11–9b. *Mona Lisa* (Britain, 1986), with Bob Hoskins and Cathy Tyson, directed by Neil Jordon. A scene can be lit in many different ways, and the lighting key can strongly affect our emotional response. *Mona Lisa* was photographed by the great British D. P., Roger Pratt. He lit the domestic scenes of the movie in sunny high-key, but whenever the gruff protagonist (Hoskins) descends into the sleazy underworld of an alluring prostitute he’s obsessed with (Tyson), the lighting becomes stylized, noirish, and sinister. Her world is a city of dreadful night, where nothing is as it appears, where everything is for sale. *(Handmade Films)*

11–9a. *The Servant* (Britain, 1963), with Dirk Bogarde (foreground), directed by Joseph Losey. A scene can be photographed in literally hundreds of different ways, but the formalist selects the camera *setup* that best captures its symbolic or psychological implications. In this shot, for example, a young woman (Wendy Craig) suddenly realizes the enormous power a valet (Bogarde) wields over her weak fiancé (James Fox). She is isolated on the left, half-plunged in darkness. A curtained doorway separates her from her lover, who is so stupefied with drugs he scarcely knows where he is, much less what’s really going on. The servant coolly turns his back on them, the camera’s low angle further emphasizing his effortless control over his “master.” *(Landau Distributing)*
11–10a. *Splash* (U.S.A., 1984), with Daryl Hannah and Tom Hanks, directed by Ron Howard. A common misconception about formalistic films is that they are merely light entertainment, far removed from serious concerns. For example, this movie deals with a young man who falls in love with a strange young woman, who turns out to be a mermaid. The film is a symbolic fantasy, and it’s certainly entertaining, but it also explores fundamental values—about loyalty, family, work, and commitment. (Buena Vista Pictures)

11–10b. *Blue Velvet* (U.S.A., 1986), with Kyle MacLachlan and Isabella Rossellini, written and directed by David Lynch. The most extreme branch of the formalist cinema is the avant-garde, and David Lynch is one of its most audacious artists. In this movie, he explores bizarre rituals, subconscious fears and desires, nightmares, and sexual fantasies—the eerie, urgent world of the Id, Freud’s label for all that is ferociously hungry in the human psyche. Jeffrey (Mac-Lachlan), the film’s naive main character, is both transfixed and repelled by the kinky, dark world he senses beneath the cheerful banality of everyday reality: “I’m seeing something that was always hidden,” he tells his girlfriend (Laura Dern), who is even more innocent and ignorant than he. (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group)
THE AUTEUR THEORY

In the mid-1950s, the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* revolutionized film criticism with its concept of *la politique des auteurs*. This committed policy of authors was put forth by the pugnacious young critic François Truffaut. The auteur theory became the focal point of a critical controversy that eventually spread to England and America. Before long, the theory became a militant rallying cry, particularly among younger critics, dominating such lively journals as *Movie* in Great Britain, *Film Culture* in America, and both French- and English-language editions of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Although a number of writers rejected the theory as simplistic, auteurism dominated film criticism throughout the 1960s, and is still a prominent approach among critics.

Actually, the main lines of the theory aren’t particularly outrageous, at least not in retrospect. Truffaut, Godard, and their critical colleagues proposed that the greatest movies are dominated by the personal vision of the director. A filmmaker’s “signature” can be perceived through an examination of his or her total output, which is characterized by a unity of theme and style. The
writer’s contribution is less important than the director’s because subject matter is artis-


Above all, the auteurists emphasized the personality of the artist as the main criterion of value. François Truffaut, who originally formulated *la politique des auteurs*, went on to create some of the most distinctively personal movies of the New Wave. His Doinel series is one of the crowning achievements of the *nouvelle vague.* These semiautobiographical movies trace the adventures (mostly amorous) of its likable but slightly neurotic hero, Antoine Doinel. Truffaut’s protégé Léaud was the best known actor of the French New Wave. *(New World Pictures)*

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tically neutral. It can be treated with brilliance or bare competence. Movies ought to be judged on the basis of *how*, not *what*. Like other formalists, the auteur critics claimed that what makes a good film is not the subject matter as such, but its stylistic treatment. The director dominates the treatment, provided he or she is a strong director, an *auteur*.

Drawing primarily from the cinematic traditions of the United States, the *Cahiers* critics also developed a sophisticated theory of film genre. In fact, André Bazin, the editor of the journal, believed that the genius of the Ameri-
can cinema was its repository of ready-made forms: westerns, thrillers, musicals, action films, comedies, and so on. “The tradition of genres is a base of opera-
tions for creative freedom,” Bazin pointed out. Genre is an enriching, not a constricting, tradition. The auteurists argued that the best movies are **dialectical**, in which the conventions of a genre are held in aesthetic tension with the personality of the artist.

The American auteurs that these critics praised had worked within the studio system, which had broken the artistic pretentions of many lesser filmmakers. What the auteurists especially admired was how gifted directors could circumvent studio interference and even hackneyed scripts through their technical expertise. The subject matter of Hitchcock’s thrillers or Ford’s westerns was not significantly different from others working in these genres. Yet both auteurs managed to create


Steven Spielberg’s movies have been enormously popular with the public, most of them grossing hundreds of millions of dollars. He has an uncanny sense of what the public will like, but he’s also made personal movies that he didn’t think would find a wide audience—movies like *E.T.*, *Schindler’s List*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. They were all huge hits, of course. He exer-
cises total control over how his films will be made, including the scripting, the casting, the shooting, and the final cut. A superla-
tive technician, especially in his camera work and editing, he is a foremost stylist of the contempo-
rary cinema. Like Truffaut and De Sica, Spielberg is sensitive with children, able to capture their innocence, charm, and resilience without being cutesy. Within the industry, he is regarded as a class act: generous, idealistic, and hard working. In short, he’s a world-
class auteur as well as the most commercially successful film-
maker in history. *(Warner Bros./
DreamWorks Pictures)*
great films, precisely because the real content was conveyed through the mise
en scène, the editing, and all the other formal devices at the director’s
disposal.

