter explains the concept of film structure, the camera's role as an element of structure, and the relation between the camera's method of seeing and the viewer's perception. Through their structural design, films correspond with, and transform, the visual and social skills and experiences viewers bring to the medium.

□ THE CONCEPT OF STRUCTURE

To understand how movies express meaning, and how filmmakers work, one must become familiar with the concept of **structure**. A convenient way to illustrate this concept is to make a distinction between structure and content. Consider the average newspaper movie review. It provides a description of a film's story and a paragraph or two about the characters and the actors who play them. In addition, the reviewer might mention the theme or themes of the film. These descriptions of story, character, and theme address the content of the movie.

Now, instead of thinking about content, one could ask about those things that help create the story, give shape to the characters, and illustrate and visualize the themes. These are questions about structure. Structure (which might also be called *style* or *technique*) depends upon manipulations of the camera, lights and color, production design, performance style, editing, sound, and narrative. These elements of structure, and the particular ways they are used by a filmmaker, create the audiovisual design of a film. Without structure, there can be no content and no film. Structure, then, refers to the audiovisual design of a film and the particular tools and techniques used to create that design.

The Role of the Director

Who creates a film's structure? A wide range of creative personnel design picture and sound on any given production. These include cinematographers, editors, sound designers, production designers, and many other important collaborators. Although filmmaking is a collaborative enterprise, one individual has overall artistic authority, and this is usually the director. The director coordinates and organizes the artistic inputs of other members of the production team, who generally subordinate their

Batman (Warner Bros., 1989)

Distinctive structural features of *Batman* include the title character's striking costume along with dark lighting and stylized set design. Together these help establish the film's grim, urban fantasy world of crime and superhero adventure.





JFK (Warner Bros., 1991)

Director Oliver Stone confers with actor Kevin Costner during filming of *JFK*. Stone has established a distinctive film style, but collaboration with artists and performers is essential to the making of any film. Directors can realize their vision only by cooperating with, and depending on, the talents of other production personnel.

artistic tastes or preferences to a director's stated wishes or vision. The director, in turn, answers to the producer who generally has administrative control over a production (e.g., making sure the production stays on schedule and within budget).

In practice, great variety exists in the working methods of directors. Some directors, such as Robert Altman (*Ready-to-Wear*, 1994; *The Player*, 1992), welcome input from other production team members in a spirit of shared, collective artistry. Other directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock or Charles Chaplin, tend to be more autocratic and commanding in their creative approaches. Some directors, such as Stanley Kubrick (*Full Metal Jacket*, 1987), take an active role in the editing of their pictures. Most directors place special emphasis upon the quality of the script, believing a polished script to be essential to making a good film. Two of Clint Eastwood's best films as director, *Unforgiven* (1993) and *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), feature exquisitely written scripts. Whatever particular working method a director may employ, on most films, the director is the key artist overseeing and organizing the film's audiovisual structure and the contributions of other production personnel.

Structure, Time, Space

The elements of cinematic structure, organized by directors and their production teams, help shape distinctive properties of time and space in a film. A convenient way of thinking about the arts is to consider the properties of time and/or space that they possess. Music, for example, is primarily an art of time. Its effects arise through the arrangement and sequence of tones in a musical composition that has some duration or length. Movies, by contrast, are an art of time as well as space.

Structure and Time

The time component of movies has several aspects. **Running time** designates the duration of the film, that is, the amount of time it takes a viewer to watch the film from beginning to end. Most commercially released films are called **feature films**, which means that they typically run between 90 to 120 minutes. Some films, however, are much longer. The Russian production of *War and Peace* (1968) runs for 7.5 hours.

Story time designates the amount of time covered by the narrative, and this can vary considerably from film to film. In Fred Zinnemann's Western, *High Noon* (1952), the story spans 1.5 hours, roughly equivalent to the running time of the film itself. Story time, on the other hand, can span many epochs and centuries, as in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which goes from the dawn of the apes well into the age of space travel. Filmmakers may also organize story time through the use of flashbacks so that it becomes fragmented, doubling back on itself, as in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), in which the story of Charles Foster Kane is told largely through the recollections of friends and associates who knew him.

Internal structural time, a third distinct aspect of cinematic time, arises from the structural manipulations of film form or technique. If a filmmaker edits a sequence so that the lengths of shots progressively decrease, or become shorter, the tempo of the sequence will accelerate. A rapid camera movement will accelerate the internal structural time of a shot. Regardless of the shot's actual duration on screen, it will seem to move faster.

In *Dances With Wolves* (1990), the editing imposes a slow pace upon the story by letting many shots linger on screen for several seconds. Director Kevin Costner thought a slow pace suited this stately epic about an era when horse and wagon were major modes of transportation. By contrast, the pacing of contemporary urban action films such as *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995) races at breakneck speed, rarely pausing long enough for an audience to catch its breath.

Dances With Wolves (Orion Pictures, 1990) and **Die Hard** (Twentieth Century Fox, 1988)

The slow pace and long running time (nearly 3 hours) of *Dances With Wolves* help establish the film's epic focus on the final years of the Sioux. Snappy editing and a fast pace would be as ill suited to this material as a leisurely pace would be for contemporary action films such as the *Die Hard* series

