
This chapter devotes itself to how film critics and theorists have responded to movies—how they evaluate them and how they place them in a wider intellectual context. People who critique movies fall into three general classes:

1. **Reviewers** are generally regional journalists who describe the contents and general tone of a movie, with only incidental emphasis on aesthetic evaluation. Often such writers point out whether a given film is suitable for children or not.

2. **Critics** are also journalists for the most part, but their emphasis is more on evaluation than on mere content description. Nationally known film critics can have considerable influence on the commercial success or failure of a given movie.
3. **Theorists** are usually professional academics, often the authors of books on how movies can be studied on a more philosophical level. Most theorists are concerned with the wider context of the medium—its social and political implications. Theorists have also explored the essential nature of cinema—what differentiates it from other art forms, what its basic properties are. For the most part, film theory has been dominated by Europeans, especially the French and British. The tradition of criticism in the United States has been less theoretical and more pragmatic in its thrust. In recent times, however, American movie critics have shown a greater interest in the theoretical implications of the medium, though the bias in favor of practical criticism remains strong.

A theory is an intellectual grid, a set of aesthetic generalizations, not eternal verities. Some theories are more useful than others in understanding specific movies. No single theory can explain them all. For this reason, recent developments in the field have stressed an eclectic approach, synthesizing a variety of strategies.

Traditionally, critics and theorists have focused their attention on three areas of inquiry: (1) the work of art, (2) the artist, and (3) the audience. Those
Theory is the handmaiden of art, not vice versa. Movies can be explored from a variety of theoretical perspectives, each with its own set of values and parameters of inquiry. Your theoretical orientation will depend in large part on what you’re looking for. For example, The Maltese Falcon can be placed in at least seven theoretical contexts: (1) An auteur critic would regard it as a typical Huston film. (2) It could also be analyzed as a Bogart vehicle, exploiting and expanding the star’s iconography. (3) An industry historian would place the picture within its commercial context—as a superior example of the Warner Brothers product of this era. (4) A genre theorist would be interested in it as a classic example of the detective thriller, and one of the first of the so-called deadly female pictures that were so popular in the United States during the 1940s. (5) A theorist interested in the relationship of movies to literature might focus on Huston’s script, based on Dashiell Hammet’s celebrated novel of the same title. (6) A stylistic critic would analyze the picture within the context of film noir, an important style in the American cinema of the 1940s. (7) A Marxist might interpret the movie as a parable on greed, an implicit condemnation of the vices of capitalism. Each theoretical grid charts a different cinematic topography.


“Masterpiece” is a term that’s too loosely used by some film critics, yet it’s an undeniably useful concept, signifying an artistic work of the highest value. Responsible film critics are reluctant to call a recently released movie a masterpiece because generally a film must survive the test of time in order to qualify. For example, even today On the Waterfront is almost universally regarded as a masterpiece. Who decides whether a movie is great or not? Generally, influential film critics, film festival judges, industry leaders, and other professionals who are widely respected for their taste and judgment. Of course no one is obliged to agree with them. What makes a movie a masterpiece? Usually, significant innovations in subject matter or style, or both. Also, a richness and complexity in the treatment of characters and story. Often a masterpiece provides us with a valuable insight of some kind, a revelation of the human condition. But in the end, “masterpiece” is a subjective term. Film critics and scholars are by no means in total agreement about what movies are masterpieces and what movies aren’t. Such commentators often refer to “the canon”—that is, a loose consensus of individual films that are widely regarded as privileged works, superior to the rest. In other words, a collection of masterpieces.

