

11

Critique



Universal Studios

Surely there are no hard and fast rules: It all depends on how it's done.

—PAULINE KAEL, FILM CRITIC

 **Overview** Types of critics and theorists. What is the essential nature of cinema? The three focus points: the work of art, the artist, the audience. Theories of realism: a mirror of the real world. The self-effacing artist. The values of discovery, intimacy, and emotional richness. The avoidance of artifice. Italian neorealism. Formalist film theories: imaginary worlds. A place of magic. The pleasure principle. The film artist: the auteur theory. The French *nouvelle vague*. Eclectic and synthetic theories. The American tradition of practical criticism. Eclecticism: Whatever works is right. Structuralism and semiotic theories. The complexity of film: codified data in a deep structure. Quantifying the ineffable. Thematic polarities and the nonlinear methodology of structuralism. Historiography: the assumptions and biases of writing histories. Aesthetic approaches. Technological approaches. Economic histories. Social histories.

This chapter devotes itself to how film critics and theorists have responded to movies—how they evaluate them and how they place them in a wider intellectual context. People who critique movies fall into three general classes:

1. *Reviewers* are generally regional journalists who describe the contents and general tone of a movie, with only incidental emphasis on aesthetic evaluation. Often such writers point out whether a given film is suitable for children or not.
2. *Critics* are also journalists for the most part, but their emphasis is more on evaluation than on mere content description. Nationally known film critics can have considerable influence on the commercial success or failure of a given movie.
3. *Theorists* are usually professional academics, often the authors of books on how movies can be studied on a more philosophical level.

Most theorists are concerned with the wider context of the medium—its social and political implications. Theorists have also explored the essential nature of cinema—what differentiates it from other art forms, what its basic properties are. For the most part, film theory has been dominated by Europeans, especially the French and British. The tradition of criticism in the United States has been less theoretical and more pragmatic in its thrust. In recent times, however, American movie critics have shown a greater interest in the theoretical implications of the medium, though the bias in favor of practical criticism remains strong.

A theory is an intellectual grid, a set of aesthetic generalizations, not eternal verities. Some theories are more useful than others in understanding specific movies. No single theory can explain them all. For this reason, recent developments in the field have stressed an eclectic approach, synthesizing a variety of strategies.

Traditionally, critics and theorists have focused their attention on three areas of inquiry: (1) the work of art, (2) the artist, and (3) the audience. Those

11-1a. *The Maltese Falcon* (U.S.A., 1941), with Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Mary Astor, and Sydney Greenstreet; directed by John Huston.

Theory is the handmaiden of art, not vice versa. Movies can be explored from a variety of theoretical perspectives, each with its own set of values and parameters of inquiry. Your theoretical orientation will depend in large part on what you're looking for. For example, *The Maltese Falcon* can be placed in at least seven theoretical contexts: (1) An auteur critic would regard it as a typical Huston film. (2) It could also be analyzed as a Bogart vehicle, exploiting and expanding the **star's iconography**. (3) An industry historian would place the picture within its commercial context—as a superior example of the Warner Brothers product of this era. (4) A **genre** theorist would be interested in it as a classic example of the detective thriller, and one of the first of the so-called deadly female pictures that were so popular in the United States during the 1940s. (5) A theorist interested in the relationship of movies to literature might focus on Huston's script, based on Dashiell Hammet's celebrated novel of the same title. (6) A stylistic critic would analyze the picture within the context of **film noir**, an important style in the American cinema of the 1940s. (7) A **Marxist** might interpret the movie as a parable on greed, an implicit condemnation of the vices of capitalism. Each theoretical grid charts a different cinematic topography. (Warner Bros.)



11-1b. *On the Waterfront* (U.S.A., 1954), with Eva Marie Saint and Marlon Brando, directed by Elia Kazan.

"Masterpiece" is a term that's too loosely used by some film critics, yet it's an undeniably useful concept, signifying an artistic work of the highest value. Responsible film critics are reluctant to call a recently released movie a masterpiece because generally a film must survive the test of time in order to qualify. For example, even today *On the Waterfront* is almost universally regarded as a masterpiece. Who decides whether a movie is great or not? Generally, influential film critics, film festival judges, industry leaders, and other professionals who are widely respected for their taste and judgment. Of course no one is obliged to agree with them. What makes a movie a masterpiece? Usually, significant innovations in subject matter or style, or both. Also, a richness and complexity in the treatment of characters and story. Often a masterpiece provides us with a valuable insight of some kind, a revelation of the human condition. But in the end, "masterpiece" is a subjective term. Film critics and scholars are by no means in total agreement about what movies are masterpieces and what movies aren't. Such commentators often refer to "the canon"—that is, a loose consensus of individual films that are widely regarded as privileged works, superior to the rest. In other words, a collection of masterpieces. (Columbia Pictures)

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11-1c. *Last Tango in Paris* (Italy/France, 1972), with Maria Schneider and Marlon Brando, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.

In the minds of many people, the word “masterpiece” somehow suggests a perfect work of art. In fact, the opposite is usually the case. Virtually any movie, even one so original and brilliant as *Last Tango*, contains scenes that just don’t work, or feature embarrassing lapses in taste or execution. In this film, the central character (Schneider) is engaged to a young filmmaker who seems very lightweight compared to her secret lover (Brando), whom she meets for anonymous, passionate sex in a rented apartment. The subplot about the filmmaker is shallow and conventional, but the story about her secret lover is fascinating. Thematically

rich and complex, *Last Tango* is about sex and love and the differences between them. “I didn’t make an erotic film,” Bertolucci explained, “only a film *about* eroticism.” His main concern in the movie is to show how sex is used to satisfy subconscious needs that are only superficially related to sex: “Things are ‘erotic’ only before relationships develop,” he pointed out. “The strongest erotic moments in a relationship are always at the beginning, since relationships are born from animal instincts. But every sexual relationship is condemned. It is condemned to lose its purity, its animal nature. Sex becomes an instrument for saying other things.” Sex can morph into love, which is a lot more complicated. (*United Artists*)

who have stressed the work of art have explored the inner dynamics of movies—how they communicate, the language systems they use. Film theorists can be divided into **realists** and **formalists**, just as filmmakers tend to favor one style or the other. The most important artist-oriented approach is the **auteur theory**, the belief that a movie is best understood by focusing on its artistic creator, presumably the director. Structuralism and semiology were the dominant theories after 1970, and both tend to emphasize a synthetic approach, combining such concerns as genre, authorship, style, **iconography**, social context, and ideology. In the area of historiography—the theoretical assumptions underlying film history—recent trends have also emphasized an integrated approach.

THEORIES OF REALISM

Most theories of realism emphasize the documentary aspects of film art. Movies are evaluated primarily in terms of how accurately they reflect external reality. The camera is regarded as essentially a recording mechanism rather than an expressive medium in its own right. The subject matter is paramount in the cinema of realism, technique its discreetly transparent handmaiden. As we have seen in the case of André Bazin (Chapter 4), most theories of realism have a

moral and ethical bias and are often rooted in the values of Islamic, Christian, and Marxist humanism.

Realist theorists like Cesare Zavattini and Siegfried Kracauer believe that cinema is essentially an extension of photography and shares with it a pronounced affinity for recording the visible world around us (11–2a). Unlike other art forms, photography and cinema tend to leave the raw materials of reality more or less intact. There is a minimum of interference and manipulation on the artist's part, for film is not an art of invention so much as an art of "being there."

Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* (11–2b) inaugurated the Italian **neorealist** movement, one of the triumphs of the cinema of realism. The movie deals with the collaboration of Catholics and Communists in fighting the Nazi occupation of Rome shortly before the American army liberated the city. Technically, the film is rather crude. Good quality film stock was impossible to obtain, so Rossellini had to use inferior newsreel stock. Nevertheless, the technical flaws and the resultant grainy images convey a sense of journalistic immediacy and authenticity. (Many neorealists began their careers as journalists, and Rossellini himself began as a documentarist.) Virtually all the movie was shot at actual locations, and there are many exterior shots in which no additional lights were used. With the exception of the principal players, the actors were nonprofessionals. The structure of the movie is episodic—a series of vignettes showing the reactions of Roman citizens to the German occupation.

Open City is saturated with a sense of unrelenting honesty. "This is the way things are," Rossellini is said to have declared after the film premiered. The statement became the motto of the neorealist movement. The film provided a rallying point for an entire generation of Italian filmmakers whose creative talents had been stifled by the repressive Fascist regime of the prewar era. Within the next few years, there followed an astonishing series of movies that catapulted the Italians into the front ranks of the international cinema. The major filmmakers of the movement were Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica and his frequent scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini.

There are considerable differences between these men and even between their early and later works. Furthermore, neorealism implied a style as well as an ideology. Rossellini emphasized the ethical dimension: "For me, Neorealism is above all a moral position from which to look at the world. It then became an aesthetic position, but at the beginning it was moral." De Sica, Zavattini, and Visconti also stressed morality as the touchstone of neorealism.

The main ideological characteristics of the movement can be summarized as follows: (1) a new democratic spirit, with emphasis on the value of ordinary people such as laborers, peasants, and factory workers; (2) a compassionate point of view and a refusal to make facile moral judgments; (3) a preoccupation with Italy's Fascist past and its aftermath of wartime devastation, poverty, unemployment, prostitution, and the black market; (4) a blending of Christian and Marxist humanism; and (5) an emphasis on emotions rather than abstract ideas.

The stylistic features of neorealism include (1) an avoidance of neatly plotted stories in favor of loose, episodic structures that evolve organically from the situations of the characters; (2) a documentary visual style; (3) the



11-2a. *Narc* (U.S.A., 2002), with Jason Patrick and Ray Liotta, written and directed by Joe Carnahan.

