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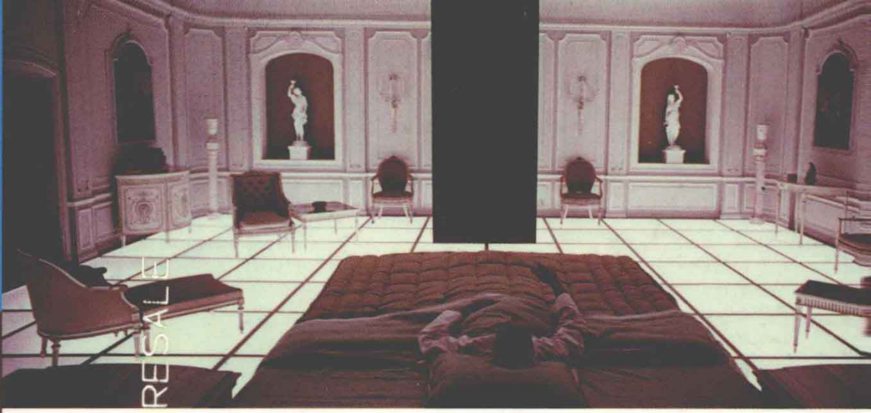

Film, Form, & Culture

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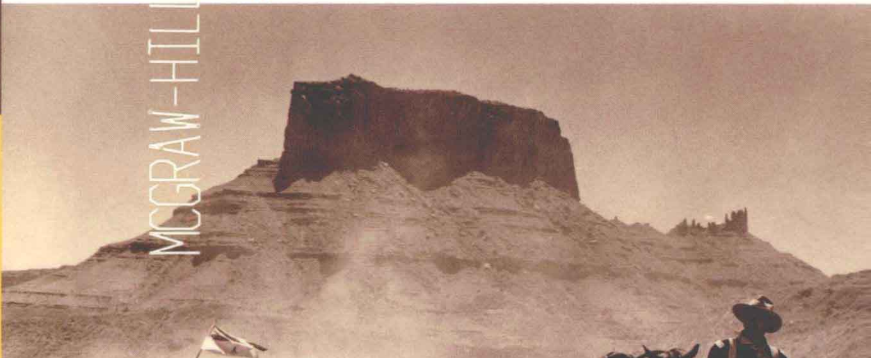
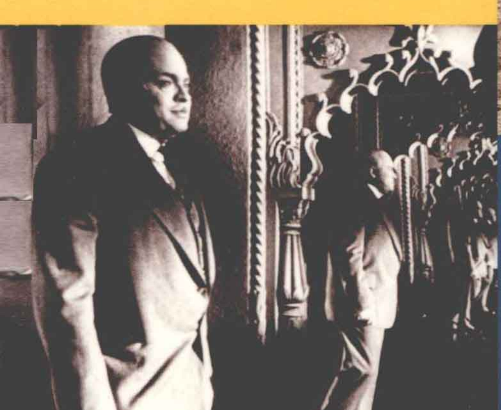


Robert Kolker



Introductory Text &
Interactive DVD-ROM

FILM, FORM, AND CULTURE

THIRD EDITION

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For Linda

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Teaching film is about getting control of the image and handing that control over to students." That has been Robert Kolker's goal in teaching and writing about film for the past 30 years. Combining his love of computers with his love of film, Kolker began experimenting with ways to deliver film in manageable, manipulable ways to an audience who could then watch carefully, see it analyzed, and interact with the moving image in a close and comfortable setting. The result is the DVD-ROM and textbook, *Film, Form, and Culture.* The textbook results from another overriding interest: to present a thorough grounding in film form and theory in readable prose that emphasizes not only the formal matters of film structure, but the larger cultural contexts in which film thrives.

ROBERT KOLKER is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Maryland and Adjunct Professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia. He is the author of many books on film. *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* is in its third edition. He has recently edited *Alfred Hitchcock's* Psycho: *A Casebook.* His book on European film, *The Altering Eye,* is now on the World Wide Web (http://otal.umd.edu/~rkolker/AlteringEye).

