

SERIOUS FEATHER

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An Introduction to Film Study

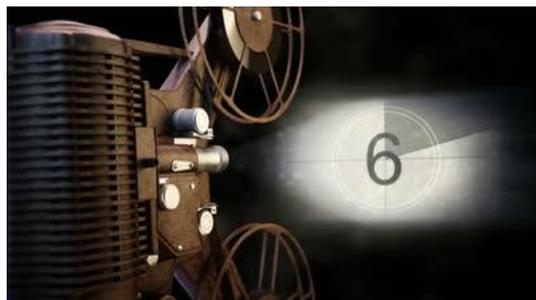


We don't need to have studied catering to be able to eat and enjoy a meal and, in a similar way, we don't need to have studied film to be able to watch and enjoy a movie.

It could be argued however that if we know little about food preparation, herbs, spices and cooking times etc. then we're going to lack the insight and knowledge needed to fully understand and appreciate the culinary experience.

In turn, if we know little about direction, cinematography, *mise-en-scene* and narrative etc. then the chances are we're going to lack the insight and knowledge needed to fully understand and appreciate the cinematic experience.

In both cases, it could be argued, we'll be missing out, and our cultural lives will be less rich and less fulfilling.



In simple terms we can perceive the films or movies we see projected on a screen as a pattern of light, dark, colour, movement and sound presented over a period of, say, 100 minutes, by a producer, scriptwriter, director, actors, technicians etc. all working together in an attempt to distract us, entertain us, and/or to cause us to think and feel in certain ways.

This is somewhat reminiscent of Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' wherein prisoners are chained up in a cave and can see only shadows dancing against its far wall. Over the course of their lives the prisoners eventually name these shadows, recognise them and believe in them until they are transformed into reality itself, rather than the representation of reality which they actually are. Plato then contends that for prisoners to set themselves 'free' they must begin to critically understand the 'form' and 'context' of these shadows, the mechanics at work behind them, as well as the 'content' of their performance.



As a consequence, as students of film, we are required to identify, interpret and explain the key roles technical and textual aspects play in the construction and reception of a movie, to recompose its 'shadows' and 'patterns' in order to articulate its emotional, psychological and cultural elements and formulate, if only for personal nourishment, a deeper set of additional or alternative meanings and enjoyments.

Of course, this is no simple task, as the film theorist, Christian Metz, highlights:

Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand.

Naturally then, concentration, patience and self-discipline are required as we watch and re-watch a variety of movies from a variety of eras, excavating their specific shots, sequences and scenes in order to understand how and why they might have been designed in the way they have.



Equipped with a set of tools (a specialist vocabulary or discourse) we should then begin our adventure by reflecting on questions such as:

- Why has the director decided to direct a particular scene one way and not another? Is he or she in full control of the material, or does the studio which is funding the production have creative control?
- In what ways has the cinematographer lit a scene a certain way? What effect does this have on the tone and atmosphere of the images we observe?
- How has the role of the editor affected the logic and pace of the action and the narrative? What techniques have been used to achieve this?



- Does the soundtrack complement the visual experience or contrast with it? What emotions and understandings do these stir up within us?

- What approach have the actors taken with regards to their performances? Are they naturalistic, theatrical or something else? Are they reinforcing our 'suspension of belief' or undermining it? Is this accidental or on purpose?
- What about the film's budget? Is it a multi-million dollar blockbuster or a small low budget indie? Should we judge these two different types of films by applying the same critical criteria?



- What about the themes the film explores? Do they relate to our day-to-day, real-world experiences, our hopes, fears and values? Will we remember them in years to come?
- Will the movie play for women in the same way it would for men? What about the ages of the audiences, their ethnicities, their nationalities, their financial backgrounds, their education levels, their sexual orientation etc.?
- Importantly, is the film honest? Does it genuinely attempt to tell its story as effectively as it can, with the resources it has available, so it engages and challenges its audience beyond its screening time?

Over the years many people have complained of course that to analyse a film is to 'spoil' it and dispel its 'magic', arguing instead that we should obediently sit and watch the shadows dancing on the wall without curiosity, comment or question. In other words, just keep quiet and enjoy the show.



But after we've eaten a meal that's been cooked for us isn't it natural to give feedback, to ask questions about its ingredients and preparation, to learn what is to our taste or not, to be surprised by something we've never eaten before?

This begins a series of film study papers based on over 25 years of education, teaching and filmmaking practice. They will be posted online for free as time permits for the interest of others.