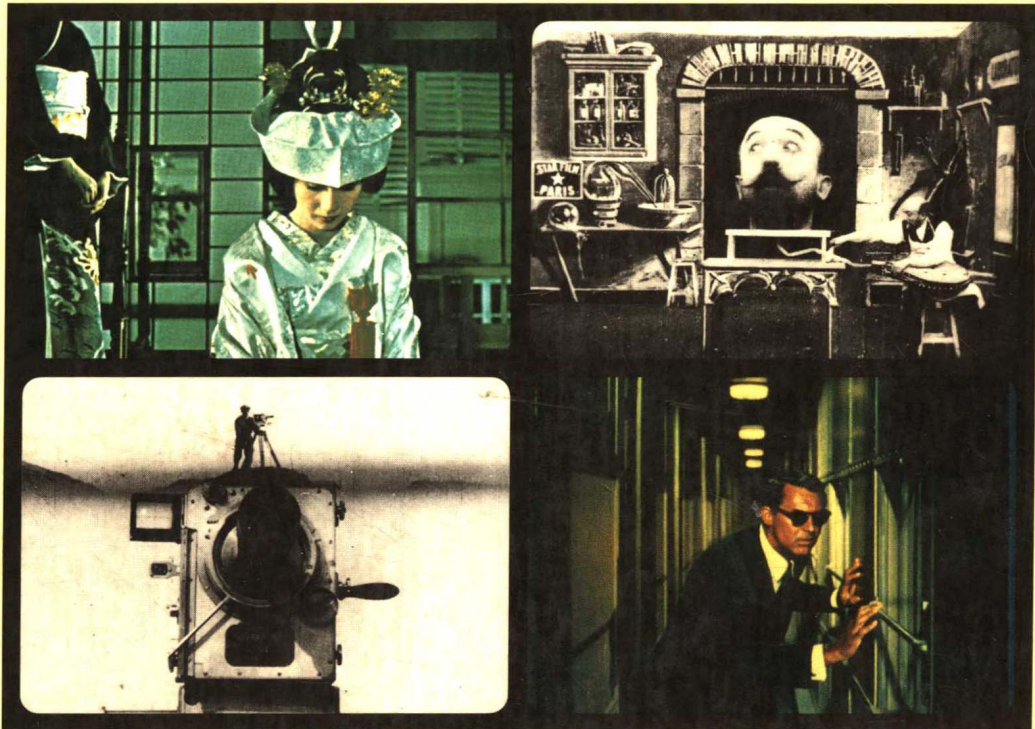


FILM ART

AN INTRODUCTION

THIRD EDITION



DAVID BORDWELL
KRISTIN THOMPSON

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FILM ART: AN INTRODUCTION

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The authors have previously collaborated, with Janet Staiger, on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Columbia University Press, 1985).

PREFACE

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, 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 is the interested general reader, who wants to know a little more about the movies. Second 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 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 I).

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 II). 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 III).

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 IV).

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 V).

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 skills—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.

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.

This edition of *Film Art: An Introduction* seeks to enrich and refine the ideas set forth in the first edition a decade ago. Once again we have tried to make the book more comprehensive, flexible, and up to date.

By and large the concepts pertaining to film form and film technique remain constant from the second edition. We have updated the *Notes and Queries* sections to reflect recent developments in more advanced cinema studies, and Chapter 11's treatment of film history has been revised in the light of contemporary scholarship. In the interests of greater clarity of exposition, we have reordered the chapters within Part II. Now it begins with our discussion of narrative form, the variety most familiar to students. The survey of nonnarrative forms follows.

In many respects the book's range of coverage has expanded. We have included more material on animation, documentary, and experimental cinema. We have added critical analyses of *Man with a Movie Camera* and a trio of animated films. In acknowledgment of the persistent importance of Hitchcock's American films to introductory film studies courses, we have replaced our analysis of the British version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* with a study of *North by Northwest*. We have drawn examples from recent films such as Wenders's *Wings of Desire* and Sayles's *Matewan*, and we have devoted a lengthy analysis to Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*. In addition, Chapters 1 and 6 take more notice of video as a significant distribution/exhibition outlet. Finally, the opening chapter has been thoroughly revised to provide a more detailed account of both large-scale studio production and of independent filmmaking. In all, the book now includes a great many fresh examples and several dozen new illustrations.

Because of the increasing importance of developing college students' writing skills, Part IV now includes a guide to writing critical essays on films. This is not meant as a replacement for basic work in expository and argumentative writing, but it does suggest how general principles of composition apply to the specific tasks of planning, organizing, and writing critical analyses.

Over the years, many people have helped us improve *Film Art: An Introduction*. For previous editions, our thanks go to David Allen, Tino Balio, Eileen Bowser, Martin Bresnick, Michael Budd, Peter Bukalski, Richard B. Byrne, Kent Carroll,

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David Bordwell
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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.

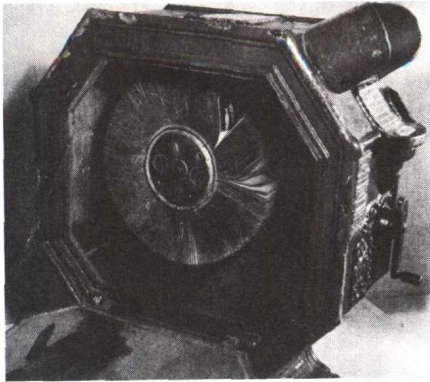


Fig. 1.1

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:

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, with a brief pause while each frame is held in the aperture. 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 (fps).

