

# THE ART OF WATCHING FILMS

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NINTH EDITION



**Mc  
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Hill**  
Education

DENNIS W. **PETRIE**  
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# *The* **ART** *of Watching* **FILMS**

**Ninth Edition**

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**Mc  
Graw  
Hill  
Education**



## THE ART OF WATCHING FILMS

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*For* **MIRIAM**

# contents

PREFACE x



Source: Star Wars: The Force Awakens/Lucasfilm

## 1 The Art of Watching Films 2

THE UNIQUENESS OF FILM 3

*What Makes Film Unique* 3

*Increasing Realism as Technology Evolves* 4

THE CHALLENGES OF FILM ANALYSIS 5

THE VALUE OF FILM ANALYSIS 6

*Either/Or Positions About Analysis* 6

*The Two Sides Can Coexist: This Book's Position* 6

*Analysis Enhances Our Love of Films* 8

BECOMING A RECEPTIVE VIEWER 8

*Be Aware of Personal Biases* 9

*Watch the Whole Film* 10

*Consider Your Expectations* 10

THE FILM-VIEWING ENVIRONMENT 11

PREPARING TO SEE A FILM 14

DEEPENING OUR RESPONSES TO FILMS 16

*Analyzing Your Responses to a Film* 17

**Notes** 17



Source: *Captain Fantastic*/Bleecker Street

## 2 Thematic Elements 18

THEME AND FOCUS 19

*Focus on Plot* 19

*Focus on Emotional Effect or Mood* 19

*Focus on Character* 21

*Focus on Style or Texture or Structure* 21

*Focus on Ideas* 23

IDENTIFYING THE THEME 27

EVALUATING THE THEME 28

**Analyzing Theme** 30

**Watching for Theme** 32

**Films for Study** 32

**Notes** 33



Source: *Manchester by the Sea*/Amazon Studios

## 3 Fictional and Dramatic Elements 34

FILM ANALYSIS AND LITERARY ANALYSIS 35

THE ELEMENTS OF A GOOD STORY 35

*A Good Story Is Unified in Plot* 35

*A Good Story Is Credible* 36

*A Good Story Is Interesting* 38

*A Good Story Is Both Simple and Complex* 41

*A Good Story Handles Emotional Material With Restraint* 42

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE 44

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE 45

*Linear, or Chronological, Structure* 45

*Nonlinear Structures* 45

*Endings: Fine-Tuning the Dénouement* 46

CONFLICT 48

CHARACTERIZATION 50

*Characterization Through Appearance* 51

*Characterization Through Dialogue* 51

*Characterization Through External Action* 52

*Characterization Through Internal Action* 53  
*Characterization Through Reactions of Other Characters* 53  
*Characterization Through Contrast: Dramatic Foils* 54  
*Characterization Through Caricature and Leitmotif* 55  
*Characterization Through Choice of Name* 55  
*Varieties of Characters* 56

ALLEGORY 59

SYMBOLISM 60

*Universal and Natural Symbols* 60  
*Creating Symbolic Meanings* 61  
*Symbolic Patterns and Progressions* 64  
*Symbolic Values in Conflict* 65  
*Metaphors* 65  
*Overreading Symbolism* 66

IRONY 67

*Dramatic Irony* 67  
*Irony of Situation* 67  
*Irony of Character* 68  
*Irony of Setting* 69  
*Irony of Tone* 69  
*Cosmic Irony* 70

**Analyzing Fictional and Dramatic Elements** 70  
**Watching for Fictional and Dramatic Elements** 72  
**Mini-Movie Exercise** 73  
**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 74  
**Films for Study** 74  
**Notes** 75



Source: *Mad Max: Fury Road*/Warner Brothers

## 4

### Visual Design 76

COLOR VERSUS BLACK AND WHITE 77  
SCREEN FORMAT (ASPECT RATIO) 78  
FILM STOCK AND HIGH-DEFINITION VIDEOGRAPHY 81  
PRODUCTION DESIGN/ART DIRECTION 82  
*The Script: The Starting Point* 83  
*Setting and Its Effects* 85  
*Studio Versus Location Shooting* 89  
*Period Pieces* 90  
*Living Spaces and Offices* 91  
*Fantasy Worlds* 92  
COSTUME AND MAKEUP DESIGN 93

LIGHTING 96  
THE BUDGET'S EFFECT ON THE FILM'S LOOK 100  
**Analyzing Visual Design** 100  
**Watching for Visual Design** 102  
**Mini-Movie Exercise I** 102  
**Mini-Movie Exercise II** 102  
**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 103  
**Films for Study** 104  
**Notes** 104



Source: *Moonlight*/A24

## 5

### Cinematography and Special Visual Effects 106

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VISUAL IMAGE 107  
THE CINEMATIC FILM 107  
CINEMATIC POINTS OF VIEW 108  
*Objective Point of View* 109  
*Subjective Point of View* 110  
*Indirect-Subjective Point of View* 111  
*Director's Interpretive Point of View* 113  
ELEMENTS OF CINEMATIC COMPOSITION 114  
*Focusing Attention on the Most Significant Object* 115  
*Keeping the Image in Motion* 118  
*Creating an Illusion of Depth* 123  
SPECIALIZED CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES 130  
*Handheld Camera* 130  
*Camera Angles* 130  
*Color, Diffusion, and Soft Focus* 132  
*Special Lenses* 134  
*Fast Motion* 135  
*Special Lighting Effects* 136  
MOVIE MAGIC: SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS IN THE MODERN FILM 136  
THE F/X OF ANIMATED FEATURE FILMS . . . ESPECIALLY FOR ADULTS 144  
**FLASHBACK: ANIMATION: ONCE AN OPENING ACT, NOW A MAIN EVENT** 146  
**Analyzing Cinematography and Special Visual Effects** 152  
**Watching for Cinematography and Special Visual Effects** 153  
**Mini-Movie Exercise: Cinematography** 153

