LOOKING AT MOVIES

AN INTRODUCTION TO FILM

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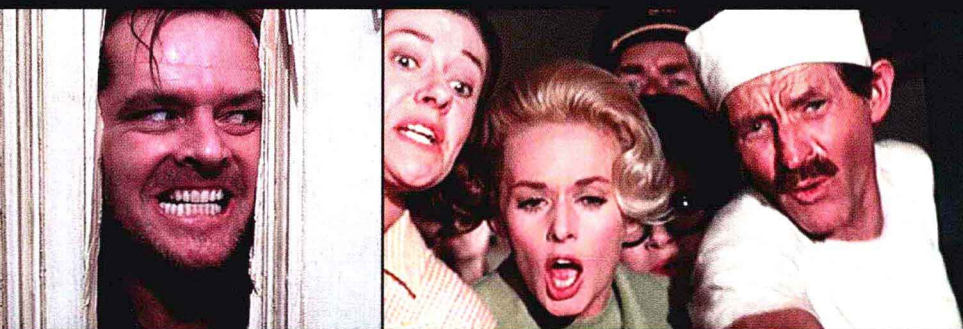
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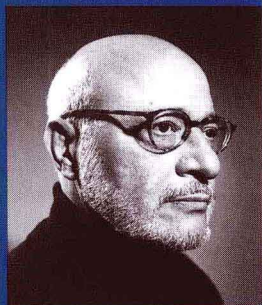
RICHARD BARSAM (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is Professor Emeritus of Film Studies at Hunter College. He is the author of *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (rev., exp. ed. 1992), *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker* (1988), *In the Dark: A Primer for the Movies* (1977), and *Filmguide to "Triumph of the Will"* (1975); editor of *Nonfiction Film Theory and Criticism* (1976); and contributing author to Paul Monaco's *The Sixties: 1960–1969* (Vol. 8, *History of the American Cinema*, 2001) and *Filming Robert Flaherty's "Louisiana Story": The Helen Van Dongen Diary* (ed. Eva Orbanz, 1998). His articles and book reviews have appeared in *Cinema Journal, Quarterly Review of Film Studies, Film Comment, Studies in Visual Communication*, and *Harper's*. He has been a member of the Executive Council of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the Editorial Board of *Cinema Journal*, and the Board of Advisers of the *History of American Cinema* series, and he cofounded the journal *Persistence of Vision*.

To Students

In 1936, the art historian Erwin Panofsky had an insight into the movies as a form of popular art, an observation that is more true today than it was when he wrote it:

> If all the serious lyrical poets, composers, painters and sculptors were forced by law to stop their activities, a rather small fraction of the general public would become aware of the fact and a still smaller faction would seriously regret it. If the same thing were to happen with the movies the social consequences would be catastrophic.[1]

Decades later, we would hardly know what to do without movies. They are a major presence in our lives, and, like personal computers, perhaps the most influential product of our technological age. In fact, some commentators feel that movies are too popular, too influential, too much a part of our lives. Since their invention a little more than one hundred years ago, movies have become one of the world's largest industries and the most powerful art form of our time.

A source of entertainment that makes us see beyond the borders of our previous experience, movies have always possessed powers to amaze, frighten, and enlighten us. They challenge our senses, emotions, and intellects, pushing us to say, often passionately, that we *love* (or *hate*) them. Because they arouse our most public and private feelings—and can overwhelm us by the magic of their sights and sounds—it's easy to be excited by movies. The challenge is to join that enthusiasm with understanding, to say *why* we feel so strongly about particular movies. That is one reason why this book encourages you to go beyond movies' stories, to understand how those stories are told. Movies are not reality, after all, only illusions of reality, and (as with most works of art) their form and content work as an interrelated system, one that asks us to accept it as a given rather than as the product of a process. But as you read this book devoted to *looking* at movies—that is, not just passively watching them, but actively considering the relation of their form and their content—remember that there is no one way to look at any film, no one critical perspective that is inherently better than another, no one meaning that you can insist on after a single screening. Indeed, movies are so diverse in their nature that no one approach could ever do them justice.

