

# The Critical Eye:



## An Introduction to Looking at Movies

Second Edition

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*Christine Saxton*  
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**Second Edition**

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To the memory of Christine Saxton 1945-1991

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# Acknowledgments

These days, most people get information through the visual media. Almost everyone has had some exposure to TV and the movies; in the United States, and increasingly all over the world, they are a fact of life. Because they convey the values, assumptions, and ideas of our society, it is important to understand how they work. This book introduces the viewer—who is usually quite experienced at viewing, having watched hours, months, even years of TV and movies—to the vocabulary of film study and methods of interpretation. Knowing these things will help viewers become "film literate" and help them develop a "critical eye."

To reach these goals, this text sets out clearly and concisely the basic vocabulary of film. And it also presents descriptive examples, accompanied by pictures and analyses of films so the beginning student can learn to recognize the way images convey information and stories, to think critically about what they see, and to interpret the images. In short, the text should enable students to see how movies produce meaning.

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
<b>CHAPTER 1: The Visual Media</b>	<b>1</b>
Communication and Information	5
The Media	7
Visual Literacy	8
Realism: The Narrative Film	9
Persuasion Through Advertising	12
Persuasion and the Visual Media	13
Meaning and Response	15
Levels of Meaning	15
<b>CHAPTER 2: The Camera Eye</b>	<b>17</b>
A Historical Note	21
The Shot and the Frame	22
The Lens	22
Distance	25
Angle	28
Camera Movement	36
Camera Speed	41
Optical Processes	42
Special Effects	44
Conclusion	48
<b>CHAPTER 3: <i>Mise-en-Scène</i></b>	<b>49</b>
Sets and Locations	50
Props and Objects	55
Costuming	56

## **iv**    Contents

Color Design	57
Actors and Acting	57
Blocking and Choreography	61
Lighting	63
Composition	67
Composition in Depth	73
Screen Size	77
Graphic Elements	79
Dynamic Composition	82
Conclusion	86
 <b>CHAPTER 4: Editing</b>	 <b>88</b>
A Historical Note	88
The Kuleshov Effect: An Experiment in Editing	89
Soviet Montage	93
"The Odessa Steps" Sequence	93
Hollywood Montage	96
Classical Editing	97
The Match Cut	98
The Shot / Reverse Shot	104
The Master-Shot Sequence	104
Transitional Devices	105
Narrative Progression	108
Conclusion	111
 <b>CHAPTER 5: Sound</b>	 <b>113</b>
A Historical Note	113
Music	121
Dialogue	131
Narration	133
Narration in Fiction Films	134
Narration in Documentaries	137
Sound Effects	138
Conclusion	140



<b>CHAPTER 6: Elements of Meaning</b>	<b>142</b>
Film as Language	143
Underlying Meaning	144
Theme	146
Point of View	147
Structure	151
Symbol	163
Metaphor	167
Motif	168
Allusion	169
Conclusion	170
 <b>CHAPTER 7: Making Meaning in     <i>Little Big Man</i></b>	 <b>171</b>
Sequence Analysis	181
Conclusion	189
 <b>CHAPTER 8: About the Business</b>	 <b>191</b>
A Historical Note	192
Transitional Forces	193
Current Circumstances	199
Production	202
Distribution	207
Exhibition	210
The Future	211
 Afterword: A Critical Eye	 218
 Glossary	 220
 Index	 227

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# CHAPTER

## 1

# The Visual Media

If you had gone to France in the fifties, you would have found that, unlike the United States, it had only two TV channels, which broadcast only about six hours per day, and all of the programs were chosen by ORTF (l'Office de la Radio-diffusion Télévision Française), the government's media agency that controls programming and broadcasting. Many other things, too, would have struck you as the opposite of things in this country. For example, French TV had no ads, but before every show at the movies there were short film ads for everything from ice cream and candy to socks and shirts.

Even if you had gone twenty years later, in the 1970s, you would have found the situation more or less unchanged, although, by that time, one or two more TV channels had been added, along with a few more hours in the broadcast day. The programs would have included some movies, French ones, but mostly you would have seen the same type of cultural programming, shown without interruption, and with only a few minutes of advertising grouped at the end of each program. And if you were feeling a little homesick, you could always go to see an American movie—*The Big Sleep* or a Jerry Lewis film (with French subtitles, of course) playing in a special "art" movie house.

