

Second Edition

Film, *form*,



and Culture

Robert Kolker

# FILM, FORM, AND CULTURE

SECOND EDITION

**Robert Kolker**

Georgia Institute of Technology



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## FILM, FORM, AND CULTURE

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**For Linda**

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# PREFACE

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The response from colleagues and students who have used the first edition of *Film, Form, and Culture* has been both gratifying and helpful. Based on their responses, we have made a number of changes that will hopefully result in a text and CD-ROM even more useful and comprehensible for your film course.

In the text, I have retained the coverage that teachers and students appreciated, including an introduction to the cinematic shot, a description of the collaborators who work to make a film, a discussion of genre, an overview of the history of representation, and a look at “other screens” (television and computer). I’ve kept the cultural studies chapter, which introduces students to the methodologies of historical and cultural analysis through a comparative reading of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and McTiernan’s *Die Hard*. (Colleagues tell me that students particularly like that chapter!) The cultural reception of film is treated throughout. The response from readers is that the book presents sophisticated ideas in contemporary film criticism in an accessible, readable style appropriate for undergraduate students.

## NEW TO THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition of the book expands into areas suggested by the many reviewers and colleagues who’ve given me both formal and informal feedback on the original edition. The text has been reorganized for a better flow of ideas. I have expanded and clarified some of the more difficult concepts and added two major sections: one on documentary films—from Flaherty to Errol Morris—and one on women filmmakers—such as Maya Deren and Julie Dash.

A number of features have been added to the text to make it easier for you to integrate the book and the CD-ROM in your course:

- Each chapter now ends with a boxed section on how to integrate the CD-ROM segments with each chapter of the text.

- A glossary of film terms has been added to the text that covers terms from both the text and the CD-ROM.
- An index of CD-ROM contents has been added to the book to make it easier for you to integrate the two in your syllabus and to assist with assignments.

### **THE *FILM, FORM, AND CULTURE* CD-ROM**

Unique to this book is an interactive CD-ROM in which clips from films are analyzed closely, more closely than can be imagined through the still images common to most film texts. Through images interactively designed with explanatory text, stills, and animations, the reader will become intimately familiar with the basic elements of editing, montage, shot structure, point of view, mise-en-scène, lighting, and camera movement. The CD-ROM can be used alone and/or easily used in conjunction with the text.

The *Film, Form, and Culture* CD-ROM has been expanded in the new 1.0.3 version. A section on “sound” has been added to the music segment, with examples from *Citizen Kane*, *Nothing Sacred*, and *Meet John Doe*. The unit illustrates how sound is used to concentrate the viewer’s attention on dialogue, how it functions as an expressive element that complements the visual, and how it works as one of the methods of continuity cutting. There’s also a new section on genre, focusing on film noir. Using clips from *Detour* and from the films of Anthony Mann, the section demonstrates how genre operates in terms of thematic and visual patterns, examines the gender issues of noir, and discusses noir’s overwhelming sense of isolation and fear.

*Film, Form, and Culture* remains a unique introduction to film (and new media) for students in a variety of courses. It is the only introductory text with an interactive CD-ROM and one of the few that discusses not only the basic issues of film construction but the way film is constructed for and by the culture in which it is made. It thinks about film as part of the world it inhabits. I hope it will remain a good reading (and viewing) experience for both instructors and students.

**Robert Kolker**

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# INTRODUCTION

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*Film, Form, and Culture* asks you to think seriously about film, as seriously as you would about literature. It's a book about form and structure, content and contexts, history and business. It will give you some sense of film's history and its place in the greater scheme of things, especially in that envelope of words and deeds, money, art, artifacts, and daily life we live in that is called culture.

But why think seriously about film at all? Many people don't. In fact movies are among those things in our lives that we apparently don't *need* to take seriously. We go to the movies to be entertained, scared, grossed out; to make out, spend time, have something to discuss afterward. But we don't often want to think about movies as a serious part of our emotional or intellectual lives, or even treat them with the same intensity we use when we discuss sports or politics. Outside of a film studies course, we rarely hear other people engaged in a discussion of films that goes much deeper than plot or characters.

