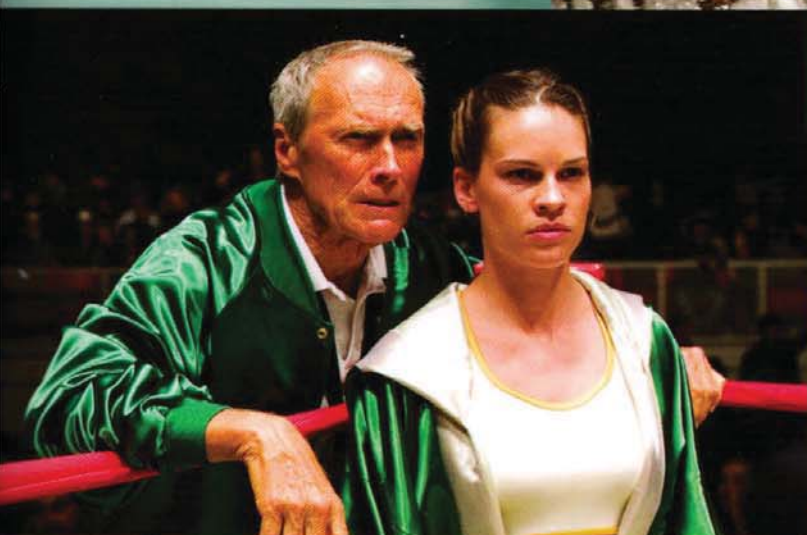


The **ART** *of* **WATCHING** **FILMS**

Seventh Edition

Joseph M. Boggs
Dennis W. Petrie



Using both contemporary and classic films, *The Art of Watching Films* helps students develop critical skills in the analysis and evaluation of film. By suggesting what to look for and how to look for it, the text challenges students to sharpen their powers of observation, establish habits of perceptive watching, and discover complex aspects of cinematic art that will further enhance their enjoyment of watching films.

REVISION HIGHLIGHTS

- A new full-color design, including new color photos and movie stills throughout, adds to the book's attractiveness and appeal to students; more importantly, it helps them better understand concepts discussed in such chapters as Color, Cinematography, and Visual Design.
- New coverage of such thought-provoking topics as the treatment of sex, violence, and language; censorship and the MPAA Rating System; the "foreignness" of foreign films; and social problem films is now highlighted in new Chapter 15, Film and Society.
- The new "Flashback" feature gives students a brief historical overview of such topics as the history of film editing (Chapter 6); the use of color in filmmaking (Chapter 7); voice dubbing (Chapter 8); acting in silent films (Chapter 10); and the role of the screenwriter (Chapter 13).

STUDENT CD-ROM WITH FILM CLIPS AND COMMENTARY

This CD-ROM, designed specifically for *The Art of Watching Films*, provides short film clips that reinforce the key concepts and topics in each chapter. Along with each film clip is commentary that relates the film clip to the ideas discussed in the text. A short quiz accompanies each clip and commentary. Film clips are from such movies as *The Graduate*, *Psycho*, *Pleasantville*, *Meet the Parents*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Vertigo*, and *Shakespeare in Love*.

**VISIT THE ONLINE
LEARNING CENTER AT
www.mhhe.com/awf7**

This Web site for *The Art of Watching Films* includes tools for both instructors and students. For instructors, the Online Learning Center (OLC) offers a new instructor's manual; a test bank; EZ Test Computerized Test Bank; a PowerPoint presentation including outlines for each chapter and discussion questions; and multiple-choice questions for use with the Classroom Performance System. Instructors also have access to all the assets in the Student edition of the OLC, which include a special feature "Writing About Film;" a selected bibliography and list of resource materials; self-testing quizzes for each chapter, including multiple-choice and true-false questions; and study materials for every chapter, including chapter outline, Internet exercises, and Web links.

