

A silhouette of a cowboy riding a bucking horse against a cloudy sky. The horse is in mid-air, rearing up on its hind legs. The cowboy is holding onto the horse's mane. The background is a dark, cloudy sky. The overall tone is dramatic and cinematic.

STEPHEN PRINCE

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SECOND  
EDITION

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MOVIES AND  
MEANING

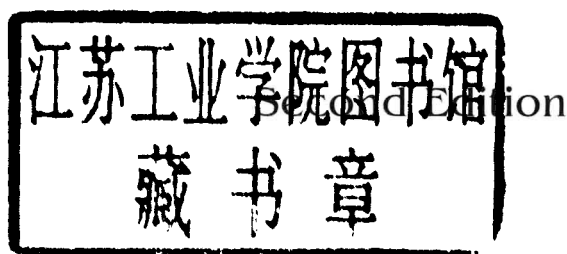
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AN INTRODUCTION TO FILM



# *Movies and Meaning*

## An Introduction to Film



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# Preface



*Movies and Meaning* provides a comprehensive introduction to the motion picture medium. The text is organized around three basic questions: How do movies express meanings? How do viewers understand those meanings? How does cinema function globally as 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 that it gives to the ways that viewers understand and interpret the elements of film structure and the attention that it gives to cinema as a global business as well as an art. To fully understand the medium of cinema, the reader needs to know what filmmakers do with the tools of their craft, how viewers respond to the designs those tools create, and how the art and business of film are interrelated. Film is an art form, but it is also a business enterprise. These two domains are not separate; they map onto each other, and knowing one requires knowledge of the other.

These three core questions frame the essential attributes of cinema. 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 actors' performance, editing, sound design, and narrative structure. Each of these areas contributes to the organizing design of a film, and, by manipulating these tools, filmmakers are able to express a range of meanings.

To look only at what filmmakers do to create meaning, though, 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.

Thus, the second core question—How do viewers understand film?—asks what viewers do when watching movies. How do viewers interpret the audiovisual designs that filmmakers have created? How do filmmakers anticipate in their work the likely ways that 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 and sounds on screen?

Viewers respond to film, and understand it, by applying significant aspects of their real-life visual, personal, and social experience as well as their knowledge of motion picture conventions and style. The upcoming chapters emphasize both aspects of this response: the mapping of real experience onto the screen and the knowledge of medium-specific codes and style. This dual response is a function of the medium's own duality, its ability to *document* visual reality and to *transform* it. These functions receive special emphasis throughout the chapters because they are fundamental to much of what the cinema does and how.

The third question—How does cinema operate as an art and business on a global scale?—asks about the medium's capacity as a business enterprise and a vehicle of creative expression. An account that emphasized the cinema only as an art form would be inadequate and incomplete, and it would fail to grasp some of the medium's essential features, namely, the remarkable interrelation between art and commerce that has defined cinema since its inception. Filmmakers today work in a medium that faces grave economic problems, and these problems are affecting the kinds of films that get made. Furthermore, commercial filmmaking operates as part of a global communications industry, which exerts considerable influence on film content and style. At the same time, the global context carries with it considerable diversity, with filmmakers representing a range of countries, cultures, and styles. Although these issues of art and commerce, of cultural diversity and homogenization, are complex, no comprehensive examination of the medium should ignore them.

*Movies and Meaning* focuses on narrative filmmaking, and on fictional narratives in particular, because this is the most popular and pervasive form of filmmaking, seen by the largest audiences, and 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 cinema by exploring these boxed discussions. Each chapter ends with a few suggested readings to direct the interested reader's attention to more intensive treatments of basic issues. Bold-face terms throughout the text designate items defined in the glossary.

## ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographic illustrations utilize production stills and frame enlargements. An on-set photographer makes production stills during the course of a film's production, and they only *approximate* the actual shots and compositions in a film. To exactly reproduce the actual images that viewers see when watching a film, frame enlargements must be used. All frame enlargements in the text are labeled 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 THIS EDITION

For this new edition of *Movies and Meaning*, I have updated the film examples and photographic illustrations used throughout the text, and I have expanded, or added to, the discussion of core areas: the history of sound technology; film stock and aspect ratio in cinematography; digital production methods used in film editing, sound design, and special effects, the actor's performance in relation to issues of depth of field, lighting, lenses, and visual effects; and the Hong Kong cinema as a relatively contemporary example of national new wave filmmaking.

At the organizational level, the reader will notice one significant change. The chapter on narrative is now at the front of the book. Because *Movies and Meaning* deals with narrative filmmaking, and because a film begins with a script that formulates a story, it is appropriate to begin the book with an examination of the nature of narrative in cinema. The discussion of film genres, located elsewhere in the previous edition, is now situated within the chapter on narrative.

