

English 4: Film as Literature

Required Summer Reading Assignment

Assignment Overview

This summer assignment is designed to introduce you to the fundamentals of film analysis. Throughout the assignment, you will practice identifying how filmmakers create meaning through storytelling, structure, style, and visual techniques.

There are **three parts** to the assignment:

1. **Read Chapter 2: “An Approach to Film Analysis”**
2. **Respond to Chapter 2 Reading Questions**
3. **Complete a Narrative Analysis for one of the films from the list**

Part 1— Chapter Reading

Directions: Read **Chapter 2: “An Approach to Film Analysis”** carefully. As you read, pay close attention to the following concepts:

- Audience expectations
- Genre
- Motifs
- Parallels
- Film structure
- Turning points
- Film style
- Intertextual references
- Classical, realist, and formalist filmmaking

You should annotate or take notes while reading. Highlight unfamiliar vocabulary and important examples discussed in the chapter. A list of key terms is included in this packet.

Part 2 — Reading Questions

Directions: After reading the chapter, respond to the reading questions that follow. Use complete sentences.

Requirements

- Create a Google doc that can be submitted on the first day of class.
- Answer all questions thoroughly.
- Use evidence and examples from the chapter.
- Responses should demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the reading.

Part 3 — Narrative Film Analysis

Directions: You will write a narrative analysis using the concepts from Chapter 2. Your goal is to explain **how the film creates meaning through storytelling and cinematic choices**.

Requirements:

- Create a Google doc to be submitted on the first day of class
- Use the same headings and question numbers that appear on the assignment
- Respond to the answers below. Your responses should:
 - Use examples from the film
 - Apply vocabulary and concepts from Chapter 2
 - Include thoughtful explanation, not just plot summary
 - Demonstrate careful observation and interpretation

Film Selection: Choose **one** of the following films to analyze. Complete the Narrative Film Analysis that follows.

1. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018)

Rating: PG

Directors: Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, Rodney Rothman

Genre: Animation / Superhero

Brief Summary: Teenager Miles Morales becomes Spider-Man while discovering alternate universes filled with different versions of the superhero.

2. *Rear Window* (1954)

Rating: PG

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Genre: Mystery / Thriller

Brief Summary: A photographer confined to his apartment believes he may have witnessed a murder while watching his neighbors through his window.

3. *WALL-E* (2008)

Rating: G

Director: Andrew Stanton

Genre: Animation / Science Fiction

Brief Summary: A lonely robot left behind on Earth discovers friendship and purpose while humanity lives far away in space.

4. *The Princess Bride* (1987)

Rating: PG

Director: Rob Reiner

Genre: Fantasy / Adventure / Comedy

Brief Summary: A grandfather reads a fairy-tale adventure story about true love, revenge, friendship, and heroic quests.

5. *Dead Poets Society* (1989)

Rating: PG

Director: Peter Weir

Genre: Drama

Brief Summary: An inspiring English teacher encourages students at a strict boarding school to think independently and pursue meaningful lives.

6. *Knives Out* (2019)

Rating: PG-13

Director: Rian Johnson

Genre: Mystery / Comedy

Brief Summary: A detective investigates the suspicious death of a wealthy novelist while uncovering secrets within his dysfunctional family.

Chapter 2 Reading Questions

1. How do casual viewers, critics, and film scholars analyze films differently?
2. What are audience expectations, and how do they influence the viewing experience?
3. Why might some viewers struggle to appreciate avant-garde films?
4. How does *Hell or High Water* encourage viewers to sympathize with Toby?
5. Why might some audiences find the ending of *No Country for Old Men* frustrating?
6. How does *Blackfish* use the structure of a murder mystery to engage viewers?
7. What is the purpose of motifs in film analysis?
8. How does the monolith function as a motif in *2001: A Space Odyssey*?
9. Explain how moving houses becomes symbolic in *Boyhood*.
10. How do filmmakers use parallels to compare characters or situations?
11. How does *Moonlight* use visual parallels between Juan and Chiron?
12. Why are opening and closing scenes important when analyzing film structure?
13. What is a turning point in a film? Give an example from the chapter.
14. How does *Under the Skin* visually signal an important turning point?
15. Why are historical references important in films like *Inglourious Basterds*?
16. How does *Get Out* connect horror conventions with real-world social issues?
17. What is an intertextual reference? Provide an example from the chapter.
18. What is the difference between classical, realist, and formalist film styles?
19. Why does the chapter argue that cinematic realism is still a constructed style?
20. How can repeated details help viewers discover a film's deeper meaning?

Narrative Film Analysis

Directions: Use headings and question numbers in your document.

Introduction

1. What film did you choose, and why did you select it?
2. What is the basic plot and the central conflict of the film?
3. What audience expectations does the film create through its genre, stars, or director?

Narrative Structure

4. Who is the protagonist, and what does the character want?
5. What obstacles or conflicts stand in the protagonist's way?
6. Identify one major turning point in the film. Why is it important?
7. Does the film provide clear narrative closure at the end? Explain.
8. How does the opening of the film connect to the ending?

Motifs and Repetition

9. Identify at least one motif in the film. What detail, image, sound, or object repeats?
10. Why is this motif important to the film's meaning?
11. Does the film use parallels between characters, settings, or events? Explain.

Style and Meaning

12. Would you describe the film's style as mostly classical, realist, or formalist? Why?
13. How do cinematography, sound, music, or editing influence the viewer's emotions?
14. Identify one memorable visual moment in the film. Why is it effective?
15. Does the film include references to history, culture, other films, or social issues? How do those references affect meaning?

Critical Thinking

16. What message or theme do you think the film communicates?
17. Did the film meet or challenge your expectations? Explain.
18. What emotions or ideas did the filmmaker want the audience to experience?
19. Do you think the film succeeds artistically? Why or why not?
20. What did analyzing this film teach you about how movies create meaning?

Chapter Two

An Approach to Film Analysis

How can you still enjoy movies, I am often asked [...], when you spend all your time analyzing them and researching them? All I can say in response is that I enjoy movies more than ever, but admittedly, in a very different way from my very first excursions into the illuminated darkness.

Andrew Sarris

Learning Objectives

2.1 Explain how expectations inform the way audiences respond to and interpret a film.

2.2 Identify strategies that filmmakers employ for orchestrating details.

2.3 Demonstrate how repetition can signpost important structural elements in a film.

2.4 Describe how references to people, events, texts, and objects shape the meaning of a film.

2.5 Categorize a film according to the style it employs.

2.6 Name and define the three types of claims a viewer can make about a film's meaning.

When a college student tells a friend about seeing Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964; fig. 2.1), a black comedy about nuclear deterrence, what information does he convey? When a film reviewer writes about that film, does she present the same ideas as the friends who informally share their opinions? And when a film scholar writes an essay about that film, would he adopt the same approach as the casual viewer or the popular critic?

It seems likely that these three viewers would discuss the same film in different ways. Is one of them "right"? Casual viewers might focus on whether they formed a personal connection to characters or enjoyed a particular performance, such as Slim Pickens's comic turn. Were the special effects exciting? If so, they may decide to see more Kubrick films. By contrast, critics and scholars place their observations in a specialized framework. They use their knowledge of film to formulate interpretations about what the film means, on the level of the story and on broader aesthetic and cultural levels.

A film critic would evaluate the film using criteria such as story coherence, technical innovations, and notable performances, perhaps comparing this film to other work

by the same **director**. (Even film critics, however, will differ in their approaches: a film critic writing in 2018 would probably use different evaluative criteria from one writing in 1964, the year the film was released, because *Dr. Strangelove* has come to be recognized as an important classic.) A film scholar might write an essay arguing that *Dr. Strangelove* represents an important moment in cinema history, when independent film production blossomed as the Hollywood studio system declined.

Any viewer's ability to find meaning in a film is based on knowledge, cultural experiences, preferences, formal training, and expectations. But the significance a viewer derives from a film also depends upon the choices the filmmaker has made. The more practiced the spectator is at recognizing artistic choices, the more she will understand and appreciate the film.

This chapter introduces two ideas that are essential to film analysis. The first one is that expectations influence filmmakers' choices and viewers' experiences of films. Those expectations involve many aspects of a film, including its formal organization, genre, stars, and director. The second idea is that filmmakers present information, elicit



2.1 Slim Pickens adds humor in Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

emotions, and suggest ideas by orchestrating details in a systematic way. A close analysis of the way such details are used can therefore provide clues about the film's underlying structure and themes. Another way for a filmmaker to create meaning is through references to people, events, or issues outside the film itself, and this chapter also looks at how such references work. The chapter ends with a look at how an understanding of a film's structure and themes can form the basis for making different sorts of statements about it, and, in particular, for making interpretive claims about it.

Understanding Audience Expectations

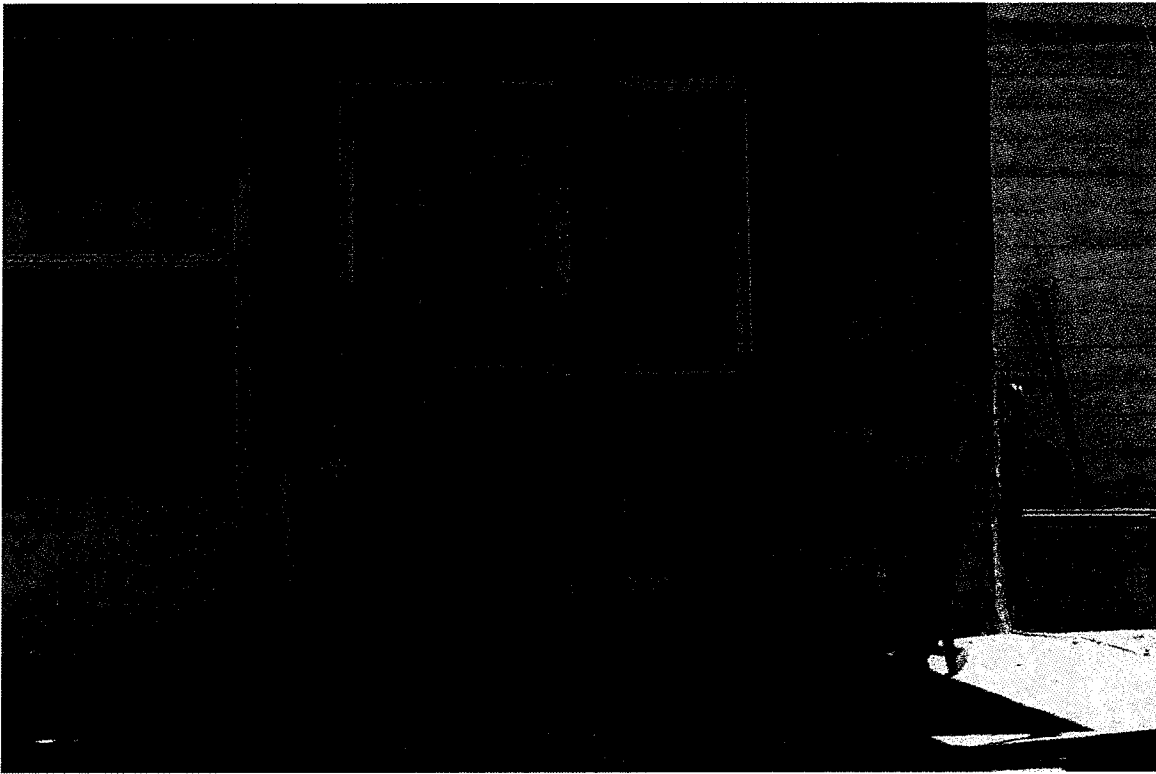
All film viewers bring expectations to their experiences of film. Someone who goes to a Judd Apatow film for a laugh brings vastly different expectations from someone attending an Ingmar Bergman retrospective hoping to be challenged intellectually. Viewers form expectations about movies by learning about and experiencing film, visual art, and culture.

Expectations may be based on labels that film critics or the general public give to films, such as "art cinema," "pure entertainment," or "bromance." Labels that make a sharp distinction between art and entertainment miss the point that art films entertain because they are challenging, and that even an accessible action film requires visual artistry to produce stunning effects. In short, the distinction between art and entertainment is an artificial

one, which wrongly suggests that only art films (which many people assume must be dull and academic affairs) are worthy of serious analysis. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Most viewers form expectations about the *kind* of film they plan to see. Will it tell a story or present an argument, or will it consist of abstract images set to a soundtrack? In narrative fiction films, viewers expect to see stories about human characters whose circumstances produce comedy or tragedy, or both. If these viewers planned to see a documentary instead, they would expect the film to present real-world events, and they might expect to be given factual information about a historical or contemporary situation. If these viewers saw an **avant-garde film**, they might not expect to see a story at all, since avant-garde filmmakers treat film as a visual art form rather than a storytelling medium.