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Seventh Edition

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For ELIZABETH PETRIE GILL
and ROBERT D. BRILES

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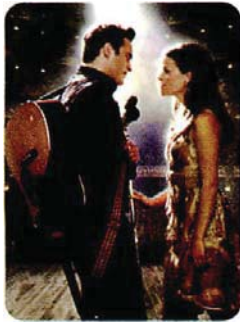
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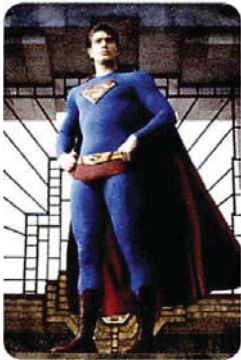
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Preface



Not only is there an art to making films, there is also an art to watching films. We wrote this book to challenge students in introduction to film courses to sharpen their powers of observation, develop the skills and habits of perceptive watching, and discover complex aspects of film art that they might otherwise overlook. We designed the text to complement any film studied; its analytical framework can be applied to films as distinctly different as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Caché*, *Dreamgirls*, *Batman Begins*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *Flags of our Fathers*.

We are excited to offer this new seventh edition of *The Art of Watching Films* in full color. The addition of color photos and movie stills throughout not only adds to the book's attractiveness, but also helps students better understand concepts discussed in such chapters as Color, Cinematography, and Visual Design. In all, more than 450 images with extensive, informative captions illustrate key points in the text.

As in previous editions, we have tried to include as examples a large number of contemporary films that today's students are likely to have seen. 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 and include examples from films from other countries, documentaries, and animated films.

ORGANIZATION

In its formal organization and intent, *The Art of Watching Films* is as straightforward as possible, with a focus on narrative film. The first chapter offers a rationale for film analysis while providing suggestions for deepening film appreciation from day one of the course. The text then develops a foundation for understanding theme and story (Chapters 2 and 3) and moves on to discuss dramatic

and cinematic elements (Chapters 4–11). Chapter 12 provides a framework for integrating knowledge of all these elements into an analysis of the whole film. Subsequent chapters explore special topics: adaptations (13); genre films, remakes, and sequels (14); and film and society (15).

Based on extensive reviewer feedback, we have made the following organizational changes to the seventh edition:

- The topic of special visual effects is now covered in Chapter 5 on Cinematography.
- A special section on animated feature Films was added to Chapter 5.
- Examples from silent films are integrated throughout, but special coverage of silent films can be found in Chapter 10, Acting, and Chapter 15, Film and Society.
- As with silent films, examples and discussion of foreign films are integrated throughout, with special coverage in Chapter 8, Sound Effects and Dialogue, and Chapter 15, Film and Society.

FEATURES

New—“Flashback” Features

New to this seventh edition of the text are seven boxed features that explore important aspects of film history. “Flashback” features are illustrated by one or more photos and give students a brief historical overview of such topics as the history of film editing (Chapter 6); the use of color in filmmaking (Chapter 7); voice dubbing (Chapter 8); acting in silent films (Chapter 9) and the role of the screenwriter (Chapter 13) and the underrated art of documentary filmmaking (Chapter 15).

New—Chapter on Film and Society

A new chapter on Film and Society 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.

Student CD-ROM with Film Clips and Commentary

This CD-ROM, designed specifically for *The Art of Watching Films*, provides short film clips that reinforce the key concepts and topics in each chapter. Along with each film clip is commentary that relates the film clip to the ideas discussed in the text. A short quiz accompanies each clip and commentary. Film clips are from such movies as *The Graduate*, *Psycho*, *Pleasantville*, *Meet the Parents*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Vertigo*, and *Shakespeare in Love*. The CD-ROM

was created by Donna Davidson-Symonds of College of the Canyons, Santa Clarita, CA.

Unique Chapter on Adaptation

Chapter 13, Adaptation, treats a major aspect of current filmmaking that is rarely covered in textbooks: the adaptation not only of works of literature, but also television series, computer games, graphic novels, children's books, and even magazine articles, into feature films.

Video Exercises

End-of-chapter video exercises offer a hands-on immediacy to the study of film. Assuming that most students have at least limited access to a VCR or DVD player, we have devised video exercises for nine of the chapters in the text.