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PREFACE

The response from colleagues and students who have used the second edition of *Film, Form, and Culture* continues to be both gratifying and helpful. Based on their comments, I have made a number of changes in the third edition that I believe will result in both textbook and DVD-ROM (replacing the two CD-ROMs of the previous edition) even more useful and comprehensible for your film course. The book has been expanded to nine chapters, and parts of it completely rewritten, in an accessible, readable style appropriate for undergraduate students.

NEW TO THE THIRD EDITION

Many users of the text asked for more detailed discussion of the shot, composition, editing, and genre. I've expanded discussion on all of these subjects and divided them into separate chapters. Because it is no longer possible to separate film from the digital—indeed, by the time you read this, film will be well on its way in its process of conversion from celluloid to digital design, cinematography or videography, and projection—it is important to think about the technical and aesthetic changes this will bring about, and therefore, elements of the former chapter on the digital are now part of the general discussion of film and its future.

The cultural context of film and film and media economics is treated throughout; it is the basic theme of this text that films never exist in a cultural vacuum and are always created in a culturally determined economic system. The cultural studies chapter, which introduces students to the methodologies of historical and cultural analysis, remains, along with the comparative reading of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and McTiernan's *Die Hard* that colleagues tell me is particularly liked by students. It now serves as something of a focal point, pulling together the examination of film form on one side and the discussion of genres—the stories films tell us—on the other. I've expanded the treatment of genres, cinema's life blood, and so arranged two chapters devoted to the subject by returning to the auteur, especially foreign directors, and their influence on genres. I've balanced the *Vertigo/Die Hard* comparison at the end of the text with a comparative analysis of three films built on the same narrative, each of which corresponds to its cultural moments and national origins: Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), the German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), and Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2002). This allows for a useful conclusion to the study of genre and to the text as a whole. Throughout the book, many more stills now illustrate important points.

The Glossary has been expanded and more terms and their definitions within the text clarified. All words in boldface appear in the Glossary, in addition to terms used in the Glossary of the FFC DVD-ROM.

The *Film, Form, and Culture* DVD-ROM

Unique to this book from its beginning was an interactive CD-ROM in which clips from films are analyzed closely, more closely than can be imagined through the still images common to most film texts. That CD has now been redesigned and enlarged into an interactive *Film, Form, and Culture* DVD-ROM. Segments from more recent films have been added, and additional examples provided. Through moving images interactively designed with explanatory text, stills, and animations, students will become intimately familiar with the basic elements of editing, montage, shot structure, point of view, mise-en-scène, lighting, camera movement, film sound and music, and aspects of genre, focusing on film noir. The FFC DVD-ROM can be used alone or easily used in conjunction with the text.

Film, Form, and Culture remains a unique introduction to film for students in a variety of courses. It is one of the few that discusses not only the basic issues of film construction, but the way film is constructed for and by the culture in which it is made. It considers film as part of the world it inhabits. It is the first introductory text with a fully interactive FFC DVD-ROM. I hope it will remain a good reading (and viewing) experience for both instructors and students.

Robert Kolker

I would like to express my thanks for the many useful comments and suggestions provided by the following reviewers: Jeffrey Renard Allen, *City University of New York—Queens College*; Richard Ascough, *Queen's Theological College*; Anna Banks, *University of Idaho*; Jon G. Bentley, *Albuquerque TVI Community College*; Richard A. Blake, *Boston College*; Gerald Boyer, *Maryville University*; Bill Clemente, *Peru State College*; Robert A. Cole, *State University of New York—Oswego*; Jeffrey S. Cole, *King College*; Shekhar Deshpande, *Arcadia University*; Michel deBenedictis, *Miami–Dade Community College*; Carol Donelan, *Carleton College*; Pamela S. Ecker, *Cincinnati State Technical & Community College*; Susan Felleman, *Southern Illinois University*; Angelica Fenner, *University of Minnesota*; Cliff Fortenberry, *Mississippi College*; Eric Freedman, *Florida Atlantic University*; Mark Gallagher, *University of Oregon*; Mikhail Gershovich, *State University of New York—Old Westbury*; Marsha Gordon, *University of Maryland*; Melody

