Introduction

The first edition of *How to Read a Film* appeared in 1977, a generation ago. The timing had been right for the book. We were just at the end of an exciting period in film history. In the sixties and seventies filmmakers had discovered their own history, a new generation of cineastes had emerged, and we were on the verge of a new technology that would change not only the way we make movies—but our entire system of communication.

It has been fascinating to watch the development of this tectonic shift in society. The new technology is pervasive, and its effect on the way we make not only movies but all media is profound. The microcomputer revolution, which was beginning just as the first edition of *How to Read a Film* appeared, has thoroughly dominated the cultural and business history of our generation. The way we process text, images, and sounds today is radically different from what it was thirty years ago. And the union of media, which the invention of movies foreshadowed more than a hundred years ago, is now a reality. It's as if film, the defining medium of the twentieth century, was but prologue to the new media of the twenty-first. As the old technologies of chemistry and mechanics continue to yield to digital electronics and photonics, filmmakers are rediscovering the pioneer spirit. The medium is reinventing itself: now, if you can think it, you can film it.

The way we consume motion pictures has changed even more. In the 1970s, film buffs organized their lives around repertory-house schedules,

and might travel fifty miles to catch a screening of a rare film. Today, tens of thousands of films are available on disc or on the web and you can be sure that, after Google finishes scanning all the world's books, they'll turn their attention to digitizing all the world's movies. Thirty years ago, very few of us actually owned movies; today, even fewer of us do not. Films are a lot more like books, now (and books are about to become more cinematic). In the past three decades our exposure to filmed entertainment has increased by several magnitudes. To my mind, this shift has been so great that it amounts to a qualitative—not just quantitative—change in the experience. More important, it has had a profound effect on the social contract. (Much of Chapters 6 and 7 deal with this new "Mediasphere" which now dominates our lives.)

Over the course of more than three decades and four editions[*] parts of *How to Read a Film* have changed radically, as you might expect. We've cut a lot of earlier history to make room for some comments on the contemporary scene. Chapter 7 was added to the third edition to discuss the digital world that had grown up since 1977. The first and second editions included a glossary which grew so much that it became its own book in 1999 (*The Dictionary of New Media*). Now that there are so many bibliographical tools available on the web, the extensive bibliography of the earlier editions has been replaced with a much shorter, more succinct list of suggested reading, which I hope you will find more useful.

But parts have changed very little. Chapters 1 ("Film as an Art"), 3 ("The Language of Film"), and 5 ("Film Theory") have been updated but not radically restructured. The medium of film still bears the same relationship to the other arts as it did thirty years ago. Semiotics still seems to me the best way to understand how films mean what they mean (and examples drawn from the old masters seem the best illustrations). The basics of film theory were well described in the last century and—although contemporary academics may disagree—I don't think in the last decades we've gone very far beyond the works discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 ("Technology") presented a dilemma. The Maltese Cross, the variable shutter—even the reflex camera—must seem like quaint antiques to the digital generation. They are still here in the fourth edition because

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[*] *How to Read a Film* has also been translated into German (*Film verstehen*, Rowohlt Verlag, four editions); Dutch (*Film: Taal, techniek, geschiedenis*, Uniboek), Italian (*Leggere un film*, Zanichelli), Turkish (*Bir Film Nasıl Okunur?*, Oglak Yagyinlari); Czech (*Jak Číst Film*, Albatros); Japanese; Chinese; Farsi; and Korean.

they illustrate important principles. One of the dangers of digital media is its abstraction: an appreciation for how mechanical/chemical cinema worked is, I think, critical to understanding the medium.

You'll find major changes in Chapters 4, 6, and 7. More than thirty percent of the text is new; there are 125 new illustrations and diagrams. But please understand that, despite the changes, Chapters 4 ("Film History") and 6 ("Media") remain just sketches of history: Scores of important and interesting films and television programs didn't make the cut.

I wrote the first edition of *How to Read a Film* on a Smith-Corona electric typewriter on which I had pounded out about 1.5 million words as a freelance writer in the 1970s. I rewrote recent editions on a series of Power-Books, working on files that had been retrieved from the digital typesetting for the second edition. The experience was fascinating. Writers' tools, like painters', can have a marked effect on the work. Henry James's novels doubled and tripled in length once he was earning enough to switch from handwriting to dictation. Ernest Hemingway wrote with a pencil. Standing up. You feel it in his prose. The main advantage of word-processing software is the power to revise. As I worked my way through the old sentences of the second edition, I saw immediately how the craft had changed. Time and again in the old prose, I saw myself spinning wheels. Phrases, clauses, sometimes whole sentences existed only to pass the time, keep the rhythm going, while I figured out how to say what I had in mind. This is a function of typewriting. I've cleaned up a lot of this padding.

Being able to look at the paragraphs on the screen in an approximation of the font in which they will appear in the book was also instructive. You can see problems that aren't apparent in a double-spaced Courier typescript. (Yes, you could do this in the old days on galley proofs, but that was an expensive luxury for most writers.) The visual architecture of writing becomes more important. The typescript or manuscript bears as much relation to the printed book as pencil sketches do to finished paintings. Writers are now beginning to have the same control over the final product that painters have always had.

Perhaps even more important than the power of revision and increased control over the architecture of the text is the opportunity electronic publishing provides for real-time writing. Books have always been "batch-processed." Once a book goes to press it is finished. The economics of publishing made frequent editions difficult. Now we have the ability—and with it goes a responsibility—to keep the text fresh. Closely allied with this new facility is the interactivity of electronic text. I've always missed

the other side of the conversation; now, I expect to hear at least a part of it. (Check the website at ReadFilm.com for comments and updates.)