**Mini-Movie Exercise: Animated F/X** 154

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 154

**Films for Study** 157

**Notes** 158



Source: *Hell or High Water*/Lionsgate

## 6

### Editing 159

SELECTIVITY 161

**FLASHBACK: FILM EDITORS: A HISTORY BEHIND THE SCENES** 162

COHERENCE, CONTINUITY, AND RHYTHM 164

TRANSITIONS 164

RHYTHMS, TEMPO, AND TIME CONTROL 174

EXPANSION AND COMPRESSION OF TIME 175

SLOW MOTION 176

THE FREEZE FRAME, THE THAWED FRAME, AND STILLS 185

*The Freeze Frame* 185

*The Thawed Frame* 186

*Stills* 187

CREATIVE JUXTAPOSITION: MONTAGE 187

**Analyzing Editing** 188

**Watching For Editing** 191

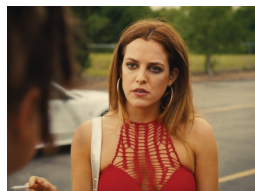
**Mini-Movie Exercise I** 191

**Mini-Movie Exercise II** 192

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 192

**Films for Study** 193

**Notes** 194



Source: *American Honey*/A24

## 7

### Color 195

**FLASHBACK: DISCOVERING COLOR AT THE MOVIES** 198

COLOR IN THE MODERN FILM 201

*Effects of Color on the Viewer* 201

*Color as a Transitional Device* 204

*Expressionistic Use of Color* 207

*Color as Symbol* 208

*Surrealistic Use of Color* 209

*Leitmotifs in Color* 210

*Color to Enhance Mood* 211

*Comic Book Color* 211

*Comic Strip Color* 212

*Painterly Effects in Color* 212

*Ironic Use of Color* 214

*Special Color Effects* 215

COLOR VERSUS BLACK AND WHITE 216

**Analyzing Color** 220

**Watching for Color** 221

**Mini-Movie Exercise** 221

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 222

**Films for Study** 223

**Notes** 224



Source: *Arrival*/Paramount Pictures

## 8

### Sound Effects and Dialogue 225

SOUND AND THE MODERN FILM 226

DIALOGUE 227

THREE-DIMENSIONALITY IN SOUND 228

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE SOUND 230

POINTS OF VIEW IN SOUND 232

SPECIAL USES OF SOUND EFFECTS  
AND DIALOGUE 234

*Sound Effects to Tell an Inner Story* 234

*Distortion of Sound to Suggest Subjective States* 236

*The "Personality" of Mechanical Sounds* 236

*Slow-Motion Sound* 236

*Ironic Juxtaposition of Sound and Image* 238

*Placing Unusual Emphasis on Sound* 238

*Using Sound for Texture, Time, and  
Temperature* 239

SOUND AS A PLOT DEVICE 240

SOUND AS A TRANSITIONAL ELEMENT 241

VOICE-OVER NARRATION 242

SILENCE AS A SOUND EFFECT 247

RHYTHMIC QUALITIES OF DIALOGUE  
AND SOUND EFFECTS 247  
THE “SOUNDS” OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE  
OR INTERNATIONAL FILMS 247