If viewers expect all films to tell stories, they may be disappointed or confused by documentaries and avant-garde films. As film scholar Scott MacDonald points out, "by the time most people see their first avant-garde film, they have already seen hundreds of films in commercial theaters and on television and their sense of what a movie is has been almost indelibly imprinted in their conscious and unconscious minds" (MacDonald, p. 1). This doesn't mean that audiences can't learn to value other types of cinematic experiences. Sometimes when viewers connect with an avant-garde or experimental film, the experience can be a life-changing event, opening up new ways for appreciating the cinema's expressive potential. What's



2.2 Generating audience sympathy: Toby counts his money at the family farm in *Hell or High Water*.

most important, however, is to recognize that, despite their differences, each mode of organization provides viewers with profound and enjoyable experiences, and each type is amenable to analysis and interpretation using the tools provided in this book.

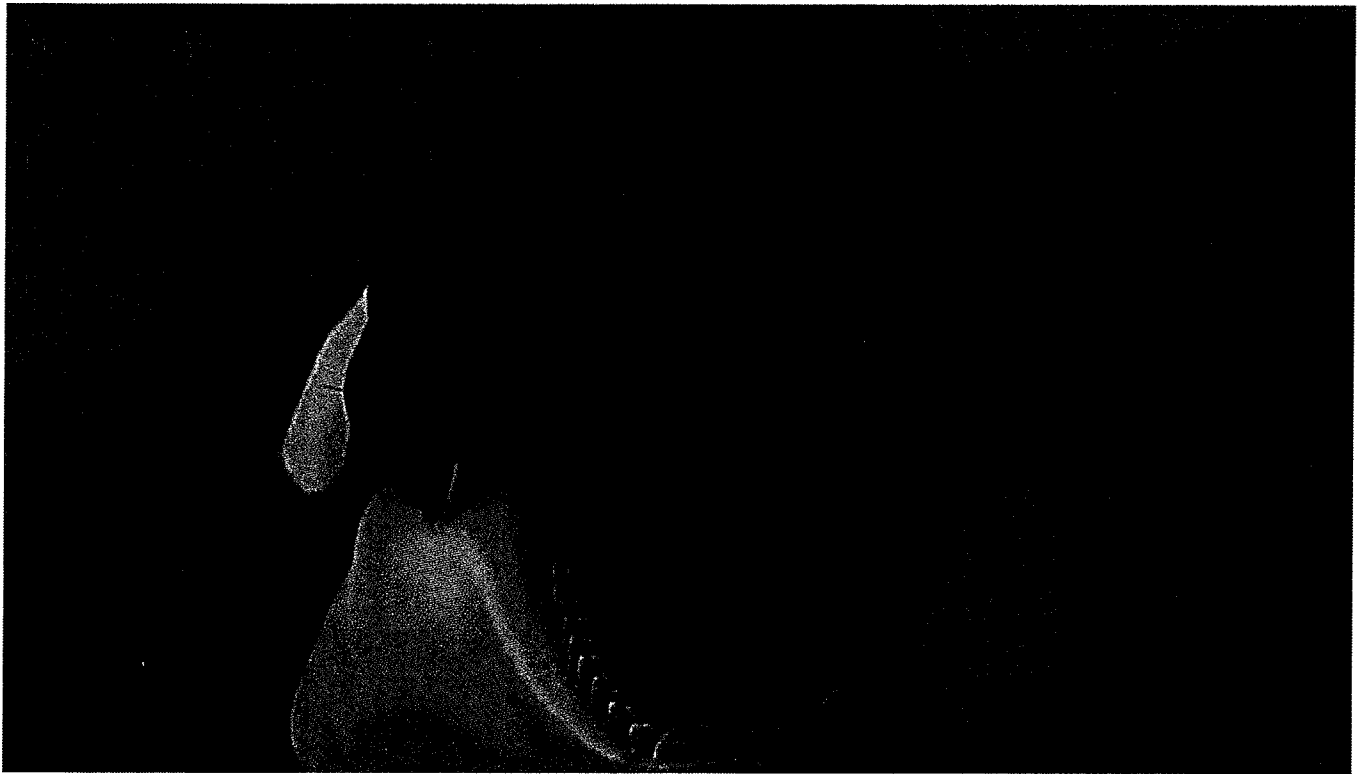
Expectations and Modes of Organization

Narrative fiction films are organized by the cause-and-effect logic of storytelling: they present characters who encounter obstacles as they attempt to achieve their goals. Viewers identify with characters and understand the choices they make, even if they themselves wouldn't make the same ones. In *Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016), Toby Howard (Chris Pine) enlists the help of his ne'er-do-well brother Tanner (Ben Foster) to stage a series of bank robberies, focusing on branches of the bank that's about to foreclose on their family farm. While most viewers probably wouldn't stoop to violent armed robbery, the film nevertheless depends on audiences sympathizing with Toby's plight. Understanding the character's motivation helps viewers to become emotionally engaged in his story (fig. 2.2).

Most filmgoers expect to encounter characters such as Toby Howard whose motivations are clear. But filmmakers may sometimes flout that expectation and present a character with unclear motivations, which may enhance or detract from the viewer's enjoyment.

Characters with unclear motivations may be unusual, but they can also be intriguing. In Michelangelo Antonioni's mystery *Blow-Up* (1966), the audience never learns why Jane (Vanessa Redgrave) was involved in a murder, or why the victim was killed. That missing information is consistent with the film's focus on a self-absorbed photographer (David Hemmings), who learns that his camera does not help him see, understand, or control reality. Viewers who wish to be challenged appreciate the way films like this one vary standard patterns of character development.

Viewers generally expect a narrative film to offer a conclusion that resolves conflicts. Some directors work against the traditional happy ending. The Coen brothers' crime thriller *No Country for Old Men* (2007) follows a Texas sheriff as he pursues a deranged killer across the state. But the film concludes before the sheriff even meets the killer, much less brings him to justice. Audiences expecting order to be restored might feel that the movie stops short of that goal because none of its conflicts get resolved. Such an open-ended conclusion may



frustrate audiences, leaving them with lingering questions rather than **closure**.

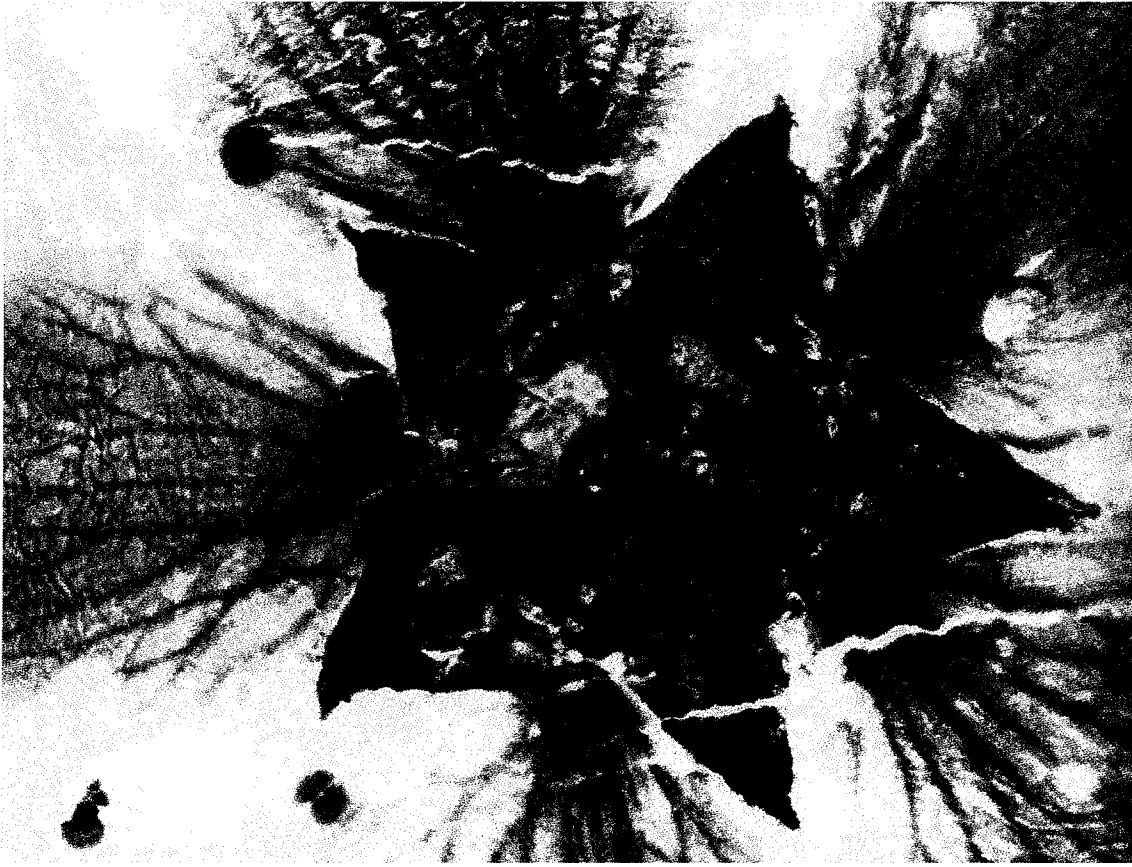
Recognizing the important role narrative plays in shaping viewer expectations, some documentary filmmakers organize their depiction of real-world events according to standard conventions of storytelling in order to appeal to a broad audience. These films may satisfy many of the expectations regarding character, conflict, and resolution that viewers bring to narrative fiction films. *Blackfish* (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013) explores a number of vexing issues related to the practice of profiting from the captivity of wild animals. Focusing specifically on the treatment of orca whales at SeaWorld parks in the United States, the film delves into questions about animal rights, animal behavior in captivity versus the wild, workers' rights, and corporate malfeasance.

One way that *Blackfish* manages to tackle so many weighty themes is by offering its audience a recognizable, tried-and-true narrative structure: the true-crime police procedural. The film opens with a series of 911 calls reporting that the whale Tilikum has killed a SeaWorld trainer, Dawn Brancheau. As if borrowing a page from television's *Law and Order* (right down to the font used for the titles), *Blackfish* grabs viewers' attention with a grisly murder. A mystery begs to be understood and a culprit surely deserves punishment. One of the film's expert

2.3 *Blackfish*: a documentary that unfolds like a murder mystery.

witnesses even says, "To understand what happened to Dawn Brancheau, you have to go back over twenty years." And indeed, the film proceeds to loop backward to explain why a woman would dare to swim with a 12,000-pound animal with a history of aggressive behavior. In the process, it traces the history of SeaWorld's practice of keeping 'killer whales' in captivity and offers a 'psychological profile' of Tilikum, who was presumably driven to madness by all the years he spent in a cage. In keeping with its true-crime sensibilities, the film even returns to scene of the death, replaying and reinterpreting footage from the event and quoting the autopsy report as evidence. In short, *Blackfish* engages with ideas about animal behavior and the politics of animal rights through the device of a compelling mystery. It uses the narrative form of the murder mystery to entice the viewer into wanting to learn more, just as a fictional story might do (fig. 2.3).

Other documentaries explore their subject matter through a less direct approach. *Winged Migration* ("Le Peuple migrateur"; Jacques Cluzaud, Michel Debats, and Jacques Perrin, 2001) observes a real-world phenomenon—the migration of birds—without appearing to present



2.4 An abstract image from *Mothlight*.

an explicit message. Even so, the film contains an implicit idea: that birds are a unique and interesting life form and may be threatened by human activities such as hunting and industrial pollution.