In 1987, ORTF sold two channels to private commercial companies which began to broadcast American programs: game and quiz shows, rock videos, a complete

range of films, including American ones, and soaps and sitcoms, especially the very popular "Dallas" and "Dynasty." Now, suddenly, the French were talking as fluently of J.R. (pronounced "Gee Air"), the "Streets of San Francisco" (pronounced "Saun Franseesco"), "market share," "exposure," and "advertising revenue," as they did about the Eiffel Tower and champagne. And you would have found, if you had visited, that cowboy hats and boots were as fashionable as the blue jeans (pronounced "lay bloo-djeen") that have long been popular with Europeans. All the programs and films were dubbed into French, but a significant cultural shift had begun to take place and American TV was dominant.

By the 1990s changes are appreciable: American-produced programming, while still sizable, no longer completely dominates the TV market even though it is trying: the soap opera "Santa Barbara" continues its long run and a French version of "Divorce Court" is in the works. However, three French networks broadcast a wide range of American-type programs, and paying for programs through advertising is an accepted fact. Another way to pay for the programming is through pay-per-view, and the channel Canal Plus (Canal+) has been formed based on that concept. It programs films, many of which it produces, and all uninterrupted by ads. Canal+ has become one of the major film production companies in France, making films both for TV and theatrical release. With its expanded market, French television companies can produce programs geared primarily to French tastes. Besides movies, TV programming there includes, for example, French game and quiz shows (including one in which contestants win prizes for English competence!); interviews with writers on book tours, international and French celebrities, such as Warren Beatty, Sylvester Stallone, and Charles Aznavour; discussion programs on issues of national interest; "real-life" adventures recounted and re-

enacted; and variety-comedy shows. Today American TV is struggling against this massive local production. The case in Italy and Germany has mirrored the one in France. In Germany, "Dallas" and "Dynasty" were dubbed into German and widely popular. A German version of "All in the Family" that depends on German political and cultural conflicts is receiving a great deal of attention. However, these days more local production, much all-European programming, and a growing cable television market have carved out prime time that had been almost entirely monopolized by American shows. Only in the area of the movies do American products prevail in the face of the changing international marketplace.

In many other countries, however, American TV shows and movies continue to be widely distributed and popular. In Egypt, where TV programming is bound by strict Islamic restrictions, "Dallas" with its marital intrigues is dubbed into Arabic, although kissing is edited out. In Japan, where the family is strongly respected, "Dynasty" with its vicious family conflicts is dubbed into Japanese. Currently a Finnish version of "American Gladiators" is being prepared, and a German version of "Married . . . With Children" is being marketed. American TV companies are pursuing new markets in countries just beginning widespread distribution of TV material, such as Portugal and Turkey. In many countries used to strict government control of information, certain subjects—most often references to religion, politics, and sex—are not permitted. That control is becoming more difficult in the face of more than 1 billion TV sets worldwide with that number expected to grow by 5 percent a year. MTV already reaches hundreds of millions of households, and CNN is seen in 137 countries.

It is indisputable that American television and films are influencing values, attitudes, and habits all over the

world. Consider that when the President of Poland Lech Walesa was asked what had caused the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, he pointed to a nearby TV set and replied, "It all came from there." Larry Hagman of "Dallas" agreed, surmising that weekly exposure of those citizens to images of Western opulence—food, clothes, cars—in other words, to such readily available material goods, suggested alternative ways of living to Eastern bloc populations which they then demanded. The pattern threatens to repeat itself in many other developing countries where poverty lives beside immense wealth.

Even though people all over the world are watching a great deal of television, for the present at least, they also continue to attend movies enthusiastically. In European cities, movie theatres are still thriving, but there are signs of imminent changes like those we have experienced in the United States. Videotape sales and rentals are flourishing. A growing proportion of those millions sitting in front of the TV every night are watching videotape releases of movies. It seems reasonable to suggest that the expansion of the video cassette recorder market in Europe signals the impending closure of urban movie theatres there, just as it did in the United States.

