

Film, Fourth Edition

Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis

Writing and Discussion Topics

Chapter 1

Cinema, Then and Now

In what sense is the current practice of watching short videos on phones, laptops, and computers reminiscent of the cinema's early days?

Beyond Entertainment

Identify a film that prompted you to reflect on how your personal values are tied to (or in conflict with) the society in which you live. In what ways does this film demonstrate that the cinema still matters?

Cultural Relevance

Summarize two ways in which the public reception of *Moonlight* demonstrated that the film had cultural significance beyond just being a source of entertainment.

Chapter 2

Expectations and Stars

Think about the last movie you watched. Identify the film and then discuss how one casting choice influenced your response to it. What did you expect of this actor? Do you think the filmmaker relied on these expectations to help establish character? Did the filmmaker work against these expectations?

Finding Patterns

By definition, motifs involve the *repetition* of detail. So how can they be used to suggest the ways in which characters or situations *change*? Refer to *Boyhood* to help you explain your answer.

Types of Claims

Write a descriptive claim, an interpretive claim, and an evaluative claim, each focused on the same scene from a film. Each claim should be no longer than one sentence long.

Chapter 3

Managing Verb Tense

What is wrong with the following sentences? Explain your logic in one to two sentences, then correct the mistakes you've identified.

“In *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, Bill Jr. was knocked unconscious by the sheriff’s punch while he was attempting to break his father out of prison. When he awoke, he found himself in the midst of a destructive cyclone.”

Details and Focus

Jolin’s review of *Moonlight* focuses largely on acting and performance. Identify another detail, which has nothing to do with acting or casting choices and discuss how Jolin could have included this detail in his review. How could the detail in question help maintain the focus on “Chekhov’s gun”?

Chapter 4

Diegetic vs. Non-diegetic

The words that pop up on screen throughout *Fruitvale Station* are diegetic. Why is it important to make this distinction? Do film audiences read or interpret this text in a way that differs from the way they might respond to non-diegetic text (e.g. the opening crawl in *Star Wars*)?

Classical vs. Non-classical Storytelling

In some ways, *The 400 Blows* contains important elements of a classically structured film: Antoine longs to see the ocean (motivation), so he defies authorities and runs until he arrives at the shoreline (action and accomplishment). So why is the film *not* classical? How does Truffaut complicate the narrative connection between motivation and action?

Evaluating Film Narratives

Think about an experience you’ve had of watching a film because it received lots of critical buzz, only to be disappointed by the narrative. Name the film and identify a specific aspect of the storytelling that left you feeling bored or confused. Was this an accidental flaw – an example of weak storytelling? Or, in retrospect, had the screenwriter intentionally attempted to challenge the conventions of Hollywood’s classical narrative?

Chapter 5

Setting

Most of *The Planet of the Apes* takes place in nameless settings at the boundary where the natural realm (forest and desert) meets a primitive civilization fashioned by apes. What role does the Statue of Liberty play in shaping how audiences interpret this setting? Why do you think the filmmakers wait until the very end of the *syuzhet* to reveal this familiar architectural landmark?

Character and Space

Watch the scene from *Citizen Kane* in which Emily confronts Kane in Susan's apartment. What strategies do the filmmakers use to portray those moments when Kane tries to assert himself and re-establish his authority?

Chapter 6

Claims and Evidence

Study the discussion of the camera movement in *12 Years a Slave* on p. 161. Break each passage down to its constituent parts: what is the interpretive claim about how camera movement functions in the scene? What is the evidence?

Selective Focus

Review the discussion of *Still Alice* accompanying figs. 6.34 and 6.35. Watch the film and identify two other moments when the cinematographer relies on selective focus to suggest Alice's feelings of dislocation. How do narrative context and other visual elements influence your interpretation of these images?

Digital Effects

One might initially assume that digital effects are primarily the domain of action blockbusters and sci-fi. But list two reasons why a cinematographer shooting an intimate period drama might find it useful to employ digital technologies.

Chapter 7

The Kuleshov Effect

Of the three attributes of editing, which one is most closely associated with the Kuleshov Effect? How does Kuleshov's theory explain the way this attribute affects the viewer's perception? Explain your answer in two to three sentences.

Analyzing the Attributes of Editing

Study the scene in *Notorious* when Alicia and Devlin sit at a sidewalk café shortly after arriving in Brazil. Identify the moment when the couple's romantic daydreaming gives way to anger and resentment. What role does editing play in helping the audience recognize which of Devlin's words hurt Alicia the most?

Associational Editing

In the Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin*, the contrasting images of soldiers and the civilians establish a literal cause/effect relationship from shot to shot. But how do the specific visual qualities (e.g., camera placement, composition, etc.) of these images also suggest a more abstract metaphorical commentary on the relationship between government forces and the people they supposedly represent?

Chapter 8

Silent Era Innovation

How does the contrast between the “silent film” *Sunrise* and the “talking pictures” released during that same time period demonstrate why many critics feared that the advent of synchronized sound technology would curtail, not enhance, film art?

Sound vs. Image

Watch *Taxi Driver* and identify two moments when sound and image differ in significant ways. Drawing on the concepts covered in the section ‘The Relationship between Sound and Image’, how does sound deviate from the image? How do these moments contribute to the film’s attempt to discourage the audience from identifying too closely with Travis?

