



FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM

**INTRODUCTORY
READINGS,
THIRD EDITION**

**EDITED BY
GERALD MAST
AND
MARSHALL
COHEN**

FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM

Introductory Readings

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Gerald Mast
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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The preface to the second edition of this collection noted an emerging distinction between traditional approaches to problems of film theory and those newer approaches influenced by the terms, assumptions, and methodologies of certain disciplines in the social sciences. In the five years that have elapsed between the second and this third edition, these differences between the two types of film theory have become both more pronounced and more clear. In recognition of this clarity, film theorists themselves have divided their field into two halves: "classical film theory" as opposed to "contemporary film theory" (or even "film theory" proper). The basis of this division is partly historical: the recognition that certain problems intrigued film theorists from about 1916 (the year in which the first essay anthologized in this volume was published) until the late 1960s (the years of the Viet Nam War, the student riots in Paris, and the emergence of the new academic disciplines and sensibilities partially in response to these social phenomena). It now seems clear that "classical film theory" can itself be divided into two historical waves. Its first was, broadly, formalist; from the late silent period through the early sound period, theorists such as Hugo Munsterberg, Rudolf Arnheim, and Sergei Eisenstein labored to demonstrate that film was indeed an art—not a mere copying of nature by a mere recording machine. The coming of synchronized sound and an accompanying nostalgic preference for the achievements of silent

cinema provoked a second wave of "classical theory," the realist reaction to the formalist argument. Theorists such as Erwin Panofsky, Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, and Stanley Cavell labored to demonstrate that film was not an art in opposition to nature but somehow, and paradoxically, an art of nature.

"Contemporary film theory" arose in the 1960s both from conditions in the world—public reaction to certain cultural biases and economic inequities—and from conditions in scholarly fields contiguous to that of film theory. The study of linguistics, from the early work of C. S. Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roman Jakobson, to the more recent work of Noam Chomsky and Louis Hjelmslev, explicated the bases of the systems upon which communication and knowledge themselves rest. The structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the cultural observations of Roland Barthes, the demystifying historical arguments of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, the psychoanalytic studies of Jacques Lacan, and the deconstructionist philosophy of Jacques Derrida have all exerted a powerful influence on film study, as they have on every other form of humanistic inquiry. The primary effect of these new (generally French) theories has been an undermining of confidence in the very terms upon which the issues of classical film theory were based—terms like art, nature, society, culture, effect, affect, reality, illusion, self, consciousness, work, text, author, artist. "Contemporary film theory," like contemporary literary theory, is less concerned with individual works than with the terms and assumptions required for examining and evaluating such works.

In response to this current division in film theory, this collection maintains its historical perspective as a broad survey of film thinking over the past eight decades. What may seem its quantitative bias toward "classical theory" arises from several considerations. First, there is the simple difference in the time span of the two traditions; while "contemporary theory" is indeed contemporary, with a body of texts stretching back less than twenty years, "classical theory" embraces arguments about film over the entire period that there have been films to argue about. Second, the works of "classical film theory" have had the time to demonstrate their usefulness in thinking about film and films; despite the limitations of these theories, they have provided the means to focus and define certain key issues in the consideration of film as an art and cultural medium. Many of the newer pieces of film theory have not yet demonstrated that enduring utility, nor have the more and less useful applications of those assumptions yet been sorted out. In its older applications, "classical film theory" continues to

provide useful insights to a new generation of student readers; in its newer formulations, "classical film theory," usually based on the American academic traditions of empiricism or phenomenology, continues to fill the gaps and plug the leaks of earlier formulations. Despite the claims that "classical film theory" is (at most) obsolete and (at least) unfashionable, many film theorists, particularly in America, continue to ask the same questions that have dominated "classical film theory" or propose answers that fuse the "classical" and "contemporary" modes. It may well be that the most adventurous, innovative, and pioneering work in film theory today can be attributed to followers of the French schools, but the "classical" works of current film theory continue to solidify the field if not expand its borders.

The most obvious influence of "contemporary film theory" on this volume can be seen in its final section, which has once again been retitled, expanded, and extensively revised. Its new title, "Film: Society, Ideology, and Psychology," indicates that the central issue of such a line of inquiry is not film itself but film's relationship to its culture and its consumers—the way films shape or reflect cultural attitudes, reinforce or reject the dominant modes of cultural thinking, stimulate or frustrate the needs and drives of the psyche. In a very broad sense, the title of this final section might more appropriately have returned to that of the first edition, "The Film Audience," rather than of the second, "Film and Society," since "contemporary film theory" treats not just social issues but psychological, political, and economic ones—and the inseparable interrelation between them. Although the most extensive collection of "contemporary" essays can be found in this seventh section, the footprints of "contemporary film theory" can be tracked throughout the volume, in response to more "classical" issues—the Freudian basis of a film genre, the relationship of a movie star to sexist ideology, or the implications of television as a medium.

The other major revision of this third edition can be seen in its fifth section, which has been retitled "Film Genres" (rather than "Kinds of Film"). The shift of title indicates that the focus of this section is narrower than it previously was, concentrating exclusively on distinctions within a single kind of film—fictional Hollywood movies (or "classical Hollywood narrative cinema," as it is now called). Other than an inescapable response to the necessity of making this collection as economical as possible, the change of the section's title and focus reflects current thinking about the categorization of films, which has almost exclusively narrowed to types within the fictional Hol-

lywood narrative tradition. We must apologize for any pedagogical inconvenience or disruption which the removal of these essays might cause—and for the excision of any others which may have seemed useful or interesting.