The sheer breadth of their knowledge of film history permitted these critics to
reevaluate the major works of a wide variety of directors. In many instances,
they completely reversed previous critical judgments. Before long,
personality cults developed around the most popular directors. On the whole,
these were filmmakers who had been virtually ignored by the critical
establishment of the previous generation: Hitchcock, Ford, Hawks, Lang, and
many others. The auteur critics were often dogmatic in their dislikes as well
as their likes. Bazin expressed alarm at their negativism. To praise a bad
movie, he felt, was unfortunate; but to condemn a good one was a serious
failing. He especially disliked their tendency to hero worship, which led to
superficial a priori judgments. Movies by cult directors were indiscriminately
praised, whereas those by directors out of fashion were auto-
matically
condemned. Auteurists were fond of ranking directors, and their listings
could be bizarre. Perfectly routine commercial directors like Nicholas Ray
were elevated above such important masters as John Huston and Billy Wilder.
The principal spokesman for the auteur theory in the United States was Andrew Sarris, the influential critic of the *Village Voice*. More knowledgeable about the complexities of the star and studio system than his French counterparts, Sarris nonetheless defended their basic argument, especially the principle of tension between an artist’s personal vision and the genre assignments that these directors were given by their Hollywood bosses.

Quite correctly, these critics insisted that total artistic freedom isn’t always a virtue. After all, Michelangelo, Dickens, and Shakespeare, among others, accepted commissioned subjects. Though this principle of dialectical tension is a sound one—in the other arts as well as cinema—some auteurists carried it to ridiculous extremes. In the first place, there is the problem of degree. It’s doubtful that even a genius like Bergman or Kubrick could do much with the script and stars of *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy*. In other words, a director’s got to have a fighting chance with the material. When the subject matter sinks beneath a certain potential, the result is not tension but artistic annihilation.

The most gifted American directors of the studio era were producer–directors who worked independently within the major studios. These tended to be the same artists the auteur critics admired most. But the lion’s share of American fiction movies produced during this era were studio films. That is, the director functioned as a member of a team and usually had little to say about the scripting, casting, or editing. Many of these directors were skillful technicians, but they were essentially craftsmen rather than artists.

Michael Curtiz is a good example. For most of his career, he was a contract director at Warner Brothers. Known for his speed and efficiency, Curtiz directed dozens of movies in a variety of styles and genres. He often took on several projects at the same time. Curtiz had no “personal vision” in the sense that the auteur theory defines it: He was just getting a job done. He often did it very well. Even so, movies like *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Casablanca*, and *Mildred Pierce* (11–13a) can be discussed more profitably as Warner Brothers movies rather than Michael Curtiz movies. The same principle applies to most of the
During the golden age of the big-studio era (roughly from 1925 to 1955), most American mainstream movies were dominated by the imprimatur of the studio rather than the director. The director was regarded more as an executor of a collaborative enterprise rather than a creative artist in his own right. *Mildred Pierce* has “Warner Brothers” written all over it. Typically tough and proletarian in emphasis, the movie features Joan Crawford as a self-made woman who kills a man. It was regarded as her comeback performance after many years as a glamorous star at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The movie, based on James M. Cain’s hard-boiled novel, was adapted by Ranald MacDougall, a studio scribe. It was directed by Michael Curtiz, Warners’ ace director, who was known for his speed, efficiency, and versatility. He was also able to control Warners’ feisty stars, who were known to be difficult and rebellious. Even Bette Davis, the gutsiest of them all, was cowed by Curtiz. When she complained that he hadn’t allowed her any break for lunch, he replied majesterially, “When you work for me, you don’t need lunch. You just take an aspirin.” (Warner Bros.)

In the contemporary American cinema, most mainstream movies are still collaborative enterprises, with the director—even one as brilliant as Mike Nichols—serving as a coordinator of talent. The film is based on a political novel by “Anonymous”—actually journalist Joe Klein. The book is a thinly disguised account of the first presidential primary of Bill Clinton, his wife
Hillary, and their political organization. The smart and wickedly funny screenplay was written by Elaine May. A first-rate cast is headed by Travolta, who does an uncanny impersonation of the gregarious and charismatic Clinton, who is at once a genuine democrat, a dedicated public servant, and a womanizing opportunist. The miracle of the movie is that it’s so seamless, with its multiple individual contributions blended into a unified artistic whole. That was Mike Nichols’s contribution. (Universal Studios)

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11–14. Today, the term “auteur” is commonly used to designate a film artist, an individual whose personality is indelibly stamped onto his or her work. An auteur controls the major modes of expression—script, performance, execution—whether working within the commercial industry, like a Spielberg, a Scorsese, or a Spike Lee, or working outside the studio system, in what has been called the independent cinema. See also Cinema of Outsiders, by Emanuel Levy (New York: New York University Press, 1999), a study of the American independent cinema movement.