*Voice Dubbing* 248

*Subtitles* 249

**Analyzing Sound Effects and Dialogue** 251

**Watching for Sound Effects and Dialogue** 251

**Mini-Movie Exercise** 252

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 252

**Films for Study** 253

**Notes** 255



Source: *La La Land*/Lionsgate

## 9

### The Musical Score 256

THE REMARKABLE AFFINITY OF MUSIC AND FILM 257

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MUSICAL SCORE 257

GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF THE MUSICAL SCORE 258

SPECIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE MUSICAL SCORE 260

*Heightening the Dramatic Effect of Dialogue* 260

*Telling an Inner Story* 260

*Providing a Sense of Time and Place* 262

*Foreshadowing Events or Building Dramatic Tension* 262

*Adding Levels of Meaning to the Visual Image* 263

*Characterization Through Music* 264

*Triggering Conditioned Responses* 267

*Traveling Music* 267

*Providing Important Transitions* 268

*Setting an Initial Tone* 268

*Musical Sounds as Part of the Score* 269

*Music as Interior Monologue* 269

*Music as a Base for Choreographed Action* 269

*Covering Possible Weaknesses in the Film* 270

SYNTHESIZER SCORING 273

BALANCING THE SCORE 273

**Analyzing The Musical Score** 275

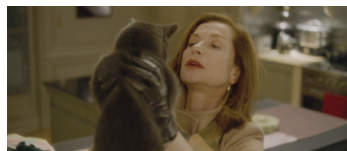
**Watching for The Musical Score** 276

**Mini-Movie Exercise** 277

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 278

**Films for Study** 280

**Notes** 281



Source: *Elle*/Sony Pictures Classics

## 10

### Acting 283

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTING 284

THE GOAL OF THE ACTOR 284

BECOMING THE CHARACTER 285

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FILM ACTING AND STAGE

ACTING 286

**FLASHBACK:** SILENT ACTING EVOLVES: THE SUBTLETIES  
OF EXAGGERATION 290

TYPES OF ACTORS 294

*Impersonators* 294

*Interpreters and Commentators* 294

*Personality Actors* 295

THE STAR SYSTEM 295

CASTING 297

*Casting Problems* 300

*The Typecasting Trap* 301

*Supporting Players* 304

*Special Casting Challenges* 306

*Extras and Small Parts* 309

ACTORS AS CREATIVE CONTRIBUTORS 310

SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES TO ACTORS 312

**Analyzing Acting** 314

**Watching for Acting** 315

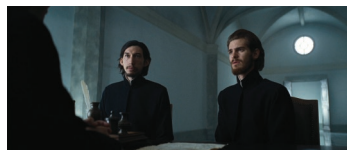
**Mini-Movie Exercise I** 315

**Mini-Movie Exercise II** 316

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 317

**Films for Study** 318

**Notes** 319



Source: *Silence* (2016)/Paramount Pictures

## 11

### The Director's Style 321

THE CONCEPT OF STYLE 324



SUBJECT MATTER 325  
CINEMATOGRAPHY 328  
EDITING 330  
SETTING AND SET DESIGN 331  
SOUND AND SCORE 331  
CASTING AND ACTING PERFORMANCES 332  
SCREENPLAYS AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE 333  
EVOLVING STYLES AND FLEXIBILITY 336  
SPECIAL EDITION: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT 339  
A PORTFOLIO OF FOUR DIRECTORS 341

**Analyzing A Director's Style 350**

**Mini-Movie Exercise I 352**

**Mini-Movie Exercise II 352**

**DVD Filmmaking Extras 354**

**Films for Study 356**

**Notes 358**



Source: *Hidden Figures*/20th Century Fox

## 12

### **Analysis of the Whole Film 360**

THE BASIC APPROACH: WATCHING, ANALYZING,  
AND EVALUATING THE FILM 361

*Theme 361*

*The Relationship of the Parts to the Whole 362*

*The Film's "Level of Ambition" 363*

*Objective Evaluation of the Film 363*

*Subjective Evaluation of the Film 365*

OTHER APPROACHES TO ANALYSIS, EVALUATION,  
AND DISCUSSION 365

*The Film as Technical Achievement 365*

*The Film as Showcase for the Actor: The Personality  
Cult 365*

*The Film as Product of a Single Creative Mind:*

*The Auteur Approach 366*

*The Film as Moral, Philosophical, or Social Statement 367*

*The Film as Emotional or Sensual Experience 368*

*The Film as Repeated Form: The Genre Approach 368*

*The Film as Political Statement 369*

*The Film as Gender or Racial Statement 370*

*The Film as Insight to the Mind: The Psychoanalytical  
Approach 371*

*The Eclectic Approach 375*

REREADING THE REVIEWS 376  
EVALUATING THE REVIEWER 376  
DEVELOPING PERSONAL CRITERIA 378

**Analyzing The Whole Film 380**

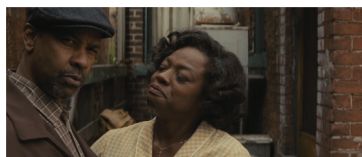
**Mini-Movie Exercise I 382**

**Mini-Movie Exercise II 382**

**DVD Filmmaking Extras 383**

**Films for Study 384**

**Notes 385**



Source: *Fences*/Paramount Pictures

## 13

### **Adaptations 386**

THE PROBLEMS OF ADAPTATION 387

*Change in Medium 387*

*Change in Creative Artists 388*

*Cinematic Potential of the Original Work 389*

ADAPTATIONS OF PROSE FICTION 390

*Literary Versus Cinematic Points of View 390*

**FLASHBACK: THE WRITER'S PLACE IN HOLLYWOOD 392**

*Third-Person Point of View: Challenges 394*

*First-Person Point of View: Challenges 394*

*The Problem of Length and Depth 396*

*Philosophical Reflections 397*

*Summarizing a Character's Past 398*

*The Challenge of Summarizing Events 399*

*Literary Past Tense Versus Cinematic Present Tense 400*

*Other Factors Influencing Adaptations of Fiction 401*

ADAPTATIONS OF PLAYS 403

*Structural Divisions 403*

*Sense of Space 404*

*Film Language Versus Stage Language 406*

*Stage Conventions Versus Cinema Conventions 406*

*Other Changes 408*

FROM FACT TO FILM: REALITY TO MYTH 409

**Analyzing Adaptations 413**

**Mini-Movie Exercise I 415**

**Mini-Movie Exercise II 416**

**DVD Filmmaking Extras 417**

**Films for Study 418**

**Notes 420**



Source: *Hacksaw Ridge*/Lionsgate

## 14

### Genre Films, Remakes, and Sequels 422

GENRE FILMS 423

*Values* 424

*The Strengths of Genre Films* 424

*Basic Genre Conventions—And Their Variations* 425

REMAKES AND SEQUELS 439

*Remakes* 441

*Sequels* 443

**Analyzing Genre Films, Remakes, and Sequels** 449

**Mini-Movie Exercise** 450

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 451

**Films for Study** 454

**Notes** 458



Source: *Spotlight*/Open Road Films

## 15

### Film and Society 461

FILM FOREIGNNESS 462

*“Strange” Silents* 464

DOES AMERICAN FILM SHAPE OR REFLECT  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES? 464

THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION CODE,  
1930–1960 466

CENSORSHIP IN TRANSITION, 1948–1968 471

THE MPAA RATING SYSTEM 473

CENSORSHIP AND FILMS ON TELEVISION 478

BEYOND THE CODE AND RATING  
SYSTEM 480

CHANGING FORMULAS FOR THE TREATMENT  
OF SEX, VIOLENCE, AND LANGUAGE 481

SOCIAL PROBLEM FILMS AND DOCUMENTARY  
FILMMAKING 484

**FLASHBACK:** FILMING LIFE: A HISTORY OF THE  
DOCUMENTARY 488

**Analyzing Films in Society** 492

**Mini-Movie Exercise I** 494

**Mini-Movie Exercise II** 494

**DVD Filmmaking Extras** 495

**Films for Study** 497

**Notes** 499

GLOSSARY G-1

INDEX I-1

# preface

Never before have movies been so readily available to those who wish to watch them. When the first edition of this book was published, students' viewing opportunities were mostly limited to local theaters, classrooms with 16mm projection capabilities, or television. Since then, cable, satellite, VCRs, laserdisc players, and DVRs (beginning with TiVo) have dramatically widened our choice of films to see and ways to see them. DVDs and streaming video via the Internet and Wi-Fi have offered home viewers both improved visual and sound quality, and content extras such as commentaries by directors, actors, writers, editors, cinematographers, and other filmmakers, as well as extended "making of" documentaries. Perhaps most helpfully for the study of film, these technologies allow direct digital entry to individual scenes so that we can now scrutinize a film sequence by sequence, shot by shot, and even frame by frame.

What are we to make of this greater access to movies? What purpose does it serve? This textbook is informed by the belief that making films is an art—and that watching films is also an art. Most students come into an introductory film course having watched plenty of movies, but during the semester, they develop ways to engage in the experience on a deeper, more meaningful level.

With an emphasis on the narrative film, *The Art of Watching Films* challenges students to take their film experience further by sharpening their powers of observation, developing the skills and habits of perceptive watching, and discovering complex aspects of film art that they might otherwise overlook. The first chapter offers a rationale for film analysis while providing suggestions for deepening film appreciation from day one of the course. Following Chapter 1, the text presents a foundation for understanding theme and story, key aspects of understanding narrative films (Chapters 2 and 3), before moving on to discussions of dramatic and cinematic elements (Chapters 4 to 11). A framework for integration and application of these elements into an analysis of the whole film is set forth in Chapter 12. Subsequent chapters explore special topics including adaptations, genre films, remakes, sequels, and the role of movies in society.

*The Art of Watching Films* introduces the formal elements and production process of films, and helps students analytically view and understand films within their historical, cultural, and social contexts. The text presents an analytical framework that can be applied to all movies as distinctly different as *Fences*, *Arrival*, *Casablanca*, *Denial*, *The Lobster*, *American Honey*, *Elle*, *Spotlight*, *Manchester by the Sea*, and *Life Itself*.

- **Images and Captions:** More than 450 images with extensive, informative captions illustrate key points in the text to provide context and a critical look at the examples.
- **Balanced Selection of Films:** Quintessential classics such as films by Alfred Hitchcock, *The Great Train Robbery*, and the French New Wave remain as great examples, while the addition of new films, such as *Moonlight*, *Hell or High Water*, and *La La Land*, illustrate cinematic concepts in relevant and relatable ways. As always, we include a large number of contemporary films

that today's students are likely to have seen (*Hidden Figures*, *Get Out*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Captain America: Civil War*). We do this with the understanding that students learn better and are more engaged by the subject matter when they start with what they know. However, we also include numerous examples from American film classics, which are discussed in a way that does not assume prior knowledge. Moreover, throughout the text, we examine a variety of films from different countries and genres.

- **Unique Chapter on Adaptation:** *The Art of Watching Films* features an entire chapter on adaptation (Chapter 13), a major aspect of current filmmaking that is rarely covered in textbooks. Adaptation pertains not only to works of literature, but also to television series, computer games, graphic novels, children's books, and even magazine articles. It's an area from which many feature films today are born.
- **Coverage of Film and Society:** A chapter on film and society (Chapter 15) covers such thought-provoking topics as the treatment of sex, violence, and language; censorship and the MPAA Rating System; the "foreignness" of foreign language and silent films; and social problem films, including documentaries. These topics provide social context for students to become more aware viewers of themes and meanings behind films.
- **Encouragement of Active Viewing:** End-of-chapter "Watching for . . ." exercises offer a hands-on immediacy to the study of film. Assuming that most students have access to a DVD player, we have devised exercises for nine of the chapters in the text. For examination of specific scenes, simply follow the descriptive references in the "chapters" indicator of the main menu.
- **Analysis of Film Themes and Techniques:** Questions at the end of every chapter help students apply chapter concepts to the analysis of any film. They increase students' involvement in the film experience, encouraging them to participate actively in an engaging quest rather than respond passively to the surface details.
- **Mini-Movie Exercises:** Chapters 3 through 15 provide students with exercises for examining a short film or "cinema sampler" (part of a feature film that is virtually self-contained). These exercises permit scrutiny of "complete," unified works rather than just fragmented bits and pieces of a feature-length film. They should be especially helpful to students and teachers who necessarily work within limited time periods.
- **DVD Filmmaking Extras:** Chapters 3 through 15 also contain annotated lists of topic-specific materials about the filmmaking process to be found on DVD versions of many movies. In addition, instructions are given for locating some "Easter eggs" (special hidden features) on DVDs.
- **Films for Study:** Chapters 2 through 15 provide lists of film titles that lead students to further examination of additional movies.