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Many people were involved in the making of *Film, Form, and Culture*. My film students, patiently working with me over the year, helped me hone and clarify my ideas. Mike Mashon indirectly provided the name of the book. Marsha Orgeron did important research on its behalf, and Devin Orgeron helped check out the facts. David and Luke Wyatt read the manuscript, and their comments made it better. Stanley Plumly made me feel better with his encouragement. Other University of Maryland colleagues—particularly Joe Miller, Sharon Gerstel, Elizabeth Loiseaux, Barry Peterson, Jenny Preece, Ben Shneiderman—helped with conversation, ideas, and facts. Marta Braun, of the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, Toronto, supplied the image by Etienne-Jules Marey that appears in the text. Paul Schrader, Oliver Stone, and William Blakefield helped make the FFC DVD-ROM possible. Jay Telotte and Angela Dalle Vaeche at Georgia Tech were endless sources of information and good humor. Robert Lieberman, my agent, saw the book's potential and helped bring it to publication. At McGraw-Hill, Allison McNamara, Cynthia Ward, Shannon Gattens, Catherine Schultz, Heather Burbridge, and David Patterson were extremely helpful through the first two editions. Melody Marcus, Martin Fox, Shannon Gattens, Beth Ebenstein, and Cathy Iammartino worked closely with me on the third. I am also grateful to Stephen Prince, who gave me technical support, and Patty Zimmerman, who offered invaluable information on independent women filmmakers.

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INTRODUCTION

Film, Form, and Culture asks you to think seriously about film, as seriously as you would about literature. It's a book about form and structure, content and contexts, history and business. It will give you some sense of film's history and its place in the greater scheme of things, especially in that envelope of words and deeds, money, art, artifacts, and daily life we live in that is called culture.

But why think seriously about film at all? Many people don't. Movies are among those things in our lives that we apparently don't *need* to take seriously. We go to the movies to be entertained, scared, grossed out; to make out, spend time, have something to discuss afterward. But we don't often want to think about movies as a serious part of our emotional or intellectual lives, or even treat them with the same intensity we use when we discuss sports or politics. Outside of a film studies course, we rarely hear people engaged in a discussion of films that goes much deeper than plot or characters.

Even the people who review movies on television or in the papers are not as serious about their subject as other journalists are about sports, music, or painting. They make jokes and puns, stick their thumbs up or down, tell us the plot and whether the characters are believable. Reviewers, in fact, are often part of the show, a kind of overture to the film we may go to see or bring home on video. They are another part of the entertainment.

The reason that attention must be paid to film is that most of us get our stories—our narratives and myths—from it, or from its close cousin, television. In other words, from the late nineteenth century onward, people have turned to film as entertainment, escape, *and* education—as an affirmation of the way they live or think they ought to live their lives. But even if film were "only" entertainment it would be important to find out how it works. Why does it entertain us? Why do we need to be entertained? And film is part of world politics and national policy. Some governments support filmmakers as a means to express their national culture to the world. Other governments have caused international incidents over film, particularly when copyright and piracy issues were at stake.

Hard to believe, but sometimes international policy concerning film can lead to aesthetic consequences. After the end of World War II, in 1946, for example, a major agreement was drawn up between France and the United States: the Blum-Byrnes Accords. This agreement came as an unequal compromise in the face of France's concern about getting its own films shown on its own screens. The French public wanted American films. The Accords forced France to accept American films in an uneven ratio: it could show sixteen weeks of its own films, thirty-six weeks of anything else. The Accords changed the way the French made films because some filmmakers decided that the best way to meet the quota was to make high-quality films through the adaptation of literary works. Other French filmmakers hated these adaptations and started to experiment with new cinematic forms, resulting in a revolution of filmmaking in the late 1950s that was called the French New Wave. The result, in turn, was a change in film form all over the world. French resentment over the influx of American film and other media surfaced again in the 1990s.