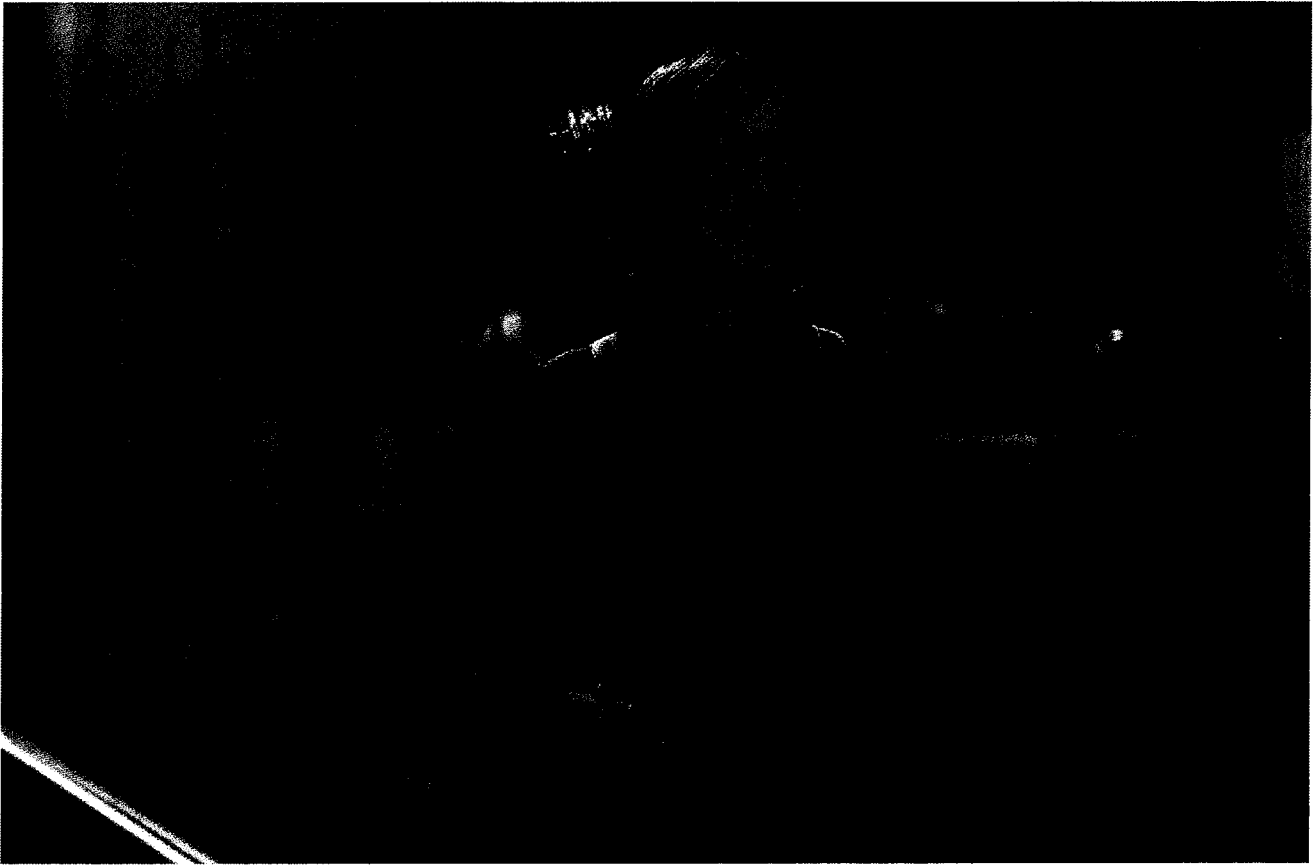
Avant-garde films move even farther away from the conventions of narrative film. Avant-garde filmmakers explore the aesthetic capabilities of the film medium itself, seeing it as similar to painting, sculpture, or dance. They rarely tell stories or present arguments and, instead, make meaning through symbols and metaphors. A viewer of avant-garde films would expect that basic visual elements of the film medium, such as **composition** (the arrangement of visual elements in the frame) and editing patterns, will carry great significance, while characters or events are given less importance. Film enthusiasts who are open to a non-narrative exploration of sound and vision may enjoy the experimental works of filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, whose mesmerizing short films often consist of nothing but abstract images. For example, to make his film *Mothlight* (1963), Brakhage affixed moth

wings and other organic materials to 16 mm splicing tape to create a kaleidoscopic explosion of shapes and tints. The resulting flutter of light brings inanimate matter back to life (fig. 2.4).

Whether a filmmaker creates a narrative, documentary, or avant-garde film, he or she is aware of audience expectations. For their part, viewers bring expectations about the type of film they are seeing and may be delighted or disturbed by a filmmaker's choices.

Expectations of Genres, Stars, and Directors

When viewers plan to see a narrative fiction film, they inevitably arrive with specific expectations based on their knowledge of storytelling conventions, film genres, movie stars, and directors. Filmmakers anticipate this, and they may fulfill these expectations ... or strategically opt not to. Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), an adaptation of U.S. soldier Chris Kyle's (Bradley Cooper) autobiography, radically transforms one aspect of Kyle's experience in order to fulfill the expectation that stories should include clearly defined heroes and villains. In the film, the face of antagonist opposition is the terrorist sniper Mustafa (Sammy Sheik), who relentlessly pursues Kyle through



much of the film. In keeping with the narrative convention of male-oriented action dramas, *American Sniper* builds to a final shootout between Kyle and his nemesis. Kyle's triumph at this moment frees him to return home to rebuild his marriage. Mustafa, however, is actually a minor character in Kyle's autobiography, appearing in only a single paragraph (Jilani). Eastwood takes creative liberties with historical fact in order to create a tangible antagonist—exemplifying how filmmakers seek to fulfill audience expectations. In this case, those expectations revolve around the need for a story to include a good guy, a bad guy, conflict, and resolution. Viewer expectations also come into play because fans enjoy seeing their favorite actors in the same kind of roles again and again. The star system is a marketing process that studios, talent agencies, and the press rely on to transform actors into brand-name products. In some cases, actors are closely associated with specific genres: John Wayne with the Western; Judy Garland with the musical; and Melissa McCarthy and Seth Rogen with bawdy comedy. But even when the biggest stars hop from one genre to another, audiences still expect them to play the same *type* of character. For example, for her breakout performance in *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik,

2.5 Jennifer Lawrence's Katniss in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2* exemplifies her feisty, down-to-earth star persona.

2010), Jennifer Lawrence played Ree, a teenage girl in the Ozark mountains who faces down vicious crime lords, investigates her father's disappearance, and protects her younger siblings. In many ways this character has defined the major roles Lawrence has played since then. Whether she's Bradley Cooper's dance partner Tiffany in the romantic comedy *Silver Linings Playbook* (David O'Russell, 2012), or Katniss, the archer extraordinaire in *The Hunger Games* franchise, her characters tend to be emotionally scarred but resilient and even defiant; she is inevitably angry, but also nurturing (fig. 2.5).

By contrast, Scarlett Johansson's characters—from the non-conformist twenty-something exploring what life has to offer in Woody Allen's romantic comedy *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), to the titular drug mule turned psycho-kinetic assassin in Luc Besson's sci-fi thriller *Lucy* (2014)—project sultry, sexual self-confidence, without a hint of Lawrence's fragility or tomboyishness. Several

films go so far as to draw upon Johansson's aloof detachment in order to depict her as a non-human or computer-generated life form: *Lucy*, *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), and *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017).

Viewers form expectations of directors in a similar way. In some cases, they become the stars behind the cameras. Alfred Hitchcock is known as "the master of suspense," whereas John Ford and Sergio Leone immediately conjure memories of the Western. Christopher Nolan, David Fincher, and Kathryn Bigelow are known for action-oriented dramas, whereas Wes Anderson is associated with quirky ensemble comedies.

It's important to recognize, however, that sometimes filmmakers self-consciously defy audience expectations for dramatic effect. John Carney's *Once* (2007) charmed audiences by breaking the rules of the musical: rather than highlighting the glitzy song-and-dance numbers associated with the genre, Carney used non-professional actors and Dublin location shooting to create a realistic film with a mature, down-to-earth sensibility. His 2016 film *Sing Street*, which follows a group of school friends in Dublin who form a band in the 1980s, builds on this approach.

Defying audience expectations obviously involves a certain amount of risk. Fans hoping to see Steve Carell's offbeat comedic persona might have been shocked by his dramatic turn in Bennett Miller's *Foxcatcher*, playing the mentally unstable John du Pont, inheritor of a family

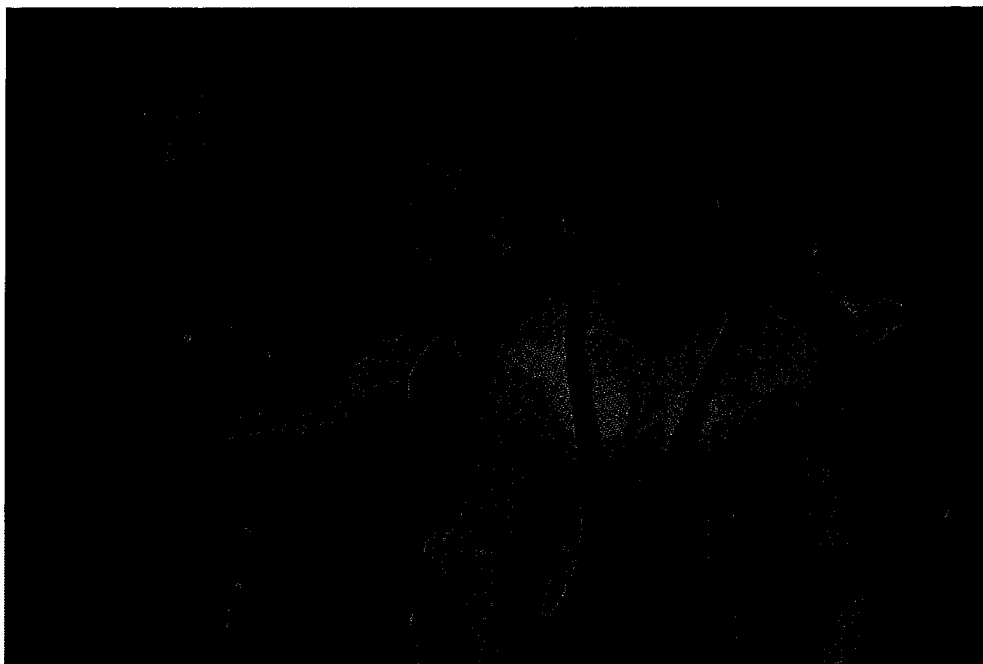
fortune who mysteriously murders the Olympic wrestler he is sponsoring. *Foxcatcher* also works against viewer expectations in that it refuses to capitalize on the qualities that have made Channing Tatum one of Hollywood's most profitable leads. Tatum plays Olympic wrestler Mark Shultz, but rather than exploiting the actor's capacity for playing congenial, hunky, self-confident men, *Foxcatcher* accentuates the character's brooding, almost simian oafishness (fig. 2.6).

Both Carell and Tatum earned critical acclaim for their performances (Carell received an Oscar nomination), but the film was not the box-office smash that the more conventional star vehicles *22 Jump Street* (Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, 2014) and *Magic Mike XXL* (Gregory Jacobs, 2015) were (fig. 2.7).

In order to analyze a film, therefore, one must consider viewer expectations and take note of which expectations are met and which are modified or rejected. And if there are modifications, what are the effects of these choices?

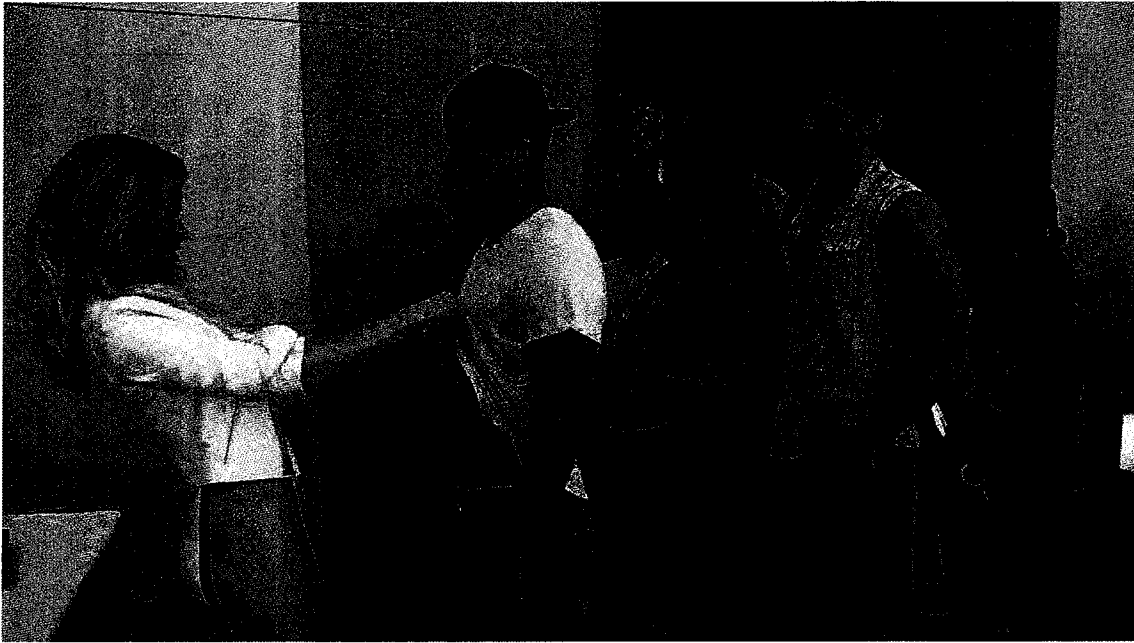
The Orchestration of Detail

Film, like music, is a temporal art form. Just as songs and symphonies are organized around the repetition and variation of musical phrases, films organize the flow of visual and sound details according to discernable patterns. Practically every filmmaker will want her audience to pay attention to certain details. Those details may relate to



2.6 *Foxcatcher* downplays Channing Tatum's boyish charm.