11–14a. Sling Blade (U.S.A., 1996), with Billy Bob Thornton, written and directed by Thornton. Independent filmmakers have much more control over their product than most mainstream directors, in part because independent movies are usually made on low budgets. Most of the people involved are working for free, or very little, compared to Hollywood studio personnel. These alternative artists can also explore unusual or unfashionable subjects. For example, though more than 40 percent of Americans attend religious services weekly, this fact is rarely
acknowledged in mainstream movies. But an important element of *Sling Blade* is its strong Southern Baptist flavor, lending the bizarre tale a spiritual richness. (Miramax Films)


The protagonists of mainstream movies are almost exclusively heterosexual, and rarely do they suffer from any sexual problems. Independent films can be more real. This film’s gay protagonist (Donovan) has just had his lover stolen from him by his manipulative sixteen-year-old half sister (Christina Ricci at her most evil). His best friend (Kudrow) is sexually repressed and hopelessly in love with him. That’s just part of their problems. Mainstream movies are rarely as witty and bitchy and shrewd about the subject of sex. Nor do they usually offer such juicy roles for women, who are every bit as neurotic as the men. (TriStar Pictures)

*continued ➤*
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Mainstream movies tend to reaffirm conventional morality. They also tend to be highly predictable. Within the first ten minutes of watching a typical genre film, we can usually guess how it’ll end. The good guys will triumph, decency will be restored, blah blah blah. Independent movies can be more perverse. Like this deadpan exploration of teenage dorkdom, which turned out to be a box-office hit. The movie centers on an endearingly awkward, frizzy-haired high school geek (Heder) and his equally dorky family and friends. It was warmly received at the Sundance Film Festival, which is still the preferred place to premiere an indie film. The movie became a cult favorite and grossed over $44 million. It’s wickedly funny. (Twentieth Century Fox)

other Hollywood studios. In our day, it applies to films that are dominated by producers and financiers rather than artists.

Other films have been dominated by stars. Few people would think of referring to a Mae West movie as anything else, and the same holds true for the W. C. Fields comedies and the works of Laurel and Hardy. The ultimate in the star as auteur is the so-called star vehicle, a film specifically tailored to showcase the talents of a performer (11–15).

The auteur theory suffers from a number of other weaknesses. There are some excellent films that have been made by directors who are otherwise mediocre. For example, Joseph H. Lewis’s *Gun Crazy* is a superb movie, but
it’s atypical of his output. Conversely, great directors sometimes produce bombs. The works of such major filmmakers as Ford, Godard, Renoir, and Buñuel are radically inconsistent in terms of quality, and some of their movies are outright awful. The auteur theory emphasizes history and a director’s total output, which tends to favor older directors at the expense of newcomers. Some artists have explored a variety of themes in many different styles and genres: Carol Reed, Sidney Lumet, and John Frankenheimer are good examples. There are also some great filmmakers who are crude directorial technicians. For example, Chaplin and Herzog in no way approach the stylistic fluency of Michael Curtiz, or a dozen other contract directors of his era. Yet there are very few artists who have created such distinctively personal movies as Chaplin and Herzog.

Despite its shortcomings and excesses, the auteur theory had a liberating effect on film criticism, establishing the director as the key figure at least in the art of cinema, if not always the industry. To this day, the concept of directorial dominance remains firmly established, at least with films of high artistic merit (11–14).

ECLECTIC AND SYNTHESIZING APPROACHES

Eclecticism is the favored approach of many film critics in the United States, such as the former critic of The New Yorker, Pauline Kael, who once wrote, “I believe that we respond most and best to work in any art form (and to other experience as well) if we are pluralistic, flexible, relative in our judgments, if we
Many movies are dominated by stars rather than directors, studios, or genres. This film is a sequel to *Legally Blonde* (2001), a popular comedy that ushered Reese Witherspoon into stardom. She was executive producer to the sequel, virtually guaranteeing her control over how the movie would be made. The story is specifically tailored to showcase her comic abilities as well as her good looks. She is rarely off-camera and the plot is pretty much more-of-the-same but more of what made the first movie a commercial hit. The film is competently directed, but the dominant personality is clearly in front of the camera, not behind it. *(MGM/United Artists)*

Eclecticism is sometimes called the tradition of sensibility because a high value is placed on the aesthetic discriminations of a person of taste and discernment. Such critics are often urbane, well educated, and conversant in the other arts. The cultural cross-references in the writings of such critics as Roger Ebert, David Denby, and Frank Rich range over a wide spectrum, including literature, drama, politics, and the visual arts. They frequently allude to the ideas of such seminal thinkers as Freud, Marx, Darwin, and Jung. Sometimes critics combine an ideological perspective—such as
feminism—with practical criticism, sociology, and history, as in the criticism of Molly Haskell and B. Ruby Rich (11–16). The best eclectic critics are gifted writers, including such distinguished prose stylists as James Agee, Pauline Kael, and Roger Ebert, whose film criticism has won a Pulitzer Prize. Polished writing is valued as writing, in addition to the ideas it conveys.

Eclectic critics reject the notion that a single theory can explain all movies. They regard this as a cookie-cutter approach to criticism. Most of them insist that an individual’s reaction to a film is deeply personal. For this reason, the best a critic can do is explain his or her personal responses as forcefully as possible.