Issues of piracy of American films have changed distribution patterns, so that, instead of staging the release of a new movie first in the United States and then slowly releasing it around the world, many films are now released internationally. Film, politics, money, and culture are never separable.

The business of film ripples through the economy, the policies, and the technology of the world at large to this very day. In the coming years, the mergers of enormous media powers—most especially America Online and Time-Warner and the French company Vivendi and Universal pictures—may bring wide-reaching changes not only in the economics of film but in what film actually means. Media mergers may create a confluence of various delivery systems—film, digital video, print, music, and the World Wide Web—that will make film as we now understand it a different form and kind of entertainment. Or, as in the case of AOL Time-Warner, this convergence may fail. While still one company, the name "AOL" has been removed from its title.

All nations, our own included, understand the power of film and television to influence their people, to propagandize values and ideologies. Film may be a bargaining chip in foreign policy, always an economic commodity, sometimes the subject of the politician's wrath at home (as when candidates for office rail against the evil moral influence of Hollywood film, while Hollywood stars become politicians and influence our lives even more) and consequently film becomes the subject of study of many different kinds of academic courses in which its power and complexity are acknowledged and analyzed. We will talk some about the politics and the business, because film is big business and its creation, its form, and its content are about power, the core of politics. But mostly we will talk about the form—the way films are put together so that we, as viewers, understand what they are attempting to tell us—and the content of film. We will come to all of this from the perspective of textuality—studying the film itself and how all its parts work—and find out how film, its production and reception, its place in our culture, makes up a large, coherent construction of meaningful and interrelated elements that we can analyze—a text that we can read.

Let's go back for a moment to our straw men, the film reviewers. The first thing almost any reviewer does is talk about (usually summarize) the film's plot. "Charlie Kane is an unhappy newspaper man. His wife leaves him, and he loses all his friends." "*2001* opens with a number of shots of animals out on the desert. Then one tribe of apes attacks another until, in the middle of the night, one of the tribes discovers this strange monolith in the middle of their camp. There isn't much dialogue, but the apes look real enough."

What film reviews almost always evade is one of the few realities of film itself, that it is an artificial construct, something made in a particular way for specific purposes, and that the plot or story of a film is a function of this construction, not necessarily its first principle. In other words, and as we'll see in more detail as we go along, the formal elements of film—the shot and the cut, for example—are unique to film. They are the basic forms of its construction—along with lighting, camera movement, music, sound, acting—and they themselves were and are determined by things going on in the development of film throughout its history and the development of the culture that filmmaking is one part of. When I speak of film as "artificial," I don't mean it's false; I'm using the term in its root sense, made by art or, often in the case of film, by craft. Film is an artifice, and it becomes an artifact, made in specific ways, using specific tools, fashioned to produce and create specific effects (one of which is the plot, which we often do have to revert to for convenience and to make a point about a movie) with the aim of pleasing the audience who pays to see it. Film reviewers and most everyday discussions of film try to ignore the artificial, constructed aspect of film—its form—and instead talk about it as pure story. The characters of its story become, somehow, "realistic," as if they might "really" exist rather than result from the way the film itself puts meaning together.

There is no doubt that filmmakers and the development of film form early in the last century play a role in this deception. Many filmmakers assume that most viewers are not interested in the construction principles of their work and have accomplished a remarkable feat, making the structure of their films invisible. In other words, one reason we don't pay attention to the form and structure of film is that the form and structure of film disappear behind the very story and characters they produce. This is a great act of prestidigitation and one of the main reasons film has become so popular. Movies have achieved a presence of being, an emotional immediacy that seems unmediated—simply there, without a history, without apparatus, without anything actually between us except the story.