## NEW AND UPDATED IN THE NINTH EDITION

### Refreshed Photo Program with Scores of New Film Images

All of the film images in the book are full-color screenshots captured from the films themselves. Publicity and production stills do not depict actual shots in the films. More than ever before, the image program shows students what the films really look like, indicating accurate framing, color, and aspect ratio.

## More Currency and Relevancy with Films New to this Edition

Many new film examples whose release dates span from 2011 to 2018 have been added and discussed in this 9th Edition. These movie titles have all been carefully selected to nurture an appreciation and understanding of the art. Of course, classic films and ones that will always serve as good examples have been retained.

## Updated Coverage of Current Technology

The technological coverage has been updated throughout the new edition, with an emphasis on the technologies and resources that students today use most frequently: DVD, Blu-ray, Netflix, and so on. We also strengthened the coverage of computer-generated graphics (CGI) and the process of directing with digital film.

## Improved Organization for More Straightforward Information

Chapters include headings and key terms to guide students new to the analysis of films.

## New Exercises for More Application and Appreciation

Two new Mini-Movie Exercises help students appreciate adaptations (*Higglety, Pigglety, Pop!*, chapter 13) and film and society issues (*Wild Tales*, chapter 15).



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The ninth edition of *The Art of Watching Films* is now available online with *Connect*, McGraw-Hill Education's integrated assignment and assessment platform. *Connect* also offers *SmartBook* for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students study more effectively. All of the title's website and ancillary content is also available through *Connect*, including:

- A full Test Bank of multiple choice questions that test students on central concepts and ideas in each chapter.
- An Instructor's Manual for each chapter with full chapter outlines, sample test questions, and discussion topics.
- Lecture Slides for instructor use in class.
- Quizzes, Internet Exercises, Flashcards, Chapter Outlines, and Extended Films for Study.
- Video content consisting of one classic movie clip per chapter with accompanying commentary and quiz questions for each chapter.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This ninth edition of *The Art of Watching Films* presents scores of new photographs, most of which are frame captures. We believe that this approach allows film students to view dynamic images as they actually appear in the films themselves, rather than merely as static publicity stills. With considerable technological and editorial assistance from Ron Nelms, Jr.—who created the photo illustrations used throughout the book, and to whom I extend my heartfelt and enduring thanks—I have chosen each new image in this book both for the pleasure it may give readers and, most crucially, for the direct manner in which it supports the text. Our central goal has been to create a consistently instructive, visually appealing volume that may also entertain anyone who loves, or is simply curious about, the eternally magical world of cinema.

Once again, to my patient and encouraging family, friends, colleagues, and students, I wish to express enormous gratitude. For constant and wonderfully generous support, I especially offer my sincere appreciation to Sue Van Wagner, Jane Tubergen, Thomas Tierney, Roberta Tierney, and Robert Briles.

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Dex Westrum, University of  
Wisconsin–Parkside

Finally, I gratefully salute Donna Davidson-Symonds, College of the Canyons, who created the excellent student tutorial and film-clip exercises that are now significant elements of the free online materials supporting this text.

***Dennis W. Petrie***

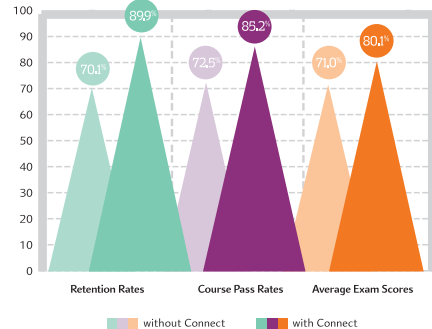
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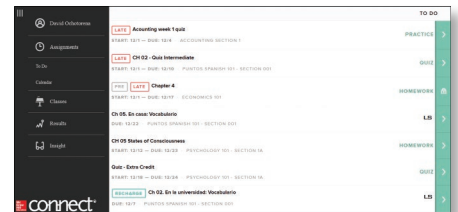
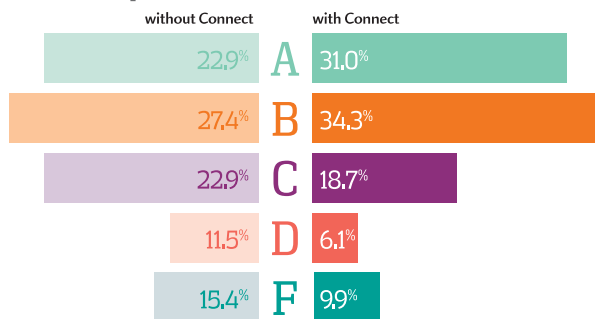
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1