Police stories, thrillers, urban melodramas—all these genres tend to favor realism as a style. Realism insists that truth lies on the surface of life, and the function of the artist is to mirror this surface accurately, without bias or distortion. Realism is especially effective in revealing the darker side of human nature, where sentimentality, wishful thinking, and glib certainties about right and wrong are regarded as a kind of moral virginity. (Paramount Pictures)

11-2b. *Open City* (Italy, 1945), with Marcello Pagliero, directed by Roberto Rossellini.

The torture scenes of this famous Resistance film were so realistic that they were cut out of some prints. In this episode, a Nazi S.S. officer applies a blowtorch to the body of a Communist partisan in an effort to force him to reveal the names of his comrades in the underground. The crucifixion allusion is deliberate, even though the character is a nonbeliever. It parallels the death of another partisan, a Catholic priest, who is executed by a military firing squad. The French critic André Bazin was a champion of Italian neorealism, applauding its moral fervor even more than its technical restraint. “Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism, and only secondarily a style of filmmaking?” he asked. (Pathé Contemporary Films)



use of actual locations—usually exteriors—rather than studio sets; (4) the use of nonprofessional actors, sometimes even for principal roles; (5) an avoidance of literary dialogue in favor of conversational speech, including dialects; and (6) an avoidance of artifice in the **editing**, camerawork, and lighting in favor of a simple “styleless” style.

Realists have shown a persistent hostility toward plot and neatly structured stories. For example, Cesare Zavattini defined the ordinary and the everyday as the main business of the cinema. Spectacular events and extraordinary characters should be avoided at all costs, he believed. He claimed that his ideal movie would consist of ninety consecutive minutes from a person’s actual life. There should be no barriers between reality and the spectator, no directorial virtuosity to “deform” the integrity of life as it is. The artistry should be invisible, the materials “found” rather than shaped or manipulated.

Suspicious of conventional plot structures, Zavattini dismissed them as dead formulas. He insisted on the dramatic superiority of life as it is experienced by ordinary people. Filmmakers should be concerned with the “excavation” of reality. Instead of plots, they should emphasize facts and all their “echoes and reverberations.” According to Zavattini, filmmaking is not a matter of “inventing fables” that are superimposed over the factual materials of life, but of searching unrelentingly to uncover the dramatic implications of these facts. The purpose of the cinema is to explore the “dailiness” of events, to reveal certain details that had always been there but had never been noticed.

In his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, the German-trained theorist Siegfried Kracauer also attacks plot as a natural enemy of realism. According to Kracauer, the cinema is characterized by a number of natural affinities. First of all, it tends to favor “unstaged reality”—that is, the most appropriate subject matter gives the illusion of having been found rather than arranged. Second, film tends to stress the random, the fortuitous. Kracauer is fond of the phrase “nature caught in the act,” meaning that film is best suited to recording events and objects that might be overlooked in life. The realistic cinema is a cinema of “found moments” and poignant revelations of humanity. A third affinity that Kracauer notes is indeterminacy. The best movies suggest endlessness. They imply a slice of life, a fragment of a larger reality rather than a self-contained whole. By refusing to tie up all the loose ends at the conclusion of the movie, the filmmaker can suggest the limitlessness of reality.

Kracauer is hostile toward movies that demonstrate a “formative tendency.” Historical films and fantasies he regards as tending to move away from the basic concerns of the medium. He also dismisses most literary and dramatic adaptations because he believes that literature is ultimately concerned with “interior realities,” what people are thinking and feeling, whereas movies explore surfaces, exterior reality. He regards all stylistic self-consciousness as “uncinematic,” because instead of emphasizing the subject matter, the filmmaker calls attention to *how* it is presented.

Theories of film realism are not very helpful in understanding the complexities of formalist movies—the works of a Sergei Eisenstein or a Steven Spielberg. On the other hand, they do help to explain the raw emotional power of



11-3. De Sica, Renoir, and Ray were world-class cinematic realists, and these three movies are among their most celebrated masterpieces.

11-3a. *Umberto D* (Italy, 1952), with Carlo Battisti (right), directed by Vittorio De Sica.

Scripted by Cesare Zavattini, *Umberto D* concentrates on “small subjects,” ordinary people, and the details of everyday life. The story explores the drab existence of a retired pensioner who’s being forced out of his modest apart-

ment because he can’t afford the rent hike. His only comfort is his adoring pet dog who accompanies him in his desperate attempts to come up with the necessary cash. (*Museum of Modern Art*)

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11-3b. *The Rules of the Game* (France, 1939), directed by Jean Renoir.

“Everyone has his reasons,” Jean Renoir once observed of his characters. In this wise and profound comedy of manners, Renoir refuses to divide people glibly into good guys and bad, insisting that most people have logical reasons for behaving as they do. Sometimes good people commit horrible deeds—like this enraged working-class husband who blasts away with a shotgun at the man he thinks has seduced his wife. Incongruously, he does so in the middle of a luxurious salon filled with (mostly) innocent bystanders. (*Janus Films*)



11–3c. *Pather Panchali (The Song of the Road)*, (India, 1955), with Kanu Bannerjee, directed by Satyajit Ray.

Like his idols De Sica and Renoir, Ray was a humanist, exploring a wide range of emotions. *Pather Panchali* is a study of grinding poverty in a remote Indian village. It packs a powerful emotional punch. Terrible catastrophes seem to strike out of nowhere, almost crushing their victims and plunging them into unspeakable grief. Surviving this squalor and desperation is human hope, flickering like a candle against the wind, refusing to be extinguished. (Audio-Brandon Film)



Why should we watch such depressing stories? Hedonists might well complain that movies like these bring you down, that they're painful to watch, a kind of cinema for masochists. The answer is complex. Such movies often *are* painful to watch. But they're also insightful, dramatizing what it's like to be up against the wall, to be really desperate. They show us the toughness and resilience of our brothers and sisters. At their best, movies like these can be profoundly spiritual—offering us privileged glimpses into the nobility of the human spirit.

such masterpieces of realism as *Bicycle Thief*, which was directed by Vittorio De Sica and scripted primarily by Zavattini (6–33).

Bicycle Thief was acted entirely by nonprofessionals and consists of simple events in the life of a laborer (played by Lamberto Maggiorani, who was an actual factory worker). In 1948, when the film was released, nearly a quarter of the workforce in Italy was unemployed. At the opening of the movie, we are introduced to the protagonist, a family man with a wife and two children to support. He has been out of work for two years. Finally, a billboard-posting job opens up, but to

11-4a. *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs* (Italy, 1978), directed by Ermanno Olmi.

As a movement, Italian neorealism was pretty much over by the mid-1950s, but as a style and an attitude toward reality, its influence spread to many other countries. A number of Italian filmmakers continued in the tradition of neorealism. For example, Olmi's movies are steeped in the values of Christian humanism. In this film, he celebrates the everyday lives of several peasant families around 1900. For them, God is a living presence—a source of guidance, hope, and solace. Their faith is childlike, trusting, like that of St. Francis of Assisi. In a series of documentarylike vignettes,

Olmi unfolds their gentle drama, extolling their patience, their tough stoicism, their dignity. For Olmi, they are the salt of the earth. (*New Yorker Films*)



11-4b. *Taste of Cherry* (Iran, 1998), with Homayoun Ershadi, written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami.

Winner of the Palme d'Or (top prize) at the Cannes Film Festival, *Taste of Cherry* demonstrated to the world that neorealism was alive and thriving in Iran. Shot on actual locations with a nonprofessional cast, the movie poetically validates the sacredness of life, from an Islamic-humanist perspective. The plot is episodic and loosely structured, allowing maximum space to explore philosophical and religious themes, but in a simple, unpretentious way. It's a movie of considerable wisdom. For a good collection of essays exploring the renaissance of Iranian movies, see *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, edited by Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

(*Zeitgeist Films*)



accept it, he must have a bicycle. To get his bike out of hock, he and his wife pawn their sheets and bedding. On his first day on the job, the bicycle is stolen. The rest of the movie deals with his attempts to recover the bike. The man's search grows increasingly more frantic as he crisscrosses the city with his idolizing son, Bruno. After a series of false leads, the two finally track down one of the thieves, but the protagonist is outwitted by him and humiliated in front of his boy. Realizing that

11-5a. *Italian for Beginners* (Denmark, 2002), written and directed by Lone Scherfig.

Kamikaze realism. European cineastes have a long tradition of making pontifical pronouncements and publishing strident manifestos. Like *Dogma 95*, for example. That's their real name, their chosen name. In 1995, a group of Danish filmmakers issued a list of strict rules about movie making. The most famous of these directors are Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and Lone Scherfig.

Presumably by following these rules, movies could be *really* realistic, and not faux realistic, like everyone else's so-called realistic movies. Some of these rules: Only real locations can be used as sets. Props also have to be found on the location. Sound must always be diegetic—sourced from within the image. No music, unless you can see the musicians in the shot. The camera must be handheld. The film must be in color: No artsy black and white. No unusual lights can be set up: available lighting is best. No special effects—they're not real. Not even any filters: reality should not be modified or prettified. No melodramatic or extraordinary events: just everyday life. Movies should always stay in the present: No flashbacks, no dream or fantasy sequences. Finally, the director must not be credited. Needless to say, very few of the filmmakers have been able to obey all these draconian injunctions. Most of the commercially or critically successful works by these artists have been admired not because they followed the rules, but because the characters are genuinely compelling. In this movie they all have a story, they all have a need. Needs. Scherfig's dialogue is fresh and spontaneous sounding, often wryly funny. And her ensemble cast is first-rate. It's not her technique that makes the movie engrossing, it's the human interaction. (Miramax Films)



11-5b. *Jarhead* (U.S.A., 2005), with Jamie Foxx, directed by Sam Mendes.