All these high-tech advantages are intriguing, but don't give up on the classic crafts of media too quickly. At a multimedia conference in Los Angeles in February 1995, I watched a demonstration of the new Quick-Time VR technology. The large audience broke into spontaneous applause when they saw it in operation. The speaker then described how the VR team at Apple had first tried videotape as the source material for Quick-Time VR, rejected it in favor of an expensive panoramic still camera, then finally settled on old-fashioned 35 mm still photography. "Film!" he exclaimed, "This stuff has incredible resolution!" The Hollywood professionals in the audience chuckled at the irony.

And just as the nineteenth-century film medium itself isn't likely to disappear anytime soon, neither is the ingenious device that is a book. Like the inclined plane or the wheel, the book is a simple machine of rugged versatility. No sensible person would prefer a computer screen to a well printed page for reading text (or looking at pictures). This stuff has incredible resolution. Moreover, sewing the pages together on one side provides an excellent search engine for many applications.

In the end, however, it is not the technical superiority of print on bound pages that will prove the lasting value of the book but rather its physical reality. It is only a matter of time before digital technology provides the resolution and visual power of print. What it can never provide is the "thingness" of a book. In an increasingly virtual and abstract world, these physical objects, with unique weight, feel, and smell, will be increasingly prized.

"No ideas but in things," William Carlos Williams told us.

tion. Jessica Ryan, Managing Editor at Oxford, took great care with a complex project. To all, much thanks.

I'm also grateful to my wife and children. While it is traditional in acknowledgments of this kind to thank your family, in this case it is doubly appropriate. Not only did they offer the support, encouragement, and patience any writer needs, over the years they have also contributed directly. Their assistance in research, editing, production, and programming has been invaluable. I hope they agree that this family project was more fun than any yard sale.

J. M.
Sag Harbor NY
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Preface to the Second Edition

Is it necessary, really, to learn How to Read a Film? Obviously, anyone of minimal intelligence over the age of two can—more or less—grasp the basic content of a film, record, radio, or television program without any special training. Yet precisely because the media so very closely mimic reality, we apprehend them much more easily than we comprehend them. Film and the electronic media have drastically changed the way we perceive the world—and ourselves—during the past century, yet we all too naturally accept the vast amounts of information they convey to us in massive doses without questioning how they tell us what they tell. *How to Read a Film* is an essay in understanding that crucial process—on several levels.

In the first place, film and television are general mediums of communication. Certain basic interesting rules of perception operate: Chapter 3, "The Language of Film: Signs and Syntax," investigates a number of these concepts. On a more advanced level, film is clearly a sophisticated art—possibly the most important art of the twentieth century—with a rather complex history of theory and practice. Chapter 1, "Film as an Art," suggests how film can be fit into the spectrum of the more traditional arts;

Chapter 4, "The Shape of Film History," attempts a brief survey of the development of the art of movies; Chapter 5, "Film Theory: Form and Function," surveys some of the major theoretical developments of the past seventy-five years.

Film is a medium and an art, but it is also, uniquely, a very complex technological undertaking. Chapter 2, "Technology: Image and Sound," is—I hope—a simple exposition of the intriguing science of cinema. Although film is dominant, the development of the electronic media— records, radio, tape, television, video—has proceeded in parallel with the growth of film during the twentieth century. The relationship between film and media becomes stronger with each passing year; Chapter 6 outlines a general theory of media (both print and electronic), discusses the equally complex technology of the electronic media, and concludes with a survey of the history of radio and television. Since the first edition of this book appeared thirty years ago, film has become part of a much larger universe of audiovisual media: Chapter 7 explores this new world.

As you can see from this outline, the structure of *How to Read a Film* is global rather than linear. In each of the seven chapters the intention has been to try to explain a little of how film operates on us psychologically, how it affects us politically. Yet these twin central dominant questions can be approached from a number of angles. Since most people think of film first as an art, I've begun with that aspect of the phenomenon. Since it's difficult to understand how the art has developed without some knowledge of the technology, Chapter 2 proceeds immediately to a discussion of the science of film. Understanding technique, we can begin to discover how film operates as a language (Chapter 3). Since practice does (or should) precede theory, the history of the industry and art (Chapter 4) precedes the intellectualization of it here (Chapter 5). We conclude by widening the focus to view movies in the larger context of media (Chapter 6) and the digital revolution (Chapter 7).

This order seems most logical to me, but readers might very well prefer to begin with history or theory, language or technology, and in fact the book has been constructed in such a way that the sections can be read independently, in any order. (This has resulted in a small number of repetitions, for which I ask your indulgence.) Please remember, too, that in any work of this sort there is a tendency to *prescribe* rather than simply *describe* the phenomena under investigation. Hundreds of analytical concepts are discussed in the pages that follow, but I ask that readers consider them just that—concepts, analytical tools—rather than given laws. Film

study is exciting because it is constantly in ferment. It's my hope that *How to Read a Film* is a book that can be argued with, discussed, and used. In any attempt at understanding, the questions are usually more important than the answers.

A few miscellaneous notes: Film titles are in English, unless the original foreign language titles are commonly used. In cases where halftones are direct enlargements of film frames, this has been noted in the captions; in most other cases, you can assume the halftones are publicity stills and may differ in slight respects from the actual images of the film.

Acknowledgments

Over thirty-two years numerous colleagues have contributed to *How to Read a Film.* Although many of them (William K. Everson, David Bombyk) are no longer with us, I think it important to remember their contributions.

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