# The **ART** of WATCHING FILMS



## **Star Wars: The Force Awakens**

Source: *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*/Lucasfilm

*The cinema is a work of art when motion conforms to a perceptible rhythm with pause and pace and where all aspects of the continuous image relate to the whole.*

—JOSEF VON STERNBERG, DIRECTOR

## THE UNIQUENESS OF FILM

The tremendous expense involved in producing motion pictures reminds us that film is both an industry and an art form. Each film is the child of a turbulent marriage between businesspeople and artists. Yet despite an ongoing battle between aesthetic and commercial considerations, film is recognized as a unique and powerful art form on a par with painting, sculpture, music, literature, and drama. A. O. Scott, a film reviewer for *The New York Times*, has eloquently identified other tensions within our insatiable appetite for going to the movies: “[I]t is at once collective and radically solitary, an amalgam of the cohesive social ritual of theater-going and the individualist reverie of novel-reading. . . . [M]oviegoing is perhaps still . . . the exemplary modern cultural activity. It splices together . . . the line at the box office and the solitary dreaming in the dark. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

As a form of expression, the motion picture is similar to other artistic media, for the basic properties of other media are woven into its own rich fabric. Film employs the compositional elements of the visual arts: line, form, mass, volume, and texture. Like painting and photography, film exploits the subtle interplay of light and shadow. Like sculpture, film manipulates three-dimensional space. But, like pantomime, film focuses on *moving* images, and as in dance, the moving images in film have rhythm. The complex rhythms of film resemble those of music and poetry, and like poetry in particular, film communicates through imagery, metaphor, and symbol. Like the drama, film communicates visually *and* verbally: visually, through action and gesture; verbally, through dialogue. Finally, like the novel, film expands or compresses time and space, traveling back and forth freely within their wide borders.

### What Makes Film Unique

Despite these similarities, film is unique, set apart from all other media by its quality of free and constant motion. The continuous interplay of sight, sound, and motion allows film to transcend the static limitations of painting and sculpture—in the complexity of its sensual appeal as well as in its ability to communicate simultaneously on several levels. Film even surpasses drama in its unique capacity for revealing various points of view, portraying action, manipulating time, and conveying a boundless sense of space. Unlike the stage play, film can provide a continuous, unbroken flow, which blurs and minimizes transitions without compromising the story’s unity. Unlike the novel and the poem, film communicates directly, not through abstract symbols like words on a page but through concrete images and sounds. What’s more, film can treat an almost infinite array of subjects—“from the poles to the equator, from the Grand Canyon to the minutest flaw in a piece of steel, . . . from the flicker of thought across an almost impassive face to the frenzied ravings of a madman. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Film has the capability to represent just about anything we can imagine or perceive. Time can be slowed or speeded up so that the invisible is revealed. As if by magic, a bullet’s trajectory through the air or the many stages of a flower’s bloom can be made visible and comprehensible. Film can afford us experiences not normally available to mortals. Until movies such as *Harry Potter* and *Avatar*

came out, how else—other than in our dreams—have human beings been able to feel the motion of swooping through a canyon on the wings of a wild bird? What better way to understand the depth, pathos, and genius of Mozart’s life than through his own music (*Amadeus*)? Even the universe itself feels palpable when Han Solo shifts his ship into warp speed and stars collapse outside his window in *Star Wars*.

The medium is unlimited not only in its choice of subject but also in its approach to that material. A film’s mood and treatment can range from the lyric to the epic. In point of view, a film can cover the full spectrum from the purely objective to the intensely subjective; in depth, it can focus on the surface realities and the purely sensual, or it can delve into the intellectual and philosophical. A film can look to the remote past or probe the distant future; it can make a few seconds seem like hours or compress a century into minutes. Film can run the gamut of feeling from the most fragile, tender, and beautiful to the most brutal, violent, and repulsive.

## Increasing Realism as Technology Evolves

Of even greater importance than film’s unlimited range in subject matter and treatment, however, is the overwhelming sense of reality it can convey. The continuous stream of sight, sound, and motion creates a here-and-now excitement that immerses the viewer in the cinematic experience. Thus, through film, fantasy assumes the shape and emotional impact of reality (Figure 1.1). The technological history of film can in fact be viewed as a continual evolution toward greater realism, toward erasing the border between art and nature. The motion picture has progressed step by step from drawings, to photographs, to projected images, to sound, to color, to wide screen, to 3-D and beyond. Attempts have been made to add the sense of smell to the film experience by releasing fragrances in the theater. Aldous Huxley’s classic novel *Brave New World* depicts a theater of the future in which a complex electrical apparatus at each seat provides tactile images to match the visuals: “Going to the Feelies this evening, Henry? . . . I hear the new one at the Alhambra is first-rate. There’s a love scene on a bearskin rug; they say it’s marvelous. Every hair of the bear reproduced. The most amazing tactual effects.”<sup>3</sup>

Although Huxley’s “Feelies” have not yet become reality, the motion picture has succeeded—through Cinerama, IMAX, and other wide-screen, curved-screen, large-screen projection or computerized virtual reality techniques—in intensifying our experience to a remarkable degree. In fact, by creating images that are larger than life, films have sometimes been made to seem more real than reality. A cartoon published shortly after the release of the first Cinerama film (*This Is Cinerama*, 1952) illustrates the effectiveness of this device. The drawing pictures a man groping for a seat during the famous roller-coaster sequence. As he moves across a row of theater seats, another spectator, in a panic, grabs his arm and screams hysterically, “Sit down, you fool! You’ll have us all killed!” This comic exclamation echoed similar ones from early silent film patrons who reacted nervously to the first train that swiftly entered a cinema’s “station.” What awesome delights must await us consumers of movie **CGI (computer-generated imaging)** in future decades.



