A POCKET GUIDE TO ANALYZING FILMS

Robert Spadoni

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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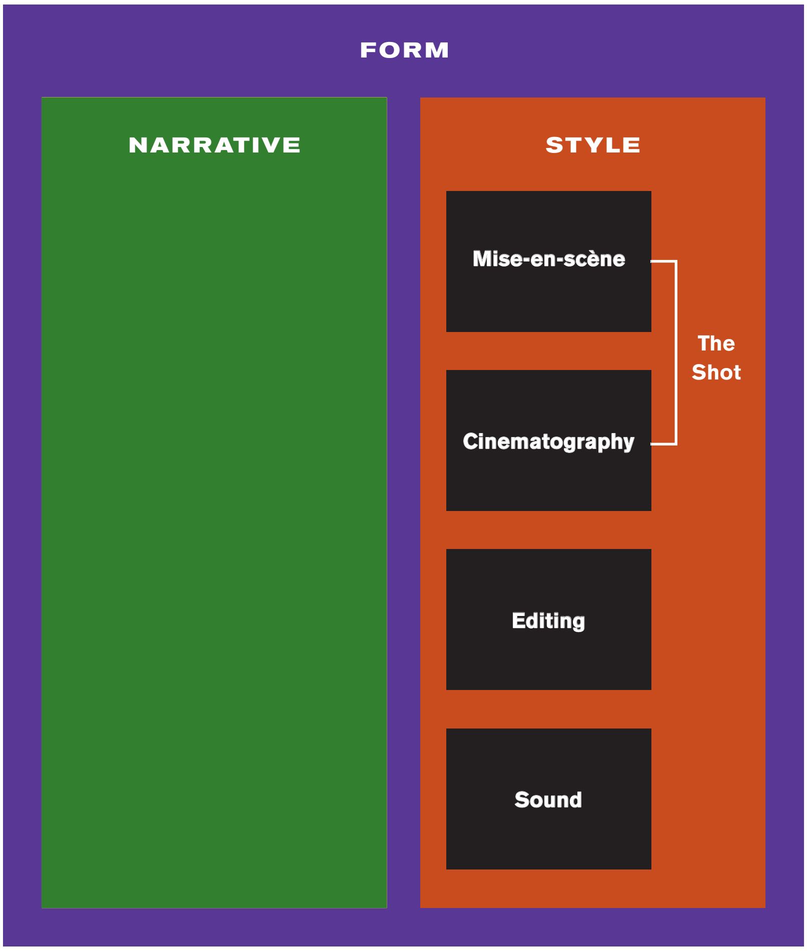
FORM
NARRATIVE
STYLE
Mise-en-scène
Cinematography
Editing
Sound
The Shot

The major components of a narrative film.

Introduction

A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films is founded on the belief that most any film can be better understood and appreciated when it is viewed as a system in which the parts relate to each other and together make up the whole. Thinking about a film in this way is sometimes called "close reading" and sometimes "textual analysis." We will call it **formal analysis.**

Because it focuses exclusively on describing the methods of formal analysis, and on making a case for their usefulness regardless of one's specific interest in the cinema, this book leaves out a lot of things. It concentrates on those aspects of the film-viewing experience that don't change, or have changed the least, over time. There's nothing, or close to it, on silent versus sound cinema, IMAX, Technicolor, YouTube, and 3-D. And there's a minimum on how techniques are executed, on behind-the-scenes production realities like optical printers, performance capture suits, Final Cut Pro, and stunt doubles. The focus, instead, is on the *results* of these efforts, what happens on the screen, the functions and effects of these techniques both individually and, more important, when they work together. There is little mention of the turn to digital cinema in recent years, because the thing that we'll be calling "film form" has not been remade by this change. The methods, terminology, and target of the kind of analysis described in this book have not experienced the upheavals currently sweeping the world's cinema institutions, technologies, and economies. There's no overview of the movie business today or even a snapshot of movie history. And this isn't a how-to guide for aspiring filmmakers. That said, filmmakers who want to learn more about how films shape the viewing experience will find here a concise road map to the tools and principles that govern this dynamic and richly complex process.