It is a fact that other countries see a great deal of our media products, which means that American culture has become very influential. American movies have dominated foreign markets since World War II and continue to do so today. Box office receipts and market share of American films in foreign markets overpower the home-grown products. The obvious signs of American cultural dominance as exemplified by the blossoming of the McDonald's chain around the world are more apparent than subtler changes, such as the steady conversion of European television from a cultural to a merchandising entity. If we travel in other countries, we can see some of those effects on people's daily lives. They are

not so noticeable in our own country because we accept them as "natural" and do not really perceive them. Yet the media influence everyone, everywhere. Almost all of our lives, we have watched TV and movies, mainly for entertainment and information; they are a source of pleasure, escape, even companionship—a constant part of our daily routines. We must realize, though, that the media also have the power to influence and manipulate.

### **Communication and Information**

At another very important level, thanks to developments in telecommunications technology, information travels faster and farther than ever before. Satellites speed information across even closed national borders, creating a global network and causing changes. The effect of this "migration of information" is incalculable. Through state-run media agencies, some countries have controlled and limited what their citizens can see. It is worth noting that to some extent they are losing that control. Many of those governments are attempting to regain command of information outlets by any means necessary, even by altering videotaped news emissions. Government-run satellites are taking the place of ground transmitters. This suggests that public information will continue to be controlled and, in turn, influence and control populations—in spite of the seeming availability of opposing facts. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the bloodshed at the Tiananmen Square demonstration, and the Persian Gulf War were seen live through satellite technology in many countries, and opinions around the world were swayed. According to some media analysts, the hastiness of German unification was largely the result of massive and emotional public response to images of the Berlin Wall being torn down (see fig. 1). The unprecedented number of people throughout the world who saw these and other events in their homes,



**Figure 1.** Media analysts contend that the massive and emotional public response to images of the Berlin Wall being torn down in November of 1989 hastened German unification.

*(Photograph by Diane Kaye, © 1989)*

who are able to see the Academy Awards or the Olympics, or who regularly tune in to MTV and know all the latest songs, demonstrates the vast horizons opened up by international telecommunications. Clearly we can say that a new era has arrived in which TV will not only document and report on events and trends, but also shape and accelerate them.

### The Media

Observers worry that the public in today's world "consumes" the media as never before. But what is the role of the media in contemporary society? People used to buy newspapers and magazines by the millions and used to listen to thousands of hours of radio. The difference is that nowadays people depend almost exclusively on the *visual* media for both the news and entertainment. TV has reached "saturation" of the American market: 98 percent of American homes have at least one TV set and 65 percent have more than one—more than have indoor plumbing! It is estimated that viewers in the United States watch on average more than three hours of television a day, and more than 80 million people are likely to be watching on any given evening. As many as 90 million people tuned in to the three 1992 presidential debates, making the concept of a "national town meeting" or "electronic democracy" a reality. This is a medium that has become a considerable part of our daily lives and has an immense effect on the way those lives are led.

The same observers note somewhat nervously that as a result of TV's influence, contemporary society—all over the world—has become a *visual culture*, dependent upon looking at images rather than on reading words. This may be partly true. While it is probably accurate to predict that our society will always use writing, perhaps the demand for it is less these days in which we are con-



stantly exposed to images—on television, in movies, video games, photographs, newspapers, advertisements, magazines, on billboards, product labels, and record jackets. Some critics blame the visual media, especially television, for America's decline in literacy because, they argue, people would rather watch those images passively than read words since reading requires work. One thing is certain: *the widespread power of the visual media around the world has made it necessary to study them, to understand them, and to see how they work—in other words, to become visually literate.*

### Visual Literacy

Let us consider for a moment the idea of literacy. To be literate means more than just being able to read and pronounce the words on the page. To be *functionally* literate, a reader must be able to grasp the meaning first of each word and then of all the words combined, and to understand the meaning of a sentence and a paragraph. To be *fully* literate involves even more: the reader must be able to detect the underlying structure of a piece of writing, to recognize how s/he is being persuaded, to understand the implications of what has been said. The ability to *detect structure*, to *recognize persuasion*, and to *understand implications* is the basis of understanding all communication.

Media experts occasionally object to applying the terms "reading" (as in "reading a film") and "literacy" (as in "visual literacy") to *pictures*, and in a way they are correct because, after all, the term *literate* comes from *letters* and has to do with words and language. Then, too, people grasp visual information differently than written information. But since there is no equivalent word for pictures—no "picturate"—and "visually literate" is handy and understandable, it makes sense to let *literacy* mean for visual media what it means for writ-