

FILM ART

An Introduction/Second Edition



David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson

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David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson

University of Wisconsin

Alfred A. Knopf  New York

*To our parents
Marjorie and Jay Bordwell
and Jean and Roger Thompson*

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Preface to the Second Edition

For the second edition of *Film Art*, we have left the original organization of the book intact, but we have expanded discussion of several areas. Types of nonnarrative form are now discussed in a separate chapter, while discussions of genre, narration, and the spectator's role have been expanded considerably. A fuller and more systematic discussion of meaning and interpretation in film analysis is now provided. Overall, our attention to documentary films and experimental cinema has increased. We have added material on wide-screen filmmaking and more references to techniques of color. The history section has been expanded by the addition of material on two areas of current interest to film students: Japanese cinema of the 1930s and the New German Cinema. Another helpful change is the addition of an appendix listing alternative films that may be shown in conjunction with each chapter. Finally, a Glossary defines film terminology for the reader, while a thoroughly updated Notes and Queries section facilitates use of more specialized film literature.

We are grateful to our editors at Knopf for their help: Roth Wilkofsky, Kathleen Domenig, Jennifer Sutherland, and Ted Mason. Five outside reviewers contributed many sound suggestions for the second edition. They are Mike Budd of Florida Atlantic University, Claudia Gorbman of Indiana University, Robert Silberman of the University of Illinois, John C. Stubbs, also from the University of Illinois, and Charles Wolfe, of the University of California at Santa Barbara. Edward Branigan and Donald Larsson also deserve our gratitude for their detailed comments on the first edition. Special thanks, too, must go to the many instructors who have used the first edition of *Film Art* and informally offered their reactions and suggestions for improvement since it was first published five years ago.

Madison, Wisconsin
July 1985

D.B.
K.T.

Preface to the First Edition

This book seeks to introduce the reader to the aesthetics of film. It assumes that the reader has no knowledge of cinema beyond the experience of moviegoing. Although some aspects of the book may prove useful for people with considerable knowledge of film, our aim is to survey the fundamental aspects of cinema as an art form.

By stressing film as art, we necessarily ignore certain aspects of the medium. Industrial documentaries, instructional filmmaking, propaganda, the social history of cinema or its impact as a mass medium—all these are important dimensions of film, and each would require a separate book for adequate treatment. Instead, this book seeks to isolate those basic features of film which can constitute it as an art. The book therefore directs itself at the person interested in how the film medium may give us experiences akin to those offered by painting, sculpture, music, literature, theater, architecture, or dance.

As we wrote this book, we envisioned readers of three particular sorts. First, there is the interested general reader, who wants to know a little more about the movies. Second, there is the student in a course in film appreciation, introduction to film, film criticism, or film aesthetics; for this reader, the book can function as a textbook. Third, there is the more advanced student of film, who may find here a convenient outline of principal issues and concepts and a set of suggestions for more specialized work.

Organizationally, *Film Art: An Introduction* offers a distinct approach to studying its topic. It might be possible to survey, willy-nilly, all contemporary approaches to film aesthetics, but we judged this to be too eclectic. Instead, we have sought an approach that would lead the reader in logical steps through various aspects of film aesthetics. Crucial to this approach is an emphasis on *the whole film*. Audiences experience entire films, not snippets. If the particular film is the irreducible center of our inquiry, we need an approach that will help us understand it. The approach we have chosen emphasizes the film as an artifact—made in particular ways, having a certain wholeness and unity, existing in history. We can outline the approach in a series of questions.

How is a film created? To understand film as art demands that we first understand how human labor creates the artifact. This leads to a study of *film production* (Part One).

How does an entire film function? This book assumes that like all artworks, a film may be understood as a *formal* construct. This leads to a consideration of what form is and how it affects us, of basic principles of film form, and of narrative and nonnarrative forms in cinema (Part Two). Matters of film form also demand that we consider the *techniques* which are characteristic of the film medium, for such techniques function within the form of the total film. Thus we will analyze the artistic possibilities of the four primary film techniques: mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound (Part Three).

How may we analyze a film critically? Armed with both a conception of film form and a knowledge of film technique, we can go on to analyze *specific films* as artworks. We analyze several such films as examples (Part Four).