The key word is *concise*. This *Pocket Guide* is designed to be just that, small enough to have with you whenever and wherever you might need it, both in and out of class. What it lacks in breadth and depth, I hope it makes up for with portability. Provided is only what you'll need to be able to sift through the elements that make up a film, regardless of your particular interest or orientation to it. Your interest might be in learning more about how films cohere and work their effects. Or maybe you have a more focused goal. You might be taking a course in film theory (classical, semiotic, or cognitivist, for example), or on a genre (science fiction, musicals, film noir, etc.), or a survey of movie history, or a course on race and gender in film, the French New Wave, cinemas of the Pacific Rim, Alfred Hitchcock, film adaptation, or any of a hundred other possibilities. Such a course will expose you to readings that will help you explore its specific topical material. But the heart of your inquiry, regardless of the course focus, will be films. This book, as much as possible, cuts across historical and national boundaries, driving at all times toward the common core of elements that make up films of virtually every kind. Here are the specialized terms and concepts that you will need to make formal analysis the robust center of a persuasive film essay.

Described are not only film techniques but also more general ideas that will help you make sense of those techniques. You notice that a shot is filmed from a low angle. Why should you or anyone else care? A major reason is that you can organize things like camera angles into patterns that will help you ask, and answer, "big questions" about a film, including what it means. More valuable than helping you *articulate* what you think is going on in a film, these principles can help you *discover* what is going on. Most of these principles are described in part 1, in chapter 1, the longest and most important chapter in the book.

The images in this book are digital captures from films, not production stills, which are photographs taken on the film set for promotional purposes and not accurate representations of how the film looks on the screen. You'll also find thumbnail readings of a selection of films and film sequences, pointers on writing a film essay, and notes on areas of possible confusion—like terms that sound alike but mean different things, and ones that mean similar or overlapping things. I try to clear these up as I go. I urge you to flag them with your pen or highlighter as you go.

My advice, unless your teacher instructs you otherwise, is to read this book all the way through once, marking it up, making it yours. It's short and has lots of pictures, so this should not be a difficult task. Then have it with you when you watch a film, and keep it handy afterward when you're looking at your viewing notes, making your outline, drafting your essay, and going back to the film. Filmmakers have at their disposal an amazingly powerful tool kit for putting a film together. Most every task and problem they encounter can be handled in a wide variety of ways. Filmmakers have, above all, a range of choices for construing and meeting the creative challenges they face. *And something is always gained or lost when one choice is favored over another.* This book is about the choices and about how you can examine them in a way that will help you more fully grasp and appreciate how they all come together.

This book is indebted to the work of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, whose *Film Art: An Introduction* carries on and consolidates the long tradition, in film studies, of closely examining individual films. This tradition includes writing by such major figures as French film critic André Bazin and Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, both of whom I briefly consider in the pages that follow. But it is Bordwell and Thompson who lay out what has become the standard approach to the formal analysis of films. This *Pocket Guide* gratefully acknowledges their foundational contribution to the discipline.

Some final notes. First, this book can help you analyze many kinds of films, including experimental and documentary films, but the emphasis is on story films. Second, while this book can help readers interested in any national cinema, the majority of films referenced are U.S. films. And finally, at the first mention of a film, the producing country is given only when it is not the United States.

FORM

This first part of the book isn't really about film. There is little in it about the medium, not much on specific techniques of storytelling, cinematography, editing, and so on. All of that starts with part 2. But this part is crucial. It lays out the core ideas of the approach this book takes to analyzing films. The focus of part 1, consisting of chapter 1, is the concept of form in artworks. You'll use the ideas in this chapter as a framework that the rest of the chapters in this book will fit inside.