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In the minds of many people, the word “masterpiece” somehow suggests a perfect work of art. In fact, the opposite is usually the case. Virtually any movie, even one so original and brilliant as *Last Tango*, contains scenes that just don’t work, or feature embarrassing lapses in taste or execution. In this film, the central character (Schneider) is engaged to a young filmmaker who seems very lightweight compared to her secret lover (Brando), whom she meets for anonymous, passionate sex in a rented apartment. The subplot about the filmmaker is shallow and conventional, but the story about her secret lover is fascinating. Thematically rich and complex, *Last Tango* is about sex and love and the differences between them. “I didn’t make an erotic film,” Bertolucci explained, “only a film about eroticism.” His main concern in the movie is to show how sex is used to satisfy subconscious needs that are only superficially related to sex: “Things are ‘erotic’ only before relationships develop,” he pointed out. “The strongest erotic moments in a relationship are always at the beginning, since relationships are born from animal instincts. But every sexual relationship is condemned. It is condemned to lose its purity, its animal nature. Sex becomes an instrument for saying other things.” Sex can morph into love, which is a lot more complicated. *(United Artists)*
who have stressed the work of art have explored the inner dynamics of movies—how they communicate, the language systems they use. Film theorists can be divided into realists and formalists, just as filmmakers tend to favor one style or the other. The most important artist-oriented approach is the auteur theory, the belief that a movie is best understood by focusing on its artistic creator, presumably the director. Structuralism and semiology were the dominant theories after 1970, and both tend to emphasize a synthetic approach, combining such concerns as genre, authorship, style, iconography, social context, and ideology. In the area of historiography—the theoretical assumptions underlying film history—recent trends have also emphasized an integrated approach.

THEORIES OF REALISM

Most theories of realism emphasize the documentary aspects of film art. Movies are evaluated primarily in terms of how accurately they reflect external reality. The camera is regarded as essentially a recording mechanism rather than an expressive medium in its own right. The subject matter is paramount in the cinema of realism, technique its discreetly transparent handmaiden. As we have seen in the case of André Bazin (Chapter 4), most theories of realism have a moral and ethical bias and are often rooted in the values of Islamic, Christian, and Marxist humanism.

Realist theorists like Cesare Zavattini and Siegfried Kracauer believe that cinema is essentially an extension of photography and shares with it a pronounced affinity for recording the visible world around us (11–2a). Unlike other art forms, photography and cinema tend to leave the raw materials of
reality more or less intact. There is a minimum of interference and manipulation on the artist’s part, for film is not an art of invention so much as an art of “being there.”

Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City* (11–2b) inaugurated the Italian **neorealist** movement, one of the triumphs of the cinema of realism. The movie deals with the collaboration of Catholics and Communists in fighting the Nazi occupation of Rome shortly before the American army liberated the city. Technically, the film is rather crude. Good quality film stock was impossible to obtain, so Rossellini had to use inferior newsreel stock. Nevertheless, the technical flaws and the resultant grainy images convey a sense of journalistic immediacy and authenticity. (Many neorealists began their careers as journalists, and Rossellini himself began as a documentarist.) Virtually all the movie was shot at actual locations, and there are many exterior shots in which no additional lights were used. With the exception of the principal players, the actors were nonprofessionals. The structure of the movie is episodic—a series of vignettes showing the reactions of Roman citizens to the German occupation.

*Open City* is saturated with a sense of unrelenting honesty. “This is the way things are,” Rossellini is said to have declared after the film premiered. The statement became the motto of the neorealist movement. The film provided a rallying point for an entire generation of Italian filmmakers whose creative talents had been stifled by the repressive Fascist regime of the prewar era. Within the next few years, there followed an astonishing series of movies that catapulted the Italians into the front ranks of the international cinema. The major filmmakers of the movement were Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica and his frequent scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini.

There are considerable differences between these men and even between their early and later works. Furthermore, neorealism implied a style as well as an ideology. Rossellini emphasized the ethical dimension: “For me, Neorealism is above all a moral position from which to look at the world. It then became an aesthetic position, but at the beginning it was moral.” De Sica, Zavattini, and Visconti also stressed morality as the touchstone of neorealism.
The main ideological characteristics of the movement can be summarized as follows: (1) a new democratic spirit, with emphasis on the value of ordinary people such as laborers, peasants, and factory workers; (2) a compassionate point of view and a refusal to make facile moral judgments; (3) a preoccupation with Italy’s Fascist past and its aftermath of wartime devastation, poverty, unemployment, prostitution, and the black market; (4) a blending of Christian and Marxist humanism; and (5) an emphasis on emotions rather than abstract ideas.