Aside from this change, the book's plan of discussion proceeds as before. The initial chapters examine the basic elements of creative design in cinema: narrative, the camera, cinematography, production design, the actor's performance, editing, and sound. Chapter 1 examines the nature of narrative in film. What is narrative, what are its elements, how do filmmakers organize those elements so as to create a narrative structure, and how do viewers contribute to the narrative experience?

Chapter 2 explains the concept of film structure and how filmmakers use camera position, angle, lens, and movement to create visual design and meaning. Chapter 3 extends this discussion of the camera by exploring cinematography, the ways that filmmakers use light, color, and composition, and how viewers interpret those effects.

Chapter 4 examines the areas of production design (this includes costume design, set design, and the use of mattes and miniature models) and acting, considered in terms of the unique cinematic characteristics of film performance and how the actor becomes part of a film's total visual design.

Chapter 5 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 6 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 artistically expressive ways? How do viewers interpret sound in relation to images?

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 the global context. Chapter 8 studies the impact of popular U.S. commercial filmmaking on world markets and the ways the U.S. 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 international alternatives to Hollywood's 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 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 construct that criticism. Chapter 11 examines theories about the nature of cinema, surveys the most important theories, and discusses their strengths and weaknesses.

When readers have finished *Movies and Meaning*, they will have a comprehensive understanding of the 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 an art and a business in a global context. Above all, it is the author's hope that the reader will finish this book having grown not only wiser about the cinema, but with greater affection for it, 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 rich and complex as the cinema and that now encompasses a century of creative development. The approach adopted here aims to be accessible for the reader and easy to understand while honoring the complexity of the medium. Without oversimplifying the medium or the issues involved in its 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 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. In addition, I thank the following reviewers of this edition who made insightful comments: Donald Larsson and Richard Terrill, Minnesota State University at Mankato, Blake Wood, Franklin Pierce College, and Paul Helford, Northern Arizona University.

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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.

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# Contents



## Preface

xiii

## 1 The Nature of Narrative in Film 1

Story and Script	3
The Turn to Narrative in Early Film History	4
Elements of Narrative	8
The Fictive Stance	8
Narrative Structure: Story and Plot	10
Authorship and Point of View	17
The Classical Hollywood Narrative	21
Alternatives to the Classical Narrative	24
The Viewer's Contribution to Narrative	28
Film Genres	31
The Western	32
The Gangster Film	35
The Musical	40
The Horror Film	42
Summary	47

## 2 Film Structure 49

Elements of Film Structure	51
The Production Process	51

The Role of the Director	52
Time and Space in Cinema	56
Structure and the Camera	58
Camera Position	58
Camera Angle	64
Camera Lens	70
Camera Movement	75
Structural Design and Creative Choice	83
The Camera and Human Perception: Cinema's Dual Capability	85
Transforming Visual Reality	86
Corresponding with Visual Reality	87
Summary	90

## 3 Cinematography 93

Collaboration and Previsualization	95
The Essentials of Cinematography	98
Film Stocks, Lenses, and Aspect Ratios	100
Lighting Design	105
Cinematography and Digital Effects	118
Visual Style and Design Quotations	120
Summary	123

## 4 Production Design and Performance Style 125

What the Production Designer Does	126
Basic Tools of Production Design	129
Costumes	130
Sets, Mattes, and Miniatures	131
The Design Concept	136
Production Design and Special Effects	140

Acting	142
Acting in Film and Theater	142
Categories of Film Performers	146
Method and Technical Approaches to Performing	150
The Performer as an Element of Visual Design	152
Performance, Emotion, and the Viewer's Response	160
Summary	162

## 5 Editing: Making the Cut 164

What Is Editing?	166
Linear and Nonlinear Systems	166
Types of Visual Transitions	167
Functions of Editing	172
Continuity	173
Dramatic Focus	173
Tempo and Mood	174
Narration and Point of View	175
The Principles of Continuity Editing	185
A Continuous Flow of Action	185
Errors of Continuity	193
Facilitating the Viewer's Response	194
Subverting Continuity Editing	194
Alternatives to Continuity Editing	196
Jump Cuts	196
Montage	197
Sequence Shots	206
Summary	207

## 6 Sound Design 209

Evolution of Film Sound	211
Types of Sound	214
Dialogue	214
Sound Effects	220
Music	221

Sound Design	231
Differences between Sound and Image	232
The Codes of Sound Design	234
Summary	249

## 7 Modes of Screen Reality 251

Realism	253
Ordinary Fictional Realism	253
Historical Realism	257
Documentary Realism	259
Expressionism	263
Classic German Expressionism	264
Contemporary Expressionism	266
Fantasy and the Fantastic	272
Ways of Making Fantasy Credible	273
Fantasy and Cinema Technology	276
Cinematic Self-Reflexivity	279
Comic Self-Reflexivity	279
Didactic Self-Reflexivity	281
Impact on Viewers of Self-Reflexive Techniques	285
Summary	285