1

Film as Form

What is form? Think of **form** as the way the different parts of an artwork relate to each other and how they come together to make up the whole. We are conceiving of the artwork as a *system*.

This book has two major emphases. One is analyzing a film *as a film,* really digging into the particulars of what makes it a film versus being a work in another medium, such as literature or theater. The second emphasis *is seeing the whole in terms of the parts and seeing the parts in terms of the whole.* There's a half-hour French film titled *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) that consists almost entirely of still images. Only a single shot, lasting six seconds, contains movement in the sense of what we understand a motion picture to do most fundamentally. In it a woman blinks her eyes. It's a moment that can leave a viewer moved and even awestruck. Suppose you told your friend, "I saw this movie last night, and there was a scene where a woman blinks her eyes, and her eyes *actually move!* It was awesome." Your friend would look at you as though you were crazy. The point is that the extraordinary thing about this moment only makes sense if you look at it in the context of the whole film. Looking at the whole film in terms of its parts involves grounding your analysis in the concrete specifics of the film you are examining.

This book describes a way of looking at films, an approach and a philosophy, and everything in it turns on this idea of form.

People enjoy seeing how the parts of something fit together. In *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) Han Solo comes flying out of nowhere and blasts Darth Vader's ship, giving Luke Skywalker a clear shot at destroying the Death Star. But, of course, Han doesn't really come out of nowhere. We know this character. We've seen him before. We like him. The film has coaxed us temporarily to forget about him, but when he returns, it's like the pleasurable feeling one experiences when a jigsaw puzzle piece drops into place. The character belongs there. The parts fit together. This is form.

Now, if people enjoy artworks that convey a sense of themselves as robustly complete, a film can tap into this desire and satisfy it. A film that does this is *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), when, in the final minutes, the whole film snaps into a new and super-crisp focus. We learn something that assigns new meanings to almost everything that has come before. The film turns out to have a tighter organization, to be more systematic, than we thought. If people love this film, this is a big reason why.

But a filmmaker can *frustrate* this desire as well, in ways that can be just as interesting and worthwhile as the happiest ending of the most mainstream blockbuster movie. Both kinds of film exhibit form equally, and both kinds will reward close study.

A VIEWER-CENTERED APPROACH

A common way to understand form is to set it off against "content." The form/content distinction is so widespread in discussions of films and other artworks that many people take it as a given. But, while some academic writing and other serious discussions make this distinction, I am going to suggest that there are benefits to putting it aside and understanding form in an entirely different way.

Refraining from discussing content won't limit us in what we can say about a film. This is because anything a person might call "content" will be something we'll include in our discussion of form. Suppose by "content" someone means a film's story. A little man with big hairy feet goes on a journey to destroy an evil ring. That's content. But we're going to call that *narrative,* the topic of the next chapter, where we'll view narrative as deeply and inextricably a part of form. Others might mean *subject matter,* World War I, say. But everything in a film that might *represent* this subject matter—costumes, trenches, guns, dialogue, even archival footage of the actual war—will all be things that we will identify as elements of form. World War I isn't "inside" this film, isn't a part of it, any more than Middle Earth is inside Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or J. R. R. Tolkien's books are inside it. The same real-world event or work of literature can inspire many films, but these films won't all share a common core material that is a war or a book. And finally, what if by *content* someone means *meaning?* This chapter will have a lot to say about meaning, but for now I'll just say that we won't be calling it content.

It's all form—which is good, because this means that nothing in a film is outside the scope of your analysis. Well, there are three other things, besides content, that I will suggest you can fruitfully avoid when analyzing a film. We get to these later in the chapter. But first, if we're not understanding form by opposing it to content, how are we understanding it?

We'll see a strong relationship between form and *expectations*. Whose? Those of viewers. There are many kinds of approach to film analysis. Here you'll learn about one that is *formalist* and also *viewer centered*. Another kind is author centered, which we will consider briefly when we get to films and *function* later in the chapter.