**FIGURE 1.1 Making Fantasy Become Reality** The film medium gives such fantasy movies as novelist and screenwriter J. K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* the texture and emotional impact of reality.

Source: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*/Warner Brothers

## THE CHALLENGES OF FILM ANALYSIS

The properties that make film the most powerful and realistic of the arts also make analysis challenging. A motion picture moves continuously in time and space. Once frozen, a film is no longer a “motion” picture, and the unique property of the medium is gone. Therefore, film analysis requires us to respond sensitively to the simultaneous and continuous interplay of image, sound, and movement on the screen. This necessity creates the most challenging part of the task: We must somehow remain almost totally immersed in the experience of a film while we maintain a high degree of objectivity and critical detachment. Difficult though it may seem, this skill can be developed, and we must consciously cultivate it if we desire to become truly “cineliterate.” Innovations in digital videodisc (DVD), Blu-ray players and recorders, and streaming video can help, initially at least, by simply making screenings (as well as multiple viewings) of a film easier than in the past.

The technical nature of the medium also creates challenges. It would be ideal if we all had some experience in cinematography and film editing. In the absence of such experience, we should become familiar with the basic techniques of film production so that we can recognize them and evaluate their effectiveness. Because a certain amount of technical language or jargon is necessary for the analysis and intelligent discussion of any art form, we must also add a number of important technical terms to our vocabularies.

The most challenging part of our task has already been stated: We must become almost totally immersed in the experience of a film and at the same time maintain a high degree of objectivity and critical detachment. The complex nature of the medium makes it difficult to consider all the elements of a film in a single viewing; too many things happen too quickly on too many levels to allow for a complete analysis. Therefore, if we wish to develop the proper habits of analytical viewing, we should see a film at least twice whenever possible. In the first viewing, we can watch the film in the usual manner, concerning ourselves primarily with

plot elements, the total emotional effect, and the central idea or theme. Then, in subsequent viewings, because we are no longer caught up in the suspense of what happens, we can focus our full attention on the hows and whys of the filmmaker's art. Constant practice of the double- or multiple-viewing technique should make it possible for us gradually to combine the functions of two or more viewings into one. Still, few of us possess the kind of total recall claimed by celebrated film critic Pauline Kael, who often insisted that she never watched any movie more than once before she composed a review.

We must also remember that film analysis does not end when the film is over. In a sense, this is when it really begins. Most of the questions posed in this book require the reader to reflect on the film after viewing it, and a mental replay of some parts of the film will be necessary for any complete analysis.

Finally, as we move through the chapters that follow toward the analysis of individual films, we must always remind ourselves that if the medium can truly be called an "art," then it is definitely a *collaborative* one. Scores, if not hundreds, of commercial professionals are involved in the production of the average "picture" (to use the term that many filmmakers themselves prefer). When we analyze a literary work such as a novel or poem, we judge the toil of a single creative individual. By contrast, our close examination of a film requires an awareness of the talents of many different artists, including producers, directors, production/costume/makeup designers, and, of course, actors. Usually, though, in the beginning is still the word, and the screenwriter—who has historically been viewed as the least respected major team player in Hollywood—remains the primary *originating* force within cinematic art.

## THE VALUE OF FILM ANALYSIS

Before we turn to the actual process of film analysis, it may be worthwhile to look into certain fundamental questions that have been raised about the value of analysis in general.

### Either/Or Positions About Analysis

Perhaps the most vocal reactions against analysis come from those who see it as a destroyer of beauty, claiming that it kills our love for the object under study. According to this view, it is better to accept all art intuitively, emotionally, and subjectively, so that our response is full, warm, and vibrant, uncluttered by the intellect. However, an either/or, black-and-white polarization of intuition and analysis is flawed. It denies the possibility of some middle ground—a synthesis that retains the best qualities of both approaches and embraces as equally valid both the emotional/intuitive and the intellectual/analytical avenues.

### The Two Sides Can Coexist: This Book's Position

This book rests on that middle ground. It assumes that the soul of the poet and the intellect of the scientist can coexist within all of us, enriching and enhancing the film experience. Analysis need not murder our love of the movies. We can experience beauty, joy, and mystery intellectually as well as intuitively. With the tools of



**FIGURE 1.2 Learning to Dive** Watching classic film dramas such as Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* helps us to understand our human selves with a depth that might elude us otherwise.

Source: *The Seventh Seal*/The Criterion Collection

analysis, we can discover the deepest reaches of understanding that only the poet within us can fully appreciate (Figure 1.2). By creating new avenues of awareness, analysis can make our love for movies stronger, more real, more enduring. The analytical approach is essential to the art of watching films, for it enables us to see and understand how each part functions to contribute its vital energy to the pulsing, dynamic whole.