2.7 A more conventional star vehicle, *Magic Mike XXL* capitalizes on Channing Tatum's hunky exuberance.



a storyline or its characters, or they may arise from the visual or sound aspects of the film. One simple and highly effective strategy that filmmakers use to encourage audiences to focus attention on a particular detail is to repeat it.

Motifs

When any detail takes on significance through repetition, it is called a **motif**. Filmmakers may employ any film element to develop a motif, including (among others) lines of dialogue, gestures, costumes, locations, props, music, color, and composition.

Motifs have a variety of functions. They can provide information about characters and reinforce the significance of an idea. In *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), the last word spoken by newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane (Welles)—“rosebud”—serves as a motif. The fact that nobody knows what Kane meant by the word motivates Mr. Thompson (William Alland) to interview Kane’s friends, ex-wife, and business associates. The repetition of “rosebud” unifies stories that five different narrators tell about Kane’s life. Finally, the physical object the word refers to sheds light on Kane’s hidden desires.

Motifs often encourage spectators to compare and contrast different moments that occur over the course of a film. When an eerie black monolith appears in a prehistoric sequence and returns in the second and fourth parts of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), viewers compare those moments in space and time. The strange humming sound that accompanies the monolith each time it appears reinforces its mysterious nature and its

importance to the film. The film questions whether humankind has made progress over the span of recorded time, and the mysterious recurring monolith acts as a concrete object that serves as both a point of comparison across time and space, and as a potent symbol for generating interpretations.

A motif’s expressive power accumulates as it reappears, and more complex motifs acquire a significance that extends beyond providing narrative information. The repetition of two children’s experiences as they move from home to home in Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* (2014) demonstrates how a motif can take on symbolic weight as it interacts with other details. The film follows the life of Mason (Ellar Coltrane) from age five to eighteen. During this period, he and his sister Samantha (Lorelei Linklater) follow their mother (Patricia Arquette) from one home to another as she pursues her education, relationships, and job opportunities. The motif of moving from house to house functions on a literal level: it captures the instability of life in an economically disadvantaged, single-parent family.

But careful attention to Linklater’s treatment of this motif and the way it complements images and dialogue suggests that, in this film, moving from house to house isn’t simply about a family’s quest to find better shelter: the motif is a symbol of life’s transience (fig. 2.8, p. 28). Each time the family moves, Mason must wistfully leave behind friends and objects that are important to him. Each new house represents a new stage of life and underlines the way in which growing up requires us to leave familiar things behind—for better or for worse. The

film culminates with Mason leaving his family for college. Before he leaves, his mother breaks down and cries because now *she* is the one who is being left behind: watching her children depart makes her all too aware of her own aging.

Linklater's unusual approach to shooting this film further informs the way we might read this motif. Rather than using makeup and **prostheses** to create the illusion of characters aging, Linklater actually filmed *Boyhood* over the course of twelve years. Ellar Coltrane was seven years old when shooting began, and eighteen when it was complete. Publicity heralded the director's daring approach at the film's release, so most members of the audience would have been keenly aware of the fact that they were watching the young actor transition from

2.8 Important motifs throughout *Boyhood* encourage the audience to reflect on life's transitory nature.

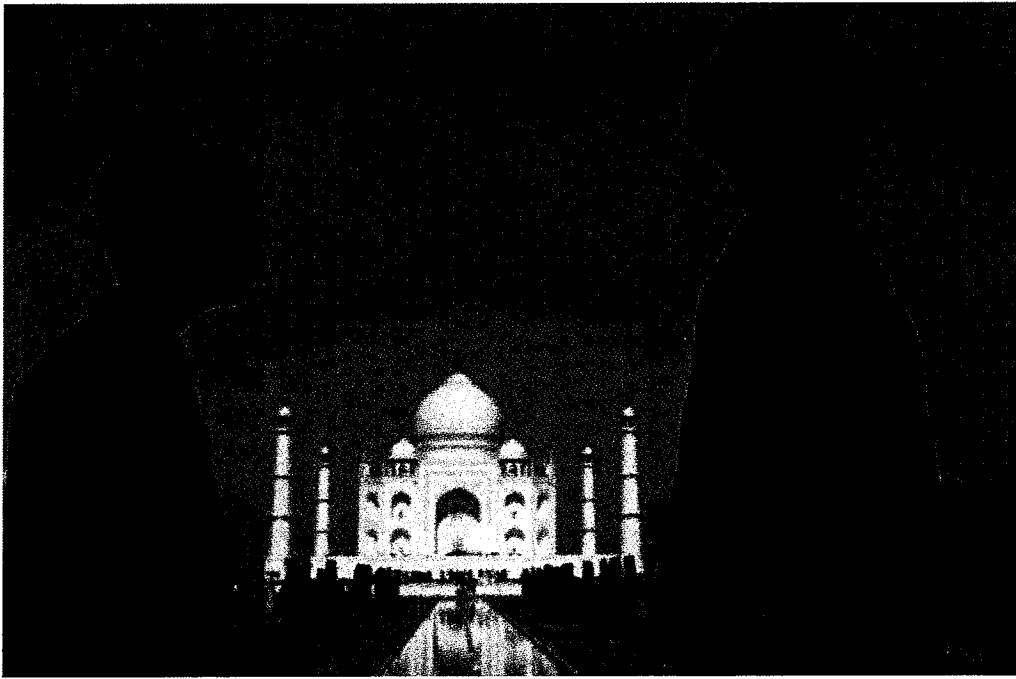


childhood to adulthood before their very eyes. Right in front of them, some members of the cast get taller, others get plumper; some faces fill out and sprout their first hairs, while others grow wizened. The film asks audiences to bear witness to the dramatic and inevitable transformations that time forces on us all. In this cinematic context, then, the motif of moving from house to house isn't just about inhabiting a different physical location; it is a symbol of the inevitable changes we confront as we move through life.

A motif's meaning depends on more than just repetition, too. It's important to recognize when and why patterns of repetition change. *Boyhood* demonstrates that motifs evolve and may suggest character development or other changes in the narrative. In this film, homes aren't the only spaces that get left behind. Mason and Samantha's father (Ethan Hawke) has a desire to explore the world. Early in the film, Mason Sr. is completely absent, having left the family to explore the wilds of Alaska. When he makes his reappearance, his vintage Ford GTO establishes his vaguely irresponsible, carefree attitude; the reluctant family man, clinging desperately to his adolescent glory days, is *always* on the move. Later in the film, when he remarries and settles down with a new family, he trades his GTO for a minivan. Like Mason, he is getting older, and as he enters middle age he must leave the trappings of his youth, including his wanderlust, behind. The evolution of the GTO motif helps the audience recognize a coming-of-age story that unfolds in parallel to Mason's: that of his father.

A film need not limit its use of motifs to objects within the frame. An analysis of *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008) illustrates how filmmakers repeat a visual composition as a way of underlining important ideas. In the film, two brothers, Jamal (Tanay Chheda) and Salim (Ashutosh Gajiwala), flee the slums of Mumbai where they were born. In their wandering, they accidentally stumble across the Taj Majal. Having been raised in abject poverty, Jamal and Salim have never even heard of the ornate mausoleum, even though it is one of India's most renowned landmarks. To capture the boys' awe, Boyle and Tandan position them in the foreground, looking toward the magnificent structure, which is cloaked in mist in the distant background (fig. 2.9). Boyle and Tandan repeat this careful arrangement several times in the film to evoke the boys' experience of excited discovery and simultaneous feelings of cultural alienation. Because of their poverty, Jamal and Salim are outsiders in their own country, far removed from the majestic treasures it has to offer wealthy tourists.

Repetition can also serve an important function in documentary films. Documentary filmmakers may repeat images to highlight their significance, as Albert and David



2.9 The arrangement of characters becomes a motif in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Maysles do in *Gimme Shelter* (1970), a documentary about the Rolling Stones' American tour in 1969. The filmmakers repeat scenes that show a man being attacked near the stage during the Altamont concert. The first time, the viewer sees the images as part of the performance. But the images reappear in the next scene, where the filmmakers and band members watch the concert footage on an editing table. This repetition emphasizes the significance of the tragic incident and provides viewers with access to the band's reactions to it.

Repetition can also create meaning in avant-garde films. Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia* (1971) is based on the repetition of a simple, disjointed act: while the camera is trained on a photograph, a **voice-over** describes an image. Over time, it becomes apparent that the voice-over does not describe the image it accompanies but, rather, the next photograph in the series. At the end of each description, the photograph is burned. The burning motif signals the transition to a new combination of words and image, but also comments on the material, yet also ephemeral, nature of photographic images and memories.

Parallels

Filmmakers sometimes use the repetition of details to create **parallels**. A parallel arises when two characters, events, or locations are compared through the use of a narrative element or a visual or sound device. When this happens, viewers are encouraged to consider the similarities and differences between these characters or situations. In

Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016), Juan (Mahershala Ali), a neighborhood drug dealer, embraces the role of surrogate father figure to Chiron (Alex R. Hibbert). Four dominant motifs establish Juan's macho credentials: the golden grill adorning his front teeth, his do-rag, his tricked-out car, and an oversized-crown air freshener propped on its dashboard (fig. 2.10). Perpetually tormented because of his slight stature and latent homosexuality, Chiron sees Juan as an exemplar of a black masculinity that is tough,

2.10 In *Moonlight*, Chiron looks up to Juan as a model of black masculinity.



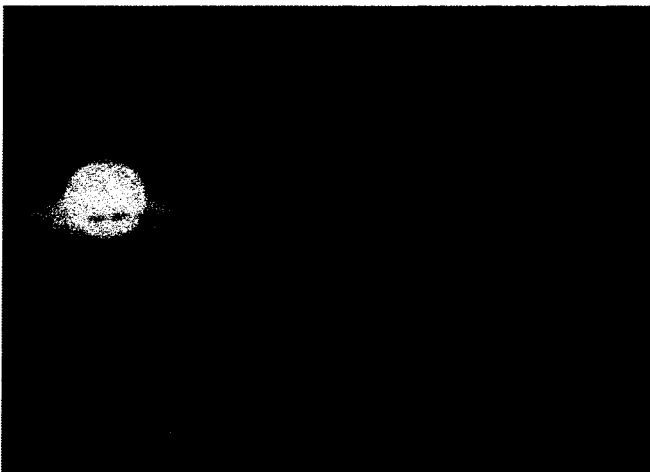


2.11 Visual parallels in *Moonlight*: as an adult, Chiron re-enacts Juan's lifestyle.

yet also nurturing and kind. Later, when Chiron grows into adulthood (Trevante Rhodes), he is associated with these same visual motifs, notably the grill and the car. The parallels make it clear that Chiron has physically transformed himself so that he more closely adheres to the paradigm of black masculinity that Juan embodied (fig. 2.11).

In avant-garde films, parallels may work as metaphors, suggesting the common characteristics of two images. *Un Chien Andalou* ("An Andalusian Dog"; Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929) compares a shot of clouds slicing across the moon with one depicting the filmmaker Luis

2.12 Clouds slicing across the moon in *Un Chien Andalou* ("An Andalusian Dog").



Buñuel slicing an eye (figs. 2.12 and 2.13). The shift from beauty to horror functions as a metaphor for the way the movie intends to assault its viewers, and the film did shock contemporary audiences with its irrational, anti-narrative structure.

Repeated details form patterns that contribute to a film's meaning. In a narrative fiction film, these elements may explain a character's motivation, present themes, and contribute to the overall flow of the story. In documentaries, they may encourage viewers to make connections between ideas or to reconsider their initial thoughts about an event. In avant-garde films, repetition can organize the flow of images and sound, and may create connections between seemingly dissimilar images. As a result, paying attention to repetition, motifs, and parallels can help viewers to recognize a film's deeper structure.

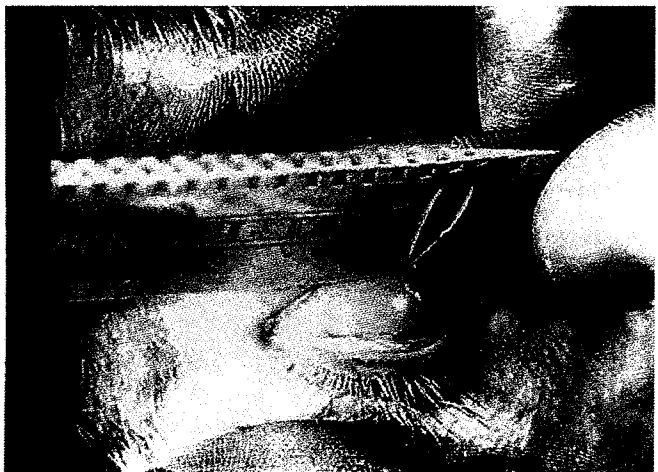
Details and Structure

One way to create a framework for meaning is to pay attention to the way a film begins and ends, and the way it unfolds in sections. Each section forms a part of the underlying structure of a film. A full analysis of the film reunites the parts and considers the way they interact to produce meaning.