Too much realism? When film realism is too close to reality, problems often arise. *Jarhead* is a movie about military combat, but the main characters, highly trained marine snipers, never get a chance to exercise their skills. They never even get to see a war—in this case, the first American invasion of Iraq, dubbed Desert Storm. Based on the memoirs of marine Anthony Swofford, the film spends most of its time waiting, waiting to head toward the combat zone. Meanwhile, they train, they drink and smoke, train some more, clown around, and wait some more. They're all pumped up with nowhere to go. While they're waiting, the war comes to an end. No pay-off scene. The movie was a box-office disappointment, despite its excellent cast. Why? Perhaps cultural critic Frank Rich said it best: "A long attention span has never been part of the American character. We like fast-paced narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends. We like an upbeat final curtain." In short, we don't like our realism to be too real.

(Universal)



he will lose his livelihood without a bike, the desperate man—after sending his son away—sneaks off and attempts to steal one himself. But the boy observes from a distance as his father peddles frantically to escape a pursuing mob. He is caught and again humiliated in front of a crowd—which includes his incredulous son. With the bitterness of betrayed innocence, the youngster suddenly realizes that his dad is not the heroic figure he had formerly thought, but an ordinary man who in desperation yielded to a degrading temptation. Like most neorealist films, *Bicycle Thief* doesn't offer a slick solution. There are no miraculous interventions in the final reel. The concluding scene shows the boy walking alongside his father in an anonymous crowd, both of them choking with shame and weeping silently. Almost imperceptibly, the boy's hand gropes for his father's as they walk homeward, their only comfort a mutual compassion.

FORMALIST FILM THEORIES

Formalist film theorists believe that the art of cinema is possible precisely because a movie is unlike everyday reality. The filmmaker exploits the limitations of the medium—its two-dimensionality, its confining **frame**, its fragmented

11-6. *Ugetsu* (Japan, 1953), with Masayuki Mori and Machiko Kyo, directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Realistic critics and theorists tend to underestimate the flexibility of an audience's response to nonrealistic movies. Of course, it's easier for a filmmaker to create the illusion of reality if the story deals with everyday events, for the world of the movie and the actual world are essentially the same. On the other hand, a gifted artist can make even fantasy materials "realistic." A movie like *Ugetsu*, which is set in the remote past and features spirits and demons, presents us with a self-contained magical universe that we are able to enter by temporarily forgetting the outside world of reality. In short, audiences are highly sophisticated in their responses to nonrealistic films. We can almost totally suspend our disbelief, partially suspend it, or alternate between extremes according to the aesthetic demands of the world of the movie. (Janus Films)

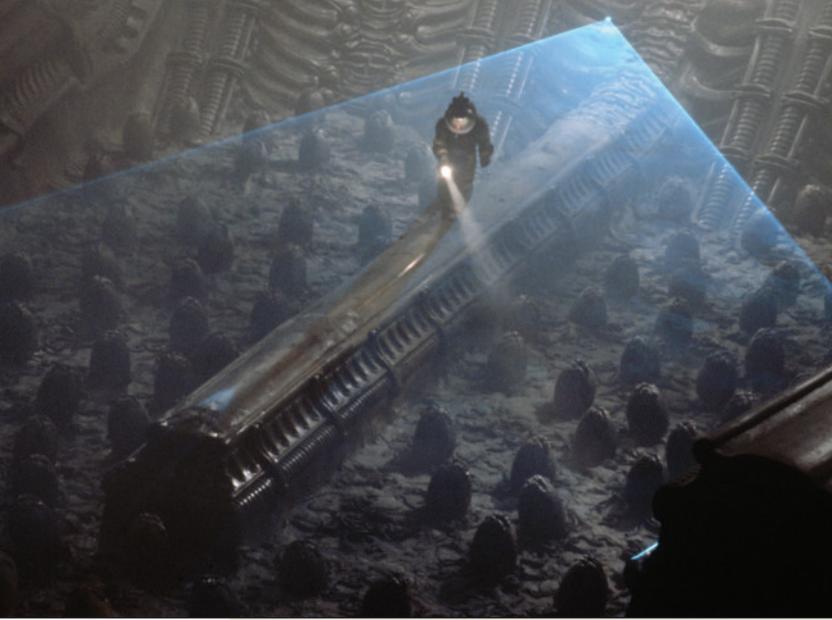


11-7a. *The Wizard of Oz* (U.S.A., 1939), with Judy Garland and Ray Bolger, directed by Victor Fleming. Formalism luxuriates in the artificial. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto,” Dorothy observes to her dog when they are whisked into an enchanted place where nothing looks real. The wondrous world of the MGM musical was a triumph of artifice: lions that talked (and cried), flying creatures in the sky, scarecrows that danced (beautifully), swaying fields that sparkled like diamonds, and a superb musical score by E. Y. Harburg and the great Harold Arlen. (MGM)



11-7b. *Muppets From Space* (U.S.A., 1999), with Pepe, Animal, Gonzo, Rizzo, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, and Kermit the Frog, directed by Tim Hill. Gifted filmmakers can create a believable world even without using human beings. The Muppet characters from the Jim Henson organization all have unique personalities—familiar to millions of children all over the world. You don’t have to be a child to appreciate the oddball denizens of Muppetland, who are more credible than a lot of so-called “live” characters. In this movie, our stalwart astronauts embark on an extraterrestrial adventure in the hopes of finding Gonzo’s long-lost family from a distant planet. (Jim Henson Pictures)





11–8a. *Alien* (U.S.A., 1979), directed by Ridley Scott.

If realism tends to favor the didactic, the teaching function of art, then formalism tends to favor the pleasure principle. Implicit in the concept of formalism is the supremacy of pattern over life, of aesthetic richness over literal truth. Even in movies that attempt a superficial realism, like the sci-fi classic, *Alien*, the emphasis is on the appeal of the shapes, textures, and colors of the visuals. This image might very well be an abstract paint-

ing. It's also a high-angle long shot of an astronaut (John Hurt) inside an alien spacecraft, amidst a colony of sinister throbbing eggs. (Twentieth Century Fox)

11–8b. *Adaptation* (U.S.A., 2002), with Nicolas Cage and Nicolas Cage, directed by Spike Jonze.

Independent filmmaker Spike Jonze believes that modern movies have become slaves to boring reality. Even fanciful genres like science fiction contain recognizable character types and situations from other movies. Written by the always strange Charlie Kaufman and his brother Donald, *Adaptation* is about a screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman and his brother Donald, both played by the fearless Nicolas Cage. The film is an exploration of the creative process, with all its frustrations, digressions, and spectacular highs. Said actor Cage about the experience: “*Adaptation* was an opportunity to do something totally brand new, to really transform myself. I’m playing the writer of the movie in which I’m appearing, and his brother. It’s a Cubist thing, very exciting.” (Columbia Pictures)



time–space continuum—to produce a world that resembles the real world only in a superficial sense. The real world is merely a repository of raw material that needs to be shaped and heightened to be effective as art. Film art doesn't consist of a reproduction of reality, but a translation of observed characteristics into the *forms* of the medium.

Rudolf Arnheim, a gestalt psychologist, put forth an important theory of cinematic formalism in his book *Film As Art*, which was originally published in German in 1933. Arnheim's book is primarily concerned with the perception of experience. His theory is based on the different modes of perception of the camera on the one hand and the human eye on the other. Anticipating some of the theories of the communications specialist Marshall McLuhan, Arnheim insists that the camera's image of a bowl of fruit, for instance, is fundamentally different from our perception of the fruit bowl in actual life. Or, in McLuhan's terms, the information we receive in each instance is determined by the form of its content. Formalist theorists celebrate these differences, believing that what makes photography fall short of perfect reproduction is also what makes cinema an art, not just a species of xerography.

Formalists have pointed out many instances where divergences exist between the camera's image of reality and what the human eye sees. For example, film directors must choose from which viewpoint to photograph a scene. They don't necessarily choose the clearest view, for often this does not emphasize the major characteristics of the scene, its expressive essence. In life, we perceive objects in depth and can penetrate the space that surrounds most things. In movies, space is an illusion, for the screen has only two dimensions, permitting the director to manipulate objects and perspectives in the ***mise en scène***. For example, important objects can be placed where they are most likely to be noticed first. Unimportant objects can be relegated to inferior positions, at the edges or "rear" of the image.

In real life, space and time are experienced as continuous. Through editing, filmmakers can chop up space and time and rearrange them in a more meaningful manner. Like other artists, the film director selects certain expressive details from the chaotic plenitude of physical reality. By juxtaposing these space and time fragments, the filmmaker creates a continuity that doesn't exist in raw nature. This, of course, was the basic position of the Soviet montage theorists (Chapter 4).

Formalists are always concerned with patterns, methods of restructuring reality into aesthetically appealing designs. Patterns can be expressed visually, through the photography and *mise en scène*; or aurally, in stylized dialogue, symbolic sound effects, and musical ***motifs***. Camera movements are often ***kinetic*** patterns superimposed on the visual materials, commenting on them in some heightened manner.

The problems with most formalist theories are the same as with realists: There are too many exceptions. They are certainly useful in an appreciation of Hitchcock's works, for example, or Tim Burton's. But how helpful is the theory in explaining the films of Spike Lee or De Sica? We respond to their movies because of their similarities with physical reality, not their divergences from it. Ultimately, of course, these are matters of emphasis, for films are too pluralistic to be pigeonholed into one tidy theory.