Eclectic critics often combine movie criticism with social movements such as feminism, exploring not only the sexual values within a film but also the ideological context of its production. Traditionally, women have been excluded from positions of power within the American film industry.
The situation is even worse in most other countries. *Frida*, a biography of the great Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, was a labor of love for Salma Hayek, who is herself Mexican. She nurtured the project along for years, beating out more politically connected actresses for the leading role. She thought a woman director would be more sensitive to the nuances of the character, and eventually enlisted Taymor, who was still basking from her huge success of directing the Broadway stage musical, *The Lion King*. Taymor’s visual inventiveness lent itself well to the “magical realism” of Kahlo’s painting style. The movie was a success, earning a number of awards, including a Best Actress Oscar nomination for Hayek. (*Miramax Films*)

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11–17a.

*Independence Day* (U.S.A., 1996), directed by Roland Emmerich. This movie was a huge commercial hit, gobbling up over $300 million domestically and close to $490 million in foreign markets. It also generated $500 million in so-called ancillary revenues, including video and television rights. Twentieth Century–Fox spent $30 million for advertising alone—an investment that obviously paid off. The film’s special effects constituted its main box-office appeal. In this sequence, for example, the U.S. White House is attacked by an alien force of incredible magnitude. Serious film critics either ignored the movie or dismissed it as drivel. So who’s right, the public or the “experts”? It depends on how you look at it. The mass audience tends to seek escapist entertainment: Movies are a way of forgetting their troubles. Film
critics must endure a constant barrage of such pictures in their daily line of work. Hence, they tend to get bored with anything that treads the tried (and tired) and true. What they seek in movies is something unusual, challenging, and daring. Independence Day did not meet these expectations. (Twentieth Century Fox)

11–17b. The Squid and the Whale (U.S.A. 2005), with Jeff Daniels and Laura Linney, written and directed by Noah Baumbach.
“Small” movies like this (they’re called “specialty pictures” in the trade) can easily get lost amongst all the noise and glitter and clamor of the mainstream industry. Despite its unfortunate title and its sober, downbeat materials—the collapse of a marriage and the effects on the children—excellent movies like this are precisely the kind that can be brought to the public’s attention by influential film critics. (Samuel Goldwyn Films)

possible. But it’s just an opinion, however well founded or gracefully argued. The best criticism of this type is informative even if we don’t agree with its conclusions. Because personal taste is the main determinant of value in eclectic criticism, these commentators often admit to their blind spots—and all critics have blind spots. Everyone has had the experience of being left
totally cold by a movie that’s widely hailed as a masterpiece. We can’t help the way we feel, however much our feelings go against popular sentiment. Eclectic critics usually begin with their feelings about a movie, then work outward, trying to objectify these instincts with concrete arguments. To guard against personal eccentricity, they implicitly place a film within the context of a canon, a tradition of masterpieces—that is, those works that have stood the test of time and are still considered milestones in the evolution of the cinema. This great tradition is constantly under reevaluation. It’s a loose critical consensus rather than an ironclad body of privileged works.

Eclecticism has been faulted on a number of counts. Because of its extreme subjectivity, this approach has been criticized as mere impressionism by more rigorously systematic critics. They insist that aesthetic evaluations ought to be governed by a body of theoretical principles rather than a critic’s unique sensibility, however refined. Eclectic critics are rarely in agreement because each of them is reacting to a movie according to his or her own tastes rather than a larger theoretical framework, with its built-in system of checks and balances. For all their vaunted expertise and cultural prestige, eclectic critics have track records that don’t always bear close scrutiny. For example, when Fellini’s 8 1/2 was released in 1963, many critics in America and Europe dismissed the movie as self-indulgent, formless, and even incoherent. Yet in a 1972 survey of international critics, 8 1/2 placed fourth in their list of the ten greatest films of all time. Conversely, even good critics have pronounced a film an instant masterpiece—only to regret their impetuosity in the cool distance of time, after the movie has been long forgotten.

Eclectic critics tend to be stoical about these matters, accepting them as perils of the trade. Perhaps Pauline Kael expressed their attitude best:

The role of the critic is to help people see what is in the work, what is in it that shouldn’t be, what is not in it that could be. He is a good critic if he helps people understand more about the work than they could see for themselves; he is a great critic, if by his understanding and feeling for the work, by his passion, he can excite people so that they want to experience more of the art that is there, waiting to be seized. He is not necessarily a bad critic if he makes errors in judgment. (Infallible taste is inconceivable; what could it be measured against?) He is a bad critic if he does not awaken the curiosity,
enlarge the interests and understanding of his audience. The art of the critic is to transmit his knowledge of and enthusiasm for art to others. (Quoted from *I Lost It at the Movies*; New York: Bantam, 1966.)

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STRUCTURALISM AND SEMIOLOGY

Eclectic critics celebrate the subjective, individual element in film criticism. Others have lamented it. In the early 1970s, two interrelated cinematic theories developed, partly in response to the inadequacies of the criticism of personal sensibility. *Structuralism* and *semiology* were attempts to introduce a new scientific rigor to film criticism, to allow for more systematic and detailed analyses of movies. Borrowing their methodology from such diverse disciplines as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy, these two theories first concentrated on the development of a more precise analytical terminology.

Structuralism and semiology have also focused intently on the American cinema as the principal area of inquiry, for a number of reasons. In the first place, these theories have been dominated by the British and French, traditionally the most enthusiastic foreign admirers of the cinema of the United States. American movies also provided these critics with a stylistic norm—the *classical paradigm*. Marxists among this group have explored the implications of the capitalistic mode of production of American films. Cultural commentators have concentrated on characteristically American myths and genres.

