SECOND EDITION

FILM as
Social PRACTICE

ROUTLEDGE

Graeme TURNER

Film as Social Practice

Second edition

Graeme Turner

Acknowledgements

General editor's preface

This series of books on different aspects of communication is designed to meet the needs of the growing number of students coming to study this subject for the first time. The authors are experienced teachers or lecturers who are committed to bridging the gap between the huge body of research available to the more advanced student and what new students actually need to get them started on their studies.

Probably the most characteristic feature of communication is its diversity: it ranges from the mass media and popular culture through language to individual and social behaviour. But it identifies links and a coherence within this diversity. The series will reflect the structure of its subject. Some books will be general, basic works that seek to establish theories and methods of study applicable to a wide range of material; others will apply these theories and methods to the study of one particular topic. But even these topic-centred books will relate to each other, as well as to the more general ones. One particular topic, such as advertising or news or language, can only be understood as an example of communication when it is related to, and differentiated from, all the other topics that go to make up this diverse subject.

The series, then, has two main aims, both closely connected. The first is to introduce readers to the most important results of contemporary research into communication together with the theories that seek to explain it. The second is to equip them with appropriate methods of study and investigation which they will be able to apply directly to their everyday experience of communication.

If readers can write better essays, produce better projects and pass more exams as a result of reading these books I shall be very satisfied; but if they gain a new insight into how communication

shapes and informs our social life, how it articulates and creates our experience of industrial society, then I shall be delighted. Communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces.

John Fiske

Preface

This second edition of *Film as Social Practice* emerges from the perception that film and cultural theory has moved on appreciably since the first edition. And while this book looks at film theory from a cultural studies perspective, thus dealing with it in slightly different ways to most film textbooks, there were certain theoretical developments which it seemed necessary to deal with at greater length in this second edition. Foremost among these are the debates around audience and spectatorship and, most particularly, work within feminist film theory about 'the male gaze': the masculine nature of the narrative and visual pleasures offered by popular cinema. It has not been possible to greatly expand the length of the volume, and so the insertion of new material has had to be limited. However, I am confident that the revision has widened the range of ideas covered, and brought the ideas already dealt with up to date.

Among the aims of the first edition of *Film as Social Practice* was to provide an introduction to the study of film which placed it among the representational forms and social practices of popular culture. One of the ways in which this was done was to make substantial use of contemporary examples, drawing upon recent popular cinema as well as upon the 'classics' continually revisited in film courses. The first edition was completed in 1987, so its examples are much less contemporary now than when first used. In this revision, I have updated many of these examples, and also modified the arguments in places to account for the changing trends in contemporary cinema. My hope is that it is a more accessible, fresh and useful book as a consequence.

Graeme Turner, Brisbane, 1993

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Introduction

In 1896 the French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière became the first to project moving film to an audience. Like other pioneers in film, such as Thomas Edison in the USA, the Lumières imagined that their work with moving pictures would be directed towards scientific research rather than the establishment of an entertainment industry. Edison claimed that he decided to leave the movie industry as soon as its potential as a 'big amusement proposition' became clear, although his career makes this difficult to accept since he employed some cut-throat business practices. It is certainly true that when Edison ran his first 50 feet of film in 1888, the future he envisaged for moving pictures was more akin to what we now know as television; the emphasis was to be on domestic, information-based usage. However, despite the inappropriateness of the pioneers' initial objectives, it took barely fifteen years into the twentieth century for the narrative feature to establish itself – both as a viable commercial product and as a contender for the status of the 'seventh art', the new century's first original art form.

The history of film and of the ways in which it has been studied has already been written from a multitude of perspectives: as a narrative of key films, stars, and directors; as a story of ever-improving technology and more realistic illusions; as an industrial history of Hollywood and the multinational corporations which have succeeded it; as a cultural history, in which film is used as a reflector or index of movements within twentieth-century popular culture. And yet film studies have largely been dominated by one perspective – aesthetic analysis in which film's ability to become art through its reproduction and arrangement of sound and images is the subject of attention. This book breaks with this tradition in order to study film as entertainment, as narrative, as cultural

event. The book is intended to introduce students to film as a social practice, and the understanding of its production and consumption, its pleasures and its meanings, is enclosed within the study of the workings of culture itself.