In the discussion that follows, we will explain, analyze, and demystify this apparent act of magic. As we come to understand that film has a complex and flexible form and that story and characters are created by that form, we will become more comfortable with the notion of film as something carefully and seriously *made*. From that point we will be able to move on and understand that the making has a history and the history has a number of parts and branches. One branch—the largest—is the commercial narrative cinema of Hollywood, the major subject of our study. There are a number of national cinemas, some of them, like India's, almost as large as America's, but without much influence outside the nation's borders. Still another is a more experimental cinema—often found in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America but occasionally cropping up in the United States—which explores and experiments with the potentials of film form in the way a good novelist or poet or computer programmer explores her language in order to create new meanings, new structures of thought and feeling.

Understanding film history will help us to understand the conventions of form and content. Clearly, films change over the course of time: they and their makers have a history, as we do, as the culture does. Visual structure, acting styles, story content, the way films *look*—all seem different now than ten or a hundred years ago. But, in many ways, these changes are only superficial. It would be only a small exaggeration to say that, with a few important exceptions, the structure of film and the stories and characters created by that structure have remained mostly unchanged, or have changed in only a gradual way, during the course of film history. Technical methods have indeed changed, and aspects of style (especially acting styles) have changed; but by and large the stories film tells and the ways it tells them follow a continuum almost from the very first images shown to the public. And yet film is always publicizing its uniqueness and originality. "For the first time on the screen . . ." was a popular publicity phrase in the 1940s and 1950s. "The funniest," "most unique," "unlike anything you've ever seen," "the best film," and "you've never seen anything like it" remain useful nonsense phrases for film advertisements. In truth, every commercial, theatrical film is in one way or another like every other commercial, theatrical film, and all are consciously created to be that way! In order to get a film made in Hollywood, an agent or a producer or a studio head has to be convinced that the film you have in mind is "just like" some other film "only different." Watch the first half-hour of Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) for a hilarious representation of what "pitching a story" to a Hollywood producer is like, and see Albert Brooks's *The Muse* (1999) or Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002) for an ironic fantasy about the search for an original film idea.

"Just like . . . only different" is the engine that drives film. Hollywood cinema in particular is based upon the conventions of genre, *kinds* of stories, told with styles and cinematic elements that are repeated with major and minor variations throughout the history of the genre. Through genres, films are influenced by history and, very rarely, influence history in return. Genres, as we will see in Chapters 8 and 9, are complex contractual events drawn between the filmmaker and the film viewer. We go to a horror film or a thriller, a romantic comedy or a science fiction movie, a Western or a melodrama with certain expectations that the film must meet. If it doesn't meet them, we will be disappointed and probably will not like the film. If a film masquerading as a genre turns out to attack or make fun of it, one of two things can happen. If other historical and cultural events are in sync with the attack or the parody, it is possible that the genre will wither and all but disappear. This happened to the Western in the late sixties and early seventies. Three moving and disturbing films that questioned the historical and formal elements of the Western—Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)—joined with the negative response to the Vietnam War and some profound questions about American imperial interests and the myths of "manifest destiny" to bring the Western down from its enormous popularity to a point from which it has barely recovered. These days, the Western is more likely to be a commentary on the genre rather than a repetition of it, or absorbed into other genres, like science fiction. Among the more interesting recent Westerns are those that use the genre as something like a cover for other investigations of character, history, and gender, such as Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) and Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993).

The more likely response to a film that mocks its generic construction too forcefully is that no one will go to see it. This happened with Robert Altman's late seventies Western with Paul Newman, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976); the Bruce Willis action film *Hudson Hawk* (1991); and the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *The Last Action Hero* (1993). Of course, one ironic and self-mocking Bruce Willis action film, *Die Hard* (1988), was very popular (we will analyze it closely in Chapter 7). When Willis and then Schwarzenegger took the mockery too far, however, and the action hero stereotype was made too obviously like a cartoon and too self-conscious, viewers rebelled. Stereotypes, the expected character, the unsurprising story, the hoped-for conclusion, the invisible style are all part of our contract with the movies, what their makers believe we demand of them. Such demands are certainly not restricted to movies alone: in television, pop music, news reporting, and politics, we tend to be most comfortable with what we've most often heard. We are wary of the new. Our popular culture is, more often than not, an act of affirming already held ideas, of defining, delimiting, and limiting what we accept as the real. The "new" is either quickly absorbed by convention or ignored.

