

HOW
TO
READ
A
FILM

OTHER BOOKS BY JAMES MONACO

The New Wave

Media Culture

Celebrity

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American Film Now

Who's Who in American Film Now (ed.)

The Connoisseur's Guide to the Movies

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The Film Guide (ed.)

The Dictionary of New Media

HOW TO READ A FILM

The World of Movies,
Media, and Multimedia

Art, Technology, Language, History, Theory

Third Edition, Completely Revised and Expanded

James Monaco

with diagrams by David Lindroth

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CREDITS

Design Director: David Lindroth.

General Editor English Edition: Curtis Church.

General Editor German Edition: Hans-Michael Bock.

Editorial Assistance: Richard Allen, Joellyn Ausanka, William D. Drennan, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Joe Medjuck, James Pallot, Leonard Quart, Roger Rawlings, Anne Sanow, Jerrold Spiegel, Dan Streible, John Wright, Robert Wohlleben.

Production Assistance: Kate Collins, Nick Drjuschin, Suzanne Goodwin, Jo Imeson, Susan Jacobson, Charles Monaco, Margaret Monaco, Andrew Monaco, Greg Parker, Stephen Plumlee, Susan Schenker.

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For Susan
With love, still

In Memoriam

Lucille

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INTRODUCTION

What with one thing and another, almost twenty years have passed since the second edition of *How To Read a Film*. I have excuses, mind you. We raised a family, bought a house, made a living. We founded two companies in the process. Moreover, sales of the second edition kept increasing, year after year, thanks to a loyal group of readers and film professors. In the computer industry, there's a saying: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The timing had been right for the book. The first edition was completed in 1977, just at the end of an exciting period of film history. The past twenty years have had their share of good films (and competent scholarship); Hollywood thrived during the eighties and nineties, as new distribution media made the economics of filmmaking more flexible. And independent filmmakers have both more freedom and cheaper technology at their command. But there have been no major movements since the seventies to alter radically our view of the medium or its history. The movie generation of the sixties has had a longer reign now than the generation of the thirties that preceded it. If you make a list of the important filmmakers of the late 1970s, it will serve—with only a few additions and deletions—as a list of the dominant personalities of the late 1990s. As the generation has, so the book has lasted.

Yet, in the past twenty years, the whole world has changed.

The new technology is pervasive, and its effect on the way we make not only movies but all media is about to become 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 the 1980s and 1990s. The way we process text, images, and sounds today is radically different from what it was twenty years ago. And the union of media, which the invention of movies foreshadowed a hundred years ago, is now nearly 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 yield to digital electronics and photonics, filmmakers may rediscover the pioneer spirit. The medium is about to be reborn: 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 50 miles to catch a screening of a rare film. Today, even the most out-of-the-way town has a video store with four or five thousand titles in stock, ready for viewing at a moment's notice, and if you can't find it there, you can get it on the Internet. Twenty 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 twenty years our exposure to filmed entertainment has increased by a magnitude or more.

While the new technology is exciting and promising, the art that it serves has yet to share the spirit of revolution. That's not surprising: art imitates life, not technology, and our political concerns are just about the same as they were twenty years ago. The Cold War ended, not with a bang, but a series of whimpers, and ended too late to have the dramatic effect it should have had on most people's lives (except for the victims of the Eastern European ethnic wars). The world of politics is as postmodern as our popular culture. We don't invent, we don't react, we don't create. We simply repeat, and repeat, and repeat. Ideas and feelings that were heady, exciting, and full of promise for a few brief shining moments in the 1960s are still with us, now nagging responsibilities, long in the tooth, often distorted ("politically correct"). I don't know why this has happened (perhaps we were too busy trying to figure out how to get our computers to work), but it has. It seems clear, now, that the generation of the 1960s will have to leave to our children the work of reinventing social politics, restoring its humor, and rediscovering its joy. At least they have a fresh century at their disposal.

This fourth edition of *How To Read a Film* was conceived from the beginning as a multimedia production.* The book seemed to welcome this approach not only because of its subject, but also for its architecture, which was global rather than linear. The seven sections of the book stand independently; readers can use them (or ignore them) as they see fit. Now the additional "parts" on the disc are available for this do-it-yourself construction project. You can find out more about the multimedia edition at WWW.ReadFilm.com or by writing or calling UNET 2 Corporation, 80 East 11th Street, New York NY 10003; 800 269 6422.

When I began work on the third edition, it looked like a six-month project. But the work stretched out for years as we discovered more and more possibilities

* The third edition appeared only in German as *Film verstehen* (1995).

for exciting multimedia extensions to the basic text. The movies, additional texts, and vastly expanded opportunities for still illustrations were obvious from the start. But as the project developed, we realized the importance of interactive “laboratories,” and became enamored of the possibilities for author’s notes that commented on the text. As a writer who had always been much too fond of parentheses and footnotes, I found this opportunity to go off on tangents irresistible. Then, too, one of the difficulties of writing about film has always been that you don’t have the same tools at your command as the people you write about. Multimedia restores the balance. Now we can show as well as tell.