Even the people who review movies on television or in the papers are not as serious about their subject as other journalists are about sports, music, or painting. They make jokes and puns, stick their thumbs up or down, tell us the plot and whether the characters are believable. Reviewers, in fact, are often part of the show, a kind of overture to the film we may go to see or bring home on video. They are another part of the entertainment.

But the fact is that attention must be paid to film because most of us get our stories—our narratives and myths—from it or from its close cousin, television. In other words, since the turn of the century, people have turned to film as entertainment, escape, *and* education or as an affirmation of the way they live or think they ought to live their lives. But even if film were “only” entertainment, it is important to find out how it works. Why does it entertain us? Why do we need to be entertained? And what about the fact that film is part of world politics and policy? Some governments support filmmakers as a means to express their national culture to the world. Other governments have caused international incidents over film, particularly where copyright and piracy issues are at stake.

Hard to believe, but sometimes international policy concerning film can lead in turn to aesthetic consequences. After the end of World War II, in 1946, for example, a major agreement was drawn up between France and the United States: the Blum-Byrnes Accords. This agreement came as an unequal compromise in the face of France's concern over getting its own films shown on its own screens. The French public wanted American films. The Accords forced France to accept American films in an uneven ratio: it could show sixteen weeks of its own films, thirty-six weeks of anything else. The Accords changed the way the French made films because some filmmakers decided that the best way to meet the quota was to make high-quality films through the adaptation of literary works. Other French filmmakers hated these adaptations and started to experiment with new cinematic forms, resulting in a revolution of filmmaking in the late fifties that was called the French New Wave. The result, in turn, was a change in film form all over the world. French resentment over the influx of American film and other media surfaced again in the 1990s.

The business of film ripples through the economy, the policy, and the technology of the world at large to this very day. In the coming years, the mergers of enormous media powers—most especially America Online and Time-Warner—will bring wide-reaching changes not only in the economics of film but in what film actually means. They will create a confluence of various delivery systems—film, digital video, print, music, and the World Wide Web—that will make film as we now understand it a different form and kind of entertainment. All nations, our own included, understand the power of film and television to influence their people, to propagandize values and ideologies. Film may be a bargaining chip in foreign policy, always an economic commodity, sometimes the subject of the politician's wrath at home (as when candidates for office rail against the evil moral influence of Hollywood film) and consequently the subject of study of many different kinds of academic courses in which its power and complexity are acknowledged and analyzed. We will talk some about the politics and the business, because film is a big business and its creation, its form, and its content are about power, the core of politics. But mostly we will talk about the form (that is, the way films are put together so that we, as viewers, understand what they are attempting to tell us) and the content of film. We will come to all of this from the perspective of textuality—studying the film itself and how all its parts work—and find out how film, its production and reception, its place in our culture, makes up a large, coherent construction of meaningful and interrelated elements that we can analyze—a text that we can read.

Let's go back for a moment to our straw men, the film reviewers. The first thing almost any reviewer does is talk about (usually summarize) the film's plot. "Charlie Kane is an unhappy newspaper man. His wife leaves him, and he loses all his friends." "2001 opens with a number of shots of animals out on the desert. Then one tribe of apes attacks another until, in the middle of the night, one of the tribes discovers this strange monolith in the middle of their camp. There isn't much dialogue, but the apes look real enough."