The worst thing we can say about a film is that it is "unrealistic." "The characters weren't real." "The story didn't strike me as being real." Reality is always our last resort. If someone thinks we're not being serious, we're told to "face reality." If our ideas are half-baked, overly narcissistic, or even just silly, we're told to "get real!" If we are college teachers or teenagers, we're told we'll find things different "in the real world." Reality can be a threat, the thing we're not facing, not in, or not dealing with. But it can also be a verbal gesture of approbation. "That was so real." And, of course, it's the greatest compliment we can give a film, even though—and this is the great paradox—in our media-wise world, we know deep down that what we are seeing has very, very little to do with reality.

The fact is that "reality," like all other aspects of culture, is not something out there, existing apart from us. Reality is an agreement we make with ourselves and between ourselves and the rest of the culture about what we will call real. Maybe, as some people have argued, the only dependable definition of reality is that it is something a lot of people agree upon. This is not to say that there aren't actual, "real" things in the world. Natural processes, states of matter (heat, cold, the relative solidity of physical things), the fact that, in temperate climates, plant life dies off in the fall and returns in the spring—these constitute a "reality," perhaps because they happen without our presence. But no matter what natural events and processes occur, they have little meaning without human interpretation, without our speaking about them within the contexts of our lives and our culture, without our giving them names and meanings.

We find films realistic because we have learned certain kinds of responses, gestures, attitudes from them; and when we see these gestures or feel these responses again in a film or a television show, we assume they are real, because we've felt them and seen them before. We've probably even imitated them. (Where do we learn the way to kiss someone? From the movies.) This is reality as an infinite loop, a recursion through various emotional and visual constructs, culturally approved, indeed culturally mandated, that we assume to be "real" because we see them over and over again, absorb them, and, for better or worse, live them. In an important sense, like films themselves, "reality" is made up of repetition and assent.

Here is where the reality factor is joined with genre, history, culture, convention, and the invisible structure of film that we talked about earlier. What we call "realistic" in film is, more often than not, only the familiar. The familiar is what we experience often, comfortably, clearly, as if it were always there. When we approve of the reality of a film, we are really affirming our comfort with it, our desire to accept what we see. Desire—simply wanting to see the familiar or a twist on the familiar and receive pleasure from the seeing—is an important idea, because filmgoers aren't fools. No one literally believes what they see on the screen; we all desire and in a certain sense covet, and in a greater sense *want*, what we see, despite what we know about its probability or, more likely, its improbability. We respond with a desire that things could be like this or, simply, that we might want to inhabit a world that looks and behaves like the one on the screen. We want to share, or just *have* the same feelings that the characters up there are having. We want to accept them uncritically, respond emotionally. Our culture keeps telling us over and over that emotions don't lie. If we feel it, it must be so.

In the discussion that follows, we will steer our way through the thickets of desire and try to find why we want so much from movies and how the movies deliver what they and we think we want. By examining form and the ways in which our responses are culturally determined, we will attempt to look at our responses in order to understand what we are really getting when we ask for realism, why we should be asking for it at all, and why our expectations keep changing. Remember that many of the most popular films—science fiction and action films, for example—are fantasies; and more and more of them, from the *Batman* films (Tim Burton, 1989, 1992, Joel Schumacher, 1995, 1997) through *Spider-Man* (Sam Rami, 2002, 2004) to *The Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) and *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000, 2003), are based on comic books! Horror films and horror film parodies are fantasies that now openly depend on the viewers' understanding of horror film conventions and enjoying the ability to laugh at them. The film is proof that "reality" is not a given, but chosen.

Culture is another important idea in this book. Chapter 7 will cover in detail what the study of culture, and popular culture in particular, is and how our very ideas about culture keep changing, almost as much as the culture that's being studied. But since we will use the term before then, let me begin to introduce it here.

Culture is the sum total of the intricate ways we relate to ourselves, our peers, our community, our country, world, and universe. It is made up of the

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