Parallels and Structure

Filmmakers often utilize parallels that specifically invite viewers to compare the beginning and end of a film and to reflect upon its overall structure. For example, the murder

2.13 An eye being sliced in *Un Chien Andalou*: an assault on the audience's vision.



mystery *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) begins and ends with a shot of the main character, L.B. Jefferies (Jimmy Stewart), in a leg cast, napping near an open window. But the differences between the two scenes convey a great deal about the changes Jefferies has undergone. For example, in the film's opening he naps alone, immobilized by his broken leg. In the final shot, Jefferies has casts on *both* legs, and Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly) sits contentedly nearby. The parallel imagery neatly alludes to how Jefferies and Lisa have confronted both criminal and romantic mysteries.

Parallel opening and closing images can also indicate stasis. Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* ("Dayereh"; 2000) begins and ends with eerily similar shots of Iranian women who are forced to talk to figures of authority through sliding window panels. These framing images suggest how the story has come full circle, and that the women face an endless cycle of interrogation and harassment simply for being female. Similarly, the documentary *Winged Migration* begins and ends with scenes of birds in the same locations, emphasizing the cyclical pattern of migration.

Turning Points

Just as popular songs conform to a familiar pattern—the alternation between verse and chorus—so narrative feature films tend to flow according to a standard structure. Analyzing a narrative film involves dividing the story into beginning, middle, and end, and tracking important **turning points**. Even before mastering the complexities of narrative form (the subject of Chapter 4), it is possible to recognize turning points that signal the end of one section of the film and the beginning of another.

Directors signal important moments such as these through camerawork, editing, and sound, as well as through dialogue and action. The camera may linger on a shot to suggest its importance, or dramatic music may underscore a particularly significant action.

In the first act of *Logan* (James Mangold, 2017), *X-Men* hero Logan/Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) has retreated from society (fig. 2.14). Living the life of a world-weary recluse, he drinks too much and works as a chauffeur. Logan begins to emerge from his depression when a young girl with mysterious powers sneaks into the remote compound he shares with fellow mutants Caliban (Stephen Merchant) and Charles (Patrick Stewart). At first Logan displays no patience for Laura (Dafne Keene), but when a band of thuggish bounty hunters shows up looking for her, he snaps into action to save her. After an explosion of gunfire and fisticuffs, Logan whisks Laura and Charles away in his battered limousine. Pursued, Logan manages to race his car across railroad tracks just before a long freight train cuts off the bounty hunters' path. Suddenly



2.14 Before the first turning point, Logan isolates himself in an abandoned industrial estate in *Logan*.

the adrenaline-churning sounds stop, and the movie pauses for a moment of reflection as the gentle clickety-clack of the passing train fills the soundtrack. This break in the action marks the moment when Logan begins his transformation from a cynical has-been to a modern-day cowboy hero who understands his purpose in life. In addition to momentary relief from the film's frenzied camerawork and sonic assault, this important turning point is also indicated by the shift in setting. Logan can no longer indulge in a lonely, alcoholic state of inertia; now he is on the road, in charge of transporting and protecting others. In the process, he will redeem himself as well.

Turning points can be conveyed by more subtle shifts, too. In *Under the Skin*, Scarlett Johansson plays a seductive alien who lures unsuspecting men into her trap, where they will be stored and later processed for food. The film repeats this process several times, focusing on each victim's point of view as he follows the black widow into an oily void (fig. 2.15, p. 32).

Later in the film, however, she has empathy for one of her victims and releases him. This decision puts her at odds with her extraterrestrial compatriots, who begin to pursue her. To signal the importance of this turning point, Glazer includes a shot of Johansson from behind as she cautiously walks through a fog bank. Astute viewers will recognize that this image is a variation on the motif they've seen before, only now the oily blackness has been replaced by whiteness (fig. 2.16, p. 32).

The shift in visual quality encourages viewers to recognize that a dramatic turning point has taken place: the hunter has become the hunted. The figure who was once menacing (black) has become benevolent (white). The



2.15 A mysterious alien leads men into an oily void in *Under the Skin*.

alien who once trapped men in a viscous ooze now finds herself lost in a fog. This is the moment when she literally and figuratively falls to Earth, finding herself vulnerable to the emotional and physical needs she once exploited in the men she captured.

As the above discussion suggests, all films—whether documentary, experimental, or standard fiction—are structured with the aid of turning points and repetition.

Repetition and Non-chronological Structure

In a documentary, a turning point may be based on a change from one topic, period of history, or interview subject to another. Documentaries may be structured according to the various points of view brought to bear on an issue: for example, the arguments for going to war could be positioned before or after the arguments for avoiding war. One of the most famous documentaries about the Holocaust, Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (*"Nuit et brouillard"*; 1955), can be divided into parts according to certain visual attributes. The events occurring in Nazi Germany before and during World War II are depicted in black and white, while postwar images of some of the same locations are filmed in color. Rather than presenting a straightforward chronology, Resnais interweaves the troubling events of the past and the apparent tranquility of the present, creating a strong visual comparison and contrast that finally suggests that the past lives on.

Avant-garde films can be divided into sections as well. The turning points may be subtle, however, signaled by changes in the photographic properties of images, in the way the images and sound relate to one another, or in



2.16 The same motif with a dramatic shift in color.

editing patterns that alter the film's rhythm or pace. Yoko Ono's *No. 4 (Bottoms)* (1966) is an 80-minute film entirely composed of images of rear ends walking away from the camera. At a certain point, Ono repeats some images, changing the viewer's relationship to them. Scott MacDonald argues that "once the film develops this mystery of whether a particular bottom has been seen before, the viewer's relationship with the bottoms becomes more personal: we look not to see a new bottom but to see if we 'know' a particular bottom already" (MacDonald, p. 26).

The goal of examining the relationship between details and structure is to arrive at a comprehensive analysis that takes into account the way seemingly minor elements combine to produce the overall design of a film. Viewers also must consider the details filmmakers include when they make references to people or events outside the film. Recognizing the importance of these references deepens the audience's understanding of the work.

Creating Meaning Through the World Beyond the Film

Films convey meaning by making reference to people and events that exist outside the world of the film. Viewers may understand plot details, character motivation, or themes better because of references to historical events, to other films, and to works of art. In some cases, these references will be crucial to the audience's full understanding of the film, but in others, references may function simply as inside jokes.

Historical Events and Cultural Attitudes

Narrative films convey fictional stories, yet they frequently make reference to actual historical events. A film set in a particular era—for example, during the long reign of Britain's Queen Victoria (from 1837 to 1901)—will more than likely refer to well-known events such as the death of her husband Prince Albert in 1861, which plays an important role in *Mrs. Brown* (John Madden, 1997) and *Victoria and Abdul* (Stephen Frears, 2017). The early relationship between Victoria and Albert features centrally in *The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009).

Audiences should not assume that historical references in period pieces (films set in the past) function only to establish the story's time and place. Many films use such references to develop important themes as well. One shot in the World War II film *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) emphasizes a theater marquee emblazoned with the title of G.W. Pabst's German adventure film *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (fig. 2.17). On the most basic level, this reference helps establish the historical context for the events that unfold: the story takes place in Nazi-occupied France, and the marquee captures the

Franco-German milieu, in which a French businesswoman must capitulate to demands for German entertainment. But this reference also helps develop the film's interest in how cinema functions as a tool for nationalist propaganda. First, Pabst's film was one of many so-called "mountain films," a wildly popular genre before World War II. Because these mountain films romanticized German mysticism and the Teutonic capacity for triumphing over adversity, film historians argue that the popularity of this genre inspired the Fascists, who espoused these same ideals. Second, the film featured the star Leni Riefenstahl, who would later move into directing. Adolf Hitler commissioned her to film the Nazi party's 1934 rally at Nuremberg. The resulting film, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), presents Hitler as an exalted leader who will bring unity and discipline to the German people. Critics and scholars widely condemned Riefenstahl's film as propaganda for the Fascist regime. Therefore, this reference resonates

2.17 A historical reference to cinematic propaganda in *Inglourious Basterds*.



with the parodic propaganda film represented within the **diegesis** in which one lone and highly disciplined German sniper manages to fend off the Allied advance ... all while carving a perfectly ornate swastika in his perch using a cruddy pocket knife.

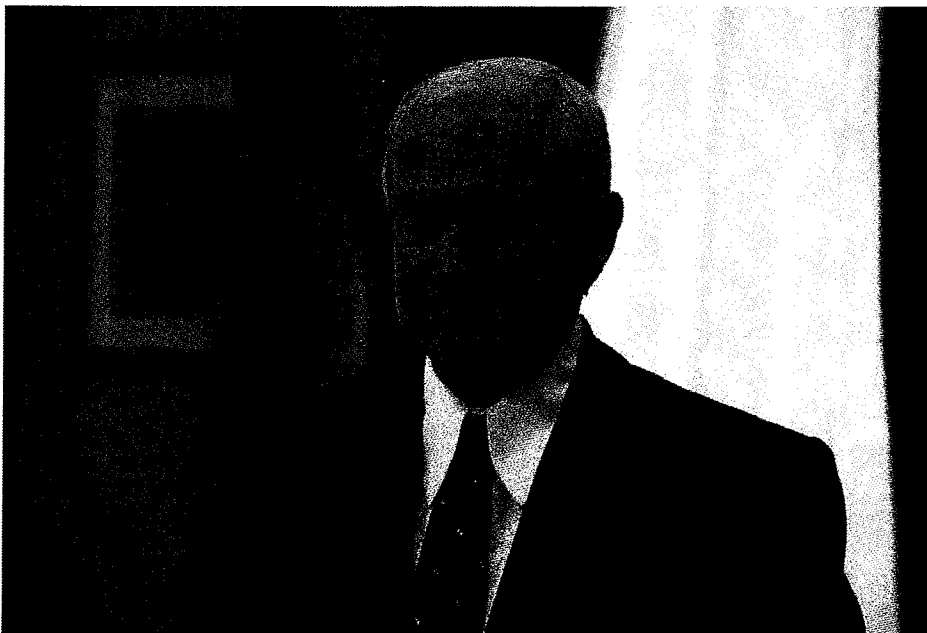
Historical references do not necessarily establish a film's setting in the distant historical past. Often films reference contemporary events. Jordan Peele's horror film *Get Out* (2017) opens with the image of a young African-American male trying to find a friend's house in an affluent suburb. A sports car passes by, going in the opposite direction. It slows to a halt, then suspiciously circles around to follow. Most audiences going into the film would already be on their toes, as *Get Out* was explicitly marketed as a horror film. This creepy expository scene plays with a hoary staple of the genre: the deadly stalker in pursuit of his first victim. Genre convention would usually dictate that the killer's first victim is a young woman or two lovers, but Peele's decision to build the scene around a black man who is surveilled while walking through a (presumably) white neighborhood evokes contemporaneous memories of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old unarmed African-American student who was fatally shot in 2012 by George Zimmerman, a community-watch volunteer who claimed he shot the young man in self-defense. Genre conventions and knowledge of current events work hand in hand to dictate that this character is doomed. Peele's reference to the infamous Trayvon Martin case invests this ominous opening with social critique: real horror isn't running into a masked serial killer or exorcising vengeful

ghosts ... it's being African American in a culture that automatically assumes black masculinity to be a threat.

Stars and Public Figures as References

Films also use stars as references to previous movies and past histories. Chapter 12 examines the star system in detail, so it's sufficient for this discussion to observe that actors often repeat and reprise roles, and that directors may expect audiences to make connections with those previous roles. In some cases, these connections might help flesh out important character traits. Wes Anderson's casting of George Clooney in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) may remind viewers of Clooney's earlier roles as Danny Ocean in *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) and its sequels. Like master criminal Ocean, Mr. Fox enjoys nothing more than planning elaborate heists (though Ocean has considerably more luck pulling his plans off).

Sometimes casting choices intentionally work against audience expectations. Lee Daniels's *The Butler* (2013) explores the life of Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker), a character based on the life of Eugene Allen, an African-American man who worked as a servant in the White House from the Eisenhower through the Reagan administrations (1952–86). Perched virtually adjacent to the catbird seat, Gaines witnesses the roughest patches of the American Civil Rights movement while serving the most powerful political figures in the land, and yet rarely is he asked to voice his opinion on racial politics. Although the film is a drama, Daniels's unusual choice to **cast against type** for the famous white politician roles leavens the



2.18 Casting a comedian against type: Robin Williams as President Eisenhower in *The Butler*.

proceedings and adds a layer of wry political commentary. Most notably, comedian Robin Williams plays President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and liberal feminist icon Jane Fonda plays the staunchly conservative First Lady Nancy Reagan (fig. 2.18). Rather than capture the solemn dignity of America's top political offices, Daniels's casting choices give the viewer some latitude to laugh at figures that history has deemed important. This lack of solemnity reflects the film's broader critique of the way that the most powerful men and women in America were slow to muster the courage to fight for Civil Rights legislation. In Daniels's view of the past, American politicians are literal and figurative jokes; in his film, the unsung servant is the true hero of American history.