What film reviews almost always evade is one of the few realities of film itself, that it is an artificial construct, something made in a particular way for specific purposes, and that plot or story of a film is a function of this construction, not its first principle. In other words, and as we'll see more in detail as we go along, the formal elements of film—the shot and the cut, for example—are unique to film. They are the basic forms of its construction—along with lighting, camera movement, music, sound, acting—and they themselves were and are determined by things going on in the development of film throughout its history and the development of the culture that filmmaking is one part of. When I speak of film as “artificial,” I don't mean it's false; I'm using the term in its root sense, made by art or, often in the case of film, by craft. Film is an artifice, and it becomes an artifact, made in specific ways, using specific tools, fashioned to produce and create specific effects (one of which is the plot, which we often do have to revert to for convenience and to make a point about a movie) with the aim of pleasing the audience who pays to see it. Film reviewers and most everyday discussions of film try to ignore the artificial, constructed aspect of film—its form—and instead talk about it as pure story. The characters of its story become, somehow, “realistic,” as if they might “really” exist rather than result from the way the film itself puts meaning together.

There is no doubt that filmmakers and the development of film form over the last century play a role in this deception. Many filmmakers assume that most viewers are not interested in the construction principles of their work and have accomplished a remarkable feat, making the structure of their films invisible. In other words, one reason we don't pay attention to the form and structure of film is that the form and structure of film disappear behind the very story and characters they produce. This is a great act of prestidigitation and one of the main reasons film has become so popular. Movies have achieved a presence of being, an emotional immediacy that seems unmediated—simply there, without a history, without apparatus, without anything actually between us except the story.

In the discussion that follows, we will explain, analyze, and demystify this apparent act of magic. As we come to understand that film has a complex and flexible form and that story and characters are created by that form, we will become more comfortable with the notion of film as something carefully and seriously *made*. From that point we will be able to move on and understand that the making has a history and the history has a number of parts and branches. One branch—the largest—is the commercial narrative cinema of Hollywood, the major subject of our study. There are a number of national cinemas, some of them, like India's, almost as large as America's, but without much influence outside the nation's borders. Still another is a more experimental cinema—often found in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America but occasionally cropping up in the United States—which explores and experiments with the potentials of film form in the way a good novelist or poet or computer programmer explores her language in order to create new meanings, new structures of thought and feeling.

Understanding film history will help us to understand the conventions of form and content. Clearly, films change over the course of time: they and their makers have a history, as we do, as the culture does. Visual structure, acting styles, story content, the way films *look*—all seem different now than ten or a hundred years ago. But, in many ways, these changes are only superficial. It would be only a small exaggeration to say that, with a few important exceptions, the structure of film and the stories and characters created by that structure have remained mostly unchanged, or have changed in only a gradual way, during the course of film history. Technical methods have indeed changed, and aspects of style (especially acting styles) have changed; but by and large the stories film tells and the ways it tells them follow a continuum almost from the very first images shown to the public. And yet film is always publicizing its uniqueness and originality. “For the first time on the screen...” was a popular publicity phrase in the forties and fifties. “The funniest,” “most unique,” “unlike anything you’ve ever seen,” “the best film,” and “you’ve never seen anything like it” remain useful nonsense phrases for film advertisements. In truth, every commercial, theatrical film is in one way or another like every other commercial, theatrical film, and all are consciously created to be that way! In order to get a film made in Hollywood, an agent or a producer or a studio head has to be convinced that the film you have in mind is “just like” some other film “only different.” Watch the first half-hour of Robert Altman’s *The Player* (1992) for a hilarious representation of what “pitching a story” to a Hollywood producer is like, and see Albert Brooks’s *The Muse* (1999) for an ironic fantasy about the search for an original film idea.