Semiology (or *semiotics*, as it’s also called) is a study of *how* movies signify. The manner in which information is signified is indissolubly linked with *what’s* being signified. The French theorist Christian Metz was in the forefront in developing semiotics as a technique of film analysis. Using many of the concepts and much of the terminology of structural linguistics, Metz and others developed a theory of cinematic communication founded on the
concept of signs or codes. The language of cinema, like all types of discourse, verbal and nonverbal, is primarily symbolic: It consists of a complex network of signs we instinctively decipher while experiencing a movie (11–18).

In most discussions of film, the shot was generally accepted as the basic unit of construction. Semiotic theorists rejected this unit as too vague and inclusive. They insisted on a more precise concept. Accordingly, they suggested that the sign be adopted as the minimal unit of signification. A single shot from a movie generally contains dozens of signs, forming an intricate hierarchy of counterpoised meanings. In a sense, this book, and especially the earlier chapters, can be viewed as a classification of signs, although necessarily more limited in scope than the type of identification and classification envisioned by Metz and other semiologists.

For example, each of these chapters is concerned with a kind of master code, which can be broken down into code subdivisions, which themselves can be reduced to even more minimal signs. Thus, Chapter 1 might be called a photog- raphy master code. This master could be broken down into subdivisions: shots, angles, lighting keys, colors, lenses, filters, optical effects, and so on. Each of these, in turn, could be subdivided again. The shots, for example, could be broken down to extreme long, long, medium, close-up, extreme close-up, deep focus. This same principle could be applied to other master codes: spatial codes (mise en scène), kinetic codes (movement), and so on. Codes of language would

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11–18. Blonde Venus (U.S.A., 1932), with Marlene Dietrich, directed by Josef von Sternberg. Semiologists believe that the shot—the traditional unit of construction in film—is too general and inclusive to be of much use in a systematic analysis of a movie. The symbolic sign, they argue, is a more precise unit of signification. Every cinematic shot consists of dozens of signify- ing codes that are hierarchically structured. Using what they call the “principle of pertinence,” semiologists decode cinematic discourse by first establishing what the dominant signs are, then analyzing the subsidiary codes. This methodology is similar to a detailed analysis of mise en scène, only in addition to spatial, textural, and photographic codes, semiologists would also explore other relevant signs—kinetic, linguistic, musical, rhythmic, and so forth. In this shot, a semiologist would explore the symbolic significance of such major signs as Dietrich’s white suit. Why a masculine suit? Why white? What does the papier-mâché dragon signify? The dis- tortured
perspective lines of the set? The “shady ladies” behind the archways? The symbolism of stage
and audience? The tight framing and closed form of the image? The protagonist’s worldly song?
Within the dramatic context, semiologists would also explore the rhythms of the editing and
camera movements, the symbolism of the kinetic motions of the performer, and so on.
Traditionally, critics likened the cinematic shot to a word, and a series of edited shots to a
sequence of words in a sentence. A semiologist would dismiss such analogies as patently sim-
pleminded. Perhaps an individual sign might be likened to a word, but the equivalent to a shot—
even a lousy one—would require many paragraphs if not pages of words. A complex shot can
contain a hundred separate signs, each with its own precise symbolic significance. (Para-
mount Pictures)

be as complex as the entire discipline of linguistics; acting codes would
involve a precise breakdown of the various techniques of signification used
by players.

Semiotic techniques can be valuable in aiding film critics and scholars to
analyze movies with more precision. But the theory suffers some defects. For
one thing, these are descriptive classifications only, not normative. In other
words, semiotics will permit a critic to discern a sign, but it’s still up to the
critic to evaluate how effective any given sign is within an artistic context.
Formalist movies seem to lend themselves to easier classification than realistic movies. For example, it’s much simpler to describe the complex mise en scène of *Troy* than to explicate the meanings of Chaplin’s expression in *The Bank* (11–19a & b). These signs aren’t really comparable. They exist on incompatible levels, like different language systems of a computer. Because formalist signs are easier to quantify, some critics tend to value films with a greater number of signs (or at least a greater number of classifiable signs) as more complex than, and hence aesthetically superior to, a film with a lower density of signs.

Another serious problem with this theory is its awful jargon, which sometimes verges on self-parody. All specialized disciplines—including cinema—have a certain number of necessary technical terms, but semiotics often chokes on its own “scientific” wordiness. Even within the field, one commentator pointed out that referring to a perfectly ordinary phenomenon as “signifier” or “signified,” “syntagm” or “paradigm” doesn’t in itself advance social knowledge to any particular degree.

As Metz pointed out, semiology is concerned with the systematic classification of types of codes used in the cinema; structuralism is the study of how various codes function within a single structure, within one movie. Structuralism is strongly eclectic and often combines the techniques of semiotics with other theoretical perspectives, such as auteurism, genre studies, ideology, stylistic analyses, and so on. For example, Colin MacArthur’s *Underworld USA* is a structuralist analysis of gangster and crime films and the style known as *film noir*. MacArthur uses semiotic classifications in exploring the iconography of the genre films of such artists as Billy Wilder (1–17a) and others.

