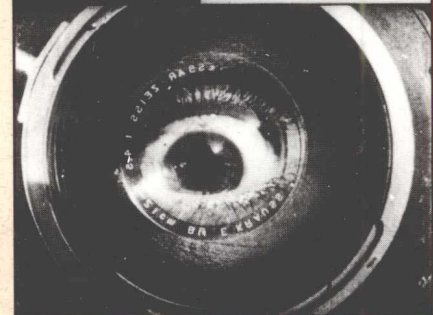# FILM ART

AN INTRODUCTION

ART

FOURTH EDITION

DAVID BORDWELL
KRISTIN THOMPSON

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University of Wisconsin

FILM ART: AN INTRODUCTION

Cover photos (*top to bottom*): Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (France,
1967), courtesy Pennebaker, Inc.; Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's
Ballet mécanique (France, 1924); John Ford's *Stagecoach* (USA,
1939); Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique*
(France, 1924); Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR,
1929); Fernando Arrabal's *Viva la Muerte!* (Spain, 1971).

FILM ART

AN INTRODUCTION

ABOUT
THE AUTHORS

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Kristin Thompson is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She holds a master's degree in film from the University of Iowa and a doctorate in film from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She has published *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible* (Princeton University Press, 1981), *Exporting Entertainment: America's Place in World Film Markets, 1907–1934* (British Film Institute, 1985), *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 1988), and numerous articles on film. She is currently at work on a history of European avant-garde film styles of the 1920s. In her spare time she does research on the work of P. G. Wodehouse.

The authors have previously collaborated, with Janet Staiger, on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Columbia University Press, 1985).

To our parents
Marjorie and Jay Bordwell
and Jean and Roger Thompson

PREFACE

This book seeks to introduce the reader to the aesthetics of film. It assumes that the reader has no knowledge of cinema beyond the experience of moviegoing. Although some aspects of the book may prove useful for people with considerable knowledge of film, our aim is to survey the fundamental aspects of cinema as an art form.

By stressing film as art, we necessarily ignore certain aspects of the medium. Industrial documentaries, instructional filmmaking, the social history of cinema or its impact as a mass medium—all these are important dimensions of cinema, and each would require a separate book for adequate treatment. Instead, this book seeks to isolate those basic features of film which can constitute it as an art. The book therefore directs itself at the person interested in how the film medium may give us experiences akin to those offered by painting, sculpture, music, literature, theater, architecture, or dance.

As we wrote this book, we envisioned readers of three particular sorts. First is the interested general reader, who wants to know a little more about the movies. Second is the student in a course in film appreciation, introduction to film, film criticism, or film aesthetics; for this reader, the book can function as a textbook. Third is the more advanced student of film, who may find here a convenient outline of principal issues and concepts and a set of suggestions for more specialized work.

Organizationally, *Film Art: An Introduction* offers a distinct approach to studying its topic. It might be possible to survey, willy-nilly, all contemporary approaches to film aesthetics, but we judged this to be too eclectic. Instead, we have sought an approach that would lead the reader in logical steps through various aspects of film aesthetics. Crucial to this approach is an emphasis on *the whole film.* Audiences experience entire films, not snippets. If the particular film is the irreducible center of our inquiry, we need an approach that will help us understand it. The approach we have

chosen emphasizes the film as an artifact—made in particular ways, having a certain wholeness and unity, existing in history. We can outline the approach in a series of questions.

How is a film created? To understand film as art demands, we must first understand how human labor creates the artifact. This leads to a study of *film production* (Part I).

How does an entire film function? This book assumes that like all artworks, a film may be understood as a *formal* construct. This leads to a consideration of what form is and how it affects us, of basic principles of film form, and of narrative and nonnarrative forms in cinema (Part II). Matters of film form also demand that we consider the *techniques* which are characteristic of the film medium, for such techniques function within the form of the total film. Thus we analyze the artistic possibilities of the four primary film techniques: mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound (Part III).

How may we analyze a film critically? Armed with both a conception of film form and a knowledge of film technique, we can go on to analyze *specific films* as artworks. We analyze several such films as examples (Part IV).

How does film art change through history? Although a thorough history of cinema would require many volumes, here we can suggest how the formal aspects of film do not exist outside determinable historical contexts. We survey the most noteworthy *periods and movements in film history* to show how understanding form helps us locate films within history (Part V).

This approach to the entire film came from several years of teaching introductory film courses. As teachers, we wanted students to see and hear more in the films we studied, but it was evident that simply providing the "lecturer's view" would not teach students how to analyze films on their own. Ideally, we decided, students should master a repertory of *principles* which would help them examine films more closely. We became convinced that the best way to understand cinema is to use general principles of film form to help analyze specific films. Our success with this approach led us to decide that this book should be skills-centered. By learning basic concepts of film form and technique, the reader can sharpen his or her perception of any particular film.