The stylistic features of neorealism include (1) an avoidance of neatly plotted stories in favor of loose, episodic structures that evolve organically from the situations of the characters; (2) a documentary visual style; (3) the

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Police stories, thrillers, urban melodramas—all these genres tend to favor realism as a style. Realism insists that truth lies on the surface of life, and the function of the artist is to mirror this surface accurately, without bias or distortion. Realism is especially effective in revealing the darker side of human nature, where sentimentality, wishful thinking, and glib certainties about right and wrong are regarded as a kind of moral virginity. *(Paramount Pictures)*

11–2b. *Open City* (Italy, 1945), *with Marcello Pagliero, directed by Roberto Rossellini.*

The torture scenes of this famous Resistance film were so realistic that they were cut out of some prints. In this episode, a Nazi S.S. officer applies a blowtorch to the body of a Communist partisan in an effort to force him to reveal the names of his comrades in the underground. The crucifixion allusion is deliberate, even though the character is a nonbeliever. It parallels the death of another partisan, a Catholic priest, who is executed by a military firing squad. The French critic André Bazin was a champion of Italian neorealism, applauding its moral fervor even more than its technical restraint. “Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism, and only secondarily a style of filmmaking?” he asked. *(Pathé Contemporary Films)*
use of actual locations—usually exteriors—rather than studio sets; (4) the use of nonprofessional actors, sometimes even for principal roles; (5) an avoidance of literary dialogue in favor of conversational speech, including dialects; and (6) an avoidance of artifice in the editing, camerawork, and lighting in favor of a simple “styleless” style.

Realists have shown a persistent hostility toward plot and neatly structured stories. For example, Cesare Zavattini defined the ordinary and the everyday as the main business of the cinema. Spectacular events and extraordinary
characters should be avoided at all costs, he believed. He claimed that his ideal movie would consist of ninety consecutive minutes from a person’s actual life. There should be no barriers between reality and the spectator, no directorial virtuosity to “deform” the integrity of life as it is. The artistry should be invisible, the materials “found” rather than shaped or manipulated.

Suspicious of conventional plot structures, Zavattini dismissed them as dead formulas. He insisted on the dramatic superiority of life as it is experienced by ordinary people. Filmmakers should be concerned with the “excavation” of reality. Instead of plots, they should emphasize facts and all their “echoes and reverberations.” According to Zavattini, filmmaking is not a matter of “inventing fables” that are superimposed over the factual materials of life, but of searching unrelentingly to uncover the dramatic implications of these facts. The purpose of the cinema is to explore the “dailiness” of events, to reveal certain details that had always been there but had never been noticed.

In his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, the German-trained theorist Siegfried Kracauer also attacks plot as a natural enemy of realism. According to Kracauer, the cinema is characterized by a number of natural affinities. First of all, it tends to favor “unstaged reality”—that is, the most appropriate subject matter gives the illusion of having been found rather than arranged. Second, film tends to stress the random, the fortuitous. Kracauer is fond of the phrase “nature caught in the act,” meaning that film is best suited to recording events and objects that might be overlooked in life. The realistic cinema is a cinema of “found moments” and poignant revelations of humanity. A third affinity that Kracauer notes is indeterminacy. The best movies suggest endlessness. They imply a slice of life, a fragment of a larger reality rather than a self-contained whole. By refusing to tie up all the loose ends at the conclusion of the movie, the filmmaker can suggest the limitlessness of reality.

Kracauer is hostile toward movies that demonstrate a “formative tendency.” Historical films and fantasies he regards as tending to move away from the basic concerns of the medium. He also dismisses most literary and dramatic adaptations because he believes that literature is ultimately concerned with “interior realities,” what people are thinking and feeling, whereas movies explore surfaces, exterior reality. He regards all stylistic self-consciousness as
“uncinematic,” because instead of emphasizing the subject matter, the filmmaker calls attention to how it is presented.

Theories of film realism are not very helpful in understanding the complexities of formalist movies—the works of a Sergei Eisenstein or a Steven Spielberg. On the other hand, they do help to explain the raw emotional power of

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11–3. De Sica, Renoir, and Ray were world-class cinematic realists, and these three movies are among their most celebrated masterpieces.

11–3a. *Umberto D* (Italy, 1952), *with Carlo Battisti (right), directed by Vittorio De Sica*. Scripted by Cesare Zavattini, *Umberto D* concentrates on “small subjects,” ordinary people, and the details of everyday life. The story explores the drab existence of a retired pensioner who’s being forced out of his modest apartment because he can’t afford the rent hike. His only comfort is his adoring pet dog who accompanies him in his desperate attempts to come up with the necessary cash. *(Museum of Modern Art)*