“Just like . . . only different” is the engine that drives film. Hollywood cinema in particular (but all cinema in general) is based upon the conventions of genre, *kinds* of stories, told with styles and cinematic elements that are repeated with major and minor variations throughout the history of the genre. Through genres, films are influenced by history and, very rarely, influence history in return. Genres, as we will see in Chapter 5, are complex contractual events drawn between the filmmaker and the film viewer. We go to a horror film or a thriller, a romantic comedy or a science fiction movie, a Western or a melodrama with certain expectations that the film must meet. If it doesn’t meet them, we will be disappointed and probably will not like the film. If a film masquerading as a genre turns out to attack or make fun of it, one of two things can happen. If other historical and cultural events are in sync with the attack or the parody, it is possible that the genre will wither and all but disappear. This happened to the Western in the late sixties and early seventies. Three moving and disturbing films that questioned the historical and formal elements of the Western—Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970), and Robert Altman’s *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)—joined with the negative response to the Vietnam War and some profound questions about American imperial interests and the myths of manifest destiny to bring the Western down from its enormous popularity to a point from which it has barely recovered. These days, the Western is more likely to be a commentary on the genre rather

than a repetition of it. Among the more interesting recent Westerns are those that use the genre as something like a cover for other investigations of character, history, and gender, such as Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) and Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993).

The more likely response to a film that mocks its generic construction too forcefully is that no one will go to see it. This happened with Robert Altman's late seventies Western with Paul Newman, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976); the Bruce Willis action film *Hudson Hawk* (1991); and the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *The Last Action Hero* (1993). Of course, one ironic and self-mocking Bruce Willis action film, *Die Hard* (1988), was very popular (we will analyze it closely in Chapter 4). When Willis and then Schwarzenegger took the mockery too far, however, and the action hero stereotype was made too obviously like a cartoon and too self-conscious, viewers rebelled. Stereotypes, the expected character, the unsurprising story, the hoped-for conclusion, the invisible style are all part of our contract with the movies, what their makers believe we demand of them. Such demands are certainly not restricted to movies alone: in television, pop music, news reporting, and politics, we tend to be most comfortable with what we've most often heard. We are wary of the new. Our popular culture is, more often than not, an act of affirming already held ideas, of defining, delimiting, and limiting what we accept as the real.

The worst thing we can say about a film is that it is "unrealistic." "The characters weren't real." "The story didn't strike me as being real." Reality is always our last resort. If someone thinks we're not being serious, we're told to "face reality." If our ideas are half-baked, overly narcissistic, or even just silly, we're told to "get real!" If we are college teachers or teenagers, we're told we'll find things different "in the real world." Reality can be a threat, the thing we're not facing, or not in, or not dealing with. But it can also be a verbal gesture of approbation. "That was so real." And, of course, it's the greatest compliment we can give a film, even though—and this is the great paradox—in our media-wise world, we know deep down that what we are seeing has very, very little to do with reality.

The fact is that "reality," like all other aspects of culture, is not something out there, existing apart from us. Reality is an agreement we make with ourselves and between ourselves and the rest of the culture about what we will call real. Maybe, as some people have argued, the only dependable definition of reality is that it is something a lot of people agree upon. This is not to say that there aren't actual, "real" things in the world. Natural processes, states of matter (heat, cold, the relative solidity of physical things), the fact that, in temperate climates, plant life dies off in the fall and returns in the spring—these constitute a "reality," perhaps because they happen without our presence. But no matter what natural events and processes occur, they have little meaning without human interpretation, without our speaking about them within the contexts of our lives and our culture, without our giving them names and meanings.

We find films realistic because we have learned certain kinds of responses, gestures, attitudes from them; and when we see these gestures or feel these responses again in a film or a television show, we assume they are real, because

we've felt them and seen them before. We've probably even imitated them. (Where do we learn the way to kiss someone? From the movies.) This is reality as an infinite loop, a recursion through various emotional and visual constructs, culturally approved, indeed culturally mandated, that we assume to be "real" because we see them over and over again, absorb them, and, for better or worse, live them. In an important sense, like films themselves, "reality" is made up of repetition and assent.