## 8 Hollywood International 287

The Global Dominance of Hollywood	289
The Majors	289
Splitting the Box-Office Dollar	292
Ancillary Markets	293
Film and Product Merchandising	295
Economic Significance of the Blockbuster Film	301
International Influence of Hollywood Style	304
Influence on Foreign Filmmakers	304
Absorption of Foreign Filmmakers	306

Remakes of Foreign Films	308
Summary	316

## 9 The Cinema in an International Frame 317

The International Auteur Cinema	319
Michelangelo Antonioni	319
Ingmar Bergman	324
Luis Bunuel	329
Federico Fellini	333
Akira Kurosawa	335
Cinema and Society: The New Wave Phenomenon	339
Italian Neorealism	339
The French New Wave	344
New German Cinema	350
Hong Kong Cinema	356
Importance of the International Cinema	359
Summary	360

## 10 Film Criticism and Interpretation 362

Why Criticism Exists	363
Polyvalence of the Sign	364
The Task of the Critic	365
Criticism as Rhetoric	365
Modes of Criticism	366
Newspaper and Television Reviewing	366
General-Interest Journal-Based Criticism	367
Scholarly Criticism	370
Creating Criticism	374
Interpretation	376
The Steps in Creating Criticism	383
Summary	383

# 11 Models of Film Theory 385

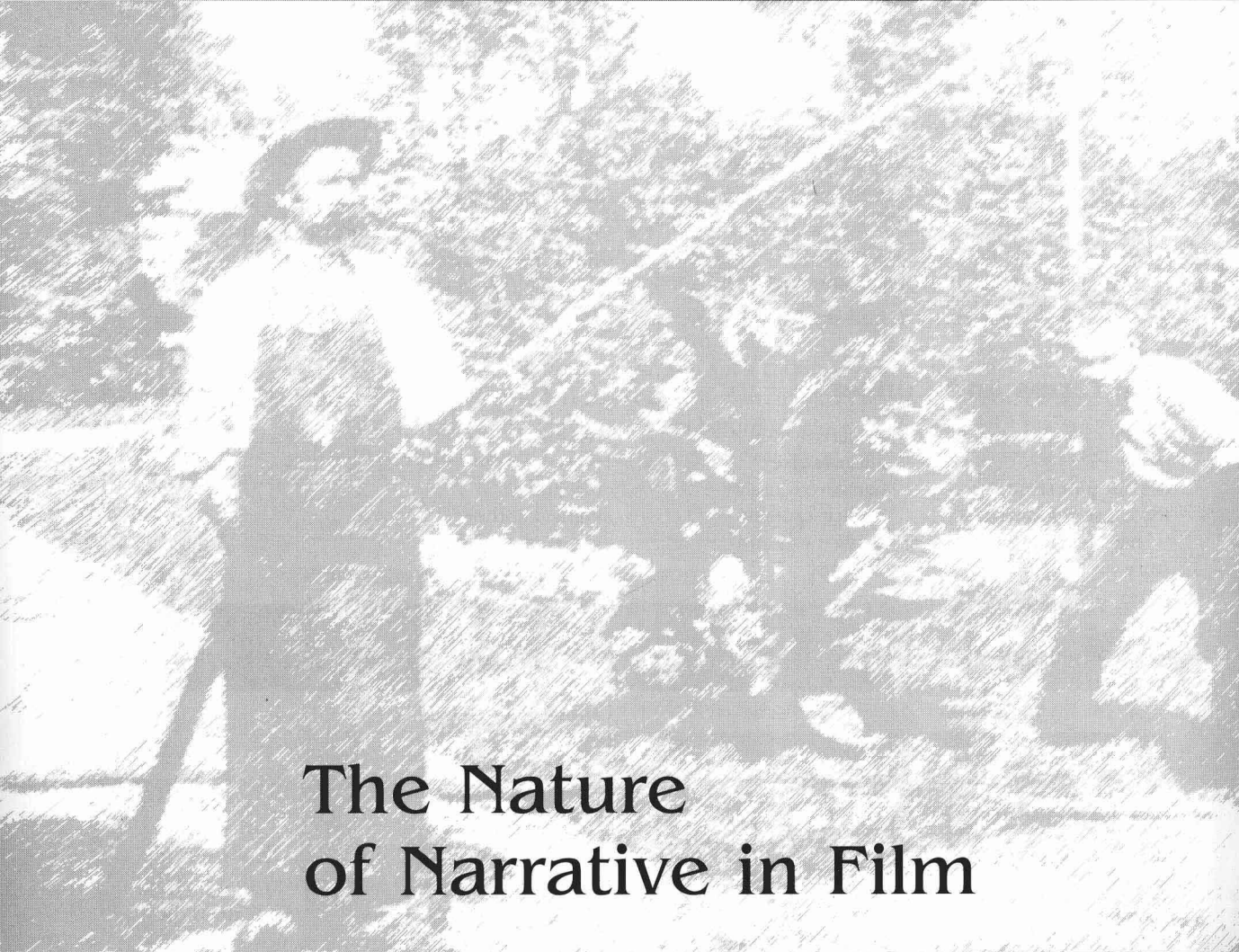
Realist Models	387
Elements of Realist Theory: Bazin	387
Strengths of Bazinian Realism	390
Weaknesses of Bazinian Realism	391
Other Realist Models	392
Auteurist Models	392
Elements of Auteurism	393
Strengths of the Auteur Model	395
Weaknesses of the Auteur Model	395
Psychoanalytic Models	396
Elements of Psychoanalytic Models	397
Strength of the Psychoanalytic Model	400
Weaknesses of the Psychoanalytic Model	400
Ideological Models	401
Elements of Ideological Models	402
Strength of the Ideological Model	408
Weaknesses of the Ideological Model	409
Feminist Models	409
Elements of Feminist Models	409
Strength of the Feminist Model	412
Weaknesses of the Feminist Model	412
Cognitive Models	413
Elements of Cognitive Models	413
Strength of the Cognitive Model	417
Weaknesses of the Cognitive Model	417
Summary	418