- **For VCR:** To view the section of film dealt with in each exercise, set the VCR counter at "0000" (or the real-time counter at 0:00:00) at the very end of the studio logo, just as the "movie proper" begins. (The "movie proper" includes such things as "Paramount Pictures Presents," opening credits, and the main title). Then fast-forward until the numbers given in the exercise appear.
- **For DVD player:** For examination of comparable scenes on any available DVD, merely follow the descriptive references in the "chapters" indicator of the main menu.

Questions for Analyzing 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 also 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 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 many “Easter eggs” (special hidden features) on DVDs.

Writing About Film

Many instructors ask students to write about the films they watch—either informally in a journal or formally in an essay to give structure and logic to their own critical responses. In this text’s Web site (www.mhhe.com/awf7), we offer guidelines for writing a film analysis and three sample student essays. The first is a lengthy, complete examination of John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, showing how a student might approach a paper assigned as a major class project. The second is a shorter, simpler paper focusing on important techniques employed in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*. Both of these essays illustrate the types of analysis that one might expect students to write by using this text and a video source for multiple viewings. So that students using this book can grasp the interrelationship of the text, film, and finished essay, we have noted in the margins of both papers the pages in *The Art of Watching Films* that helped each student writer. The third student essay is a sharply focused analysis of Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* without textual annotations.

ONLINE LEARNING CENTER

An Online Learning Center (OLC) for *The Art of Watching Films* can be found at www.mhhe.co/awf7. The Web site includes tools for both instructors and students.

For instructors, the OLC offers:

- **An instructor’s manual** including chapter outlines, chapter summaries, lecture ideas, discussion questions, and lists of recommended films.
- **A test bank** containing, for each chapter, over 30 multiple-choice, matching, and true-false questions.
- **EZ Test Computerized Test Bank**, a flexible and easy-to-use electronic testing program that allows instructors to add their own questions and export tests for use with course management systems such as Blackboard or WebCT. It is available for Windows and Macintosh environments.
- **A Powerpoint presentation** includes chapter outlines and discussion questions.
- Questions for use with the **Classroom Performance System (CPS)**, a revolutionary wireless response system that allows instructors to pose questions to students and have their responses tabulated instantly. Go to www.mhhe.com/cps or ask your McGraw-Hill sales representative for further details.

Instructors also have access to all the assets in the Student edition of the OLC, including:

- **The special feature “Writing about Film,”** described above, which provides guidelines for writing a film analysis and three sample student essays.
- **A selected bibliography** and list of resource materials.
- **Self-testing quizzes** for each chapter, including multiple-choice and true-false questions.
- **Study materials** for every chapter, including chapter outline, internet exercises, and web links.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This new, all-color seventh edition of *The Art of Watching Films* exists primarily because readers have embraced its predecessors enthusiastically. I wish to express enormous gratitude to the past and current users of my work and that of Joe Boggs.

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The **ART** *of Watching* **FILMS**

The ART of WATCHING FILMS



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:

The essential paradox . . . is that it is at once collective and radically solitary, an amalgam of the cohesive social ritual of theatergoing and the individualist reverie of novel-reading. The movies offer visions of a better world even as they are symptoms of everything wrong with this one. As such, moviegoing is perhaps still . . . the exemplary modern cultural activity. It splices together individualism and mass culture—the insistence on the particularity of identity and the standardization of experience, the line at the box office and the solitary dreaming in the dark—like a serendipitous art-house double feature programmed by a deity with perverse tastes and an odd sense of humor.¹

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.

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:

It is impossible to conceive of anything which the eye might behold or the ear hear, in actuality or imagination, which could not be represented in the medium of film. From the poles to the equator, from the Grand Canyon to the minutest flaw in a piece of steel, from the whistling flight of a bullet to the slow growth of a flower, from the flicker of thought across an almost impassive face to the frenzied ravings of a madman, there is no point in space, no degree of magnitude or speed of movement within the apprehension of man which is not within reach of the film.²

Film 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.

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 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.³

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-



FIGURE 1.1 Making Fantasy Become Reality The film medium gives such fantasy movies as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the texture and emotional impact of reality.

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.

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 videocassette recorders (VCRs), laserdisc players, and now digital videodisc (DVD) players and recorders 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 to gradually combine the functions of two or more viewings into one.

