INTRODUCTION

Film, Form, and Culture asks you to think seriously about film, as seriously as you would about literature. It's a book about form and structure, content and contexts, history and business. It will give you some sense of film's history and its place in the greater scheme of things, especially in that envelope of words and deeds, money, art, artifacts, and daily life we live in that is called culture.

But why think seriously about film at all? Many people don't. Movies are among those things in our lives that we apparently don't *need* to take seriously. We go to the movies to be entertained, scared, grossed out; to make out, spend time, have something to discuss afterward. But we don't often want to think about movies as a serious part of our emotional or intellectual lives, or even treat them with the same intensity we use when we discuss sports or politics. Outside of a film studies course, we rarely hear people engaged in a discussion of films that goes much deeper than plot or characters.

Even the people who review movies on television or in the papers are not as serious about their subject as other journalists are about sports, music, or painting. They make jokes and puns, stick their thumbs up or down, tell us the plot and whether the characters are believable. Reviewers, in fact, are often part of the show, a kind of overture to the film we may go to see or bring home on video. They are another part of the entertainment.

The reason that attention must be paid to film is that most of us get our stories—our narratives and myths—from it, or from its close cousin, television. In other words, from the late nineteenth century onward, people have turned to film as entertainment, escape, *and* education—as an affirmation of the way they live or think they ought to live their lives. But even if film were "only" entertainment it would be important to find out how it works. Why does it entertain us? Why do we need to be entertained? And film is part of world politics and national policy. Some governments support filmmakers as a means to express their national culture to the world. Other governments have caused international incidents over film, particularly when copyright and piracy issues were at stake.

Hard to believe, but sometimes international policy concerning film can lead to aesthetic consequences. After the end of World War II, in 1946, for example, a major agreement was drawn up between France and the United States: the Blum-Byrnes Accords. This agreement came as an unequal compromise in the face of France's concern about getting its own films shown on its own screens. The French public wanted American films. The Accords forced France to accept American films in an uneven ratio: it could show sixteen weeks of its own films, thirty-six weeks of anything else. The Accords changed the way the French

made films because some filmmakers decided that the best way to meet the quota was to make high-quality films through the adaptation of literary works. Other French filmmakers hated these adaptations and started to experiment with new cinematic forms, resulting in a revolution of filmmaking in the late 1950s that was called the French New Wave. The result, in turn, was a change in film form all over the world. French resentment over the influx of American film and other media surfaced again in the 1990s.

Issues of piracy of American films have changed distribution patterns, so that, instead of staging the release of a new movie first in the United States and then slowly releasing it around the world, many films are now released internationally. Film, politics, money, and culture are never separable.

The business of film ripples through the economy, the policies, and the technology of the world at large to this very day. In the coming years, the mergers of enormous media powers—most especially America Online and Time-Warner and the French company Vivendi and Universal pictures—may bring wide-reaching changes not only in the economics of film but in what film actually means. Media mergers may create a confluence of various delivery systems—film, digital video, print, music, and the World Wide Web—that will make film as we now understand it a different form and kind of entertainment. Or, as in the case of AOL Time-Warner, this convergence may fail. While still one company, the name "AOL" has been removed from its title.

All nations, our own included, understand the power of film and television to influence their people, to propagandize values and ideologies. Film may be a bargaining chip in foreign policy, always an economic commodity, sometimes the subject of the politician's wrath at home (as when candidates for office rail against the evil moral influence of Hollywood film, while Hollywood stars become politicians and influence our lives even more) and consequently film becomes the subject of study of many different kinds of academic courses in which its power and complexity are acknowledged and analyzed. We will talk some about the politics and the business, because film is big business and its creation, its form, and its content are about power, the core of politics. But mostly we will talk about the form—the way films are put together so that we, as viewers, understand what they are attempting to tell us—and the content of film. We will come to all of this from the perspective of textuality—studying the film itself and how all its parts work—and find out how film, its production and reception, its place in our culture, makes up a large, coherent construction of meaningful and interrelated elements that we can analyze—a text that we can read.

