

Source = Reading Movies by Frank Morillo

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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 whirling 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

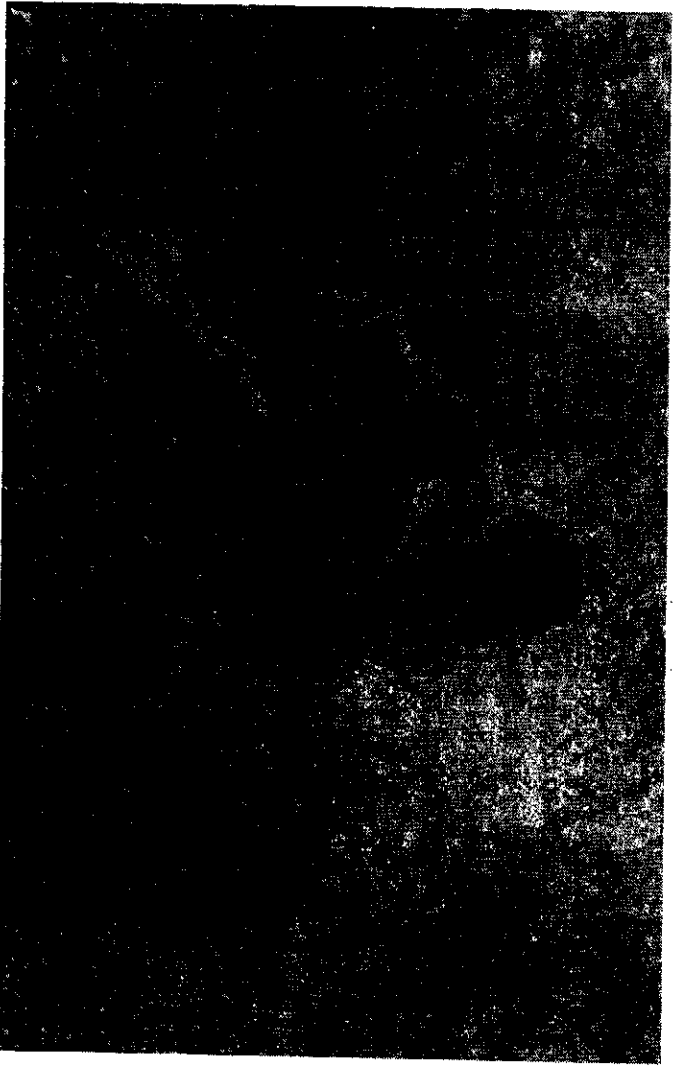


FIGURE 1.1 Making Fantasy Become Reality The film medium gives such fantasy movies as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the texture and emotional impact of reality.

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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 die Feelies dis 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 rollercoaster 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 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 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.

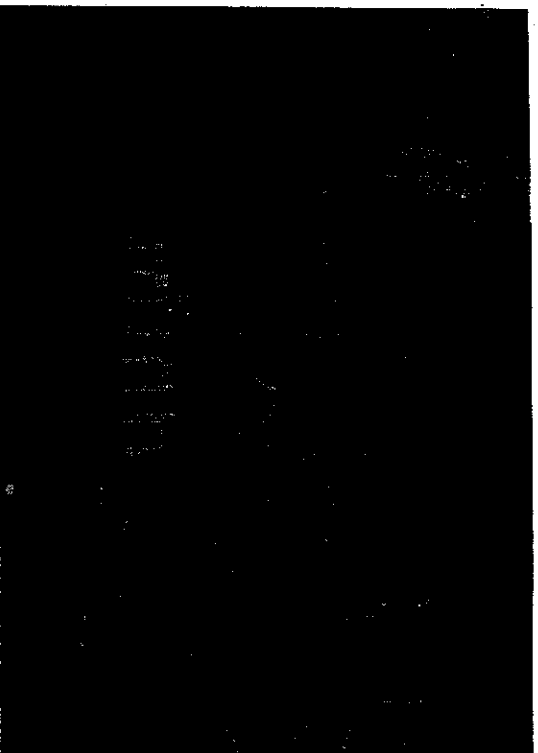


FIGURE 1.2 Learning to Dive Watching classic film dramas like Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* helps us to understand our human selves with a depth that might elude us otherwise.

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.