11-9a. *The Servant* (Britain, 1963), with Dirk Bogarde (foreground), directed by Joseph Losey.

A scene can be photographed in literally hundreds of different ways, but the formalist selects the camera **setup** that best captures its symbolic or psychological implications. In this shot, for example, a young woman (Wendy Craig) suddenly realizes the enormous power a valet (Bogarde) wields over her weak fiancé (James Fox). She is isolated on the left, half-plunged in darkness. A curtained doorway separates her from her lover, who is so stupefied with drugs he scarcely knows where he is, much less what's really going on. The servant coolly turns his back on them, the camera's low angle further emphasizing his effortless control over his "master." (*Landau Distributing*)

11-9b. *Mona Lisa* (Britain, 1986), with Bob Hoskins and Cathy Tyson, directed by Neil Jordan.

A scene can be lit in many different ways, and the lighting key can strongly affect our emotional response. *Mona Lisa* was photographed by the great British D. P., Roger Pratt. He lit the domestic scenes of the movie in sunny high-key, but whenever the gruff protagonist (Hoskins) descends into the sleazy underworld of an alluring prostitute he's obsessed with (Tyson), the lighting becomes stylized, noirish, and sinister. Her world is a city of dreadful night, where nothing is as it appears, where everything is for sale. (*Handmade Films*)





11–10a. *Splash* (U.S.A., 1984), with Daryl Hannah and Tom Hanks, directed by Ron Howard. A common misconception about formalistic films is that they are merely light entertainment, far removed from serious concerns. For example, this movie deals with a young man who falls in love with a strange young woman, who turns out to be a mermaid. The film is a symbolic fantasy, and it's certainly entertaining, but it also explores fundamental values—about loyalty, family, work, and commitment. (Buena Vista Pictures)

11–10b. *Blue Velvet* (U.S.A., 1986), with Kyle MacLachlan and Isabella Rossellini, written and directed by David Lynch.

The most extreme branch of the formalist cinema is the avant-garde, and David Lynch is one of its most audacious artists. In this movie, he explores bizarre rituals, subconscious fears and desires, nightmares, and sexual fantasies—the eerie, urgent world of the Id, Freud's label for all that is ferociously hungry in the human psyche. Jeffrey (MacLachlan), the film's naive main character, is both transfixed and repelled by the kinky, dark world he senses beneath the cheerful banality of everyday reality: "I'm seeing something that was always hidden," he tells his girlfriend (Laura Dern), who is even more innocent and ignorant than he. (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group)



THE AUTEUR THEORY

In the mid-1950s, the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* revolutionized film criticism with its concept of *la politique des auteurs*. This committed policy of authors was put forth by the pugnacious young critic François Truffaut. The auteur theory became the focal point of a critical controversy that eventually spread to England and America. Before long, the theory became a militant rallying cry, particularly among younger critics, dominating such lively journals as *Movie* in Great Britain, *Film Culture* in America, and both French- and English-language editions of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Although a number of writers rejected the theory as simplistic, auteurism dominated film criticism throughout the 1960s, and is still a prominent approach among critics.

Actually, the main lines of the theory aren't particularly outrageous, at least not in retrospect. Truffaut, Godard, and their critical colleagues proposed that the greatest movies are dominated by the personal vision of the director. A filmmaker's "signature" can be perceived through an examination of his or her total output, which is characterized by a unity of theme and style. The writer's contribution is less important than the director's because subject matter is artis-

11-11. Photo montage of Jean-Pierre Léaud as Antoine Doinel in (left to right) *Love on the Run* (1979), *Stolen Kisses* (1968), "Antoine et Colette" (an episode in the anthology film, *Love at Twenty*, 1962), and the drawing from *The 400 Blows* (1959). Missing from the Doinel series is *Bed and Board* (1970).

Above all, the auteurists emphasized the personality of the artist as the main criterion of value. François Truffaut, who originally formulated *la politique des auteurs*, went on to create some of the most distinctively personal movies of the New Wave. His Doinel series is one of the crowning achievements of the *nouvelle vague*. These semiautobiographical movies trace the adventures (mostly amorous) of its likable but slightly neurotic hero, Antoine Doinel. Truffaut's protégé Léaud was the best known actor of the French New Wave. (New World Pictures)



tically neutral. It can be treated with brilliance or bare competence. Movies ought to be judged on the basis of *how*, not *what*. Like other formalists, the auteur critics claimed that what makes a good film is not the subject matter as such, but its stylistic treatment. The director dominates the treatment, provided he or she is a strong director, an *auteur*.

Drawing primarily from the cinematic traditions of the United States, the *Cahiers* critics also developed a sophisticated theory of film genre. In fact, André Bazin, the editor of the journal, believed that the genius of the American cinema was its repository of ready-made forms: westerns, thrillers, musicals, action films, comedies, and so on. “The tradition of genres is a base of operations for creative freedom,” Bazin pointed out. Genre is an enriching, not a constricting, tradition. The auteurists argued that the best movies are **dialectical**, in which the conventions of a genre are held in aesthetic tension with the personality of the artist.

The American auteurs that these critics praised had worked within the studio system, which had broken the artistic pretensions of many lesser filmmakers. What the auteurists especially admired was how gifted directors could circumvent studio interference and even hackneyed scripts through their technical expertise. The subject matter of Hitchcock’s thrillers or Ford’s westerns was not significantly different from others working in these genres. Yet both auteurs managed to create

11–12. Publicity photo of Steven Spielberg and actor Haley Joel Osment in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (U.S.A., 2001), directed by Spielberg.

Steven Spielberg’s movies have been enormously popular with the public, most of them grossing hundreds of millions of dollars. He has an uncanny sense of what the public will like, but he’s also made personal movies that he didn’t think would find a wide audience—movies like *E.T.*, *Schindler’s List*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. They were all huge hits, of course. He exercises total control over how his films will be made, including the scripting, the casting, the shooting, and the final cut. A superlative technician, especially in his camera work and editing, he is a foremost stylist of the contemporary cinema. Like Truffaut and De Sica, Spielberg is sensitive with children, able to capture their innocence, charm, and resilience without being cutesy. Within the industry, he is regarded as a class act: generous, idealistic, and hard working. In short, he’s a world-class auteur as well as the most commercially successful filmmaker in history. (Warner Bros./DreamWorks Pictures)



great films, precisely because the real content was conveyed through the *mise en scène*, the editing, and all the other formal devices at the director's disposal.

The sheer breadth of their knowledge of film history permitted these critics to reevaluate the major works of a wide variety of directors. In many instances, they completely reversed previous critical judgments. Before long, personality cults developed around the most popular directors. On the whole, these were filmmakers who had been virtually ignored by the critical establishment of the previous generation: Hitchcock, Ford, Hawks, Lang, and many others. The auteur critics were often dogmatic in their dislikes as well as their likes. Bazin expressed alarm at their negativism. To praise a bad movie, he felt, was unfortunate; but to condemn a good one was a serious failing. He especially disliked their tendency to hero worship, which led to superficial a priori judgments. Movies by cult directors were indiscriminately praised, whereas those by directors out of fashion were automatically condemned. Auteurs were fond of ranking directors, and their listings could be bizarre. Perfectly routine commercial directors like Nicholas Ray were elevated above such important masters as John Huston and Billy Wilder.

The principal spokesman for the auteur theory in the United States was Andrew Sarris, the influential critic of the *Village Voice*. More knowledgeable about the complexities of the star and studio system than his French counterparts, Sarris nonetheless defended their basic argument, especially the principle of tension between an artist's personal vision and the genre assignments that these directors were given by their Hollywood bosses.

Quite correctly, these critics insisted that total artistic freedom isn't always a virtue. After all, Michelangelo, Dickens, and Shakespeare, among others, accepted commissioned subjects. Though this principle of dialectical tension is a sound one—in the other arts as well as cinema—some auteurs carried it to ridiculous extremes. In the first place, there is the problem of degree. It's doubtful that even a genius like Bergman or Kubrick could do much with the script and stars of *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy*. In other words, a director's got to have a fighting chance with the material. When the subject matter sinks beneath a certain potential, the result is not tension but artistic annihilation.

The most gifted American directors of the studio era were **producer-directors** who worked independently within the major studios. These tended to be the same artists the auteur critics admired most. But the lion's share of American fiction movies produced during this era were studio films. That is, the director functioned as a member of a team and usually had little to say about the scripting, casting, or editing. Many of these directors were skillful technicians, but they were essentially craftsmen rather than artists.

Michael Curtiz is a good example. For most of his career, he was a contract director at Warner Brothers. Known for his speed and efficiency, Curtiz directed dozens of movies in a variety of styles and genres. He often took on several projects at the same time. Curtiz had no "personal vision" in the sense that the auteur theory defines it: He was just getting a job done. He often did it very well. Even so, movies like *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Casablanca*, and *Mildred Pierce* (11–13a) can be discussed more profitably as Warner Brothers movies rather than Michael Curtiz movies. The same principle applies to most of the

11–13a. *Mildred Pierce* (U.S.A., 1945),
with Joan Crawford,

directed by Michael Curtiz. During the golden age of the big-studio era (roughly from 1925 to 1955), most American mainstream movies were dominated by the imprimatur of the studio rather than the director. The director was regarded more as an executor of a collaborative

enterprise rather than a creative artist in his own right. *Mildred Pierce* has “Warner Brothers” written all over it. Typically tough and proletarian in emphasis, the movie features Joan Crawford as a self-made woman who kills a man. It was regarded as her comeback performance after many years as a glamorous star at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The movie, based on James M. Cain’s hard-boiled novel, was adapted by Ranald MacDougall, a studio scribe. It was directed by Michael Curtiz, Warners’ ace director, who was known for his speed, efficiency, and versatility. He was also able to control Warners’ feisty stars, who were known to be difficult and rebellious. Even Bette Davis, the gutsiest of them all, was cowed by Curtiz. When she complained that he hadn’t allowed her any break for lunch, he replied majesterially, “When you work for me, you don’t need lunch. You just take an aspirin.” (Warner Bros.)