The academic area of film studies is now institutionalized in colleges, schools, and universities around the world. While there has always been a theoretical and academic interest in film, this interest expanded dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s – particularly in the USA, where film departments proliferated. The success of these departments can be deduced from the fact that the place once occupied by literature in humanities or arts courses is now challenged by film – just as the arts course is itself under attack from communications, media studies, or cultural studies courses of one kind or another.

Such challenges to the traditional literature or arts programme are, ironically, partly due to the defection of literature scholars who moved into the area of film studies during this period. While this has resulted in the increased sophistication of the understanding of film as a medium, the influence of attitudes developed in literary studies but applied to a popular and less verbal medium has not always been positive. Many literary scholars brought with them assumptions which later film theory was to challenge: for instance, a high-culture suspicion of such popular cultural forms as mainstream movies, television, or popular fiction; an exaggerated respect for the single unique text (book or film) coexisting with a patronizing attitude towards 'commercial', genre-styled films (westerns, thrillers, musicals, etc.); and a preference for films made from literary works. Interest in film in the 1960s and 1970s was rather narrowly circumscribed by the preference for modernistic, abstract films which bore greater similarities to literary works than to the mainstream of commercial feature film entertainment. Because film was seen to be analogous to literature, many of the things it did which literature did not were ignored. In particular, film's ability to attract millions of paying customers was disregarded because of aesthetic criticism of the most successful films. As a result it has taken some time to recover the need to understand the attraction of film-going itself: to understand the dreamlike separation from the everyday world that lies behind the shock we experience as we leave the cinema, or the lure of the luminous images on the screen.

The arguments which dominate most traditional texts on film

theory revolve around the formalism/realism debate (that is, whether or not to talk about film by way of its artistic – 'formal' – unity or by way of its specific relation to the particular world it is attempting to capture within its frames – its 'realism'). It is a debate which has a history as long as that of the medium itself, although its terms do keep changing. In their traditional form, rooted in arguments from the 1940s and 1950s, both the realist and formalist positions are aesthetic in that they are finally interested in evaluating how successful a film is as *art*, rather than as a social activity for its audience. There has, however, been a change in the kind of approach taken in film studies in the last fifteen years, and the movement away from a predominantly aesthetic approach is one that informs this book.

It is now more or less accepted that film's function in our culture goes beyond that of being, simply, an exhibited aesthetic object. Popular film takes place in an arena where the audience's pleasure is a dominant consideration – both for the audience and for the film's producers. This does not necessarily mean that the audience is drugged or fed 'junk food for the mind'. The pleasure that popular film provides may indeed be quite different from that offered by literature or fine art; it is, however, equally deserving of our understanding. Film provides us with pleasure in the spectacle of its representations on the screen, in our recognition of stars, styles, and genres, and in our enjoyment of the event itself. Popular films have a life beyond their theatre runs or their reruns on television; stars, genres, key movies become part of our personal culture, our identity. Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself. Such is the view of film explored through these pages.

The following chapters are not comprehensive guides to the full body of film theory, but a map pointing out those areas of film and cultural theory that will be of most use to students first encountering the study of film – as a set of texts and as a social practice. Suggestions for further reading and consideration will follow each chapter, and point towards issues or applications I have been unable to include within the body of the text. Chapter 7 presents a set of sample analyses or 'readings' of films in order to demonstrate the kinds of approaches outlined earlier in the book. The aim is not to define what each film is 'about', or what it means, but to show what kind of information is produced by each analytical

method. Throughout the book, but especially here, I am concerned with the *readings* any film may invite, rather than *the reading* we might want to impose.

In choosing examples with which to illustrate the points made in this book, I have attempted to deal primarily with mainstream, popular films which students may well have seen. Although there are references to some of the 'classic' films – *Metropolis* and *Citizen Kane*, for instance – the focus of this book is on film's function within popular culture, rather than its more rarefied role as high art. This is a film text about 'movies' *and* 'cinema', not just cinema alone. (Readers will note that such terms as film, movie, and cinema are used interchangeably throughout.)