How does film art change through history? Although a thorough history of cinema would require many volumes, here we can suggest how the formal aspects of film do not exist outside determinable historical contexts. We survey the most noteworthy *periods and movements in film history* to show how understanding form helps us locate films within history (Part Five).

It is worth noting that this approach to the entire film came from several years of teaching introductory film courses. As teachers, we wanted students to see and hear more in the films we studied, but it was evident that simply providing the "lecturer's view" would not teach students how to analyze films on their own. Ideally, we decided, students should master a repertory of *principles* which would help them examine films more closely. We became convinced that the best way to understand cinema is to use general principles of film form to help analyze specific films. Our success with this approach led us to decide that this book should be skills-centered. By learning basic concepts of film form and film technique, the reader can sharpen his or her perception of any specific film.

The stress on skills has another consequence. You will note that the book's examples and evidence are quite varied; we refer to a great many films. We expect that very few readers will have seen all of the films we mention, and certainly no teacher of a film course could possibly show every title. But we have varied our examples in the interests of clarity, vividness, and accessibility. If some titles seem unfamiliar, it is partly because film study over the past five years has opened up new areas of inquiry which any textbook must address. (Those areas, incidentally, are within the reach of film courses. Ozu's *The Only Son* is just as accessible as Bergman's *The Silence* and is in fact cheaper to rent; Antonioni's *Story of a Love Affair* is no harder to obtain than is his *Red Desert*. Almost every film we cite is available for rental or purchase or both.) Moreover, because the book stresses the acquisition of conceptual skills, the reader need not see all of the films we mention in order to grasp the general principles. Many other films can be used to make the same points. For instance, the possibilities of camera movement can be as easily illustrated with *La Ronde* as with *La Grande Illusion*; to exemplify narrative ambiguity, *Shadow of a Doubt* will serve as well as *Day of Wrath*. Indeed, although the book can serve as a syllabus for a course in cinema, it is also possible for a teacher to use different films to illustrate the book's ideas. (It would then be a useful exercise for the class to *contrast* the text example with the film shown, so as to specify even more clearly particular aspects of the film.) The book rests not on titles, but on concepts.

Film Art: An Introduction has certain unusual features. A book on film must be heavily illustrated, and most are. Virtually all film books, however, utilize so-called production stills—photographs taken during filming, but

usually not from the position of the motion picture camera. The result is a picture that does not correspond to any image in the finished film. We have used very few production stills. Instead, the illustrations in this book are virtually all frame enlargements—magnified photographs from the actual film. Most of these illustrations come from 35-mm prints of the films, and with the exception of the shots from *Daisies*, all of the color illustrations are taken from 35-mm prints or negatives. Although obtaining access to 35-mm material has been tedious and costly, this book's emphasis on the film itself demands the finest photographic quality possible.

Another unusual feature is the Notes and Queries section at the end of almost every chapter. In these sections we attempt to raise issues, provoke discussion, and suggest further reading and research. As chapter supplements, the Notes and Queries sections constitute a resource for the advanced undergraduate, the graduate student, and the interested general reader.

In all, we hope that this book will help readers to watch a greater variety of films with keener attention and to ask precise questions about the art of cinema.

Thanks are in order to the many people who helped us prepare this book. The text was enormously improved by the suggestions and criticism of Michael Budd, Peter Bukalski, Don Fredericksen, J. Douglas Gomery, and Claudia Gorbman.

We must also thank the many people and institutions who helped us get access to images and get permission to reproduce them: David Allen; Tino Balio, Susan Dalton, and Maxine Fleckner of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research; Eileen Bowser, Mary Corliss, and John Gartenberg of the Museum of Modern Art; Martin Bresnick and Dorothy Desmond of MacMillan Audio-Brandon Films; Kent Carroll of Grove Press Films; Arnold Jacobs of Ajay Films; Janus Films; Jose Lopez of New Yorker Films; Roger L. Mayer of MGM, Inc.; Kazuto Ohira of Toho Films; Badia Rahman and Mary Agnes Beach of the University of Wisconsin—Madison Communication Arts Department; Leon Salzman of Bonded Storage; and Edith van Slyck of Pennebaker Films.

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Madison, Wisconsin
January 1979

D.B.
K.T.