I wrote the first edition of *How To Read a Film* on the Smith-Corona electric typewriter on which I had learned to type in college, and on which I had pounded out about 1.5 million words as a freelance writer in the 1970s. I rewrote it on a series of PowerBooks, 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 can feel it in his prose. The main advantage of word-processing software is the power to revise. As I worked my way through the then fifteen-year-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 make 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 WWW.ReadFilm.com for 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 QuickTime 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 QuickTime 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, so, too, the more time I spend with computers, the more I appreciate 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," Wallace Stevens told us.

The production of the fourth edition of *How To Read a Film* (both the book and the disc) has been very much a team effort. You'll find the members of the team listed in the credits; I'm grateful to them all. I especially want to thank Jo Imeson, Kate Collins, Joellyn Ausanka, and Curtis Church for their conscientious attention to detail. James Pallot, Jerrold Spiegel, Joe Medjuck, and Curtis Church all provided valuable critiques of the revision as it progressed. Richard Allen of NYU, Raymond Fielding of Florida State University, Annette Insdorf of Columbia University, Leo Braudy of the University of Southern California, Steven Reich, Richard Reisman, and Dan Streible of the University of Texas all provided valuable information. I'm grateful to numerous film teachers who thoughtfully provided feedback over the years. Richard Lorber of Winstar New Media and Bruce Ricker of Rhapsody Films provided materials as well as encouragement.

One of the plusses in revisiting *How To Read a Film* has been the chance to work again with David Lindroth and Hans-Michael Bock. As before, David Lindroth has provided creative and engaging diagrams—only now they are all digital. It was a pleasure to work with David again. Hans-Michael Bock, the general editor of the German edition, *Film verstehen*, has once again given a native Geist to that version that a simple translation never could have conveyed. (The work on *Film*

verstehen has proceeded concurrently with the English-language edition.) Ludwig Moos of Rowohlt Verlag provided patient support during the process. To all, much thanks.

I'm also grateful to my wife and children. While it is traditional in acknowledgements 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, they also contributed directly. Their assistance in research, editing, production, and programming was invaluable. I hope they agree that this family project was more fun than any yard sale.

J. M.
Sag Harbor
August 1999

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 four 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 eighty years, 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 clear 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 this 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.

As you can see from this outline, the structure of *How To Read a Film* is global rather than linear. In each of the six 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

* I have made no changes to this Preface. It was another time.

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).

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 complex 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.

How To Read a Film is the result of ten years spent, mainly, thinking, writing, and talking about film and media. Having tried in the pages that follow to set down a few ideas about movies and TV, I find I am most impressed with the number of questions that are yet to be answered. Appendix II gives a fair sense of the considerable amount of work that has already been done (mainly in the past ten years); there is much more yet to do. Had *How To Read a Film* included all the material I originally wanted to cover it would have been encyclopedic in length; as it is now, it is an admittedly hefty, but nevertheless still sinewy, introduction. More and more it seems to me movies must be considered in the context of media in general—in fact, I would go so far as to suggest that film is best considered simply as one stage in the ongoing history of communications. Chapter 6 introduces this concept. You will find some additional material on both print and electronic media in the Chronology.

A few miscellaneous notes: Bibliographical information not included in footnotes will be found in the appropriate section of Appendix II. 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.

I owe a very real debt to a number of people who have helped in various ways. *How To Read a Film* never would have been written without my invaluable experience teaching film at the New School for Social Research. I thank Allen Austill for

allowing me to do so, Reuben Abel for taking a chance on a young teacher in 1967, and Wallis Osterholz for her unflagging encouragement and necessary help. I am especially grateful to my students at the New School (and the City University of New York) who, although they may not know it, gave at least as much as they got.

At Oxford University Press I have been particularly fortunate. Editor John Wright, with intelligence, savvy, and humor, has added immeasurably to whatever success the book might enjoy. Ellen Royer helped to make sense out of a manuscript that may have been lively, but was certainly sprawling and demanding. Dana Kasarsky designed the book with care and dealt efficiently with the myriad problems such a complex layout entails. Ellie Fuchs, Jean Shapiro, and Editor James Raimes at Oxford were consistently and dependably helpful. Curtis Church has overseen the production of the second edition with patience and great care. Thanks to all.

David Lindroth has drawn more than three dozen diagrams which I think add considerably to the effect of *How To Read a Film*. If I may say so, I think they are notably superior to comparable illustrations of this sort. David not only translated my scrawls into meaningful conceptions, he also added significantly to the realization of those conceptions. His input was invaluable.

Dudley Andrew and David Bombyk read the manuscript and commented upon it rigorously and in exceptionally useful detail. Their comments were enormously helpful. I also want to thank Kent R. Brown, Paul C. Hillery, Timothy J. Lyons, and Sreekumar Menon for reading and commenting upon the manuscript.

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Marc Fürstenberg, Claudia Gorbman, Annette Insdorf, Bruce Kawin, and Clay Steinman, among others, made suggestions valuable for this revised edition.

Penelope Houston of *Sight and Sound* and Peter Lebensold of *Take One* graciously allowed me to draw on materials originally published in their journals.

Finally, I thank my wife, Susan Schenker, who read and commented on the manuscript, talked out difficulties with me, helped write the Appendices, and did so much more. (Acknowledgments are always such a faint reflection of real feelings.)

J.M.

New York City

January 1977

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