Glossary	421
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Index	433
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# Chapter 1



## The Nature of Narrative in Film





## Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:


- explain why a script serves as the foundation for a film
- explain why the storytelling function came to film early in its history
- explain the relationship between narrative and the mass production of film
- explain the three basic elements of narrative
- differentiate between story and plot and explain how filmmakers may creatively manipulate this distinction
- explain the concept of authorship in cinema and why it is a problematic concept
- distinguish between real and implied authors
- explain how point of view operates in film narratives
- describe the classical Hollywood narrative
- distinguish explicit causality from implicit causality and explain their different narrative effects
- explain the antinarrative tradition in cinema
- describe the viewer's contribution to narrative
- define the nature of film genre
- describe the types of stories found in the major film genres

## Key Terms and Concepts

story  
plot  
deviant plot structure  
the classical Hollywood  
narrative  
story time

subjective shot  
antinarrative  
narrative causality  
explicit causality  
implicit causality  
suspense

surprise  
point of view  
real author  
implied author  
genre  
convention



**S**tories are found in all cultures. Narrative is a universal human activity used for entertainment, instruction, and socialization. It is also an essential way that people think about themselves and their world. To explain how things change, or how they got to be, people tell stories. Given the universality of narrative, it is not surprising that cinema, in its popular forms, has been a narrative medium.

Commercial filmmakers use the camera, light, color, sound, and editing to tell stories. Fiction films are distributed internationally to chains of theaters and video stores where fans of Westerns, science fiction films, and other genres turn to them for pleasure and enrichment.

The importance of narrative for popular movies cannot be overestimated. What, then, is narrative, and what are its structural elements in film? This chapter explains when and why narrative came to the movies, examines some of the basic elements of narrative structure, and concludes by examining what the viewer contributes to the experience of narrative.

## ■ STORY AND SCRIPT

Though cinema is an audiovisual medium, it begins with the written word. The initial step in the production of a film is the completion of a script. Much like a play, the script tells the story in a scene-by-scene fashion, with dialogue and character interactions written out in detail. The script furnishes the basic structure of story and dramatic action that filmmakers will transform into picture and sound. There is no substitute for these attributes at the scripting stage; filmmakers find it difficult to develop them once a production has commenced and is before the cameras. Shekhar Kapur, the director of *Elizabeth* (1998), joined that project when the script was in its third revision, and nothing went before the cameras until the script was in its thirteenth draft. The resulting film is uncommonly rich and well designed, in large part because of its solid, scripted foundation.

The elegance of structure found in such exquisitely told narrative films as Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* originated in outstanding scripts. (For *Vertigo*, Hitchcock went through three screenwriters before he got what he wanted.) Because of the structural complexity of filmmaking, a great deal about the medium must be preplanned

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### **Wild Things** (Columbia TriStar, 1998)

A creative approach to narrative design is among a filmmaker's most important talents. During the end credits, this film completely reinvents its narrative by showing the viewer key scenes that were omitted from earlier sections of the story. As a result, the plot—a murder mystery—takes on a new set of twists and implications at a point—during the end credits—where the narrative in most films has officially ended. Frame enlargement.