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. 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 intu-



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

itively, 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 approaches. 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 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 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 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.

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 human condition and who are disappointed if a film is *not* grim and depressing. Closely related are those who set up their own criteria for what makes a good film and reject movies that operate under different rules. Viewers who demand to comprehend all the plot details by the film's end would reject, for example, Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, which deliberately requires multiple viewings. Moviegoers who insist that a film hold them in a tight grip may dismiss Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* for its slow-moving segments. Excellent films may be discounted because the characters are not sympathetic or the action is not realistic. We must avoid these kinds of misconceptions and instead try to be open to the film's goals and meanings.

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.



Almost as detrimental as categorical rejection is the blindness caused by over-responding to individual elements rather than to the film as a whole. An example of this prejudice is offered by viewers who are infected with a near-fatal case of actor worship or antipathy: “I just love all Russell Crowe pictures!” or “I can’t stand Julia Roberts movies!” Such extreme reactions are certainly common among viewers who refuse to see the actor as subordinate to the film.

Less radical illustrations of this blindness include over-response to certain film elements. The two ingredients most likely to cause this kind of reaction are sex and violence. Certainly, some filmmakers exploit these ingredients and emphasize them to the point of the ridiculous, but this is not always the case. Films sometimes demand the use of nudity or violence to present honestly the story they have to tell. Thus, a perceptive filmgoer does not condemn the use of sex or violence per se, without considering the film as a whole, and neither does he or she reject or praise a movie simply because of its treatment of sex or violence. For example, many would argue that the violent ending of *Bonnie and Clyde* does not, by itself, determine the overall quality of that film. And works as diverse as *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Mrs. Henderson Presents* actually require some emphasis on sexual encounters to tell their stories. Recently, the popular film reviewer Roger Ebert, in responding to an objection by one of his readers about the sexual scenes in Paul Schrader’s *Auto Focus*, repeated what Ebert has often identified as one of his favorite and most telling critical observations: “a crucial rule for anyone seriously interested in movies: It’s not *what* the movie is about that makes it good or bad, but *how* it is about it.” Even if viewers reject this suggestion about the supremacy of style or “form,” they also must surely not insist that subject matter or “content” is always most significant.

Another subjective factor that influences film evaluation is expecting too much from a movie, whether it has won awards, critical acclaim, or great re-

views from our friends. Expectations may also run too high if we are particularly fond of a novel that is later adapted to film. When our expectations are too high, a film can't possibly measure up, and our disappointment clouds a work that we would otherwise have liked immensely.

THE FILM-VIEWING ENVIRONMENT

Many movie lovers argue that ideally we should view any film in what they call its “proper” environment: a comfortable and attractive theater, preferably one with modern stadium seating and the highest quality projection and audio equipment. There, these advocates further claim, we may not only consume films in their state-of-the-art glory, but we can also participate in one of the primary social rituals of modern life: watching movies with others in a public setting (Figure 1.4). In fact, our theater-going experiences are often much less than perfect. Noisy patrons chat and argue over and about the film's dialogue, rattling their popcorn bags and candy wrappers; often, they not only allow cell phones to ring repeatedly, but then talk loudly into them. Certainly, in a well-equipped theater, sound and image wash over you, immerse you, massage you. You need not direct your attention. Seeing a movie in a good theater is like diving into heavy surf with the tide coming in; seeing a movie on a standard television screen is like taking a sponge bath out of a gallon pail. As actor Richard Dreyfuss describes it:

[F]ilm has a power over us. When we sit in a darkened room and symbolically hold hands with one another and say, “Give me this experience”—we are investing religiosity to that experience . . . we will be swept up with it. . . . But if it's on TV, who cares? Because TV has no impact, it is simply part of the furniture sitting next to the potted palm or the refrigerator. It has no impact on a primal level.⁴

Still, even as attendance at movie theaters continues to grow (although probably never again to the numbers during the glory days of American film in the late 1940s), more and more of us most frequently view films in our own homes via the domestic magic of modern technologies. Increasingly, we have larger and sharper television screens—some of them wondrously flat and lightweight, constructed of LCD and plasma panels. The wealthiest movie watchers, of course, may also be able to afford spacious, elaborate, and elegantly appointed home theaters. But even those viewers must be aware that the home film-watching experience still differs radically from that in the multiplexes—in both negative and positive ways.