Here is where the reality factor is joined with genre, history, culture, convention, and the invisible structure of film that we talked about earlier. What we call "realistic" in film is, more often than not, only the familiar. The familiar is what we experience often, comfortably, clearly, as if it were always there. When we approve of the reality of a film, we are really affirming our comfort with it, our desire to accept what we see. Desire—simply wanting to see the familiar or a twist on the familiar and receive pleasure from the seeing—is an important idea, because filmgoers aren't fools. No one literally believes what they see on the screen; we all desire and in a certain sense covet, and in a greater sense *want*, what we see, despite what we know about its probability or, more likely, its improbability. We respond with a desire that things could be like this or, simply, that we might want to inhabit a world that looks and behaves like the one on the screen. We want to share, or just *have* the same feelings that the characters up there are having. We want to accept them uncritically, respond emotionally. Our culture keeps telling us over and over that emotions don't lie. If we feel it, it must be so.

In the discussion that follows, we will steer our way through the thickets of desire and try to find why we want so much from movies and how the movies deliver what they and we think we want. By examining form and the ways in which our responses are culturally determined, we will attempt to look at our responses in order to understand what we are really getting when we ask for realism, why we should be asking for it at all, and why our expectations keep changing. You may recall that the first film to win an Academy Award in the new millennium, *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), was part fantasy, with many "unrealistic" touches, and full of fantasy that seemed to echo "real" desires. The film is proof that "reality" is not a given, but chosen.

Culture is another important idea in this book. Chapter 4 will cover in detail what cultural studies is and how our very ideas about culture, and popular culture in particular, keep changing, almost as much as the culture that's being studied. But since we will use the term before then, let me begin to introduce it here.

**Culture** is the sum total of the intricate ways we relate to ourselves, our peers, our community, our country, world, and universe. It is made up of the minutiae of our daily lives: the toothpaste we use—the fact that we use toothpaste—the music we like; the political ideas we hold; our sexual orientation; the image we have of ourselves; the models we want to emulate. Culture is more than ourselves, because our selves are formed by a variety of influences and agreements. So culture is also made up of the general ideological components,



the web of beliefs and things we take for granted, in the society we live in. Politics, law, religion, art, entertainment are all part of our culture: they form its ideological engine, the forces of assent, the values, images, and ideas we agree to embrace and follow or struggle against.

We will use culture here in a broad sense, perhaps close to what the French think about when they worry about their culture being at stake because of the influx and popularity of American movies. In our definition, culture doesn't mean "high-toned" or refer only to works of high art that are supposed to be good for us. Rather, culture is the complex totality of our daily lives and acts. Culture is the form and content of our selves in relation to our community, our country, our social and economic class, our entertainments, our politics and economics. Culture is the way we act out ideology.

Ideology is the way we agree to see ourselves, to behave, and to create the values of our lives. As I suggested, ideology and culture are intertwined. When I decide to act calmly or angrily in a difficult situation, my reaction is determined by ideological and cultural demands of appropriate behavior. In this case it is determined by my gender, which culture forms in the course of my upbringing. Men are "supposed" to react strongly, if not violently, while women "should" be more passive, without an aggressiveness that would be perfectly acceptable in male behavior. Much of our culture nominates as "nerdy" behavior that is intellectually driven and outside the norm. But "norms" are not created naturally. They are made by the ideological assent we give to—in this instance—what kind of behavior or personality type is considered "normal." Who determines the norm? We all do to the extent to which we assent to ideological and cultural "givens." If we suddenly, as a culture, agreed that intellectual work was as meaningful and "manly" as physical work—athletics, for example—the ideological engine might shift gears and "nerds" would become as heroic as jocks. The givens of ideology are actually created over the course of time and are changeable. For example, in older films, women were seen as needing to be saved by a heroic male, a reflection of the ideologies of the time. Today, we often see in film and cheer a strong female character. Contemporary horror films are a good example of the newly seen power of women over destructive forces, while contemporary action films often question male heroics, even while celebrating them.