Let's go back for a moment to our straw men, the film reviewers. The first thing almost any reviewer does is talk about (usually summarize) the film's plot. "Charlie Kane is an unhappy newspaper man. His wife leaves him, and he loses all his friends." "2001 opens with a number of shots of animals out on the desert. Then one tribe of apes attacks another until, in the middle of the night, one of the tribes discovers this strange monolith in the middle of their camp. There isn't much dialogue, but the apes look real enough."

What film reviews almost always evade is one of the few realities of film itself, that it is an artificial construct, something made in a particular way for specific purposes, and that the plot or story of a film is a function of this construction, not necessarily its first principle. In other words, and as we'll see in more detail as we go along, the formal elements of film—the shot and the cut, for example—are unique to film. They are the basic forms of its construction—along with lighting, camera movement, music, sound, acting—and they themselves were and are determined by things going on in the development of film throughout its history and the development of the culture that filmmaking is one part of. When I speak of film as "artificial," I don't mean it's false; I'm using the term in its root sense, made by art or, often in the case of film, by craft. Film is an artifice, and it becomes an artifact, made in specific ways, using specific tools, fashioned to produce and create specific effects (one of which is the plot, which we often do have to revert to for convenience and to make a point about a movie) with the aim of pleasing the audience who pays to see it. Film reviewers and most everyday discussions of film try to ignore the artificial, constructed aspect of film—its form—and instead talk about it as pure story. The characters of its story become, somehow, "realistic," as if they might "really" exist rather than result from the way the film itself puts meaning together.

There is no doubt that filmmakers and the development of film form early in the last century play a role in this deception. Many filmmakers assume that most viewers are not interested in the construction principles of their work and have accomplished a remarkable feat, making the structure of their films invisible. In other words, one reason we don't pay attention to the form and structure of film is that the form and structure of film disappear behind the very story and characters they produce. This is a great act of prestidigitation and one of the main reasons film has become so popular. Movies have achieved a presence of being, an emotional immediacy that seems unmediated—simply there, without a history, without apparatus, without anything actually between us except the story.

In the discussion that follows, we will explain, analyze, and demystify this apparent act of magic. As we come to understand that film has a complex and flexible form and that story and characters are created by that form, we will become more comfortable with the notion of film as something carefully and seriously *made*. From that point we will be able to move on and understand that the making has a history and the history has a number of parts and branches. One branch—the largest—is the commercial narrative cinema of Hollywood, the major subject of our study. There are a number of national cinemas, some of them, like India's, almost as large as America's, but without much influence outside the nation's borders. Still another is a more experimental cinema—often found in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America but occasionally cropping up in the United States—which explores and experiments with the potentials of film form in the way a good novelist or poet or computer programmer explores her language in order to create new meanings, new structures of thought and feeling.

Understanding film history will help us to understand the conventions of form and content. Clearly, films change over the course of time: they and their makers have a history, as we do, as the culture does. Visual structure, acting styles, story content, the way films *look*—all seem different now than ten or a hundred years ago. But, in many ways, these changes are only superficial. It would be only a small exaggeration to say that, with a few important exceptions, the structure of film and the stories and characters created by that structure have remained mostly unchanged, or have changed in only a gradual way, during the course of film history. Technical methods have indeed changed, and aspects of style (especially acting styles) have changed; but by and large the stories film tells and the ways it tells them follow a continuum almost from the very first images shown to the public. And yet film is always publicizing its uniqueness and originality. "For the first time on the screen . . ." was a popular publicity phrase in the 1940s and 1950s. "The funniest," "most unique," "unlike anything you've ever seen," "the best film," and "you've never seen anything like it" remain useful nonsense phrases for film advertisements. In truth, every commercial, theatrical film is in one way or another like every other commercial, theatrical film, and all are consciously created to be that way! In order to get a film made in Hollywood, an agent or a producer or a studio head has to be convinced that the film you have in mind is "just like" some other film "only different." Watch the first half-hour of Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) for a hilarious representation of what "pitching a story" to a Hollywood producer is like, and see Albert Brooks's *The Muse* (1999) or Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002) for an ironic fantasy about the search for an original film idea.