11–13b. *Primary Colors* (U.S.A., 1998),
with John Travolta, directed by Mike Nichols.

In the contemporary American cinema, most mainstream movies are still collaborative enterprises, with the director—even one as brilliant as Mike Nichols—serving as a coordinator of talent. The film is based on a political novel by “Anonymous”—actually journalist Joe Klein. The book is a thinly disguised account of the first presidential primary of Bill Clinton, his wife Hillary, and their political organization. The smart and wickedly funny screenplay was written by Elaine May. A first-rate cast is headed by Travolta, who does an uncanny impersonation of the gregarious and charismatic Clinton, who is at once a genuine democrat, a dedicated public servant, and a womanizing opportunist. The miracle of the movie is that it’s so seamless, with its multiple individual contributions blended into a unified artistic whole. That was Mike Nichols’s contribution. (Universal Studios)



11–14. Today, the term “auteur” is commonly used to designate a film artist, an individual whose personality is indelibly stamped onto his or her work. An auteur controls the major modes of expression—script, performance, execution—whether working within the commercial industry, like a Spielberg, a Scorsese, or a Spike Lee, or working outside the studio system, in what has been called the independent cinema. See also *Cinema of Outsiders*, by Emanuel Levy (New York: New York University Press, 1999), a study of the American independent cinema movement.



11–14a. *Slung Blade* (U.S.A., 1996), with Billy Bob Thornton, written and directed by Thornton.

Independent filmmakers have much more control over their product than most mainstream directors, in part because independent movies are usually made on low budgets. Most of the people involved are working for free, or very little, compared to Hollywood studio personnel. These alternative artists can also explore unusual or unfashionable subjects. For example, though more than 40 percent of Americans attend religious services weekly, this fact is rarely acknowledged in mainstream movies. But an important element of *Slung Blade* is its strong Southern Baptist flavor, lending the bizarre tale a spiritual richness. (Miramax Films)

11–14b. *The Opposite of Sex* (U.S.A., 1997), with Martin Donovan and Lisa Kudrow, written and directed by Don Roos.

The protagonists of mainstream movies are almost exclusively heterosexual, and rarely do they suffer from any sexual problems. Independent films can be more real. This film’s gay protagonist (Donovan) has just had his lover stolen from him by his manipulative sixteen-year-old half sister



(Christina Ricci at her most evil). His best friend (Kudrow) is sexually repressed and hopelessly in love with him. That’s just *part* of their problems. Mainstream movies are rarely as witty and bitchy and shrewd about the subject of sex. Nor do they usually offer such juicy roles for women, who are every bit as neurotic as the men. (TriStar Pictures)

continued ►



11–14c. *Napoleon Dynamite* (U.S.A., 2004), with John Gries, Jon Heder, and Aaron Ruell, written and directed by Jared Hess.

Mainstream movies tend to reaffirm conventional morality. They also tend to be highly predictable. Within the first ten minutes of watching a typical genre film, we can usually guess how it'll end. The good guys will triumph, decency will be restored, blah blah blah. Independent movies can be more perverse. Like this deadpan exploration of teenage dorkdom, which turned out to be a box-office hit. The movie centers on an endearingly awkward, frizzy-haired high school geek (Heder) and his equally dorky family and friends. It was warmly received at the Sundance Film Festival, which is still the preferred place to premiere an indie film. The movie became a cult favorite and grossed over \$44 million. It's wickedly funny. *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

other Hollywood studios. In our day, it applies to films that are dominated by producers and financiers rather than artists.

Other films have been dominated by stars. Few people would think of referring to a Mae West movie as anything else, and the same holds true for the W. C. Fields comedies and the works of Laurel and Hardy. The ultimate in the star as auteur is the so-called star vehicle, a film specifically tailored to showcase the talents of a performer (11–15).

The auteur theory suffers from a number of other weaknesses. There are some excellent films that have been made by directors who are otherwise mediocre. For example, Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* is a superb movie, but it's atypical of his output. Conversely, great directors sometimes produce bombs. The works of such major filmmakers as Ford, Godard, Renoir, and Buñuel are radically inconsistent in terms of quality, and some of their movies are outright awful. The auteur theory emphasizes history and a director's



11–15. *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* (U.S.A., 2003), with Bob Newhart and Reese Witherspoon, directed by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld.

Many movies are dominated by stars rather than directors, studios, or genres. This film is a sequel to *Legally Blonde* (2001), a popular comedy that ushered Reese Witherspoon into stardom. She was executive producer to the sequel, virtually guaranteeing her control over how the movie would be made. The story is specifically tailored to showcase her comic abilities as well as her good looks. She is rarely off-camera and the plot is pretty much more-of-the-same but more of what made the first movie a commercial hit. The film is competently directed, but the dominant personality is clearly in front of the camera, not behind it. (MGM/United Artists)

total output, which tends to favor older directors at the expense of newcomers. Some artists have explored a variety of themes in many different styles and genres: Carol Reed, Sidney Lumet, and John Frankenheimer are good examples. There are also some great filmmakers who are crude directorial technicians. For example, Chaplin and Herzog in no way approach the stylistic fluency of Michael Curtiz, or a dozen other contract directors of his era. Yet there are very few artists who have created such distinctively personal movies as Chaplin and Herzog.

Despite its shortcomings and excesses, the auteur theory had a liberating effect on film criticism, establishing the director as the key figure at least in the art of cinema, if not always the industry. To this day, the concept of directorial dominance remains firmly established, at least with films of high artistic merit (11–14).

ECLECTIC AND SYNTHESIZING APPROACHES

Eclecticism is the favored approach of many film critics in the United States, such as the former critic of *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael, who once wrote, “I believe that we respond most and best to work in any art form (and to other experience as well) if we are pluralistic, flexible, relative in our judgments, if we

11–16. *Frida* (U.S.A., 2002), with Salma Hayek, directed by Julie Taymor.

Eclectic critics often combine movie criticism with social movements such as feminism, exploring not only the sexual values within a film but also the ideological context of its production. Traditionally, women have been excluded from positions of power within the American film industry. The situation is even worse in most other countries. *Frida*, a biography of the great Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, was a labor of love for Salma Hayek, who is herself Mexican. She nurtured the project along for years, beating out more politically connected actresses for the leading role. She thought a woman director would be more sensitive to the nuances of the character, and eventually enlisted Taymor, who was still basking from her huge success of directing the Broadway stage musical, *The Lion King*. Taymor's visual inventiveness lent itself well to the "magical realism" of Kahlo's painting style. The movie was a success, earning a number of awards, including a Best Actress Oscar nomination for Hayek. (Miramax Films)



are eclectic.” Such critics place a movie in whatever context seems most appropriate, drawing from diverse sources, systems, and styles. Actually, almost all critics are eclectic to some degree. For example, although Andrew Sarris has been identified with the auteur theory, he is equally at home approaching a movie in terms of its star, its period, its national origin, or its ideological context.

Eclecticism is sometimes called the tradition of sensibility because a high value is placed on the aesthetic discriminations of a person of taste and discernment. Such critics are often urbane, well educated, and conversant in the other arts. The cultural cross-references in the writings of such critics as Roger Ebert, David Denby, and Frank Rich range over a wide spectrum, including literature, drama, politics, and the visual arts. They frequently allude to the ideas of such seminal thinkers as Freud, Marx, Darwin, and Jung. Sometimes critics combine an ideological perspective—such as feminism—with practical criticism, sociology, and history, as in the criticism of Molly Haskell and B. Ruby Rich (11–16). The best eclectic critics are gifted writers, including such distinguished prose stylists as James Agee, Pauline Kael, and Roger Ebert, whose film criticism has won a Pulitzer Prize. Polished writing is valued *as* writing, in addition to the ideas it conveys.

Eclectic critics reject the notion that a single theory can explain all movies. They regard this as a cookie-cutter approach to criticism. Most of them insist that an individual's reaction to a film is deeply personal. For this reason, the best a critic can do is explain his or her personal responses as forcefully as



11–17a.

Independence Day
(U.S.A., 1996), directed
by Roland Emmerich.

This movie was a huge commercial hit, gobbling up over \$300 million domestically and close to \$490 million in foreign markets. It also generated \$500 million in so-called ancillary revenues,

including video and television rights. Twentieth Century–Fox spent \$30 million for advertising alone—an investment that obviously paid off. The film’s special effects constituted its main box-office appeal. In this sequence, for example, the U.S. White House is attacked by an alien force of incredible magnitude. Serious film critics either ignored the movie or dismissed it as drivel. So who’s right, the public or the “experts”? It depends on how you look at it. The mass audience tends to seek escapist entertainment: Movies are a way of forgetting their troubles. Film critics must endure a constant barrage of such pictures in their daily line of work. Hence, they tend to get bored with anything that treads the tried (and tired) and true. What they seek in movies is something unusual, challenging, and daring. *Independence Day* did not meet these expectations. (Twentieth Century Fox)

11–17b. ***The Squid and the Whale*** (U.S.A. 2005), with Jeff Daniels and Laura Linney, written and directed by Noah Baumbach.