Structuralists and semiologists have been fascinated by the concept of a *deep structure*—an underlying network of symbolic meaning that is related to a movie’s surface structure but is also somewhat independent of it. This deep structure can be analyzed from a number of perspectives, including Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist economics, Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious, and the theory of structural anthropology popularized by the Frenchman Claude Lévi-Strauss.
The methods of Lévi-Strauss are based on an examination of regional myths, which he believed express certain underlying structures of thought in codified form. These myths exist in variant forms and usually contain the same or similar binary structures—pairs of opposites. By collapsing the surface (narrative) structure of myths, their symbolic motifs can be analyzed in a more systematic and meaningful manner. These polarities are usually found in dialectical conflict: Depending on the culture analyzed, they can be agricultural (for example, water vs. drought), sexual (male vs. female), conceptual (cooked vs. raw), generational (youth vs. age), and so on. Because these myths are

directed by Wolfgang Petersen.
(Warner Bros.)
Semiotics can help critics to isolate and identify signs in a movie, but not to show how skillfully they function within the film. Because the theory stresses quantification, it tends to be more effective in analyzing formalist films, which contain more classifiable signs. But different types of signs or codes are not compatible, and hence qualitative judg-
ments are difficult to make on strictly quantitative data. For example, the shot from Troy contains many different signs, which are structured into an image of great visual complexity. This epic recreation of the famous Trojan horse episode from The Iliad is an example of contemporary studio craftsmanship at its best. The image is dense with detailed visual information. Chaplin’s medium-close shot, on the other hand, is relatively simple and contains very few signs other than the expression on the tramp’s face. (And how do you quantify something so ineffable?) Wolfgang Petersen is an artist of considerable skill, but he’s not in Chaplin’s class. Yet a semiotic analysis of these two works might lead to the conclusion that Petersen is the superior filmmaker, because he used more signs in his movie.

11–19b. The Bank (U.S.A., 1915), with Charles Chaplin, directed by Chaplin. (Museum of Modern Art)
A crucial shortcoming of semiotic methodology is its failure to deal with nonmaterialist values in cinema. For example, this movie explores how a drunken country music star (Duvall) finds spiritual redemption in the born-again Christian faith of the woman he loves. A strictly semiotic analysis of the film would prove inadequate in exploring these spiritual values. *(Universal Pictures)*

11–21. *An Autumn Afternoon* (Japan, 1962), with Chishu Ryu (right), directed by Yasujiro Ozu.  
The films of Ozu were not widely seen in the West until the 1970s. Prior to this time, his movies were regarded as “too Japanese” to be appreciated by foreign audiences because he was a champion of traditional values, particularly that quintessential Japanese institution, the family. If Kurosawa is the artistic spokesman for modern values and the anguished individual, then Ozu speaks for the conservative majority, especially parents. But his movies are not mindless endorsements of family life, for Ozu was also an ironist, well aware of the gap between reality and the ideal—the principal source of his irony. In this film, for example, the protagonist (Ryu) is a gentle, aging widower who lives with his unmarried daughter in mutual devotion. His loneliness is assuaged by a few drinking buddies who spend much of their free time at the local bar. After hearing of the marriage of a friend’s daughter, the widower decides that it’s time for his daughter to move on as well. He arranges a marriage with a decent young man recommended by his friends. The movie ends on a bittersweet note of irony as the father muses contentedly on the success of his arrangements. He also realizes he’s getting on in years. And he is alone. *(New Yorker Films)*
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expressed in symbolic codes, often their full meanings are hidden even from their creators. Lévi-Strauss believed that once the full implications of a myth are understood, it’s discarded as a cliché.

These structural techniques can be used to analyze a national cinema, a genre, or a specific movie. For example, the conflict between “traditional” and “modern” values can be seen in virtually all Japanese movies, and in Japanese society in general (11–21). The roots of this conflict extend back to the later nineteenth century, when Japan transformed itself from a feudal country to a modern technological society patterned after the Western industrial states, especially Britain and the United States. The Japanese are simultaneously repelled and attracted by both sets of polarities:

**Traditional**

Japanese Feudal  
Past  
Society Hierarchy Nature  
Duty Self-sacrifice Consensus Age Authority Conservative Fatalism  
Obedience Form Security
Modern

Western Democratic Future Individual Equality Technology Inclination Self-expression Diversity

Youth Autonomy Liberal Optimism Independence Substance Anxiety

A number of structuralists have explored genre films in a similar manner. For example, Jim Kitses, Peter Wollen, and others have pointed out how westerns are often vehicles for exploring clashes of value between East and West in American culture. By clustering the thematic motifs around a “master antimony” (a controlling or dominant code), a western can be analyzed according to its deep structure rather than its plot, which is often conventionalized (and less meaningful) in genre films. Such critics have demonstrated how each cultural polarity symbolizes a complex of positive and negative traits:

**West**

Wilderness Individualism Self-interest

**East**

Civilization Community Social welfare

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**West**

Freedom Anarchy Savagery Private honor Paganism Nature Masculine Pragmatism Agrarian Purity Dynamic Future Experience American

**East**

Restriction
Law and order Refinement Institutional justice Christianity Culture Feminine Idealism Industrial Corruption Static
Semiotics and structuralism expanded the parameters of film critique considerably. Their pluralistic approach allows for much more flexibility, complexity, and depth in the critical enterprise. But these theories are merely tools of analysis. By themselves, they can tell us nothing of the value of signs and codes within a film. Like every other theory, then, these are only as good as their practitioners. The writer’s intelligence, taste, passion, knowledge, and sensitivity are what produce good criticism, not necessarily the theoretical methodology used.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Historiography deals with the theory of history—the assumptions, principles, and methodologies of historical study. Film history is a relatively recent area of inquiry—a hundred years is not a very lengthy period of study compared to that of the traditional arts. Much of the best work in film historiography has taken place during the past two decades.