This is not a book on film history, but it includes relevant historical information and covers a broad range of movies; not a book on theory, but it introduces you to some of the most essential approaches to interpreting movies; not a book about filmmaking, but one that clearly

[1] Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings,* ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 280.

and thoroughly explains production processes, equipment, and techniques; not a book of criticism, but one that shows you how to think and write about the films you study in your classes.

Everything we see on the movie screen—everything that engages our senses, emotions, and minds—results from hundreds of decisions affecting the interrelation of formal cinematic elements: narrative, composition, design, cinematography, acting, editing, and sound. Organized around chapters devoted to those formal elements, this book encourages you to look at movies with an understanding and appreciation of how filmmakers make the decisions that help them tell a story and create the foundation for its meaning. After all, in the real life of the movies, on the screen, it is not historians, theorists, or critics—important and valuable as their work is—but filmmakers who continually shape and revise our understanding and appreciation of film art.

The second century of movie history has just begun, and, as I write, the entire process of making, exhibiting, and archiving movies is fast becoming a digital enterprise. Older films are being restored in digital versions, new directors are finding that making movies with digital technology is faster, more efficient, and less expensive, and those of us who *look* at movies benefit from DVDs at home and from the digital projection and sound systems being installed in theaters. As the technology for making movies continues to evolve, however, the principles of film art covered in this book remain essentially the same. The things you learn about these principles and the analytical skills you hone as you read this book will help you look at motion pictures intelligently and perceptively throughout your life, no matter which medium delivers those pictures to you.

Preface

Students who read *Looking at Movies* carefully and who take advantage of the support materials surrounding the text will finish your course with a solid grounding in the major principles of film form, a taste of film history that may spark their interest in other film courses in your curriculum, and a more perceptive and analytical eye. To give you a sense of how *Looking at Movies* accomplishes these goals, a short description of its main features follows.

PEDAGOGY THAT DEVELOPS STUDENTS' ANALYTICAL SKILLS

A good introductory film book needs to help students make the transition from natural enjoyment of movies to a critical understanding—expressed in analytical writing—of movies' form, content, and meaning(s). *Looking at Movies* does so in the following ways:

- Hundreds of illustrative examples and analytical readings of film form throughout the book provide students with concrete models for their own analytical work.
- Each chapter, excluding chapter 1, ends with an "Analyzing" section that provides students with a sample analysis of a single

movie's (or a few movies') expression of the formal principle(s) described in the chapter.

- "Questions for Analysis" following every chapter provide students with a checklist of questions to ask about the movies they watch in class or on their own.
- Web-based "case studies" (one per chapter) provide more extensive analyses of seven of the most commonly screened films.
- A separate chapter on writing about film—with a complete sample student paper—helps students put everything they've learned about film form together to produce solid, analytical writing.

AN EXCEPTIONAL AND FLEXIBLE ILLUSTRATION PROGRAM

Looking at Movies was written with one goal in mind: to prepare students for a lifetime of intelligent and perceptive viewing of motion pictures. Much of that preparation will happen through words—and so *Looking at Movies* is clear, direct, and enjoyable to read. But recognizing the central role played by visuals in the film studies classroom, *Looking at Movies* comes

with an illustration program that is both visually appealing and pedagogically focused.

The main components of the book's visual support are:

IN-TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS

The text is accompanied by over 570 illustrations, in color and black and white. Nearly all the still pictures were "captured" from digital or analog sources, thus ensuring that the images directly reflect the textual discussions and the films from which they're taken. Unlike publicity stills, which are attractive as photographs but almost useless as teaching aids, the captured stills throughout this book provide visual information that will help students learn as they read, and—because they are reproduced in the aspect ratio of the original source—will serve as accurate reference points for student analysis.

Throughout the book, the illustrations function in three ways. Depending on the particular pedagogical points being raised, still images and their accompanying captions either correspond to the text, present material related to the text, or amplify the text by introducing new information.