Most of the negative aspects of home viewing center upon the quality of the sight and sound delivery systems. First, consider the simple factor of size. An image approximately twenty feet high on the average movie screen is reduced to a maximum height of about two feet on the typical home TV. Becoming physically involved in the action of a narrative as we would in a theater is



FIGURE 1.4 Sharing Happiness With Others in the Dark Here, in a scene from one of Woody Allen's most popular films, *Annie Hall*, the title character (Diane Keaton) and her boyfriend (Woody Allen) wait in a cinema queue. While impatiently discussing their own relationship, they interact with other offbeat moviegoers, who provide laughs and groans in equal measure for this film's "mirror" audience.

nearly impossible at home. For example, a theater viewer who is susceptible to motion sickness may get a little queasy during the racing scenes in *Seabiscuit* or the Quidditch matches in the Harry Potter movies. But the same visceral sensation is nearly always lacking, as Richard Dreyfuss says, when we're watching that little box across the room. The events occurring on television seem remote, locked in the safety of a 27-inch (or even a 65-inch) screen. The change in size reduces the intensity of our experience and decreases our involvement (Figure 1.5).

Not only is the size of the image changed, but in many cases, the basic shape of the composition is altered as well. For instance, when a film shot in a **wide-screen** (rectangular) **format** (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2 in Chapter 4, pp. 94–95) is squeezed onto an essentially square TV screen, crucial visual information is often lost. Wide-screen formats are adapted to the standard television shape by a special editing process called **panning and scanning**. A scanning device determines when the most significant information in each frame is so far to the left or right of center as to be outside the perimeter of the narrower television picture. TV (and also video and DVD) producers then adjust accordingly by centering this peripheral information in the transmitted or re-recorded image. Of course, the cinematographer's art suffers from this process, because the visual composition is compromised when a large portion of the original image



FIGURE 1.5 Reducing Viewers' Involvement Watching such larger-than-life films as *King Kong* (2005) on a small television screen may decrease the intensity of our involvement and, hence, the quality of our total movie experience.

is sliced off each side. The process frequently introduces camera movement not intended by the film's creators, and thereby can alter significantly the visual rhythms of the film. The alternative to this cinematic mutilation—at least when the “square” TV shape is involved (vs. the newer high-definition television's [HDTV] 16 [wide] × 9 [high] aspect ratio)—is the use of black bands at the top and bottom of the screen. This feature irritates many viewers and, ironically, makes some believe that they are being cheated of the whole original image.

Throughout its brief history, the videocassette (whose use is now in rapid decline) seldom presented wide-screen films in their original format, and, even now, among television cable channels, few except Turner Classic Movies adamantly present films in what is called their “theatrical release aspect ratio.” Initially, the advent of the DVD format brought great hopefulness to enthusiasts of watching wide-screen films at home. Often, in fact, the enormous storage space on DVDs allowed producers to satisfy everyone by offering both the wide-screen and the pan and scan version on opposite sides of the same disc. More recently, however, large-volume video rental and sales companies such

as Blockbuster have reportedly convinced producers to release more of their films exclusively in the “standard,” “full-screen” version, fearing that their customers will be too naïve to understand the beauty *and* practicality of wide-screen films.

Television viewing of films has traditionally compromised sound even more than image. A modern movie theater equipped with multiple speakers can surround viewers with sound, immersing them in an encompassing aural environment. In the *Jurassic Park* movies, for instance, the rumble of a dinosaur passing back and forth in a landscape moves all over the theater as the sound dramatically increases and decreases in volume and shifts from place to place. Historically, most common television sets, even the largest ones, have had inadequate speakers by comparison, and many didn’t even have tone controls. However, electronics manufacturers have been vastly improving sound quality, and so-called “home theater sound systems” have become commercially successful during the past few years.