We once again wish to express our sincere thanks to those who have helped formulate the new issues and choose the new essays for this third edition—particularly, Curtis Church, Beverle Houston, Bruce Kawin, and Joel Snyder.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The Preface to the original edition of this collection closed with the following wish: "It is our hope that this anthology will contribute to the growing interest in film theory and to the practice of a more rigorous criticism than that which prevails at the present time." It is difficult to say whether the appearance of this anthology in 1974 should be taken as a prophecy, or merely as another symptom of what has become clear five years later: that the last decade has been an extremely fertile and fervent period of theorizing about film, perhaps the richest period of film theorizing in quantity, quality, and diversity since the invention of cinema itself. This recent theory is fully conscious of the context of theoretical debate, within which each new question or solution must be placed, in a way that was not true of previous generations of film theorists.

The second edition of *Film Theory and Criticism* attempts to give the reader a sense of these developments. To do so we have devoted more space to certain issues, especially to the discussion of film *genres*, and have paid greater attention to certain theoretical trends, particularly to the semiotic and structuralist approaches to film theory and criticism. Several traditional approaches to film theory continue to be employed by the most recent theory—approaches which borrow the methodologies and terminology of such related humanistic disciplines as literary criticism, art history, and aesthetics. But the newer semiotic and structuralist

approaches, often influenced by the methodologies and even the conclusions of related disciplines in the social sciences—of Marxist economic historical analysis and Freudian psychoanalysis—have become increasingly important to film theory (and a subject of controversy within it) during the last decade. Writers in this tradition have offered new perspectives on such “classical” issues of film theory as the relation of film to reality or the precise characteristics of film as a “language.” The sections of the anthology devoted to these questions have, therefore, been revised to give a fuller account of these approaches.

The semiotic school, particularly in its Marxist manifestations, has also been particularly concerned with the ways that films reveal the underlying social attitudes and “ideologies” of the cultures that produce them, the ways films manipulate audience beliefs, and the ways they exploit and satisfy audience desires. Although the importance of these issues is reflected throughout the anthology, we have given them a sharper focus by reconceiving and retitling the final section “Film and Society” to reflect the concern with treating a film not as a self-contained work of art, as much “classical” film theory does, but as a social-economic product and a cultural manifestation. To accommodate these additions, we have found it necessary to eliminate the discussion of *Shakespeare and Film*, a topic which other anthologies, devoted exclusively to it, have treated more fully.

We would like to thank all those who sent us suggestions for additions, eliminations, and emendations: Kent R. Brown; Robert E. Golden; Bruce Kawin; Barbara Leaming; Charles J. Maland; Joan Mellen; James Monaco; and William Siska. Our final decision to eliminate an essay (certainly the most difficult decision we had to make) was based both on general opinion of its usefulness as well as our opinion of its relevance to an important theoretical issue. We can only apologize if we have eliminated some of the essays readers considered most useful and interesting. We would also like to express our special thanks to Jean Shapiro, who aided us so patiently and so diligently in assembling the final manuscript.

PREFACE

TO THE FIRST EDITION

This collection of readings gathers together under one cover the most significant theories and theorists of film. Given the youth of the film art, the variety of its possibilities, and the fact that it incorporates so many other arts, it is not surprising that the general pattern of film theory is one of disagreement and diversity. Theorists have responded in many different ways to the fact that film has been both silent and with sound, in color and black-and-white, short and long, plotted and plotless, realistic and fantastic, logical and irrational, two- and three-dimensional, in wide and narrow screen, fictional and factual, live and animated, entertaining and educational.

In order to give some shape to this complexity, the book organizes its selections around seven topics which have emerged as the basic subjects of film theory. In the first section, *Film and Reality*, the collection examines the relationship between the motion picture and the reality which it photographs. In the second, *Film Image and Film Language*, the theorists examine the syntax and structure of the film itself. They ask how it generates "meaning." The third section, *The Film Medium*, considers the term "cinematic" and asks what qualities, if any, make the film art unique. The fourth section, *Film, Theater, and Literature*, continues this line of questioning and asks, in particular, how the film is related to those literary arts with which it has so much in common and from which it yet differs so greatly. The fifth section, *Kinds of Film*, analyzes some of the main genres of film and discusses the difficulties that arise

in attempting to categorize films in these ways. The sixth section, *The Film Artist*, investigates the question of who, if anyone, ought to be called the artist in the collaborative endeavor of filmmaking. The seventh section, *The Film Audience*, asks what kind of experience film provides for its audience and what kind of experience it ought to provide.

Film theory is of importance not only for its own sake but also for the contribution it can make to film criticism. Each section therefore includes, in addition to the more theoretical articles, critical essays which show how the more general issues arise in connection with specific films and filmmakers. It is our hope that this anthology will contribute to the growing interest in film theory and to the practice of a more rigorous criticism than that which prevails at the present time.

We wish to thank Dudley Andrew, Hannah Arendt, Richard Balkin, Stanley Kauffmann, Harriet Serenkin, and John Wright for their helpful advice and comments.

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