Analysis, generally, means breaking up the whole to discover the nature, proportion, function, and interrelationships of the parts. Film analysis, then, presupposes the existence of a unified and rationally structured artistic whole. Therefore, the usefulness of this book is restricted to structured or narrative films—films developed with a definite underlying purpose and unified around a central theme. Limiting our approach to structured films does not necessarily deny the artistic value of unstructured films. Many of the movies that experimental and underground filmmakers produce do communicate effectively on a purely subjective, intuitive, or sensual plane and are meaningful to some degree as experiences. But because these films are not structured or unified around a central purpose or theme, they cannot be successfully approached through analysis.

It would be foolish to suggest that a structured film cannot be appreciated or understood at all without analysis. If a film is effective, we should possess an intuitive grasp of its overall meaning. The problem is that this intuitive grasp is generally weak and vague; it limits our critical response to hazy generalizations and half-formed opinions. The analytical approach allows us to raise this intuitive grasp to a conscious level, bring it into sharp focus, and thereby make more valid and definite conclusions about the film's meaning and value. The analytical approach, however,

does not reduce film art to rational and manageable proportions. Analysis neither claims nor attempts to explain everything about film. The elusive, flowing stream of images will always escape complete analysis and complete understanding. In fact, no final answers exist about any work of art. A film, like anything else of true aesthetic value, can never be entirely captured by analysis.

But the fact that there are no final answers should not prevent us from pursuing some important questions. Our hope is that, through analysis, we can reach a higher level of understanding about films, a level where we are reflecting on the most significant aspects of the film art as opposed to the merely mundane, the practical, and the technical. Film analysis enables us to understand some elements habitually, thus freeing our minds to concentrate on the most significant questions.

## Analysis Enhances Our Love of Films

Analysis helps us to lock an experience in our minds so that we may savor it in memory. By looking at a film analytically, we engage ourselves with it intellectually and creatively and thus make it more truly our own. Furthermore, because our critical judgments enter into the process, analysis should fine-tune our tastes. A mediocre film can impress us more than it should at first, but we might like it less after analyzing it. A great film or a very good one will stand up under analysis; our admiration for it will increase the more deeply we look into it.

Film analysis, then, offers several clear benefits. It allows us to reach valid conclusions on a movie's meaning and value; it helps us to capture the experience of a film in our minds; and it sharpens our critical judgments overall. But the ultimate purpose of analysis, and its greatest benefit, is that it opens up new channels of awareness and new depths of understanding. It seems logical to assume that the more understanding we have, the more completely we will appreciate art. If the love we have for an art form rests on rational understanding, it will be more solid, more enduring, and of greater value than love based solely on irrational and totally subjective reactions. This is not to claim that analysis will create a love of films where no such love exists. Love of movies does not emerge from a book or from any special critical approach. It comes only from that secret, personal union between film and viewer in a darkened room. If that love does not already exist for the viewer, this book and its analytical approach can do little to create it.

But if we truly love films, we will find that analysis is worth the effort, for the understanding it brings will deepen our appreciation. Instead of canceling out the emotional experience of watching the movie, analysis will enhance and enrich that experience. As we become more perceptive and look more deeply into the film, new levels of emotional experience will emerge.

## BECOMING A RECEPTIVE VIEWER

Before we begin our analysis, we need to consider obstacles to objectivity and maximum enjoyment that we create through our prejudices and misconceptions and by the particular circumstances in which we watch the film. Each of us reacts in a unique and complex way to internal and external forces that are beyond the



**FIGURE 1.3 Suspending Our Disbelief** To enjoy movies such as *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, we must undergo the memorable experience of challenging our preconceived notions of reality—or, as the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested, “suspend our sense of disbelief” in narratives that break the natural, logical rules of everyday existence.

Source: *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*/New Line Cinema

filmmaker’s control. Although these forces lie outside the film itself, they can have an effect on how we experience a film. Awareness of these forces should help us overcome them or at least minimize their effect.

## Be Aware of Personal Biases

One of the most difficult prejudices to overcome is that which leads us to dismiss certain categories of films. Although it is natural to prefer some types to others, most of us can appreciate or enjoy aspects of almost any film. We should keep in mind that not all films will fit our preconceived notions. For example, a person who dislikes gangster movies might stay away from *Bonnie and Clyde*; another, who dislikes musicals, might shun *Chicago*, and a third, who dislikes fantasy movies, might ignore *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Figure 1.3). All would lose a memorable film experience, for those three films are more than simple formula pieces.

Others may reject worthwhile movies because of their unwillingness to venture beyond the norm. Some may stay away from black-and-white films, always preferring color. Others may shun foreign-language films because they dislike reading subtitles or because they are bothered by dubbing that is not perfectly synchronized with mouth movement.

Also narrow in their outlook are filmgoers who have inflexible preconceptions about what movies are supposed to be. This type of categorical rejection may be illustrated by two extreme examples. At one end of the spectrum are filmgoers who say, “I just want to be entertained,” and are offended by a film that is grim and depressing. At the other end are viewers, equally limited in their outlook, who expect every film to make a profound artistic statement about the