Film historians scoff at the naive notion that there is a film history. Rather, they insist that there are many film histories, and each is defined by the historian’s particular interests, biases, and prejudices. Theorists have charted four different types of film history, each with its own set of philosophical assumptions, methods, and sources of evidence: (1) aesthetic film histories—film as art; (2) technological film histories—motion pictures as inventions and machines; (3) economic histories—film as industry; and (4) social histories—movies as a reflection of the audience’s values, desires, and fears.

Most film historians regard cinema as too sprawling and complex to be covered by any single history. They view the field as a vast, infinite mass of data that needs to be sifted through and organized to be made coherent. Each historian concentrates on a given type of evidence, highlighting its significance while
11–22a. *Short Cuts* (U.S.A., 1993), with Lily Tomlin and Tom Waits, directed by Robert Altman. Aesthetic film historians and elitist critics tend to concentrate on such movies as *Short Cuts* because of their cultural prestige. Robert Altman is regarded as one of the great artists of the American cinema, creator of such movies as *M*A*S*H, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Nashville,* and *The Player.* Based on the short stories of Raymond Carver, *Short Cuts* is faithful to its source, including its tone of cynicism and bitterness. The film features an embarrassment of richness in the cast, many of them important stars who would have worked for Altman for nothing because of his enormous prestige within the world film community. Though widely praised by critics and nominated for a number of awards, the movie failed to arouse much interest with the general public, and its box-office revenues were small. (*Fine Line Features*)

11–22b. *The Godfather Part II* (U.S.A., 1974), with Giuseppe Sillato and Robert De Niro, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. A common misconception among many filmgoers is the glib distinction between art and entertainment, as though the two wouldn’t be caught dead in the same movie. In fact, the two are often combined. Charles Chaplin was the most popular film artist of the silent era, and he was also a darling of the critics. He still is. Long before movies were even invented, William Shakespeare was the most popular playwright in history. He still is. The first two *Godfather* films are excellent examples of this artistic–commercial fusion. Serious film critics almost
universally regard them as among the greatest works in the history of cinema. The movies were also enormously popular throughout the world, breaking virtually every attendance record. They are still among the top box-office champions of all time. Entertaining? Of course. Art? Indubitably.

(Paramount Pictures)

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deemphasizing or ignoring “irrelevant” data. Critics sometimes refer to this process of selection and emphasis as foregrounding—isolating fragments of evidence for the purpose of closer study. Foregrounding is always an implicit value judgment. Each type of film historian necessarily wrenches these fragments from their ecological context, thus presenting us with a somewhat skewed view of the whole. Each type of historian will also choose to focus on different movies, personalities, and events.

Aesthetic film historians concern themselves with a tradition of masterpieces and great filmmakers. Constantly subject to reevaluation, this tradition encompasses a broad consensus of critics, historians, and scholars. This is an elite form of history, ignoring the vast majority of motion pictures to concentrate on a relative handful of important works of art that have endured the test of time—that is, movies that are still great despite our viewing them in a totally different context. Aesthetic historians value a work primarily for its
artistic richness, irrespective of whether the film was commercially successful. Thus, in most aesthetic histories, a hugely popular success like Independence Day receives

11–23. Medium Cool (U.S.A., 1969), with Robert Forster (at camera) and Peter Bonerz (sound), directed by Haskell Wexler.

Technological film histories stress the importance of mechanical innovations in the evolution of the cinema. New technologies create new aesthetics. For example, in the late 1950s, television journalists needed simple, lightweight equipment to capture news stories quickly, while they were actually happening. The development of the so-called handheld camera (actually, usually mounted on a shoulder harness or tripod), portable sound equipment, zoom lenses, and more light-sensitive fast film stocks was in response to this need. In the 1960s, this new technology was appropriated by fiction filmmakers, allowing them to shoot movies more spontaneously and in actual locations, thus creating a more authentic style of realism. (Paramount Pictures)

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much less discussion than Citizen Kane, which failed at the box office. Opponents of this type of history have scoffed at its “Great Man” assumptions—that is, film history is largely the study of a few gifted individuals, not the dynamic matrix of social, industrial, and technological influences that inevitably affect all filmmakers, gifted or not.
The American scholar Raymond Fielding put forth the philosophy of technological historians succinctly: “The history of motion pictures—as an art form, as a medium of communication, and as an industry—has been determined principally by technological innovations.” Historians of this type are also concerned with “Great Men,” such as W. K. L. Dickson, Thomas Edison, George Eastman, and Lee DeForest—inventors and scientists rather than artists or industry moguls. Technological historians are concerned with the implications—artistic, commercial, and ideological—of such innovations as portable cameras, **synchronous sound**, color, improved film stocks, 3-D, stereophonic sound, steadycams, computer-generated imagery, and so on (11–23).

Cinema is the most expensive artistic medium in history, and its development has been largely determined by its financial sponsors—this is the thesis of most economic film histories, such as Benjamin B. Hampton’s *History of the American Film Industry from Its Beginnings to 1931* and Thomas H. Guback’s *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945*. In most European countries, the cinema in its early stages of development fell into the hands of artists who shared most of the values and tastes of the educated elite. In the former Soviet Union and other ex-communist countries, film production was carefully regulated by the government, and the movies produced in those countries reflected most of the values of the political elite.