The stress on skills has another consequence. You will note that we refer to a great many films. We expect that very few readers will have seen all of the films we mention, and certainly no teacher of a film course could possibly show every title. But because the book stresses the acquisition of conceptual skills, the reader need not see all of the films we mention in order to grasp the general principles. Many other films can be used to make the same points. For instance, the possibilities of camera movement can be as easily illustrated with *La Ronde* as with *La Grande Illusion;* to exemplify narrative ambiguity, *Shadow of a Doubt* will serve as well as *Day of Wrath*. Indeed, although the book can serve as a syllabus for a course in cinema, it is also possible for a teacher to use different films to illustrate the book's ideas. (It would then be a useful exercise for the class to *contrast* the text

example with the film shown, so as to specify even more clearly particular aspects of the film.) The book rests not on titles, but on concepts.

Film Art: An Introduction has certain unusual features. A book on film must be heavily illustrated, and most are. Virtually all film books, however, utilize so-called production skills—photographs taken during filming, but usually not from the position of the motion picture camera. The result is a picture that does not correspond to any image in the finished film. We have used virtually no production stills. Instead, the illustrations in this book are virtually all frame enlargements—magnified photographs from the actual film. Most of these illustrations come from 35mm prints of the films, and with the exception of shots from *Daisies* and *Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, all of the color illustrations are taken from 35mm prints.

Another unusual feature is the Notes and Queries section at the end of almost every chapter. In these sections we attempt to raise issues, provoke discussion, and suggest further reading and research. As chapter supplements, the Notes and Queries sections constitute a resource for the advanced undergraduate, the graduate student, and the interested general reader.

In all, we hope that this book will help readers to watch a greater variety of films with keener attention and to ask precise questions about the art of cinema.

This fourth edition of *Film Art: An Introduction* seeks to enrich the ideas set forth in preceding editions. We have again tried to make the book more comprehensive, flexible, and up to date.

By and large the concepts pertaining to film form and film technique remain constant from prior editions. We have updated the Notes and Queries sections to reflect recent developments in advanced cinema studies. Chapter 11's treatment of film history has been somewhat recast in the light of contemporary scholarship. On the whole, the book has been extensively revised for style and clarity, with some portions of each chapter wholly rewritten. Our aim has been to tighten and simplify our points, while still broadening our coverage.

In many respects the book's range of coverage has expanded. We have drawn more examples from non-Western filmmakers such as Chen Kaige, Souleymane Cissé, Yilmaz Güney, and others. We have added critical analyses of *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Raging Bull*. We have drawn examples from recent films (e.g., Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, Cameron's *Aliens*, and McTiernan's *Hunt for Red October*) that offer instructive uses of film technique. The discussion of home video in Chapters 1 and 6 has been updated, with particular reference to improvements in laserdiscs. Our discussion of aspect ratios has gained in precision, and our consideration of sound techniques has become more nuanced. Most strikingly, the number of color illustrations has quadrupled to 64, and our discussion of color in Chapters 5 and 6 has expanded accordingly. In all, the book now includes several fresh examples and over two hundred new illustrations.

Over the years, many people have helped us improve *Film Art: An Introduction*. Our list of acknowledgments rivals the lengthy credit rosters on current Hollywood films: David Allen, Tino Balio, John Belton, Ralph Berets, Eileen Bowser, Edward Branigan, Martin Bresnick, Michael Budd,

David Bordwell
Kristin Thompson

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PART I

FILM PRODUCTION

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THE WORK
OF FILM
PRODUCTION

On sober reflection, we readily admit that films are like buildings, books, and symphonies—artifacts made by humans for human purposes. Yet, as part of an audience watching an enthralling movie, we may find it difficult to remember that what we are seeing is not a natural object, like a flower or an asteroid. Cinema is so captivating that we tend to forget that movies are *made*. An understanding of the art of cinema depends initially on a recognition that a film is produced by both machines and human labor.

TECHNICAL FACTORS IN FILM PRODUCTION

Watching a film differs from viewing a painting, a stage performance, or even a slide show. A film presents us with *images* in *illusory* motion. What creates this specific effect, this sense of "moving pictures"?

For cinema to exist, a series of images must be displayed to a viewer in certain ways. Most basically, a mechanism presents each image for a very short period and inserts a brief interval of blackness between the images. If a series of slightly different images of the same object is displayed under these conditions, physiological and psychological processes in the viewer will create the illusion of seeing a moving image.

What are these processes? Since the nineteenth century, a prime candidate has been the process of "persistence of vision," the phenomenon by which an image lingers on the retina for a fraction of a second after the source has vanished. But this does not in itself explain why we would see movement rather than a succession of still images. Twentieth-century re-