“Small” movies like this (they’re called “specialty pictures” in the trade) can easily get lost amongst all the noise and glitter and clamor of the mainstream industry. Despite its unfortunate title and its sober, downbeat materials—the collapse of a marriage and the effects on the children—excellent movies like this are precisely the kind that can be brought to the public’s attention by influential film critics. (Samuel Goldwyn Films)



possible. But it's just an opinion, however well founded or gracefully argued. The best criticism of this type is informative even if we don't agree with its conclusions. Because personal taste is the main determinant of value in eclectic criticism, these commentators often admit to their blind spots—and *all* critics have blind spots. Everyone has had the experience of being left totally cold by a movie that's widely hailed as a masterpiece. We can't help the way we *feel*, however much our feelings go against popular sentiment. Eclectic critics usually begin with their feelings about a movie, then work outward, trying to objectify these instincts with concrete arguments. To guard against personal eccentricity, they implicitly place a film within the context of a canon, a tradition of masterpieces—that is, those works that have stood the test of time and are still considered milestones in the evolution of the cinema. This great tradition is constantly under reevaluation. It's a loose critical consensus rather than an ironclad body of privileged works.

Eclecticism has been faulted on a number of counts. Because of its extreme subjectivity, this approach has been criticized as mere impressionism by more rigorously systematic critics. They insist that aesthetic evaluations ought to be governed by a body of theoretical principles rather than a critic's unique sensibility, however refined. Eclectic critics are rarely in agreement because each of them is reacting to a movie according to his or her own tastes rather than a larger theoretical framework, with its built-in system of checks and balances. For all their vaunted expertise and cultural prestige, eclectic critics have track records that don't always bear close scrutiny. For example, when Fellini's *8 1/2* was released in 1963, many critics in America and Europe dismissed the movie as self-indulgent, formless, and even incoherent. Yet in a 1972 survey of international critics, *8 1/2* placed fourth in their list of the ten greatest films of all time. Conversely, even good critics have pronounced a film an instant masterpiece—only to regret their impetuosity in the cool distance of time, after the movie has been long forgotten.

Eclectic critics tend to be stoical about these matters, accepting them as perils of the trade. Perhaps Pauline Kael expressed their attitude best:

The role of the critic is to help people see what is in the work, what is in it that shouldn't be, what is not in it that could be. He is a good critic if he helps people understand more about the work than they could see for themselves; he is a great critic, if by his understanding and feeling for the work, by his passion, he can excite people so that they want to experience more of the art that is there, waiting to be seized. He is not necessarily a bad critic if he makes errors in judgment. (Infallible taste is inconceivable; what could it be measured against?) He is a bad critic if he does not awaken the curiosity, enlarge the interests and understanding of his audience. The art of the critic is to transmit his knowledge of and enthusiasm for art to others. (Quoted from *I Lost It at the Movies*; New York: Bantam, 1966.)

STRUCTURALISM AND SEMIOLOGY



Eclectic critics celebrate the subjective, individual element in film criticism. Others have lamented it. In the early 1970s, two interrelated cinematic theories developed, partly in response to the inadequacies of the criticism of personal sensibility. *Structuralism* and *semiology* were attempts to introduce a new scientific rigor to film criticism, to allow for more systematic and detailed analyses of movies. Borrowing their methodology from such diverse disciplines as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy, these two theories first concentrated on the development of a more precise analytical terminology.

Structuralism and semiology have also focused intently on the American cinema as the principal area of inquiry, for a number of reasons. In the first place, these theories have been dominated by the British and French, traditionally the most enthusiastic foreign admirers of the cinema of the United States. American movies also provided these critics with a stylistic norm—the **classical paradigm**. Marxists among this group have explored the implications of the capitalistic mode of production of American films. Cultural commentators have concentrated on characteristically American myths and genres.

Semiology (or *semiotics*, as it's also called) is a study of *how* movies signify. The manner in which information is signified is indissolubly linked with *what's* being signified. The French theorist Christian Metz was in the forefront in developing semiotics as a technique of film analysis. Using many of the concepts and much of the terminology of structural linguistics, Metz and others developed a theory of cinematic communication founded on the concept of signs or codes. The language of cinema, like all types of discourse, verbal and nonverbal, is primarily symbolic: It consists of a complex network of signs we instinctively decipher while experiencing a movie (11–18).

In most discussions of film, the **shot** was generally accepted as the basic unit of construction. Semiotic theorists rejected this unit as too vague and inclusive. They insisted on a more precise concept. Accordingly, they suggested that the sign be adopted as the minimal unit of signification. A single shot from a movie generally contains dozens of signs, forming an intricate hierarchy of counterpoised meanings. In a sense, this book, and especially the earlier chapters, can be viewed as a classification of signs, although necessarily more limited in scope than the type of identification and classification envisioned by Metz and other semiologists.

For example, each of these chapters is concerned with a kind of master code, which can be broken down into code subdivisions, which themselves can be reduced to even more minimal signs. Thus, Chapter 1 might be called a photography master code. This master could be broken down into subdivisions: shots, **angles**, lighting keys, colors, lenses, filters, optical effects, and so on. Each of these, in turn, could be subdivided again. The shots, for example, could be broken down to **extreme long, long, medium, close-up, extreme close-up, deep focus**. This same principle could be applied to other master codes: spatial codes (*mise en scène*), kinetic codes (movement), and so on. Codes of language would



11–18. *Blonde Venus* (U.S.A., 1932), with Marlene Dietrich, directed by Josef von Sternberg. Semiologists believe that the shot—the traditional unit of construction in film—is too general and inclusive to be of much use in a systematic analysis of a movie. The symbolic sign, they argue, is a more precise unit of signification. Every cinematic shot consists of dozens of signifying codes that are hierarchically structured. Using what they call the “principle of pertinence,” semiologists decode cinematic discourse by first establishing what the dominant signs are, then analyzing the subsidiary codes. This methodology is similar to a detailed analysis of *mise en scène*, only in addition to spatial, textural, and photographic codes, semiologists would also explore other relevant signs—kinetic, linguistic, musical, rhythmic, and so forth. In this shot, a semiologist would explore the symbolic significance of such major signs as Dietrich’s white suit. Why a masculine suit? Why white? What does the papier-mâché dragon signify? The distorted perspective lines of the set? The “shady ladies” behind the archways? The symbolism of stage and audience? The tight framing and closed form of the image? The protagonist’s worldly song? Within the dramatic context, semiologists would also explore the rhythms of the editing and camera movements, the symbolism of the kinetic motions of the performer, and so on. Traditionally, critics likened the cinematic shot to a word, and a series of edited shots to a sequence of words in a sentence. A semiologist would dismiss such analogies as patently simpleminded. Perhaps an individual *sign* might be likened to a word, but the equivalent to a shot—even a lousy one—would require many paragraphs if not pages of words. A complex shot can contain a hundred separate signs, each with its own precise symbolic significance. (Paramount Pictures)

be as complex as the entire discipline of linguistics; acting codes would involve a precise breakdown of the various techniques of signification used by players.

Semiotic techniques can be valuable in aiding film critics and scholars to analyze movies with more precision. But the theory suffers some defects. For one thing, these are descriptive classifications only, not normative. In other words, semiotics will permit a critic to discern a sign, but it's still up to the critic to evaluate how effective any given sign is within an artistic context. Formalist movies seem to lend themselves to easier classification than realistic movies. For example, it's much simpler to describe the complex *mise en scène* of *Troy* than to explicate the meanings of Chaplin's expression in *The Bank* (11–19a & b). These signs aren't really comparable. They exist on incompatible levels, like different language systems of a computer. Because formalist signs are easier to quantify, some critics tend to value films with a greater number of signs (or at least a greater number of classifiable signs) as more complex than, and hence aesthetically superior to, a film with a lower density of signs.

Another serious problem with this theory is its awful jargon, which sometimes verges on self-parody. All specialized disciplines—including cinema—have a certain number of necessary technical terms, but semiotics often chokes on its own “scientific” wordiness. Even within the field, one commentator pointed out that referring to a perfectly ordinary phenomenon as “signifier” or “signified,” “syntagma” or “paradigm” doesn't in itself advance social knowledge to any particular degree.

As Metz pointed out, semiology is concerned with the systematic classification of types of codes used in the cinema; structuralism is the study of how various codes function within a single structure, within one movie. Structuralism is strongly eclectic and often combines the techniques of semiotics with other theoretical perspectives, such as auteurism, genre studies, ideology, stylistic analyses, and so on. For example, Colin MacArthur's *Underworld USA* is a structuralist analysis of gangster and crime films and the style known as **film noir**. MacArthur uses semiotic classifications in exploring the iconography of the genre films of such artists as Billy Wilder (1–17a) and others.

Structuralists and semiologists have been fascinated by the concept of a *deep structure*—an underlying network of symbolic meaning that is related to a movie's surface structure but is also somewhat independent of it. This deep structure can be analyzed from a number of perspectives, including Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist economics, Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious, and the theory of structural anthropology popularized by the Frenchman Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The methods of Lévi-Strauss are based on an examination of regional myths, which he believed express certain underlying structures of thought in codified form. These myths exist in variant forms and usually contain the same or similar binary structures—pairs of opposites. By collapsing the surface (narrative) structure of myths, their symbolic motifs can be analyzed in a more systematic and meaningful manner. These polarities are usually found in dialectical conflict: Depending on the culture analyzed, they can be agricultural (for example, water vs. drought), sexual (male vs. female), conceptual (cooked vs. raw), generational (youth vs. age), and so on. Because these myths are

11–19a. *Troy* (U.S.A., 2004),
directed by Wolfgang Petersen.