Films may also make reference to public figures. Like other references, citations of and appearances by well-known individuals often resonate with other details in a film and so they shouldn't just be taken at face value. Professional boxer Mike Tyson appears as himself in *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009), and his presence adds to the increasing madness that swirls around three grooms-men over the course of a bachelor party in Las Vegas (fig. 2.19). During his reign in the 1980s and early 90s, Tyson was notorious for his erratic and violent behavior, both in and out of the ring; during one especially infamous bout, he bit off his opponent's ear. In the film, the drunken and drugged revelers are so intoxicated they decide to take on

Tyson, urinating in his pool and stealing his pet tiger. Casting Tyson was an especially effective choice, contributing to the comic premise of a night spiraling out of control as drugs and alcohol inhibit the characters' capacity to fully comprehend the ramifications of their increasingly outrageous actions.

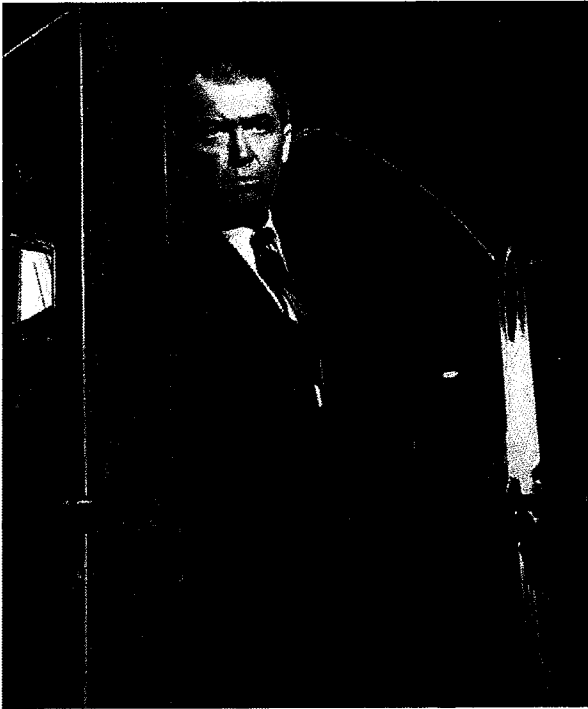
Intertextual References

Films also make **intertextual references**, or references to other films or works of art. *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation* (Christopher McQuarrie, 2015) stages one of its elaborate action set pieces at the Vienna State Opera house, where American agent Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) suspects a terrorist organization will try to assassinate the Austrian chancellor during a performance of Puccini's *Turandot*. The sequence is an elaborate tribute to Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Hitchcock directed two versions of this film (1934 and 1956), both of which feature scenes in which protagonists must foil an assassination plot set to unfold during a musical performance in London's Royal Albert Hall (fig. 2.20, p. 36).

Intellectually curious viewers should ask whether the intertextual reference functions merely as a visual trick, or

2.19 Mike Tyson plays himself in *The Hangover*.





2.20 Backstage at the opera: *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

if it has more weighty significance. Is this the case of a lazy filmmaker borrowing an idea from or just offering a nod to the man who more or less invented the thriller genre? Or, is there something more complex at play? The most fully articulated intertextual references pay tribute to the visual language and narrative design of the preceding text, creating meaning by repeating, updating, and commenting on textual influences. In this instance, McQuarrie's intertextual reference actually has many layers of meaning. Hitchcock's thrillers tend to focus on stories about individuals who find themselves swept up in nefarious geopolitical conspiracies, torn between personal motivations and civic obligation. *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, for example, revolves around the story of a couple on holiday whose son is kidnapped when they accidentally stumble across murderous political intrigue. Is their first obligation to save their son, or is it to prevent an assassination that could destabilize international politics? *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation* focuses on Ethan Hunt's similar dilemma. In an act of pure political expediency, the CIA director has decided to dismantle Hunt's controversial IMF agency just as Hunt has enough evidence to prove the existence of a global crime consortium called the Syndicate. If Hunt obeys, the Syndicate will provoke global anarchy. So Hunt decides to "go rogue" to topple the organization; in doing so, he becomes a wanted man and risks his own freedom.

Casting Rebecca Ferguson to play the British MI6 agent Ilsa Faust deepens the Hitchcock connection, given the actress's striking resemblance to Ingrid Bergman, who played Alicia Huberman in *Notorious* (1946; see figs. 4.14, p. 90, and 7.58, p. 238). Like Alicia, Ilsa feels obligated to continue her work as an undercover agent (fig. 2.21), even though this work is at odds with her desire for peaceful, romantic domesticity.

Intertextual references need not be limited to other films. References to works of literature, painting, poetry, and music can all add layers of meaning. The decision to feature *Turandot* offers more than merely a justification for the dramatic music that accompanies *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation*'s backstage showdown. Puccini's opera tells the story of a prince who is so enchanted with Princess Turandot's beauty that he risks his life to court her, despite her icy (and deadly) resistance. The opera's plot resonates with narrative tensions running throughout the film: Hunt isn't sure whether or not he can trust Faust, whose surname makes reference to another famous opera, one in which the title character sells his soul to the devil. Faust appears to serve the criminal Syndicate, and for much of the film Hunt is unaware that she is actually a British agent who has infiltrated the crime ring. Like Princess Turandot, Faust is magnetic and beautiful, but potentially deadly.

Avant-garde films frequently push the logic of intertextuality to extremes for satirical purposes. **Compilation films** are composed completely of extracted scenes taken from other films. Like the more recent trend in digital mash-ups they have inspired, compilation films create new meanings with existing material by exploiting the

2.21 *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation*: Ilsa backstage at the opera: a reference to Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.





2.22 A Coke machine as social satire in *Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

ironies that arise when images appear outside their intended or original context. For example, Todd Graham's *Apocalypse Pooh* (1987) combines original footage of the cartoon *Winnie the Pooh* with music, dialogue, and sound effects from the iconic Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). The darkly comic result by turns ridicules the United States's obsession with militarism (by associating war with childhood fantasy) and derides the blandly juvenile tendencies of popular culture (by suggesting that a dark subtext underlies a beloved cartoon character).

Meaningful References with Objects

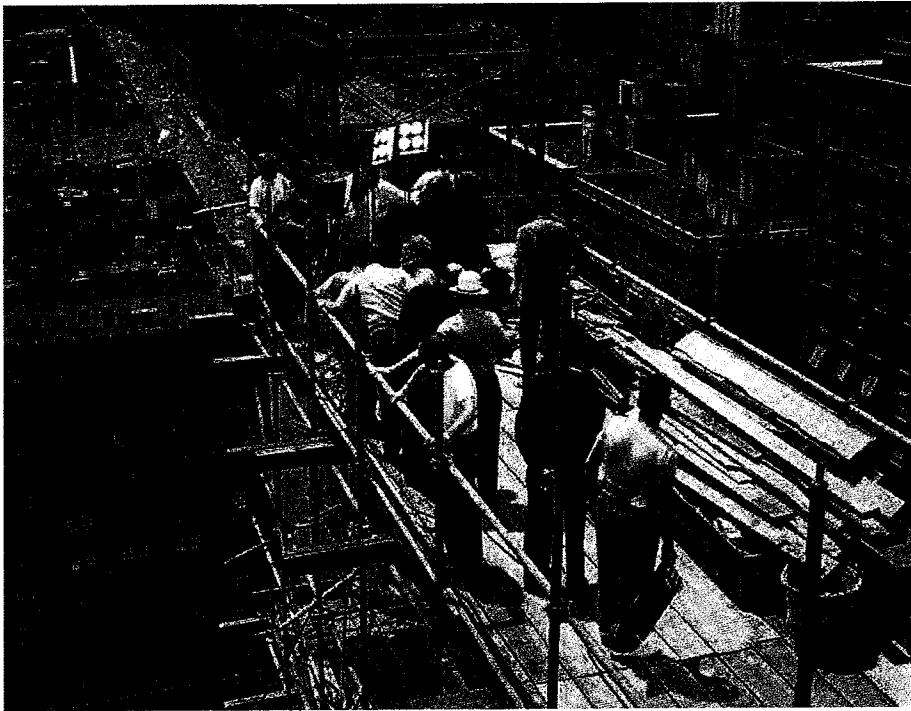
Films also refer to specific real-world objects. Characters may drive a particular kind of vehicle, wear clothing made by a designer, or consume popular brands of beer and soft drinks. Often these references are the result of lucrative business deals called **product placement**, whereby corporations agree to pay film studios a fee to feature products in a film. In Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), the script called for the alien to become hooked on M&Ms. But the Mars corporation was anxious about linking its product to a repulsive alien, so the production company turned instead to the makers of a new product, Reese's Pieces. *E.T.* caused a tremendous sensation, sending the demand for Reese's Pieces soaring, and

paving the way for a wave of product placement agreements (Monaco, p. 589).

The important question to ask is whether or not familiar products serve a purpose in terms of the film's meaning: do they help to form motifs, do they add significance? References to branded products should not be rejected out of hand as meaningless; they may serve a function in terms of character and story. The Coca-Cola Company plays a role in creating satire in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, a film set in the era prior to cell phones. An army colonel refuses to steal a vending machine's change for another officer to make a pay telephone call to the U.S. president to avert a nuclear disaster (fig. 2.22). He is reluctant to raid the coin box because the machine is the property of an American corporation. In this black comedy, protecting the profits of a familiar name brand is more important than preserving life on Earth.

Film Style

Film scholarship and criticism involve more than identifying the details we see and hear onscreen; they also require the viewer to consider *how* details are presented. A romance can be presented as a heartbreaking, melodramatic ordeal, with scenes of crashing ocean waves set to classical music, or as a whimsical romp that involves rides on Ferris wheels and 1960s pop music. A complex analysis of film style requires careful consideration of how



2.23 Critics praised *The Naked City* for its gritty realism, in part because of its use of location shooting.

a filmmaker invites the audience to engage with the details of the fictional world in a coherent way.

Classical, Realist, and Formalist Aesthetics

Film scholars have long divided narrative fiction films into three stylistic categories: **classical**, **realist**, and **formalist**. The **classical style** includes the type of films made under the Hollywood studio system, in which the story is paramount. The various elements of film art (including lighting, editing, and sound) do not call attention to themselves as aesthetic devices: instead, they contribute unobtrusively to the smooth flow of the story. The goal is to invite viewers to become absorbed in the story, not to remind them that they are watching a film. Most commercial releases adopt a classical style, seeking to entertain audiences by immersing them in a fictional world.

Realist films reject some of the rules of classical narrative in terms of characters, stories, and structure. Films made in a **realist style** do not privilege the story at the expense of details that evoke characters, places, and eras. Their stories generally involve average, everyday people. Their plots may seem to digress, as filmmakers strive for spontaneity and immediacy rather than a highly crafted structure. In Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), an Italian Neorealist film that chronicles the everyday lives of ordinary Italians after World War II, a well-known scene involves a maid, Maria (Maria-Pia Casilio) going through her morning routine (fig. 2.24). Her actions have

no real consequences for the story, so in a classical film the scene would be considered "wasted time." In this film, the scene establishes the texture of this minor character's daily life. Ironically, a realist style may be experienced as a more obtrusive style because it allows character and environment to take precedence over storytelling. Despite its name, cinematic realism is not reality. Like classicism, it is a style produced by a combination of techniques. Realist films may adopt a different approach than classical films, but they do not necessarily present a truer vision of reality. A case in point is the Jules Dassin film *Naked City* (fig. 2.23). Hailed for its gritty realism when it was released in 1948, audiences sixty years later can't help but notice the artificiality of the talky voice-over.

Films that employ a **formalist style** are self-consciously interventionist. They work to disrupt the cinematic illusion, constantly reminding the viewer that she is watching constructed images. These films rely on unusual visual techniques that call attention to themselves as artistic exploration. In doing so, formalist films often prioritize the exploration of abstract ideas; compelling storytelling is less central. Formalist films such as Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année dernière à Marienbad*; 1961), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016) self-consciously distance viewers from characters and plot through their arresting images and innovative sound techniques. They raise philosophical

questions about the nature of identity, storytelling practice, vision, truth, and reality (fig. 2.25, p. 40).