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11–3b. *The Rules of the Game* (France, 1939), *directed by Jean Renoir*. “Everyone has his reasons,” Jean Renoir once observed of his characters. In this wise and profound comedy of manners, Renoir refuses to divide people glibly into good guys and bad, insisting that most people have logical reasons for behaving as they do. Sometimes good people commit horrible deeds—like this enraged working-class husband who blasts away with a shot-
gun at the man he thinks has seduced his wife. Incongruously, he does so in the middle of a luxurious salon filled with (mostly) innocent bystanders. (Janus Films)

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11–3c. Pather Panchali (The Song of the Road), (India, 1955), with Kanu Bannerjee, directed by Satyajit Ray.
Like his idols De Sica and Renoir, Ray was a humanist, exploring a wide range of emotions. Pather Panchali is a study of grinding poverty in a remote Indian village. It packs a powerful emotional punch. Terrible catastrophes seem to strike out of nowhere, almost crushing their victims and plunging them into unspeakable grief. Surviving this squalor and desperation is human hope, flickering like a candle against the wind, refusing to be extinguished. (Audio-Brandon Film)

Why should we watch such depressing stories? Hedonists might well complain that movies like these bring you down, that they’re painful to watch, a kind of cinema for masochists. The answer is complex. Such movies often are painful to watch. But they’re also insightful, dramatizing what it’s like to be up against the wall, to be really desperate. They show us the toughness and resilience of our brothers and sisters. At their best, movies like these can be profoundly spiritual—offering us privileged glimpses into the nobility of the human spirit.
such masterpieces of realism as *Bicycle Thief*, which was directed by Vittorio De Sica and scripted primarily by Zavattini (6–33).

*Bicycle Thief* was acted entirely by nonprofessionals and consists of simple events in the life of a laborer (played by Lamberto Maggiorani, who was an actual factory worker). In 1948, when the film was released, nearly a quarter of the work-force in Italy was unemployed. At the opening of the movie, we are introduced to the protagonist, a family man with a wife and two children to support. He has been out of work for two years. Finally, a billboard-posting job opens up, but to

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accept it, he must have a bicycle. To get his bike out of hock, he and his wife pawn their sheets and bedding. On his first day on the job, the bicycle is stolen. The rest of the movie deals with his attempts to recover the bike. The man’s search grows increasingly more frantic as he crisscrosses the city with his idolizing son, Bruno. After a series of false leads, the two finally track down one of the thieves, but the protagonist is outwitted by him and humiliated in front of his boy. Realizing that
11–4a. The Tree of the Wooden Clogs (Italy, 1978), directed by Ermanno Olmi.

As a movement, Italian neorealism was pretty much over by the mid-1950s, but as a style and an attitude toward reality, its influence spread to many other countries. A number of Italian filmmakers continued in the tradition of neorealism. For example, Olmi’s movies are steeped in the values of Christian humanism. In this film, he celebrates the everyday lives of several peasant families around 1900. For them, God is a living presence—a source of guidance, hope, and solace. Their faith is childlike, trusting, like that of St. Francis of Assisi. In a series of documentarylike vignettes, Olmi unfolds their gentle drama, extolling their patience, their tough stoicism, their dignity. For Olmi, they are the salt of the earth. (New Yorker Films)

11–4b. Taste of Cherry (Iran, 1998), with Homayoun Ershadi, written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami.

Winner of the Palme d’Or (top prize) at the Cannes Film Festival, Taste of Cherry demonstrated to the world that neorealism was alive and thriving in Iran. Shot on actual locations with a nonprofessional cast, the movie poetically validates the sacredness of life, from an Islamic-humanist perspective. The plot is episodic and loosely structured, allowing maximum space to explore philosophical and religious themes, but in a simple, unpretentious way. It’s a movie of considerable wisdom. For a good collection of essays exploring the renaissance of Iranian movies, see The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity, edited by Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002). (Zeitgeist Films)
11–5a. *Italian for Beginners* (Denmark, 2002), written and directed by Lone Scherfig.