FRAME SEQUENCE ANIMATIONS ON THE WEBSITE

Among many other features, *Looking at Movies* **online** *(www.wwnorton.com/web/movies)* offers students a menu of "frame sequence animations"—still images from particular shots or scenes, presented as moving sequences. Although these animations are no substitute for viewing the movies or clips described, they usefully complement the textual descriptions and give students a shorthand sense of movement within the frame.

FILM CLIPS ON THE CD-ROM

The enclosed CD-ROM offers students fifteen full-motion film clips, with sound where appropriate, of selected shots or scenes described in the text. Unencumbered by distracting design or voiceover (but accompanied by a scrollable reproduction of the relevant textual discussion), the clips are presented with the necessary viewing software, embedded in the disk for easy use.

These images, animations, and film clips were chosen from the hundreds of film examples mentioned in the book because they come from some of the most popular movies in the introductory film classroom. Prior to writing this book, the author and W. W. Norton collaborated on an extensive survey of instructors to determine which films were most frequently screened, either whole or in part. The resulting list guided us throughout our work on the book, and the illustration program reflects that guidance. We hope you find examples here that satisfy your teaching needs and that spark your students' interest in viewing all these films outside the classroom.

TEXT AND MEDIA THAT WORK TOGETHER

Looking at Movies is accompanied by two media ancillaries—a CD-ROM and a companion website. The CD offers a menu of film clips discussed in the text, and the website offers abundant material for student review, interaction, exploration, and research.

Seventy-five of the captions in the text refer students to either the website or the accompanying CD-ROM. These captions are clearly signaled by a solid black background and one of three icons:

refers students to the website for more information on the topic discussed in the caption. Students will also find a list of web modules inside the book's back cover.

sends students to the website to view an animated sequence of frames from a particular shot or scene. Students will also find a list of the sequences inside the book's front cover.

refers students to the CD-ROM to view a short film clip of a shot or scene. Students will also find a list of the clips inside the book's front cover.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER REVIEW MATERIALS ON THE WEBSITE REINFORCE STUDENTS' LEARNING:

- "Learning objectives" online summarize each chapter's key themes.
- Over 250 self-quiz questions test students' retention of core concepts.
- An extensive timeline for each chapter highlights significant events in film history that intersect with the subject of the chapter.

A RESPONSIBLE INTEGRATION OF FILM HISTORY, FILM THEORY, AND FILM PRODUCTION

Looking at Movies is primarily focused on teaching the fundamentals of film form and on building students' analytical skills, but it also offers useful information about film history, film theory, and film production in a natural, unobtrusive way—at a level of sophistication and detail appropriate for an introductory-level course.

- Each chapter offers a synopsis of the historical development of the formal principle covered in the chapter.
- Most chapters offer basic information about the technology and personnel involved in the production of each of the major formal components of movies.
- Fundamental film theories are described in brief in chapter 8, "Writing about Movies."
- An appendix sketches a brief history of the Hollywood studio system and the independent production system that grew out of it.

ANCILLARIES FOR INSTRUCTORS

TEST-ITEM FILE

The test-item file for *Looking at Movies* offers nearly five hundred multiple-choice questions, delivered with Chariot™ software to ensure that tests are easy to generate.

NORTON RESOURCE LIBRARY

Class-management resources that are compatible with Web-CT and Blackboard software are available upon request. Ask your local representative for details.

Acknowledgments

Writing this book was, at times, very much like making a movie—a collaborative enterprise—and I have had the good fortune of working with excellent partners.

Robert Baird has been exceptionally helpful with his many suggestions and contributions, especially to the website and chapter 8, "Writing about Movies." Ed Glaser prepared the web quizzes and the timelines. For their generous responses to queries, special thanks are due to J. Dudley Andrew, Luis Antonio Bocchi, Royal S. Brown, Jeffrey Burke, Robert L. Carringer, Norman Clarius, Gregory Crosbie, Vincent LoBrutto, Russell Merritt, Rolando Perez, Richard Raskin, Charles Silver, and Steve Lloyd Wilson. At my request, Joel Zuker, at Hunter College, read and made many helpful suggestions on the entire manuscript, as did Renato Tonelli, also at Hunter, on the cinematography chapter. In assessing the first rough draft, Brenda Spatt contributed more than she will ever know.