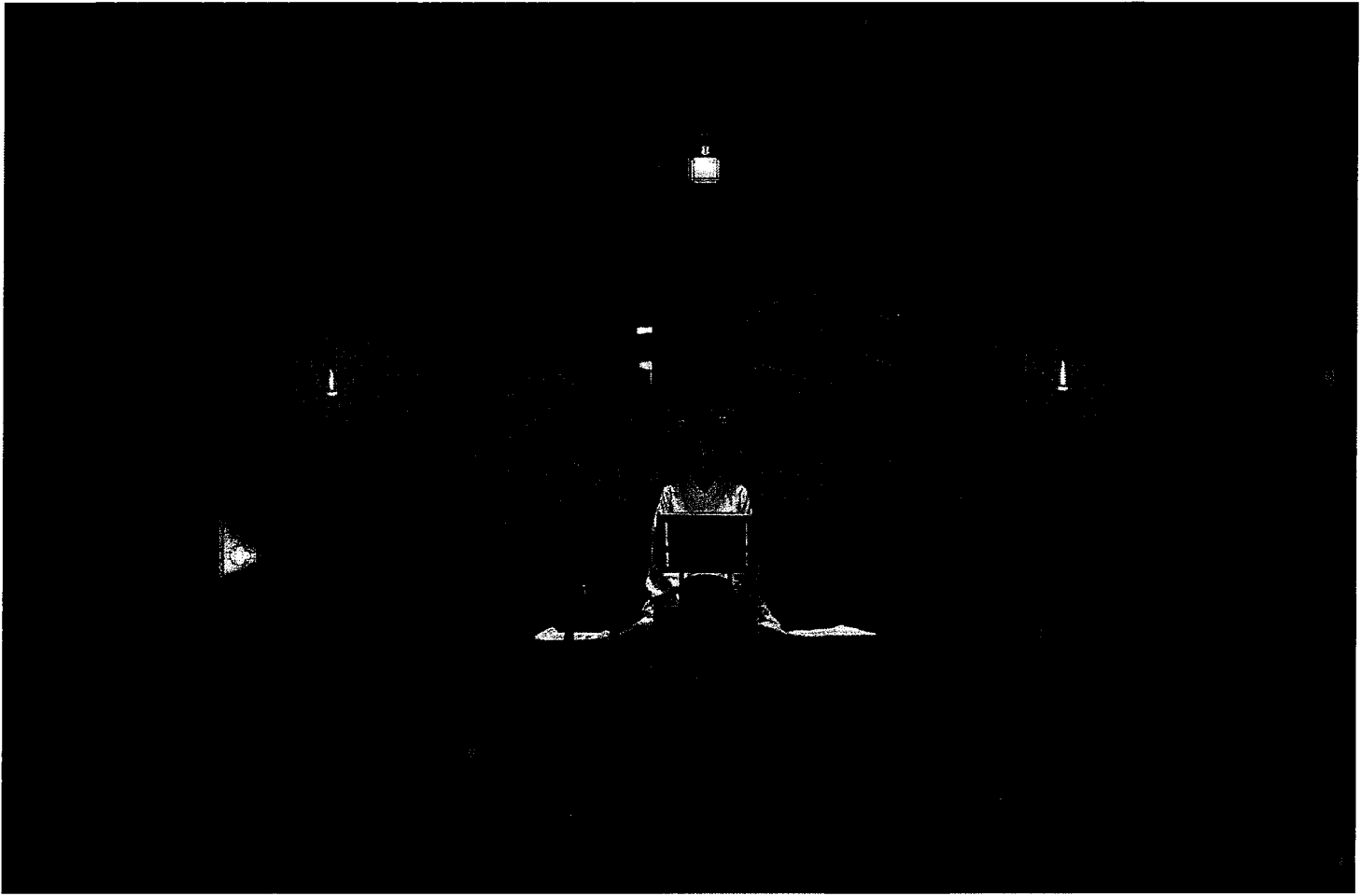
Analyzing Film Style

One recent example of a formalist film—one whose story and style are highly self-conscious—is Charlie Kaufman’s *Synecdoche, New York* (2008). Moderately successful and slightly neurotic playwright Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) goes about his everyday life in Schenectady in a desultory way. He is estranged from his wife and daughter and becomes obsessed with his own mortality. When he learns he has won a prestigious McArthur “Genius” Grant, Cotard embarks on the project that will consume the rest of his life. He moves to New York City to mount his next production, in which he stages his own life, hiring actors to play himself, his now ex-wife Adele (Catherine Keener), his second wife Claire (Michelle Williams), who is also an actress, and Hazel (Samantha Morton), another woman at the theater with whom he becomes involved.

2.24 In *Umberto D*, De Sica captures everyday life without obvious intervention on the part of the filmmaker.

Once in Manhattan, Cotard rents a warehouse, constructs a replica of his Manhattan neighborhood within it, and begins rehearsing actors, coaching them to attend to the mundane and the everyday. The film becomes increasingly obscure: narrative chronology becomes difficult to follow as the mirror images of the main characters—their doubles—begin to take on as much significance as the central characters. Decades of Cotard’s life are compressed into fleeting scenes, for example, when he visits his wife in Berlin, or has an argument with his father (Albert Finney). Pivotal emotional encounters get played out over and over again by the cast, which keeps multiplying because Cotard casts another set of actors to play the actors playing the central characters (fig. 2.26, p. 41). Cotard’s play and real life are now inseparable, not only for the director, but for all the actors and technical crew who are living inside the Manhattan warehouse. The dizzying circularity of the story gives rise to confusion as well as delight: some of the encounters between and among actors who play one another are absurdly hilarious. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert claims that viewers need to see this film twice: “I watched it the first time and knew it was a great film and that I had not mastered it.”





2.25 *The Handmaiden* explores how performance, storytelling, gender, and sexuality all depend upon deception.

Synecdoche, New York demonstrates the way that a film can integrate techniques associated with several aesthetic approaches. For example, the film's visual style is a blend of formalism and realism. On the one hand, the setting is overtly presented as artifice: viewers are constantly reminded that the world in which the characters live is a set, built by the theater's carpenters. This formalism is countered, however, by Cotard's desire to meticulously re-create the details of his life: this translates into a highly detailed, realist depiction of the interiors and street scenes, many of which Kaufman shot on location in New York. This confounds the viewer's sense of the real and the constructed.

The film's title points to the exploration of art's relationship to life, a theme that preoccupies formalist filmmakers as well as Cotard. Grammatically, a synecdoche is a part that stands in for a whole (using "wheels" to refer to

a car) or a whole that refers to a part (using "the law" for a police officer). The title also functions as a pun and a near-homonym for Schenectady, the city in upstate New York where the film begins. The title speaks of the way that supposedly artificial performances such as that of Cotard's can stand in for "real" life, and vice versa. Kaufman's emphasis on this abstract relationship, which takes place at the expense of an easily understood plot, lends a degree of abstraction to *Synecdoche, New York*. This is often the case in formalist films, where ideas take precedence over plot, action, and character development. What is particularly striking about Kaufman's film is the way he is able to fuse formalism and realism through a theatrical metaphor that's at least as old as Shakespeare, who wrote that all the world's a stage.

As this discussion makes clear, classical, realist, and formalist approaches to film style should not be understood as three rigidly defined categories, but rather as a spectrum of aesthetic choices that may be blended in a single film.

The Goal of Film Analysis: Articulating Meaning

The purpose of film analysis—breaking a film down into component parts to see how it is put together—is to make statements about a film’s themes and meaning. Those statements take three different forms, each one related to a different level of meaning. These statements aren’t mutually exclusive; a review or critical analysis of a film will often include all three types of claims, and each has its place in film scholarship.

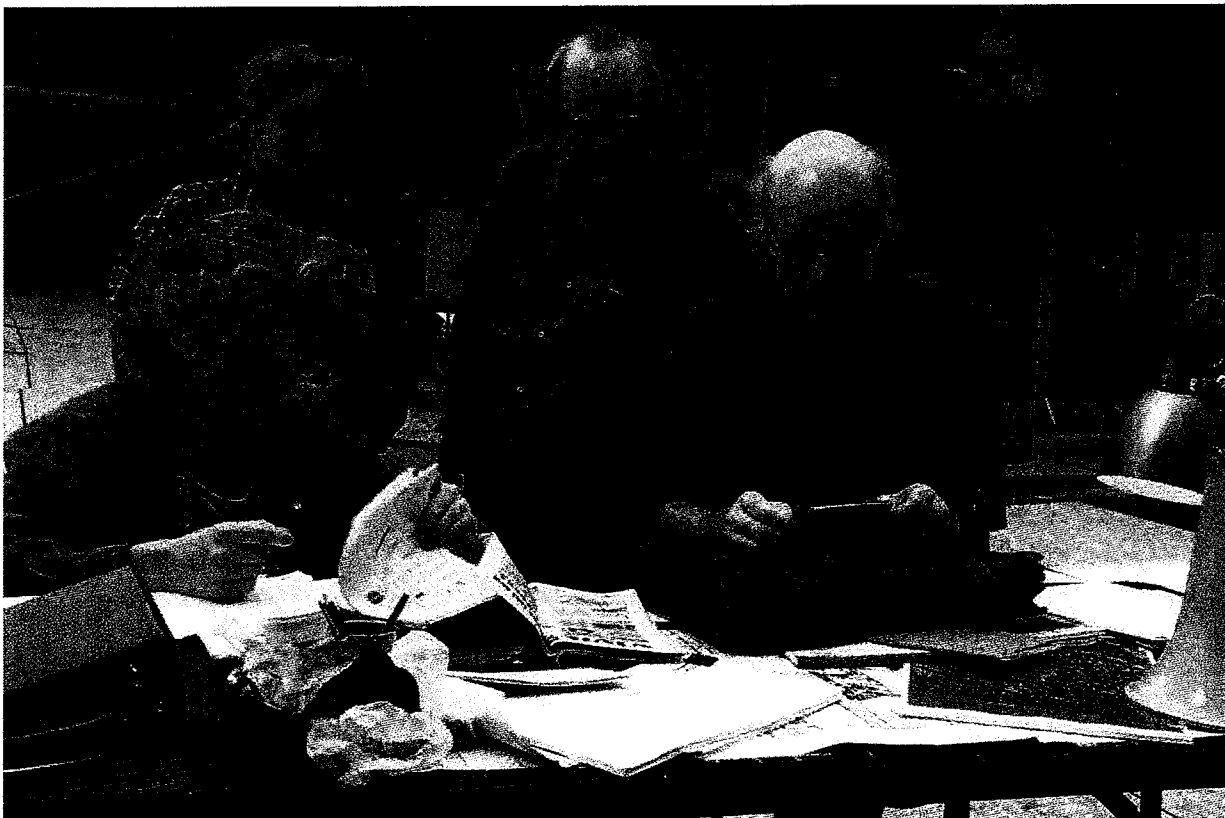
Descriptive Claims

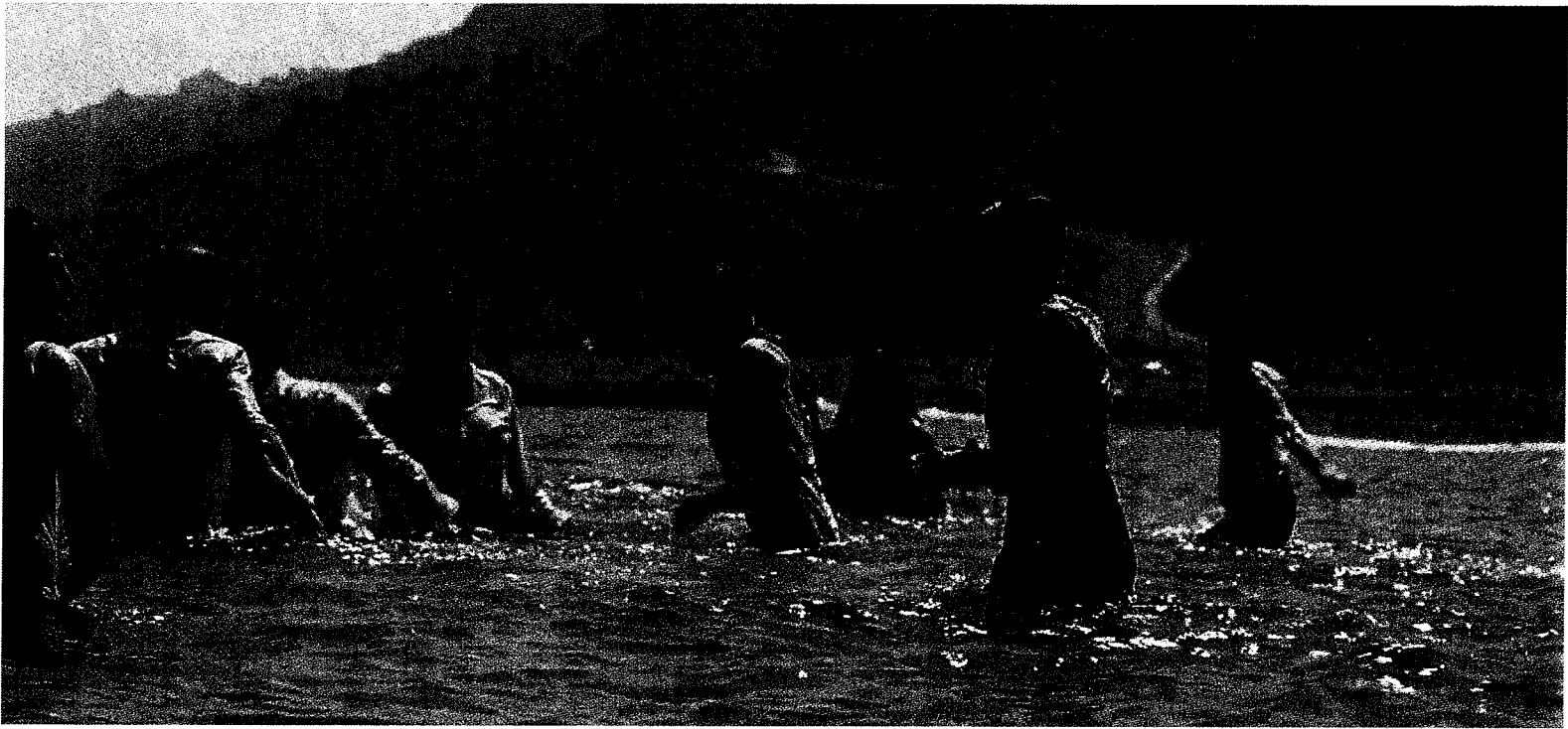
The first type of statement is descriptive: a **descriptive claim** is a neutral account of the basic characteristics of the film. Most descriptions of narrative fiction films involve plot events: “Set in contemporary Turkey, *Mustang* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015) tells the story of five sisters who are being raised by their uncle and grandmother. On the way home from school one day, the girls stop to play at the beach with a group of boys, and their grandmother punishes them for their unconventional conduct. The elders force the girls to wear traditional clothing, keep them home from school, teach them to cook and clean, and, eventually,