Kamikaze realism. European cineastes have a long tradition of making pontifical pronouncements and publishing strident manifestos. Like Dogma 95, for example. That’s their real name, their chosen name. In 1995, a group of Danish filmmakers issued a list of strict rules about movie making. The most famous of these directors are Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and Lone Scherfig. Presumably by following these rules, movies could be really realistic, and not faux realistic, like everyone else’s so-called realistic movies. Some of these rules: Only real locations can be used as sets. Props also have to be found on the location. Sound must always be diegetic—sourced from within the image. No music, unless you can see the musicians in the shot. The camera must be handheld. The film must be in color: No artsy black and white. No unusual lights can be set up: available lighting is best. No special effects—they’re not real. Not even any filters: reality should not be modified or prettified. No melodramatic or extraordinary events: just everyday life. Movies should always stay in the present: No flashbacks, no dream or fantasy sequences. Finally, the director must not be credited. Needless to say, very few of the filmmakers have been able to obey all these draconian injunctions. Most of the commercially or critically successful works by these artists have been admired not because they followed the rules, but because the characters are genuinely compelling. In this movie they all have a story, they all have a need. Needs. Scherfig’s dialogue is fresh and spontaneious sounding, often wryly funny. And her ensemble cast is first-rate. It’s not her technique that makes the movie engrossing, it’s the human interaction. (Miramax Films)

11–5b. *Jarhead* (U.S.A., 2005), with Jamie Foxx, directed by Sam Mendes.

Too much realism? When film realism is too close to reality, problems often arise. *Jarhead* is a
movie about military combat, but the main characters, highly trained marine snipers, never get a chance to exercise their skills. They never even get to see a war—in this case, the first American invasion of Iraq, dubbed Desert Storm. Based on the memoirs of marine Anthony Swofford, the film spends most of its time waiting, waiting to head toward the combat zone. Meanwhile, they train, they drink and smoke, train some more, clown around, and wait some more. They’re all pumped up with nowhere to go. While they’re waiting, the war comes to an end. No pay-off scene. The movie was a box-office disappointment, despite its excellent cast. Why? Perhaps cultural critic Frank Rich said it best: “A long attention span has never been part of the American character. We like fast-paced narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends. We like an upbeat final curtain.” In short, we don’t like our realism to be too real.

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he will lose his livelihood without a bike, the desperate man—after sending his son away—sneaks off and attempts to steal one himself. But the boy observes from a distance as his father peddles frantically to escape a pursuing mob. He is caught and again humiliated in front of a crowd—which includes his incredulous son. With the bitterness of betrayed innocence, the youngster suddenly realizes that his dad is not the heroic figure he had formerly thought, but an ordinary man who in desperation yielded to a degrading temptation. Like most neorealist films, Bicycle Thief doesn’t offer a slick solution. There are no miraculous inter-ventions in the final reel. The
concluding scene shows the boy walking alongside his father in an anonymous crowd, both of them choking with shame and weeping silently. Almost imperceptibly, the boy’s hand gropes for his father’s as they walk homeward, their only comfort a mutual compassion.

FORMALIST FILM THEORIES

Formalist film theorists believe that the art of cinema is possible precisely because a movie is unlike everyday reality. The filmmaker exploits the limitations of the medium—its two-dimensionality, its confining frame, its fragmented

11–6. Ugetsu (Japan, 1953), with Masayuki Mori and Machiko Kyo, directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Realistic critics and theorists tend to underestimate the flexibility of an audience’s response to nonrealistic movies. Of course, it’s easier for a filmmaker to create the illusion of reality if the story deals with everyday events, for the world of the movie and the actual world are essentially the same. On the other hand, a gifted artist can make even fantasy materials “realistic.” A movie like Ugetsu, which is set in the remote past and features spirits and demons, presents us with a self-contained magical universe that we are able to enter by temporarily forgetting the outside world of reality. In short, audiences are highly sophisticated in their responses to nonrealistic films. We can almost totally suspend our disbelief, partially suspend it, or alternate between extremes according to the aesthetic demands of the world of the movie. (Janus Films)
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11–7a. *The Wizard of Oz* (U.S.A., 1939), with Judy Garland and Ray Bolger, directed by Victor Fleming. Formalism luxuriates in the artificial. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas any more, Toto,” Dorothy observes to her dog when they are whisked into an enchanted place where nothing looks real. The wondrous world of the MGM musical was a triumph of artifice: lions that talked (and cried), flying creatures in the sky, scarecrows that danced (beautifully), swaying fields that sparkled like diamonds, and a superb musical score by E. Y. Harburg and the great Harold Arlen. *(MGM)*