2. *The printer* (Figs. 1.4, 1.5). Printers exist in various designs, but all consist of light-tight chambers that 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 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.

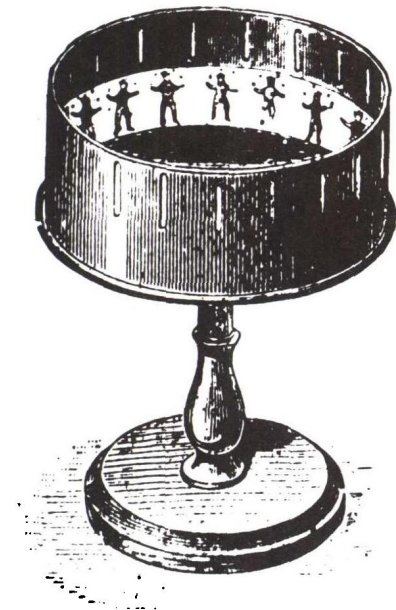


Fig. 1.2

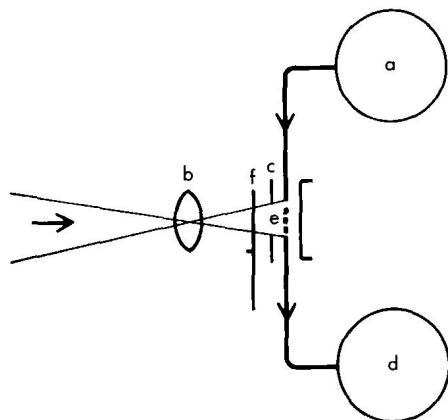


Fig. 1.3 The camera.

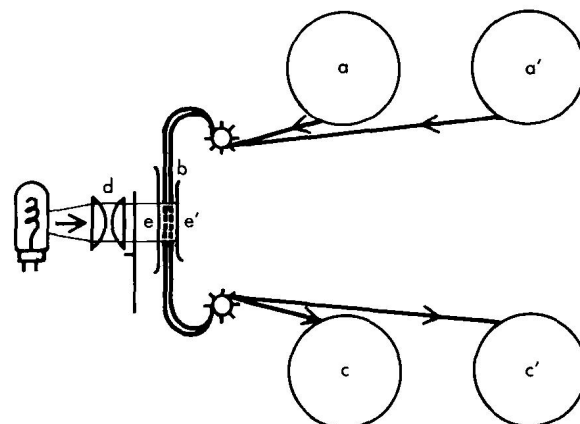


Fig. 1.4 The contact printer.

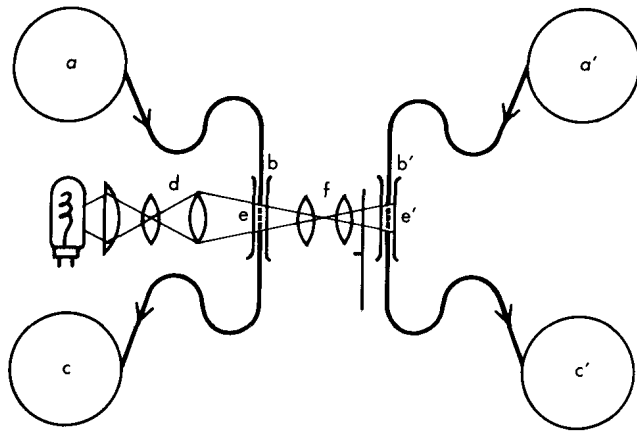


Fig. 1.5 The optical printer.

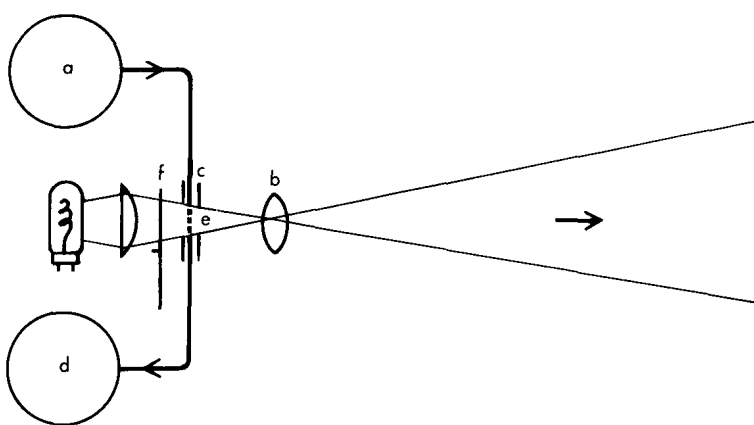


Fig. 1.6 The projector.

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).

These three machines induce the film viewer to see static pictures as moving. But what perceptual processes cause this illusion? In the nineteenth century, some thinkers proposed the concept of "persistence of vision," the phenomenon by which an image lingered on the retina for a fraction of a second after the source had vanished. But this does not in itself explain why we would see movement rather than a succession of still images. Twentieth-century research has shown the problem to be more complex. We still do not know for certain how illusory movement is generated by cinema, but at least two features of the human visual system would seem to be involved.