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Part I

**FILM
PRODUCTION**

one

The Work of Film Production

On sober reflection, we readily admit that films are like buildings, books, and symphonies—artifacts made by humans for human purposes. Yet, as part of an audience watching an enthralling movie, we may find it difficult to remember that what we are seeing is not a natural object, like a flower or an asteroid. Cinema is so captivating that we tend to forget that movies are *made*. An understanding of the art of cinema depends initially on a recognition that a film is produced by both machines and human labor.

TECHNICAL FACTORS IN FILM PRODUCTION

Watching a film differs from viewing a painting, a stage performance, or even a slide show. A film presents us with *images* in *illusory* motion. What creates this specific effect, this sense of “moving pictures”? For cinema to exist, a series of images must be displayed to a viewer by means of a mechanism which presents each image for a very short period and which inserts between successive images an interval of blackness. If a series of slightly different images of the same object is displayed under these conditions, physiological and psychological processes in the viewer will create the illusion of seeing a moving image. Such conditions for “moving pictures” exist only rarely in nature. Like most human artifacts, a film depends on particular technological factors.

First, the images must be capable of being displayed in a *series*. They might be on a row of cards, as in the Mutoscope (Fig. 1.1), and flipped past the viewer to create the illusion of movement. More commonly, the images are inscribed on a strip of some flexible material. Optical toys such as the Zoetrope put their images on strips of paper (Fig. 1.2), but cinema as we know it uses a strip of celluloid as support for the series of images, which are called *frames*. If the images are to be put on a strip of film, cinema usually requires three machines to create and display those images. All three share a basic principle: a mechanism controls how light is admitted to the film, advances the strip of film a frame at a time, and exposes it to light for the proper interval. The three machines are:

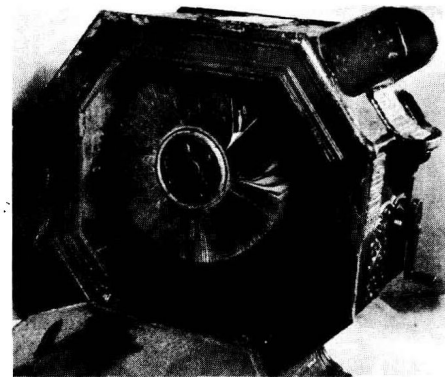


Fig. 1.1

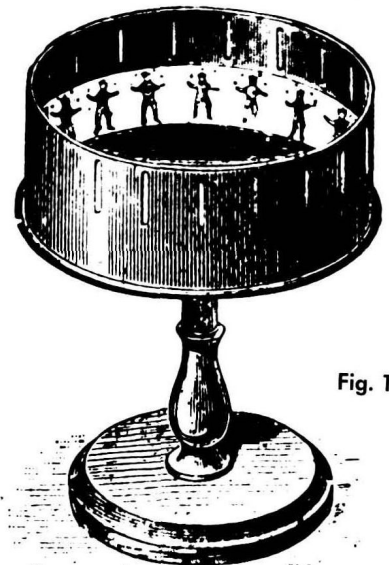


Fig. 1.2

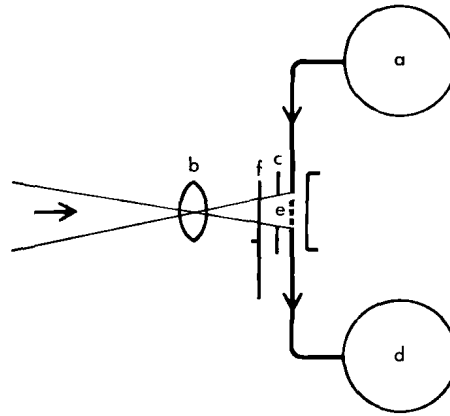


Fig. 1.3 The camera.

1. *The camera* (Fig. 1.3). In a light-tight chamber, a drive mechanism feeds the motion picture film from a reel (a) past a lens (b) and aperture (c) to a take-up reel (d). The lens focuses light reflected from a scene onto each frame of film (e). The mechanism moves the film intermittently, while a shutter (f) admits light through the lens only when each frame is unmoving and ready for exposure. The standard shooting rate for sound film is 24 frames per second.