Broadly speaking, viewer expectations can come from two places: (1) the work itself, the film; and (2) outside the film, our daily experiences, including our experience of watching other films.

If I say "knock knock," you'll say, "Who's there?" You can participate in the joke—you can, in a sense, help make it "happen"—because you've heard other knock-knock jokes and know what to say. This knowledge is external to the joke and helps you make sense of it. In fact, without this knowledge there is no joke at all.

Now, if in answer to your "Who's there?" I say, "Cash," and you say, "Cash who?" and I say, "No thanks, but I'd like some peanuts," your expectation—that "Cash" is at the door—comes not from past experiences but from the joke itself.

The joke *cued* you to have this expectation.

The interplay between these two kinds of expectation, ones coming from outside the text and ones coming from inside it, is something you can look for and ask questions about when watching a film.

More about the expectations we bring to films. You go to a musical. You expect to see people breaking into song and dance as you don't in life. If you've never seen a musical before, your reaction might not be, "Oh, they're falling in love," but, "What's happening? I don't get this at all." Again, what viewers know coming to a film plays a role in helping to make the film "happen."

Viewer expectations will be part of our understanding of form and of what films are and what they do.

CONVENTIONS AND GENRES

One way film form and viewer expectations interact is through *conventions*. A **convention** is a trait that is shared by many artworks and that we don't see, or see nearly as often, in real life. Viewers are able to understand a convention in part because they've seen it before in other films. For this reason, we can think about a convention as a way films relate, through viewers, to other films.

The number of film conventions one could list is endless. Here are four:

- A man and woman meet and instantly hate each other. If this is a romantic comedy, they'll probably fall in love.
- The mad genius doesn't get away with his diabolical scheme.
- The car explodes in slow motion.
- The underdog sports team comes from behind at the last second and wins the big game.

Another way to understand conventions is to say they can help us distinguish movie reality from actual reality. Consider the ticking-time-bomb scenario. A captured suspect possesses some secret information, and if his interrogators can only find it out—under what bridge the bomb is wired, say—many innocent lives will be saved. If it's hard to find examples of a time when such a scenario ever played out in real life, it happens every week on TV and in one big-screen action thriller after another. The scenario belongs more to movie reality than to the one we live in. In real life, if two people meet and instantly hate each other, chances are they'll just go on hating each other.

As many of my examples suggest, conventions can point strongly to certain types of films. If you're watching a film featuring a protagonist, maybe a private investigator, who's visited by a sultry woman who asks for his help and who might be secretly treacherous, you're probably watching a film noir (or a parody of one). Film noir is an example of a **film genre.** Most moviegoers are familiar with genres of many kinds—action-adventure, romantic comedy, westerns, and so on. Conventions can be spotted in every kind of film, but genre films are loaded with them to distinctive degrees. Let's consider an example.

In the science fiction film *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, US/Australia, 1999), the hero, Neo, decides to face the evil Agent Smith. The scene is a deserted subway. Trinity, the female protagonist, who loves Neo, has just made her narrow escape. She is no wallflower, but the telephone link that would allow her to return to his side has just been severed. It's a convention of many kinds of film that the hero must face his nemesis alone. Obi-Wan's ghost, in *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), tells Luke: "If you choose to face Vader, you will do it alone. I cannot interfere." One could argue that the rules of movie showdowns between good and bad guys govern Obi-Wan's exclusion from this confrontation as much as any logic internal to the Star Wars universe does. Likewise excluded, Trinity urges, "Run, Neo, run." The woman, helpless on the sidelines, fears for her man's safety. But he's going to stand firm. That this scenario is far from original makes it no less compelling.

When Neo doesn't run, Trinity asks his mentor, Morpheus, "What's he doing?" Morpheus replies, "He's beginning to believe." Viewers feel a surge of gratification as well as anticipation at this line. Since long before Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, and the cinema itself, the protagonist

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