physically confine them to the house. After the girls sneak out to attend an all-woman spectator soccer match—the youngest girl Lale (Günes Sensoy) is an avid fan—their grandmother begins to arrange marriages for them. The two oldest girls do marry (one to the boyfriend she has been sneaking out to meet at night), but the third commits suicide after it is revealed her uncle has been abusing her. The remaining girls, Nur (Doga Zeynep Doguslu) and Lale, escape to Istanbul, where they seek refuge in the home of Lale’s former teacher, who was introduced in the film’s opening scene.” By stringing together a series of descriptive claims, this viewer has arrived at a **plot summary**—a sequential account of the important events in a film.

Descriptive statements may also illustrate specific details about the film’s visual or audio style: “In a shot depicting the unauthorized after school outing, the sisters and the boys cavort joyously against a backdrop of blue” (fig. 2.27, p. 42). Descriptive claims may also go beyond events and details within the film and refer to intertextual

2.26 Formalism calls attention to artifice. In *Synecdoche, New York*, actors are cast to play the film’s main characters, then another set of actors playing them.





2.27 The composition in *Mustang* that depicts the five sisters in the sea with male classmates also confines them against a backdrop of blue.

connections and to attributes of genre: “The intimate framing of the sisters (fig. 2.28) recalls scenes from *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999)” or “*Mustang* uses music by Warren Ellis, who collaborated on the score for *Wind River* (2017), a film that dramatizes violence against young Native American women.”

Interpretive Claims

An **interpretive claim** involves a more complex intellectual response than a descriptive claim. Interpretive claims present an argument about a film’s meaning and significance. These claims go beyond plot details and style to address a film’s larger themes and abstract ideas. They do not merely identify a film’s subject matter; they go further, making an argument about what the film does with this subject matter. Many films address what it means to come of age, to grow into adulthood, but any particular film will adopt a specific perspective and explore a certain set of issues and experiences. That perspective and those issues will inform narrative events and stylistic choices. Three films examined in this chapter—*Moonlight*, *Boyhood*, and *Mustang*—adopt

different approaches to the coming-of-age story, reflecting differences of gender, class, geography, and culture. In other words, while all of these films explore the process of children growing up, each of them offers a unique thematic perspective on what it means to become an adult. The act of interpretation requires the spectator to move beyond the mere identification of a film’s subject.

A spectator developing an interpretive claim about *Mustang* might notice that the film focuses on the connections among cultural tradition, location, women’s sexuality, and education. The claim will forward an assertion about how Ergüven treats this subject matter, through a cause-and-effect relationship: “*Mustang* draws attention to the way that exposure to a cosmopolitan worldview, through educational experiences and sports events that take the girls beyond the confines of their village, challenges traditional notions that relegate women to the space of the home and to the roles of wife and mother.”

These sentences make an argument that takes into consideration the careful orchestration of scenes throughout the film. In order to support this type of overarching argument, the viewer would need to construct a logical thread of more narrowly focused interpretive claims about how individual scenes, motifs, parallels, turning points, and the like, all cohere. For example, a thorough treatment of the interpretive claim above might begin by describing how the film’s **exposition** introduces Lale’s

teacher, who is a significant figure in her life. This introduces a pattern that carries through the rest of the film: Lale seeks assistance from important figures outside her family. The film opens with Lale at school, shedding tears because her beloved instructor is about to depart for the city. Over the course of the film, Lale comes to depend upon the kindness of a stranger who does not live in her village. She befriends a passing truck driver, who not only helps the sisters escape to their soccer match adventure, but also teaches Lale to drive, which is key to her final escape. Through her encounters with people and places outside the confines of her family, Lale in particular finds support for her rejection of the limited future her family has mapped out for her and her sisters.

Of course, these statements are by no means the only interpretive claims someone might make about *Mustang*. There can be many interpretations of any one film, because a film can develop more than one large idea or theme. Audiences who don't notice the cinematic similarities to other films about young women coming of age in circumstances that limit their potential might be interested in the film's depiction of youthful resistance: "*Mustang* demonstrates the effectiveness of turning the tools of the

oppressors against them." Such a claim would be supported by the observation that, in their final scene of escape, Lale and Nur thwart their uncle and grandmother by barricading themselves in the very house in which they have been confined.

How should audiences determine which interpretation is correct? Although most films support multiple interpretations, they do not generally support diametrically opposed claims. For example, if *Mustang* champions the ability of young girls to determine their own fates, it seems unlikely that an analysis of textual details would simultaneously support an interpretive claim that the film endorses the maintenance of traditional values. Some claims also have greater validity than others. To be convincing, an interpretive claim must be well supported by details from the film. Constructing valid interpretive claims is not a simple matter: a serious interpretation demands a thorough consideration of all aspects of the film.

2.28 The intimacy of the five sisters in *Mustang* contributes to their ability to psychologically resist their confinement.



Evaluative Claims

An **evaluative claim** expresses the author's belief that the film is good, bad, or mediocre. In popular media outlets, film critics often rely on a shorthand mechanism for measuring a film's worth. One critic may give it a grade of "A," "F," or "C," for example, while other critics might employ a derivation of the "two thumbs up" formula made famous by Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. The most straightforward example of an evaluative claim is: "*Mustang* is a great film." But this, in and of itself, is a weak claim; because the speaker has not established any criteria for the evaluation, it probably wouldn't convince anyone that the film is indeed great. The listener would likely not be persuaded to see the film on the basis of this claim alone.

A stronger evaluative claim includes the reasons why the evaluation is positive or negative: "*Mustang* is great because it balances a narrative of liberation with a sensitive and cautionary tale that reflects the challenges many young girls are not able to surmount." This statement is more convincing than the first because it articulates a basis for judgment. Evaluative claims are always based on the evaluator's standards of what makes a movie worthwhile or not, and here the reviewer shares that information with his readers. Obviously, these standards will differ from person to person. But because this writer explicitly states why he liked the film, readers can gauge whether or not they are likely to agree with his opinion. Moviegoers who do not share the reviewer's basis for judgment—in this case, viewers who do not place a value on cinema's contribution to social critique—may not evaluate *Mustang* as a great film. They might counter with a different evaluation: "*Mustang* is not a good film because it lacks action, adventure, and exciting special effects."

On the surface it would appear that making an evaluative claim is much simpler than making an interpretive claim; after all, to make an evaluative claim, one merely needs to express an opinion, correct? In reality, of the three types of claims, the evaluative claim is the most sophisticated type of claim because it relies on the speaker's ability to honestly identify the criteria being used, to describe details from the film accurately, to interpret how these details relate to the film's themes, and to establish the relationship between those details (the film's visual storytelling strategies) and the evaluative criteria. The film critic must take all of this into consideration before evaluating whether or not the film succeeds. This is why a single film can elicit many provocative and, apparently, contradictory responses.

Mustang indeed prompted a range of responses from critics. Some focused on the film's treatment of the difficult situation the young women experienced, while others discussed its depiction of Turkish culture, disagreeing

about whether the film represented a Turkish or European sensibility. *The Guardian's* Jordan Hoffman linked the intimate scenes of the sisters to a realist film style rather than the exploitation of the young girls' bodies, writing, "while the subject matter is enraging, the film is not without warmth and occasional levity. Breasts and buttocks in rainbow-colored underwear are a recurring motif meant not to titillate but as bursts of naturalism." *Variety* critic Jay Weissburg called the film "controversial," concluding that, "while many Turks will find the final salvation distinctly inorganic, few can argue with the director's talent." Weissburg makes reference to the film's transnational reach: "Warren Ellis's music further ties the pic to an identifiable international cinema scene." Note that neither critic settles for a simple observation about whether or not audiences will be entertained. Rather, they both grapple with ideas that director Ergüven explores, and the techniques she uses to convey them. In each case, the evaluation of the film's artistic merit follows careful description and interpretation.

The Importance of Developing Interpretive Claims

One of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of studying film is developing interpretive claims. Whereas a brief description may be helpful when deciding whether or not to see a film, interpretive claims move the conversation to a deeper level. Interpretation takes into account the complexity of films, capturing the way films affect viewers long after they have left the theater or turned off their streaming device. Because interpretive claims grow out of description and analysis, they take account of the way that stories, characters, camera angles, sound effects, and other elements of film art interact to produce intense emotional and thought-provoking experiences.

Interpreting films also helps to develop logical thinking and writing skills, which Chapter 3 examines more fully. Making an interpretive claim about a favorite film is fun, but it also demands organization and keen insight. Finally, interpretations link films to larger social and aesthetic issues. For example, the question implicit in the divergent critical interpretations of *Mustang*—where one critic seeks to assert the innocent naturalism of the film's depiction of the girls' bodies and the other focuses on the way that this Turkish film is informed by international perspectives—might generate provocative discussions about subjects, such as gender, culture, and film representation, that are important to the world outside the movie theater.

Chapter 2 - Key Terms and Definitions

1. **Film Analysis** – The process of closely examining a film's structure, style, themes, and techniques to understand how meaning is created.
2. **Audience Expectations** – Assumptions viewers bring to a film based on genre, stars, directors, advertising, or past experiences.
3. **Narrative Fiction Film** – A film organized around storytelling, usually involving characters, goals, conflict, and resolution.
4. **Documentary Film** – A film that presents real people, events, or issues from the real world.
5. **Avant-Garde Film** – Experimental films that focus on visual or artistic expression rather than traditional storytelling.
6. **Genre** – A category of film defined by shared conventions, themes, or styles (such as comedy, horror, or Western).
7. **Star Persona** – The public image or type of character associated with a movie star.
8. **Motif** – A repeated detail, image, sound, object, or idea that gains significance through repetition.
9. **Parallel** – A comparison created between characters, events, or images through repetition or similarity.
10. **Composition** – The arrangement of visual elements within the film frame.
11. **Turning Point** – A major moment in a film that changes the direction of the story or character development.
12. **Structure** – The organizational framework of a film, including beginning, middle, and end.
13. **Non-chronological Structure** – A film structure that does not present events in chronological order.
14. **Historical Reference** – A connection to real historical events or cultural moments outside the film.
15. **Intertextual Reference** – A reference to another film, artwork, book, or cultural text.
16. **Product Placement** – The inclusion of branded products in films, often for advertising purposes.
17. **Classical Style** – A filmmaking style that emphasizes clear storytelling and invisible techniques to immerse viewers in the narrative.
18. **Realist Style** – A filmmaking style focused on ordinary life, naturalism, and everyday experiences.
19. **Formalist Style** – A filmmaking style that emphasizes artistic techniques and reminds viewers they are watching a constructed film.

- 20. **Theme** – The central idea or message explored in a film.
- 21. **Diegesis** – The fictional world in which the story takes place.
- 22. **Visual Symbolism** – The use of images or objects to represent deeper meanings or ideas.
- 23. **Narrative Closure** – The resolution of conflicts and storylines by the end of a film.
- 24. **Propaganda** – Media created to influence opinions or promote a political viewpoint.
- 25. **Cinematic Realism** – Film techniques designed to create the appearance of reality.