2. *The printer* (Figs. 1.4, 1.5). Printers exist in various designs, but all consist of light-tight chambers which drive a negative or positive roll of film from a reel (a) past an aperture (b) to a take-up reel (c). Simultaneously, a roll of unexposed film (a', c') moves through the aperture (b or b'), either intermittently or continuously. By means of a lens (d), light beamed through the aperture prints the image (e) on the unexposed film (e'). The two rolls of film may come into contact and pass through the aperture simultaneously (Fig. 1.4 diagrams a contact printer). Or, light coming through the original may be beamed to the unexposed roll through lenses, mirrors, or prisms (as in (f), in the optical printer, Fig. 1.5).

3. *The projector* (Fig. 1.6). A drive mechanism feeds the exposed and developed film from a reel (a) past a lens (b) and aperture (c) to a take-up reel (d). Light is beamed through the images (e) and magnified by the lens

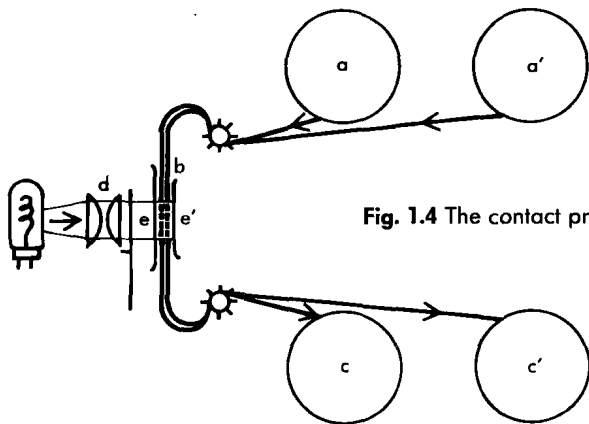


Fig. 1.4 The contact printer.

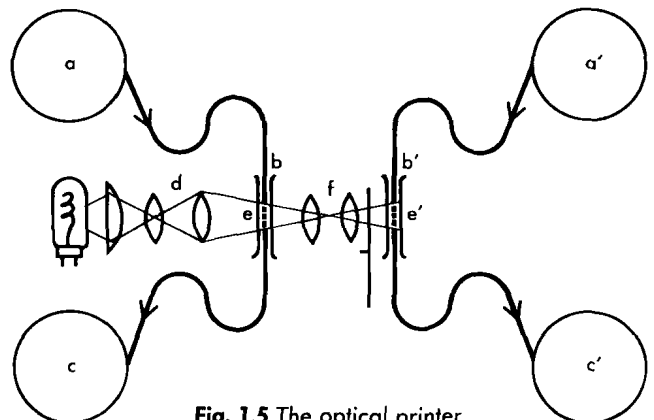
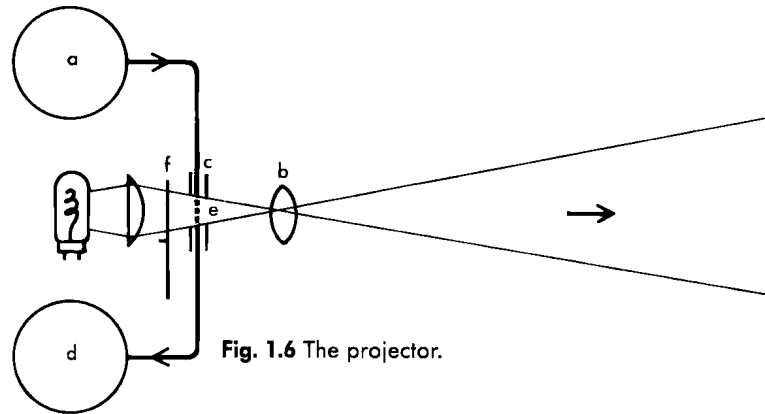


Fig. 1.5 The optical printer.



for projection on a screen. Again, a mechanism moves the film intermittently past the aperture, while a shutter (f) admits light only when each frame is pausing. For the movement effect to occur, the film must display at least 12 frames per second; the shutter must also block and reveal each frame at least twice in order to reduce the flicker effect on the screen. The standard projection rate for sound film is 24 frames per second, with two shutter flashes per frame.