In America, the film industry developed within a capitalistic system of production. The Hollywood studio system was an attempt on the part of a handful of large corporations—MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, and so forth—to monopolize the production of fiction films, and hence maximize their profits. For about three decades—roughly from 1925 to 1955—the major studios succeeded, producing about 90 percent of the fiction films in America, largely because the companies were **vertically integrated**. That is, they controlled all three phases of the industry: (1) production—the Hollywood studios; (2) distribution—financial headquarters in New York; and (3) exhibition—the large chains of big-city first-run theaters owned by the company.
During the era of studio dominance, virtually every filmmaker had to come to grips with this economic reality. The studio system was the only ball-game in town, and the majors were in business to make profits, the bigger the better. In short, the profit motive has been the main driving force in the evolution of the American film industry, and movies tend to reaffirm the ideological values of their sponsors. However, even economic historians would concede that other motives have also figured in the production of American movies—the desire for prestige, artistic integrity, and so on. Likewise, movies made in communist countries were occasionally critical of the social system that produced them. History—of any kind—is filled with contradictions.

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Economic film histories concentrate on who pays the bills, who sponsors the making of a movie, and why. Like many European filmmakers, the American John Sayles finances his movies independently, guaranteeing him total artistic control. His goal is not the amassing of huge profits, but creative freedom. Most of his movies have been made on small budgets, with many of the same loyal crew of actors and technicians. This communal spirit has allowed them to produce a movie every few years. Though Sayles’s films have not been huge hits, most of them were sufficiently profitable to maintain a constant cash flow. Sayles usually plays small roles in his own films, generally sleazoids, jerks, or villains. He is an artist of exceptional integrity. See also John Sayles, Film-maker, by Jack Ryan (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998). (Orion Pictures)
11–24b. *King Kong* (U.S.A., 2005), with Naomi Watts and friend, directed by Peter Jackson.

Modern digital technology has allowed film artists to create wondrous worlds of startling realism, like this quiet, magical moment of communion, high above the sound and fury of the city. The love-smitten ape seems so human we can read his thoughts and fears on his face—complex emotions created entirely by computers. Technology is not the enemy of human imagination but its tool, yet another language through which film artists can convey thought and emotion as well as action. Confronted with such marvels, we might well exclaim, like Miranda in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in’t. *(Universal Studios)*

Social histories are mainly concerned with the audience. They emphasize film as a collective experience, as a reflection of mass sentiments during any given era. These sentiments can be overtly articulated or subliminally insinuated by appealing to our subconscious desires. Social historians often turn to statistics and sociological data for supporting evidence. Books like Robert Sklar’s *Movie-Made America* and Garth Jowett’s *Film: The Democratic Art* are filled with revealing statistics about audience likes and dislikes.

Social historians have also devoted a great deal of attention to the American star system, arguing that popular stars are usually a reflection of audience values and anxieties. Unfortunately, these concerns do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis, and social historians are sometimes criticized for their intuitive leaps in logic. Historians of this sort are also interested in social
stereotypes—how a movie portrays blacks, women, authority figures, and so on.

In *Film History: Theory and Practice*, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery set forth the principal advantages and shortcomings of the various types of film history, arguing that a more integrated approach would minimize the dangers of distortion. As in other areas of film theory, film history is increasingly being viewed as a monolithic ecological system that must be studied from various perspectives to be comprehensively understood.

Different film commentators ask different types of questions. Those interested in the essential nature of the medium would probably focus on such traditional concerns as the realism–formalism dichotomy. The auteur theory is helpful if you want to ask questions about how a particular movie typifies the filmmaker’s thematic and stylistic traits. Obviously, this approach is not a very fruitful technique for exploring movies like *Mildred Pierce* or *Independence Day*, pictures that were constructed by committee for the purpose of maximizing profits. Eclectic critics ask whatever questions they think will help people understand and appreciate the movie better. Why is this film good (or bad, or mediocre)? How could it be better? What brings it down? And so on. Structuralists ask questions

11–25. *Collateral* (U.S.A., 2004), with Tom Cruise and Jamie Foxx, directed by Michael Mann.

The technology of digital video has totally changed the accessibility of the medium to aspiring young filmmakers. Unlike the expen-
sive, cumbersome technology of film, digital
video is cheap, fast, and (relatively) easy-to-
use. Even professional filmmakers, like the
visually sophisticated Michael Mann, shot
_Collateral_ on digital video, just to prove that first-class cinema can result from such modest
means. The sleek thriller is noirishly atmospheric and very polished visually. In the past, aspiring
filmmakers have been intimidated by the sheer complexity and expense of becoming a film
artist. Today, with a technology that’s much more accessible, who knows how many aspiring
Spielbergs and Scorseses are waiting in the wings, waiting to shoot their own stories. (Paramount
Pictures)

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about a movie’s underlying infrastructure: What thematic motifs are explored
in the film’s narrative? What are its mythic elements? What kind of codes—
both thematic and stylistic—does the movie favor? How does the film’s genre
influence the particulars of this specific movie? Does it invent, reinforce, sub-
vert, or ridicule the genre’s conventions?

Depending on their orientation, historians also ask different types of ques-
tions. The arty ones are concerned with a movie’s aesthetic worth and why
attention should be paid. The techies are more likely to ask questions about
the film’s special effects, any outstanding technical achievements, such as the
huge, near-scale proportions of the doomed ship in James Cameron’s _Titanic_.
Industry historians tend to ask questions concerning a movie’s production
expenditures and practices, how it was promoted, and what kind of tie-in
products it generated. Social historians mostly ask questions about the
audience. Why did the public love one movie and hate another? How does a
film appeal to the public’s subconscious fears and yearnings? What does a
given movie say about its era? About its icons?

In short, there are literally thousands of questions that could be asked
concerning a movie’s implications. What you are looking for will determine
most of your questions and how to focus them.