Of course, when we speak of culture, it might be more accurate to think of cultures. Neither culture nor ideology is singular or monolithic. Let's move from film for a moment and take popular music as an example of how complex culture can be and how it can move in many directions. Hip-hop and rap emerged from African American popular culture in the seventies and eighties. Rap moved from the streets to the recording studios and into the wider population by the mid-1990s, and then separated into a number of strands. One strand, Gangsta Rap, became a way for male African American teenagers to express anger at middle-class white society. But its language of violence and misogyny also disturbed parts of African American culture and signified class and economic divisions within that culture. It brought down the wrath of some of the



white establishment as well. Rap as a whole quickly transcended the music world into the larger cultural arena where art, industry, politics, and promotion are intertwined. It became sound, fashion, aggression, record sales, movie deals, police busts, highway noise, and big business. Attraction for many and irritant to some, rap became a phenomenon of the culture, a practice of one subculture (a term used to define one active part of the entire culture) and a representation of all of the culture.

The point is that culture is made up of expressions and intersections, representations, images, sounds, and stories, almost always influenced by or even formed by gender, race, and economics. It is local and global, moving and changing, depending upon the needs of individual and groups. It can be as peaceful as family churchgoing or as violent as Serbian weekend warriors, who dress up like the movie character Rambo and set out to kill those they believe are their ancient enemies.

In *Film, Form, and Culture*, we will look closely at all the contexts of film (and television and new media): where it fits in the culture, what constitutes its popularity, and why popularity is sometimes used to condemn it.

Finally, a word about the films we will discuss. We will be thinking about and analyzing theatrical, narrative, fiction film—films that tell stories that are meant to be seen by relatively large numbers of people. While we will refer to documentary and to some avant-garde practice, our concern here is with the kinds of film that most people see most of the time. We will talk a lot about American film, because that is the dominant cinema around the world. But there are other very important and very wonderful cinemas and individual filmmakers outside Hollywood, many of whom make their films in response to Hollywood. We will talk about world cinema, the roles it plays, its individual filmmakers and their films.

But doing all this raises a problem. What particular films should we discuss? Within the context of a book, it is impossible to mention (not to say analyze) everyone's favorites, or to deal with films that everyone has seen or wants to see. Adding to the problem is the fact that there is not really an established canon in film studies as there is in literature. Of course, there are great films. Everyone agrees that *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) is among the most important films ever made, and we will discuss it here. (In the first reference to a film, I've followed the convention of giving the title, director's name, and date of release.) But every film scholar and film teacher, like every filmgoer, has his or her favorites. I am no exception. The choice of films I discuss and analyze is therefore often very subjective. I've tried to follow the principle of part for whole. Rather than drown you in titles, my hope is that the analyses of the films I do discuss can provide tools for thinking, talking, and writing about other films; and that each discussion of film, genre, or larger theoretic principle will serve as a template for work on other films, other genres, and other related interests.

One more word on the selection of films. Because film has a history, I have included many older films, even (especially) black and white films. Black and

white was the norm—the reality!—before the late sixties. My hope is that you will want to see the films referred to and get a sense of how wonderful they were and still are.

No matter what the film, you will be asked to connect things and to refuse to believe that the experience of any one thing exists in isolation from any other experience. This book therefore invites you to look at the movies (and, by extension and example, television and the computer screen) as one item in the enormous palette of your own experience and the wider experiences of the culture we all belong to. It invites you to think of a film narrative as seriously as a literary narrative and to understand that the array of images and stories, beliefs and prejudices, love and rejection, peace and violence that we learn about in literature we can learn in very different ways from film. In effect, this book is about the end of film innocence; it is an invitation to discover a world in which nothing is simple, nothing is “just there,” and nothing can be dismissed without, at least, your being conscious that dismissal has consequences.

We end each chapter with a box that correlates the CD-ROM contents to the various material discussed in the text. The CD is a companion to the text: it covers many films, but not every film that's in the text, and it occasionally goes beyond the text to demonstrate what can only be shown with moving images. The films excerpted in the CD complement, rather than duplicate, the examples used in the text.

For a complete table of contents for the CD-ROM, see p. 257.