Camera, printer, and projector are all variants of the same basic machine. The camera and the projector both control the intermittent movement of the film past a light source. The crucial difference is that the camera gathers light from outside the machine and focuses it onto the film, whereas in the projector the reverse happens: the machine produces the light which shines through the film onto a surface outside. The printer combines both other devices: like a projector, it controls the passage of light through exposed film (the original negative or positive); like a camera, it gathers light to form an image (on the unexposed roll of film).

We think of cinema as a photographic medium, since its history is thickly intertwined with the history of still photography. Like photographic film, motion picture film consists of a transparent *base* (formerly of nitrate, now of acetate) which supports a light-sensitive *emulsion* (a gelatin layer containing grains of silver halide). Light reflected from the environment strikes the silver compounds and registers a latent image. Chemical processing makes the latent image visible as a configuration of black grains on a white ground. From this image (usually a negative one) one or more copies (usually positive) may be printed photographically. Although the filmmaker can create *nonphotographic* images on the film strip by drawing, cutting or punching holes, etching, or painting, most filmmakers have relied on the camera, the printer, and other photographic technology.

In order to run satisfactorily through camera, printer, and projector, the strip of film must have certain standardized features. The film strip is perforated along one or both edges, so that small teeth (sprockets) in the machines can seize the perforations (sprocket holes) and pull the film at a uniform rate and smoothness. Space is also reserved along one or both edges for an optical or magnetic sound track. The physical dimensions of the film have necessarily been standardized, with width being the crucial variable. Motion picture film widths, called *gauges*, are measured in millimeters. Although many gauges have been experimented with, the internationally standardized ones are 8 mm/super 8 mm, 16 mm, 35 mm, and 70 mm.

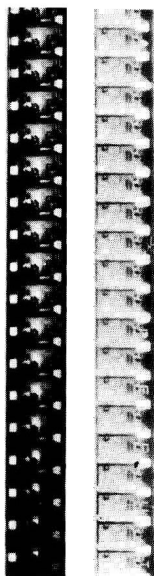


Fig. 1.7
8 mm/super 8 mm



Fig. 1.8
16 mm

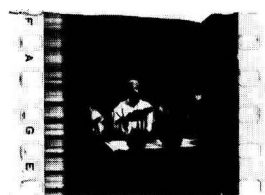


Fig. 1.9 35 mm



Fig. 1.10 70 mm

A popular gauge for both amateurs and experimentalists is 8 mm/super 8 mm (Fig. 1.7). Both 8 mm and super 8 mm are the same width, but perforations and image area differ. Figure 1.8 shows 16-mm film, which is used for both amateur and professional film work. Most film study courses show 16-mm prints of films. The standard professional gauge is 35 mm. Most commercial theaters show 35-mm prints. Figure 1.9 shows frames from *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Another professional gauge is 70-mm film, which is often used for “spectacular” projects (e.g., Figure 1.10, a frame from *Lawrence of Arabia*).

Image quality varies directly with the width of the film; normally, the higher the gauge, the better defined and more detailed the image. The print we see of a film, however, may not be in the gauge of the original. Most films shot in 70 mm are also distributed in 35-mm prints, whereas most films studied in cinema courses were originally shot in 35 mm but are shown in 16 mm. A good general rule for the viewer is to try to see a film projected in the gauge in which it was shot. Thus a 35-mm print of Keaton's *The General* will almost certainly be photographically superior to a 16-mm or 8-mm print, whereas a film shot on super 8 mm will look fuzzy and grainy if printed and projected in 35 mm.

Running along the edges of the film strip there may also be a recording of the sound that accompanies the images. The sound track may be either *magnetic* or *optical*. In the magnetic type, a strip of magnetic recording tape runs along the film's edge; in projection, the film's track is “read” by a sound head similar to that on a tape recorder. The 70-mm frame in Figure 1.10 has a magnetic sound track (running along both edges). An optical sound track encodes sonic information in the form of patches of light and dark in a parallel line running alongside the frames. During production, electrical impulses from a microphone are translated into pulsations of light which are photographically inscribed on the moving film strip. (Modern optical sound recording usually records on magnetic tape initially, then transfers the taped sound onto film.) When the film is projected, the optical track produces varying intensities of light which are translated back into electrical impulses and then into sound waves. An optical sound track may encode the sound