My editor at W. W. Norton & Company, Pete Simon, enthusiastically supported the idea of this book from the outset and pledged his formidable organizational and editorial talents to seeing it through to completion. Kurt Wildermuth, the developmental editor, contributed significantly to the book's scope, content, and final appearance, and cheerfully supervised the countless details of final editing, design, and production. Alice Falk, the copyeditor, worked wonders with the manuscript. Collaborating with Pete, Kurt, and Alice proved both an education and a pleasure. I am grateful also to others at Norton, including Marian Johnson, managing editor; Rubina Yeh, book designer; Roberta Flechner, layout artist; Benjamin Reynolds, production manager; Nicole Netherton, assistant editor, art researcher, and permissions gatherer; Eileen Connell, media editor; and Jack Lamb, electronic media designer. No author could ask for a more creative, supportive team.

Special thanks are due to my research assistants: Gustavo Mercado worked tirelessly, always put his hands on exactly what I needed, and prepared numerous summaries, and Emanuel Leonard meticulously assembled the first master tape of film clips eventually used on the CD-ROM.

I owe a major debt of gratitude to Dave Monahan, of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, a master teacher, gifted filmmaker, and treasured friend who has given untiring, generous support to my efforts. He was always ready to answer questions, suggest different approaches, and, especially, to recommend specific shots or scenes for analysis, and the final book owes much to his deep love for the movies and his inspiring work in the classroom.

Throughout this project, Edgar Munhall has offered steadfast encouragement, support, and

companionship, and, with his insight and understanding, has taught me as much about looking at movies as he has about looking at life. I gratefully dedicate this book to him.

REVIEWERS

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1 WHAT IS A MOVIE?   1

We all know what movies are. But how might we explain movies to someone completely unaware of their existence? Chapter 1 begins our exploration of this question with some fundamental principles that are shared by all movies, sketches some of the history of motion picture media, offers a snapshot of the film production process, and explains some of the categories that we use to classify movies. The image that opens chapter 1 is from Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), one of the most famous, popular, and iconographic movies.

2   FORM AND NARRATIVE   57

The relationship between *form* and *content*, a central concern in all art criticism, underlies our study of movies. Chapter 2 considers the general principles of film form and then turns to the formal structure with which we are all most familiar—narrative. After making the important distinction between a film's *story* and its *plot*, the chapter discusses the many components of film narrative, including its control of time, its development of character and setting, and its presentation of point of view. The image that opens chapter 2 is from Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996), one of several cinematic adaptations of Jane Austen's novel.

3   MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND DESIGN   121

The French phrase *mise-en-scène* literally means "staging (or putting on) a scene." Chapter 3 explores the many ways that filmmakers determine what an audience sees and hears onscreen—how they shape a movie's mise-en-scène. The discussion begins with general principles such as framing and movement, then turns to the specific importance of design—including costume and set design—on mise-en-scène. The image that opens chapter 3 comes from Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), every frame of which celebrates the expressive power of mise-en-scène.

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While cinematography might seem to exist solely to please our eyes with beautiful images, it is in fact an intricate *language* that can contribute to, enhance, or detract from a movie's overall meaning as much as the narrative, mise-en-scène, or acting does. Chapter 4 breaks this language down into basic parts that can inform our analyses of movies. The image that opens chapter 4 is from Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987), which won the Academy Award for best cinematography.

5   ACTING   247

Screen acting can seem mysterious and magical as we're watching a film, but much planning and direction go into achieving the effects of a performance. Chapter 5 approaches screen acting from several angles, acknowledging the commercial considerations behind casting choices, examining actors' various styles, and considering the ways that acting intersects with other formal elements of filmmaking. The image that opens chapter 5 is from Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), starring Denzel Washington in the title role (a performance for which Washington was nominated for the Academy Award for best actor).