Analyzing Music

The discussion of how *Thelma & Louise* uses the song “Wild Night” focuses explicitly on the importance of the song’s lyrics. But where does this analysis also hint at how the cultural significance of the performance itself adds to the song’s meaning within the film?

Chapter 9

Political Documentary: An Oxymoron?

Michael Moore’s politically charged films inevitably face criticism that they are not documentaries at all, but ideological opinion pieces. How could you offer a counter-perspective to this criticism? Draw on John Grierson’s definition of documentary form as well as the text’s discussion of one other documentary form in this section to help you explain your position.

Traditions in Experimental Cinema

In your own words, summarize the difference between “abstract,” “surrealist,” and “compilation” films.

Watching Experimental Cinema

Watch any two short (less than 15 minutes) films on UbuWeb: ubuweb.com. Identify the films by title and then categorize them according to type. What are the dominant stylistic features of each film? What technique(s) defined each film’s look and/or sound? Did you see evidence that the film challenges our preconceptions of art, culture, or politics?

Chapter 10

Ideology and Narrative Convention

A romantic happy ending as we see in *Knocked Up* is one of the most common techniques for producing closure in Hollywood films. Why would some film critics argue that this convention

is, in and of itself, ideological?

Self-Reflexivity

Why did critics such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Louis Comolli argue that the ideal films are those that are “self-reflexive”?

Ideology and the Labor of Film Production

Survey the top ten movies currently at the box office, taking note of four crucial figures behind the camera (director, producer, screenwriter, cinematographer) and two in front of the camera (lead actor and actress). Of these personalities, how many represent a minority community? Do your findings suggest anything about who is telling stories in popular culture? Whose stories are told? The website imdb.com will be a useful resource for this exercise.

Chapter 11

Art as Commerce

Locate the original trailer for Godard’s *Breathless* online (here is one source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ib1OMh5fTkQ>). Briefly outline two ways in which the promotional campaign implicitly markets the film as an alternative to Hollywood. Although the trailer doesn’t explicitly proclaim that the film challenges Hollywood convention, how does it entice the viewer by suggesting that *Breathless* resists the practices of mainstream cinema?

The Aesthetics of Neorealism

Why would Neorealism’s key aesthetic elements—location shooting, long takes, natural lighting, non-professional actors, vernacular dialogue, grainy black-and-white film stock, and unobtrusive editing—be relevant to the movement’s driving ideological agenda?

Fourth Cinema

Why does film scholar Barry Barclay call First, Second, and Third Cinemas “invader Cinemas”?

Chapter 12

Stars in Plain Sight

In your own words, explain how Scarlett Johansson’s performance in *Under the Skin* highlights how the cultural and industrial apparatus surrounding the actor contributes as much or more to the star phenomenon than the actor’s talent.

Performance

Which components of film (narrative, *mise en scène*, cinematography, editing, sound) does James Naremore describe in his analysis of how Charlie Chaplin crafts his character in *The Gold Rush*? Identify specific words and passages in your response.

The Star Persona

Read a published review of *The Dark Knight*. What evidence do you see that the critic reviewing the film evaluated Heath Ledger’s performance based on stardom’s central illusion: that the star

persona collapses “the distinction between star-as-person and star-as-performer”?

Chapter 13

Genre and Conventions

In your own words, why do most critics say that *Brokeback Mountain* is a Western even though it is set in modern society (the 1960s) and does not feature a single gunfight? Draw on concepts from the chapter in your response.

Discovering Contemporary Genres

Identify a cluster of films (name at least three) that deserve space in this chapter alongside other classic genres such as the Western and the musical. Explain why these films should be considered examples of a more contemporary genre (or subgenre) that isn't covered in this chapter.

Genre and Ideology

One of the tried and true conventions of the horror film (especially the slasher films of the 1980s) is that sexually active teens are usually among the monster's first victims. Why would some critics say this is an example of how genre movies can reinforce the status quo?

Chapter 14

Debating the Auteur Theory

Explain the difference between Pauline Kael's objections to *auteur* theory and Peter Wollen's objections.

Auteur Theory as Commercial Practice

How does the discussion of Alfonso Cuarón demonstrate the fact that the circulation of the *auteur* theory in popular culture has as much to do with commercial interests as it does with aesthetic evaluation?

The auteur as brand

Visit a website such as imdb.com or traileraddict.com and watch five trailers for upcoming features. List the titles of the films. Of these promotional campaigns, which ones focus on the director as a “brand”? What are the distinctive characteristics of these brands? In other words, do references to specific directors help build audience anticipation?

Chapter 15

Conglomeration vs. Convergence

In your own words, explain the difference between “conglomeration” and “convergence.”

The Question of Equal Access

Explain in your own words why some think that “transmediation” contributes to the

democratization of culture made possible by mass media technologies.

Vestiges of the Classical Style

Watch a brickfilm, taking care to jot down its title and URL. Is there evidence that the filmmaker works to adhere to the professional standards as established by the Hollywood film industry? By contrast, are there other details that suggest the filmmaker is indifferent towards the imperative to maintain professional standards of quality? It might be useful to review Chapter 11 in this text before beginning this exercise.