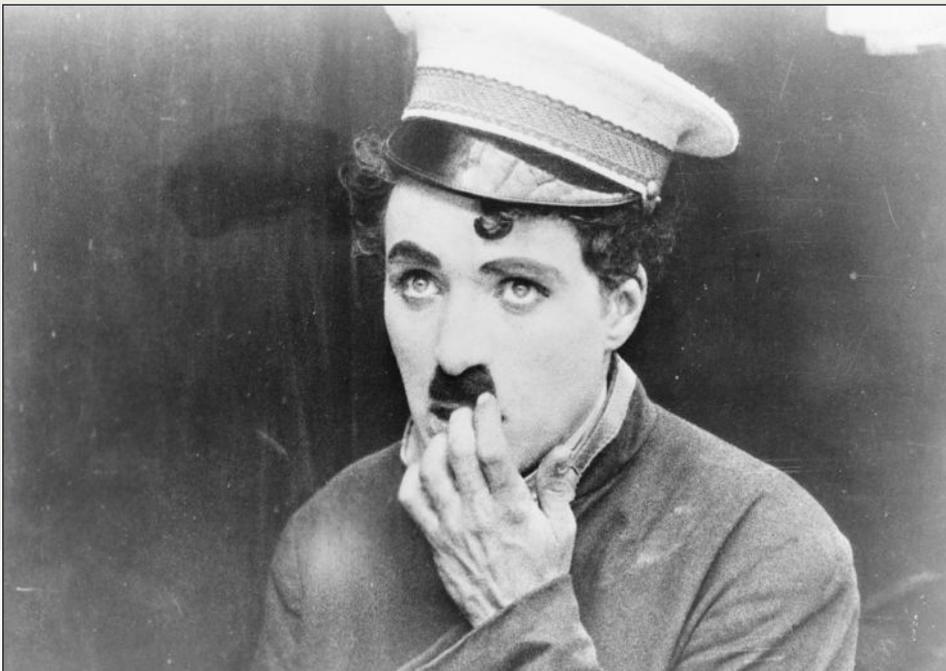
(Warner Bros.)

Semiotics can help critics to isolate and identify signs in a movie, but not to show how skillfully they function within the film. Because the theory stresses quantification, it tends to be more effective in analyzing formalist films, which contain more classifiable signs. But different types of signs or codes are not compatible, and hence qualitative judgments are difficult to make on strictly quantitative data. For example, the shot from *Troy* contains



many different signs, which are structured into an image of great visual complexity. This epic recreation of the famous Trojan horse episode from *The Illiad* is an example of contemporary studio craftsmanship at its best. The image is dense with detailed visual information. Chaplin's medium-close shot, on the other hand, is relatively simple and contains very few signs other than the expression on the tramp's face. (And how do you quantify something so ineffable?) Wolfgang Petersen is an artist of considerable skill, but he's not in Chaplin's class. Yet a semiotic analysis of these two works might lead to the conclusion that Petersen is the superior filmmaker, because he used more signs in his movie.

11–19b. *The Bank* (U.S.A., 1915), with Charles Chaplin, directed by Chaplin. (Museum of Modern Art)





11-20. *Tender Mercies* (U.S.A., 1983), with Robert Duvall and Allan Hubbard, directed by Bruce Beresford.

A crucial shortcoming of semiotic methodology is its failure to deal with nonmaterialist values in cinema. For example, this movie explores how a drunken country music star (Duvall) finds spiritual redemption in the born-again Christian faith of the woman he loves. A strictly semiotic analysis of the film would prove inadequate in exploring these spiritual values. (Universal Pictures)

11-21. *An Autumn Afternoon* (Japan, 1962), with Chishu Ryu (right), directed by Yasujiro Ozu.

The films of Ozu were not widely seen in the West until the 1970s. Prior to this time, his movies were regarded as “too Japanese” to be appreciated by foreign audiences because he was a champion of traditional values, particularly that quintessential Japanese institution, the family. If Kurosawa is the artistic spokesman for modern values and the anguished individual, then Ozu speaks for the conservative majority, especially parents. But his movies are not mindless endorsements of family life, for Ozu was also an ironist, well aware of the gap between reality and the ideal—the principal source of his irony. In this film, for example, the protagonist (Ryu) is a gentle, aging widower who lives with his unmarried daughter in mutual devotion. His loneliness is assuaged by a few drinking buddies who spend much of their free time at the local bar. After hearing of the marriage of a friend’s daughter, the widower decides that it’s time for his daughter to move on as well. He arranges a marriage with a decent young man recommended by his friends. The movie ends on a bittersweet note of irony as the father muses contentedly on the success of his arrangements. He also realizes he’s getting on in years. And he is alone. (New Yorker Films)



expressed in symbolic codes, often their full meanings are hidden even from their creators. Lévi-Strauss believed that once the full implications of a myth are understood, it's discarded as a cliché.

These structural techniques can be used to analyze a national cinema, a genre, or a specific movie. For example, the conflict between “traditional” and “modern” values can be seen in virtually all Japanese movies, and in Japanese society in general (11–21). The roots of this conflict extend back to the later nineteenth century, when Japan transformed itself from a feudal country to a modern technological society patterned after the Western industrial states, especially Britain and the United States. The Japanese are simultaneously repelled and attracted by both sets of polarities:

<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>
Japanese	Western
Feudal	Democratic
Past	Future
Society	Individual
Hierarchy	Equality
Nature	Technology
Duty	Inclination
Self-sacrifice	Self-expression
Consensus	Diversity
Age	Youth
Authority	Autonomy
Conservative	Liberal
Fatalism	Optimism
Obedience	Independence
Form	Substance
Security	Anxiety

A number of structuralists have explored genre films in a similar manner. For example, Jim Kitses, Peter Wollen, and others have pointed out how westerns are often vehicles for exploring clashes of value between East and West in American culture. By clustering the thematic motifs around a “master anti-mony” (a controlling or dominant code), a western can be analyzed according to its deep structure rather than its plot, which is often conventionalized (and less meaningful) in genre films. Such critics have demonstrated how each cultural polarity symbolizes a complex of positive and negative traits:

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
Wilderness	Civilization
Individualism	Community
Self-interest	Social welfare

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
Freedom	Restriction
Anarchy	Law and order
Savagery	Refinement
Private honor	Institutional justice
Paganism	Christianity
Nature	Culture
Masculine	Feminine
Pragmatism	Idealism
Agrarian	Industrial
Purity	Corruption
Dynamic	Static
Future	Past
Experience	Knowledge
American	European

Semiotics and structuralism expanded the parameters of film critique considerably. Their pluralistic approach allows for much more flexibility, complexity, and depth in the critical enterprise. But these theories are merely tools of analysis. By themselves, they can tell us nothing of the *value* of signs and codes within a film. Like every other theory, then, these are only as good as their practitioners. The writer's intelligence, taste, passion, knowledge, and sensitivity are what produce good criticism, not necessarily the theoretical methodology used.

HISTORIOGRAPHY



Historiography deals with the theory of history—the assumptions, principles, and methodologies of historical study. Film history is a relatively recent area of inquiry—a hundred years is not a very lengthy period of study compared to that of the traditional arts. Much of the best work in film historiography has taken place during the past two decades.

Film historians scoff at the naive notion that there is *a* film history. Rather, they insist that there are many film histories, and each is defined by the historian's particular interests, biases, and prejudices. Theorists have charted four different types of film history, each with its own set of philosophical assumptions, methods, and sources of evidence: (1) aesthetic film histories—film as art; (2) technological film histories—motion pictures as inventions and machines; (3) economic histories—film as industry; and (4) social histories—movies as a reflection of the audience's values, desires, and fears.

Most film historians regard cinema as too sprawling and complex to be covered by any single history. They view the field as a vast, infinite mass of data that needs to be sifted through and organized to be made coherent. Each historian concentrates on a given type of evidence, highlighting its significance while



11–22a. *Short Cuts* (U.S.A., 1993), with Lily Tomlin and Tom Waits, directed by Robert Altman. Aesthetic film historians and elitist critics tend to concentrate on such movies as *Short Cuts* because of their cultural prestige. Robert Altman is regarded as one of the great artists of the American cinema, creator of such movies as *M*A*S*H*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville*, and *The Player*. Based on the short stories of Raymond Carver, *Short Cuts* is faithful to its source, including its tone of cynicism and bitterness. The film features an embarrassment of richness in the cast, many of them important stars who would have worked for Altman for nothing because of his enormous prestige within the world film community. Though widely praised by critics and nominated for a number of awards, the movie failed to arouse much interest with the general public, and its box-office revenues were small. (*Fine Line Features*)

11–22b. *The Godfather Part II* (U.S.A., 1974), with Giuseppe Sillato and Robert De Niro, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

A common misconception among many filmgoers is the glib distinction between art and entertainment, as though the two wouldn't be caught dead in the same movie. In fact, the two are often combined. Charles Chaplin was the most popular film artist of the silent era, and he was also a darling of the critics. He still is. Long before movies were even invented, William Shakespeare was the most popular playwright in history. He still is. The first two *Godfather* films are excellent examples of this artistic-commercial fusion. Serious film critics almost universally regard them as among the greatest works in the history of cinema. The movies were also enormously popular throughout the world, breaking virtually every attendance record. They are still among the top box-office champions of all time. Entertaining? Of course. Art? Indubitably.

(*Paramount Pictures*)



deemphasizing or ignoring “irrelevant” data. Critics sometimes refer to this process of selection and emphasis as **foregrounding**—isolating fragments of evidence for the purpose of closer study. Foregrounding is always an implicit value judgment. Each type of film historian necessarily wrenches these fragments from their ecological context, thus presenting us with a somewhat skewed view of the whole. Each type of historian will also choose to focus on different movies, personalities, and events.