Thus, seeing (and hearing) movies at home, though still not “ideal” for many of us, may rapidly be gaining desirability. The sales momentum of the DVD player since the device’s first wide availability in the fall of 2001 has greatly outperformed even that of the audio compact disc. Its potential for swiftly increasing our “cineliteracy” surpasses even that of the so-called “video revolution” with the advent of the videocassette in the late 1970s. DVDs are beginning to re-educate film viewers about the art form’s possibilities. Director David Cronenberg (*Spider* [2003], *eXistenZ*, *Crash* [1996], *The Fly* [1986], *A History of Violence*) has expressed well what many filmmakers and fans now feel:

I love, love, love DVDs, and I pushed for them years ago when people were dubious. The first thing for a filmmaker is always picture quality and sound quality; those to me are the real reason that you want a DVD. . . . You have to understand, when I was a kid, you had to see the movie when it came to the theater, and that was it. This was before television and before movies were shown on television. There was a time when Hollywood wouldn’t even allow a television set to be shown in a movie, they were so afraid of it. So the idea that you could possess a movie like a book on your bookshelf, that you could take it out and look at favorite scenes, is fantastic. Now you can have a genuinely cinematic experience at home and have it in your control. I must confess I watch more movies at home on DVD than I do in the theater. . . . I don’t think a filmmaker can afford to be afraid of technology. . . . [I]t’s really an extension of our bodies and our minds into the universe which then comes back to change us.⁵

The editors at *IFCRant* (a publication of the Independent Film Channel) agree: DVDs “allow film aficionados a chance to get better insight into the people who brought the film to life” and also “the . . . format encourages other forms of expression beyond just the release title. . . . [W]ho knows what crazy things people might start making in the form of supplementary material for these

DVDs.”⁶ And Peter M. Nichols has begun to answer, in summary form, this implied question:

As the DVD audience broadens, so does appreciation of the disc’s extra features. Consumer studies by the DVD Entertainment Group, a trade association, rank improved picture and sound as DVD’s most valued attributes. Extra scenes, out-takes and especially bloopers (always a favorite with fans) and behind-the-scenes looks at movies being made also score highly.

Even the most time-consuming of extras, the movie-length director’s commentary, is proving popular enough to encourage reams of filmmakers’ reflection in special editions of newer films and increasingly with simpler releases of older ones. The casual viewer may feel no compulsion to dive into this material, but it is there and often well worth a look.⁷

This book attempts to encourage the reader to explore the frequently rich elements of data contained in DVDs beyond these entertainments and routine audio commentaries. At the ends of Chapters 3 through 15 in this edition of *The Art of Watching Films*, we have provided a feature called “DVD Filmmaking Extras,” which is a kind of road map for digitally augmenting the various topics discussed.

PREPARING TO SEE A FILM

How much should we know about a film before we see it? There is no simple answer to this question. Often we have little control over how much we know about a movie before we see it. Sometimes it is pleasurable (if now almost impossible) to enter a theater without one bit of information about what we are going to watch. Then we can see it free from others’ opinions and judge it purely on its own merits. But given the increased price of movies, few of us can afford this freedom. We find other ways to gauge our interest in seeing the newest films. In any case, a few general guidelines on how to prepare for watching a film might be helpful.

An easy way to gain some knowledge about a film before seeing it is to read reviews, which usually provide factual information: film credits, running time, MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) rating (G, PG, PG-13, R, or NC-17), a summary of the subject matter and plot. Most reviews also mention the elements in the film that are significant and worthy of attention. They may help us place the film in context by relating it to similar films by other directors or to other films by the same director or production team. The review may analyze the film, breaking it into its parts and examining the nature, proportions, function, and interrelationship of these parts. Although most newspaper and magazine reviews are written quickly against deadlines, they almost always include some kind of value judgment, some negative or positive opinions of the film’s overall worth (Figure 1.6).



FIGURE 1.6 Reading Movie Reviews When we consult movie reviews before watching a film new to us, we are almost always vulnerable to the kinds of value judgments they offer, whether negative or positive. Such critical opinions of the film *Munich*, for example, influenced many viewers about the overall quality of the fact-based work.