11–7b. *Muppets From Space* (U.S.A., 1999), with Pepe, Animal, Gonzo, Rizzo, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, and Kermit the Frog, directed by Tim Hill. Gifted filmmakers can create a believable world even without using human beings. The Muppet characters from the Jim Henson organization all have unique personalities—familiar to millions of children all over the world. You don’t have to be a child to appreciate the oddball denizens of Muppetland, who are more credible than a lot of so-called “live” characters. In this movie, our stalwart astronauts embark on an extraterrestrial adventure in the hopes of finding Gonzo’s long-lost family from a distant planet. *(Jim Henson Pictures)*
If realism tends to favor the didactic, the teaching function of art, then formalism tends to favor the pleasure principle. Implicit in the concept of formalism is the supremacy of pattern over life, of aesthetic richness over literal truth. Even in movies that attempt a superficial realism, like the sci-fi classic, *Alien*, the emphasis is on the appeal of the shapes, textures, and colors of the visuals. This image might very well be an abstract painting. It’s also a high-angle long shot of an astronaut (John Hurt) inside an alien spacecraft, amidst a colony of sinister throbbing eggs. (*Twentieth Century Fox)*

11–8b. *Adaptation* (U.S.A., 2002), with Nicolas Cage and Nicolas Cage, directed by Spike Jonze. Independent filmmaker Spike Jonze believes that modern movies have become slaves to boring reality. Even fanciful genres like science fiction contain recognizable character types and situations from other movies. Written by the always strange Charlie Kaufman and his brother Donald, *Adaptation* is about a screenwriter named Charlie Kaufman and his brother Donald, both played by the fearless Nicholas Cage. The film is an exploration of the creative process, with all its frustrations, digressions, and spectacular highs. Said actor Cage about the experience: “*Adaptation* was an opportunity to do something totally brand new, to really transform myself. I’m playing the writer of the movie in which I’m appearing, and his brother. It’s a Cubist thing, very exciting.” (*Columbia Pictures)*
time–space continuum—to produce a world that resembles the real world only in a superficial sense. The real world is merely a repository of raw material that needs to be shaped and heightened to be effective as art. Film art doesn’t consist of a reproduction of reality, but a translation of observed characteristics into the *forms* of the medium.

Rudolf Arnheim, a gestalt psychologist, put forth an important theory of cinematic formalism in his book *Film As Art*, which was originally published in German in 1933. Arnheim’s book is primarily concerned with the perception of experience. His theory is based on the different modes of perception of the camera on the one hand and the human eye on the other. Anticipating some of the theories of the communications specialist Marshall McLuhan, Arnheim insists that the camera’s image of a bowl of fruit, for instance, is fundamentally different from our perception of the fruit bowl in actual life. Or, in McLuhan’s terms, the information we receive in each instance is determined by the form of its content. Formalist theorists celebrate these differences, believing that what makes photography fall short of perfect
reproduction is also what makes cinema an art, not just a species of xerography.

Formalists have pointed out many instances where divergences exist between the camera’s image of reality and what the human eye sees. For example, film directors must choose from which viewpoint to photograph a scene. They don’t necessarily choose the clearest view, for often this does not emphasize the major characteristics of the scene, its expressive essence. In life, we perceive objects in depth and can penetrate the space that surrounds most things. In movies, space is an illusion, for the screen has only two dimensions, permitting the director to manipulate objects and perspectives in the **mise en scène**. For example, important objects can be placed where they are most likely to be noticed first. Unimportant objects can be relegated to inferior positions, at the edges or “rear” of the image.

In real life, space and time are experienced as continuous. Through editing, filmmakers can chop up space and time and rearrange them in a more meaningful manner. Like other artists, the film director selects certain expressive details from the chaotic plenitude of physical reality. By juxtaposing these space and time fragments, the filmmaker creates a continuity that doesn’t exist in raw nature. This, of course, was the basic position of the Soviet montage theorists (Chapter 4).

Formalists are always concerned with patterns, methods of restructuring reality into aesthetically appealing designs. Patterns can be expressed visually, through the photography and mise en scène; or aurally, in stylized dialogue, symbolic sound effects, and musical **motifs**. Camera movements are often **kinetic** patterns superimposed on the visual materials, commenting on them in some heightened manner.

The problems with most formalist theories are the same as with realists: There are too many exceptions. They are certainly useful in an appreciation of Hitchcock’s works, for example, or Tim Burton’s. But how helpful is the theory in explaining the films of Spike Lee or De Sica? We respond to their movies because of their similarities with physical reality, not their divergences from it. Ultimately, of course, these are matters of emphasis, for films are too pluralistic to be pigeonholed into one tidy theory.