Aesthetic film historians concern themselves with a tradition of masterpieces and great filmmakers. Constantly subject to reevaluation, this tradition encompasses a broad consensus of critics, historians, and scholars. This is an elite form of history, ignoring the vast majority of motion pictures to concentrate on a relative handful of important works of art that have endured the test of time—that is, movies that are still great despite our viewing them in a totally different context. Aesthetic historians value a work primarily for its artistic richness, irrespective of whether the film was commercially successful. Thus, in most aesthetic histories, a hugely popular success like *Independence Day* receives

11–23. *Medium Cool* (U.S.A., 1969), with Robert Forster (at camera) and Peter Bonerz (sound), directed by Haskell Wexler.

Technological film histories stress the importance of mechanical innovations in the evolution of the cinema. New technologies create new aesthetics. For example, in the late 1950s, television journalists needed simple, lightweight equipment to capture news stories quickly, while they were actually happening. The development of the so-called handheld camera (actually, usually mounted on a shoulder harness or tripod), portable sound equipment, **zoom lenses**, and more light-sensitive **fast film stocks** was in response to this need. In the 1960s, this new technology was appropriated by fiction filmmakers, allowing them to shoot movies more spontaneously and in actual locations, thus creating a more authentic style of realism. (Paramount Pictures)



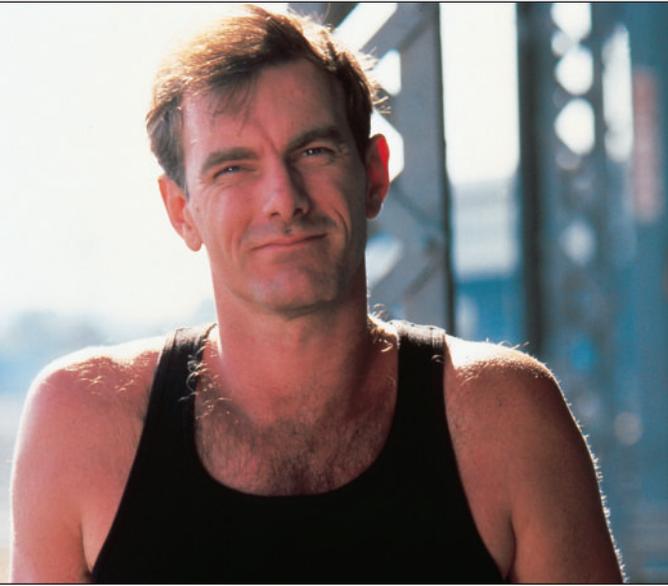
much less discussion than *Citizen Kane*, which failed at the box office. Opponents of this type of history have scoffed at its “Great Man” assumptions—that is, film history is largely the study of a few gifted individuals, not the dynamic matrix of social, industrial, and technological influences that inevitably affect all filmmakers, gifted or not.

The American scholar Raymond Fielding put forth the philosophy of technological historians succinctly: “The history of motion pictures—as an art form, as a medium of communication, and as an industry—has been determined principally by technological innovations.” Historians of this type are also concerned with “Great Men,” such as W. K. L. Dickson, Thomas Edison, George Eastman, and Lee DeForest—inventors and scientists rather than artists or industry moguls. Technological historians are concerned with the implications—artistic, commercial, and ideological—of such innovations as portable cameras, **synchronous sound**, color, improved film stocks, 3-D, stereophonic sound, steadycams, computer-generated imagery, and so on (11–23).

Cinema is the most expensive artistic medium in history, and its development has been largely determined by its financial sponsors—this is the thesis of most economic film histories, such as Benjamin B. Hampton’s *History of the American Film Industry from Its Beginnings to 1931* and Thomas H. Guback’s *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945*. In most European countries, the cinema in its early stages of development fell into the hands of artists who shared most of the values and tastes of the educated elite. In the former Soviet Union and other ex-communist countries, film production was carefully regulated by the government, and the movies produced in those countries reflected most of the values of the political elite.

In America, the film industry developed within a capitalistic system of production. The Hollywood studio system was an attempt on the part of a handful of large corporations—MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, and so forth—to monopolize the production of fiction films, and hence maximize their profits. For about three decades—roughly from 1925 to 1955—the major studios succeeded, producing about 90 percent of the fiction films in America, largely because the companies were **vertically integrated**. That is, they controlled all three phases of the industry: (1) production—the Hollywood studios; (2) distribution—financial headquarters in New York; and (3) exhibition—the large chains of big-city first-run theaters owned by the company.

During the era of studio dominance, virtually every filmmaker had to come to grips with this economic reality. The studio system was the only ballgame in town, and the **majors** were in business to make profits, the bigger the better. In short, the profit motive has been the main driving force in the evolution of the American film industry, and movies tend to reaffirm the ideological values of their sponsors. However, even economic historians would concede that other motives have also figured in the production of American movies—the desire for prestige, artistic integrity, and so on. Likewise, movies made in communist countries were occasionally critical of the social system that produced them. History—of any kind—is filled with contradictions.



11–24a. Publicity photo of John Sayles for *Eight Men Out* (U.S.A., 1988), written, edited, and directed by John Sayles.

Economic film histories concentrate on who pays the bills, who sponsors the making of a movie, and why. Like many European filmmakers, the American John Sayles finances his movies independently, guaranteeing him total artistic control. His goal is not the amassing of huge profits, but creative freedom. Most of his movies have been made on small budgets, with many of the same loyal crew of actors and technicians. This communal spirit has allowed them to produce a movie every few years. Though Sayles's films have not been huge hits, most of them were sufficiently profitable to maintain a constant cash flow. Sayles usually plays small roles in his own films, gener-

ally sleazoids, jerks, or villains. He is an artist of exceptional integrity. See also *John Sayles, Filmmaker*, by Jack Ryan (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998). (Orion Pictures)

11–24b. *King Kong* (U.S.A., 2005), with Naomi Watts and friend, directed by Peter Jackson.

Modern digital technology has allowed film artists to create wondrous worlds of startling realism, like this quiet, magical moment of communion, high above the sound and fury of the city. The love-smitten ape seems so human we can read his thoughts and fears on his face—complex emotions created entirely by computers. Technology is not the enemy of human imagination but its tool, yet another language through which film artists can convey thought and emotion as well as action. Confronted with such marvels, we might well exclaim, like Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't.

(Universal Studios)



11–25. *Collateral* (U.S.A., 2004), with Tom Cruise and Jamie Foxx, directed by Michael Mann.

The technology of digital video has totally changed the accessibility of the medium to aspiring young filmmakers. Unlike the expensive, cumbersome technology of film, digital video is cheap, fast, and (relatively) easy-to-use. Even professional filmmakers, like the visually sophisticated Michael Mann, shot *Collateral* on digital video, just to prove that first-class cinema can result from such modest means. The sleek thriller is noirishly atmospheric and very polished visually. In the past, aspiring filmmakers have been intimidated by the sheer complexity and expense of becoming a film artist. Today, with a technology that's much more accessible, who knows how many aspiring Spielbergs and Scorseses are waiting in the wings, waiting to shoot their own stories. (Paramount Pictures)



Social histories are mainly concerned with the audience. They emphasize film as a collective experience, as a reflection of mass sentiments during any given era. These sentiments can be overtly articulated or subliminally insinuated by appealing to our subconscious desires. Social historians often turn to statistics and sociological data for supporting evidence. Books like Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* and Garth Jowett's *Film: The Democratic Art* are filled with revealing statistics about audience likes and dislikes.

Social historians have also devoted a great deal of attention to the American star system, arguing that popular stars are usually a reflection of audience values and anxieties. Unfortunately, these concerns do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis, and social historians are sometimes criticized for their intuitive leaps in logic. Historians of this sort are also interested in social stereotypes—how a movie portrays blacks, women, authority figures, and so on.

In *Film History: Theory and Practice*, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery set forth the principal advantages and shortcomings of the various types of film history, arguing that a more integrated approach would minimize the dangers of distortion. As in other areas of film theory, film history is increasingly being viewed as a monolithic ecological system that must be studied from various perspectives to be comprehensively understood.

Different film commentators ask different types of questions. Those interested in the essential nature of the medium would probably focus on such traditional concerns as the realism–formalism dichotomy. The auteur theory is helpful if you want to ask questions about how a particular movie typifies the filmmaker's thematic and stylistic traits. Obviously, this approach is not a very fruitful technique for exploring movies like *Mildred Pierce* or *Independence Day*, pictures that were constructed by committee for the purpose of maximizing profits. Eclectic critics ask whatever questions they think will help people understand and appreciate the movie better. Why is this film good (or bad, or mediocre)? How could it be better? What brings it down? And so on. Structuralists ask questions

about a movie's underlying infrastructure: What thematic motifs are explored in the film's narrative? What are its mythic elements? What kind of codes—both thematic and stylistic—does the movie favor? How does the film's genre influence the particulars of this specific movie? Does it invent, reinforce, subvert, or ridicule the genre's conventions?

Depending on their orientation, historians also ask different types of questions. The arty ones are concerned with a movie's aesthetic worth and why attention should be paid. The techies are more likely to ask questions about the film's special effects, any outstanding technical achievements, such as the huge, near-scale proportions of the doomed ship in James Cameron's *Titanic*. Industry historians tend to ask questions concerning a movie's production expenditures and practices, how it was promoted, and what kind of tie-in products it generated. Social historians mostly ask questions about the audience. Why did the public love one movie and hate another? How does a film appeal to the public's subconscious fears and yearnings? What does a given movie say about its era? About its icons?

In short, there are literally thousands of questions that could be asked concerning a movie's implications. What you are looking for will determine most of your questions and how to focus them.

FURTHER READING

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