In those cases where we do consult the opinions of reviewers before we head out to the multiplex, we should remember not to place too much faith in any one notice, unless we are already familiar with the tastes and biases of its author. Better, we might choose to read several reviewers' work, preferably published in sources that we know represent a variety of philosophical bents.

Indeed, when reading reviews, we must remember that criticism—journalistic, academic, or otherwise—is a highly subjective process. If we take any single review or even a series of reviews too seriously before seeing a film, we will restrict our ability to judge the work independently. Also, if we rely too much on the reviews, we may completely lose faith in our own judgment and end up in a tug-of-war between critical opinions.

Reviews, of course, are not the only source of information and attitudes about films. The enormous amount of publicity generated for almost every movie (both by producers and studios and also, frequently, the media outlets owned by conglomerates that also own the studios) can influence our reactions. Ubiquitous television talk shows continuously feature interviews with actors and directors of recently released films. A great deal of important information can also be picked up from the grapevine, the word-of-mouth reviews by friends who have seen the movie (Figure 1.7). And now most moviegoers also have the vast cinema resources of the World Wide Web at their immediate command. Two indispensable sites are the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and Rotten Tomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com). The latter's idiosyncratic name and



FIGURE 1.7 Succeeding by Word of Mouth Sometimes, filmmakers with very modest expectations for their movie's commercial success discover an enormous audience for their work via the grapevine: oral recommendations by friends and relatives who have seen and enjoyed the movie. In this manner, *March of the Penguins*, an independent film produced on a miniscule budget, became one of the greatest box office successes in the history of motion pictures.

the gossipy tone of the former's very visible daily news entries may at first repel some readers. Nevertheless, film students should perhaps begin their "cineliteracy" journey with *The Art of Watching Films* by visiting each site at length, becoming familiar with the multipaged insights and delight available there, including everything from movie facts and still photos to preview clips that we can download and view.

DEEPENING OUR RESPONSES TO FILMS

As students of film, once we have gathered facts, decided what movies to see, and attempted to clear our minds of preconceptions, then what? We should begin to deepen our perceptions.

After watching a film, we naturally start to think about our reactions to it. Sometimes, though, we hesitate to speak with others about our experience. Typically, we want to deal with our personal, emotional responses first, perhaps silently, perhaps while we "savor the moment" during the movie's end credits or even throughout the ride home. At other times, we are compelled immediately to speak out loudly with friends or family members who have accompanied us on our cinematic journey, sharing their joy or misery, or arguing not only about the work's emotional landscape, but also about its logical sharpness or stupidity. If the film has indeed encouraged any cerebral responses, we may especially desire to record our reactions in written form, all the better to understand our experience. Now, as we turn directly to the analytical approach to film viewing, consider keeping a movie journal. Record what movies you see

and, quite literally, what you see in them. Take note of both the emotional and the intellectual levels of your watching. Ask yourself questions about every aspect of the film, and let these questions lead you to other, more complex ones in your continuing to read this book. As you progress, stop to consider the questions for analysis that accompany each of the following chapters.

ANALYZING YOUR RESPONSES TO A FILM

1. Do you have any strong prejudices against this particular type of film? If so, how did these prejudices affect your responses to the film? Does this film have any special qualities that set it apart from other films of the same type?
2. How much do your personal and highly subjective responses to the following aspects of the film affect your judgment: actors in the film, treatment of sexual material, and scenes involving violence? Can you justify the sex and violence in the film aesthetically, or are these scenes included strictly to increase box-office appeal?
3. What were your expectations before seeing the film? How did these expectations influence your reaction to the film?
4. Was your mood, mental attitude, or physical condition while seeing the movie less than ideal? If so, how was your reaction to the film affected?
5. If the physical environment in which you watched the film was less than ideal, how did this fact influence your perception?
6. If you watched the movie on a TV screen, in which scenes do you feel you lacked the intensity of involvement needed to enjoy the film most completely? In which scenes does the small-screen format work?
7. If you read reviews or scholarly essays before your viewing, what observations or opinions caught your interest? What is your own opinion after having seen the movie?