In writing this book, I have received help and encouragement from a number of colleagues who deserve thanks. Most importantly, Bruce Molloy from the Queensland University of Technology, who was originally to be part of this project and had to withdraw, is owed particular thanks for his contribution to the early planning and design of the book. Other colleagues who read sections – Dugald Williamson from Griffith University and Stuart Cunningham from Queensland University of Technology – and my ever encouraging friend and editor John Fiske from the University of Wisconsin, Madison also deserve gratitude for their patience and interest. My research assistant, Shari Armistead, who searched out most of the illustrations with charm and determination, relieved me of an unpleasant task and has made a significant contribution to the book. None of the above are, of course, responsible for any flaws the reader may detect in this book.

Chapter 1

The feature film industry

THE FEATURE FILM TODAY

The role of the feature film within western cultures may no longer be as pronounced as it was in the 1930s, but it is still pervasive. Now, popular film is rarely presented to its public as a single product or commodity. It can be a kind of composite commodity, incorporating the *Wayne's World* T-shirt or the *Terminator* doll into the purchase of the cinema ticket. Film is no longer the product of a self-contained industry but one of a range of cultural commodities produced by large multinational conglomerates whose main interest is more likely to be electronics or petroleum than the construction of magical images for the screen.

Going to see a film is still an event, however, the nature of which will be discussed in Chapter 5. But it is not a discrete event. As film audiences have declined, and the pressure on producers to compete for these shrinking audiences has increased, many changes in industry practices have occurred. These changes have serially affected an individual film's place in its cultural context. First, the industry's concentration on the blockbuster – the expensive movie with high production values, big stars, and massive simultaneous release – has made it harder for more modest films to gain publicity or even distribution. Despite frequent examples of these more modest films succeeding at the box-office – *Home Alone*, for a recent instance – the industry has been particularly cautious in choosing projects to support. As a result, it has become more difficult for an independent producer to interest a major company in backing his or her film. During the 1980s, this actually helped to provide opportunities for producers of 'teen movies', which have good box-office potential but, usually, lower pro-

duction costs. Such opportunities were few in other genres, however, as the concentration on the blockbuster reduced the variety of films produced while increasing the competition for, and thus the fees paid to, the few 'bankable' stars. (This trend, by 1992, seems to have peaked and may even be in decline.) The second change in industry practices, itself a sign of the commercial pressures on the producer-distributors, is the tendency to provide enormous levels of marketing support for those few films chosen as the likely hits of the season. These hits are backed up with merchandizing (the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* dolls), tie-ins (a hit single, for instance, like 'Unchained Melody' from *Ghost*), and the full range of advertising and promotional strategies – giveaways, competitions, dissemination of logos and so on.

The desire to watch a popular film is related to a whole range of other desires – for fashion, for the new, for the possession of icons or signs that are highly valued by one's peers. For example, in most countries T-shirts with the logo for *Ghostbusters* were ubiquitous well before the film was released; so was the hit single. As advertising for *Ghostbusters* they did not need to represent an accurate image of the experience of the film. Their job was to put the film on the list of 'new' commodities to be tried. The Bryan Adams hit single '(Everything I Do), I Do It For You' carried a quite different story to the film it accompanied, *Robin Hood*, but it (and the supporting video) helped to promote the desire to see the film. Marketing has recognized that film is now part of a multimedia complex. We have seen the expansion of the marketing of products more or less associated with a film, the sales of both products 'tied in' to each other. Probably the most elaborate array of tie-ins was that surrounding the 1975 film, *Jaws*; this included a sound-track album, T-shirts, plastic tumblers, a book about the making of the movie, the book the movie was based on, beach towels, blankets, shark costumes, toy sharks, hobby kits, iron-on transfers, games, posters, shark's tooth necklaces, sleepwear, water pistols, and more.

Advertising budgets have grown, not only in response to the fall in audiences but also to the change in the nature of their use of the cinema. At the peak of the feature film's popularity, audiences attended their favourite cinema as a regular night out – often more than once a week – and regardless of what was showing. Going to *the movies* was the event, not going to *this particular* movie. That situation has now reversed itself as home-based competitors for