"Just like . . . only different" is the engine that drives film. Hollywood cinema in particular is based upon the conventions of genre, *kinds* of stories, told with styles and cinematic elements that are repeated with major and minor variations throughout the history of the genre. Through genres, films are influenced by history and, very rarely, influence history in return. Genres, as we will see in Chapters 8 and 9, are complex contractual events drawn between the filmmaker and the film viewer. We go to a horror film or a thriller, a romantic comedy or a science fiction movie, a Western or a melodrama with certain expectations that the film must meet. If it doesn't meet them, we will be disappointed and probably will not like the film. If a film masquerading as a genre turns out to attack or make fun of it, one of two things can happen. If other historical and cultural events are in sync with the attack or the parody, it is possible that the genre will wither and all but disappear. This happened to the Western in the late sixties and early seventies. Three moving and disturbing films that questioned the historical and formal elements of the Western—Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)—joined with the negative response to the Vietnam War and some profound questions about American imperial interests and the myths of "manifest destiny" to bring the Western down from its enormous popularity to a point from which it has barely recovered. These days, the Western is more likely to be a commentary on the genre rather than a repetition of it, or absorbed into other genres, like science fiction. Among the more interesting recent Westerns are those that use the genre as something like a cover for other investigations of character, history, and gender, such as Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Ma:* (1995) and Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993).

The more likely response to a film that mocks its generic construction too forcefully is that no one will go to see it. This happened with Robert Altman' late seventies Western with Paul Newman, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976); th Bruce Willis action film *Hudson Hawk* (1991); and the Arnold Schwarzenegge film *The Last Action Hero* (1993). Of course, one ironic and self-mocking Bruc Willis action film, *Die Hard* (1988), was very popular (we will analyze it closely in Chapter 7). When Willis and then Schwarzenegger took the mockery too far however, and the action hero stereotype was made too obviously like a cartoor and too self-conscious, viewers rebelled. Stereotypes, the expected character, the unsurprising story, the hoped-for conclusion, the invisible style are all part o our contract with the movies, what their makers believe we demand of them Such demands are certainly not restricted to movies alone: in television, po music, news reporting, and politics, we tend to be most comfortable with wha we've most often heard. We are wary of the new. Our popular culture is, mor often than not, an act of affirming already held ideas, of defining, delimiting and limiting what we accept as the real. The "new" is either quickly absorbed by convention or ignored.

The worst thing we can say about a film is that it is "unrealistic." "The characters weren't real." "The story didn't strike me as being real." Reality is always our last resort. If someone thinks we're not being serious, we're told to "face reality." If our ideas are half-baked, overly narcissistic, or even just silly, we're told to "get real!" If we are college teachers or teenagers, we're told we'll find things different "in the real world." Reality can be a threat, the thing we're not facing, not in, or not dealing with. But it can also be a verbal gesture of approbation. "That was so real." And, of course, it's the greatest compliment we can give a film, even though—and this is the great paradox—in our media-wise world, we know deep down that what we are seeing has very, very little to do with reality.

The fact is that "reality," like all other aspects of culture, is not something out there, existing apart from us. Reality is an agreement we make with ourselves and between ourselves and the rest of the culture about what we will call real. Maybe, as some people have argued, the only dependable definition of reality is that it is something a lot of people agree upon. This is not to say that there aren't actual, "real" things in the world. Natural processes, states of matter (heat, cold, the relative solidity of physical things), the fact that, in temperate climates, plant life dies off in the fall and returns in the spring—these constitute a "reality," perhaps because they happen without our presence. But no matter what natural events and processes occur, they have little meaning without human interpretation, without our speaking about them within the contexts of our lives and our culture, without our giving them names and meanings.

We find films realistic because we have learned certain kinds of responses, gestures, attitudes from them; and when we see these gestures or feel these

responses again in a film or a television show, we assume they are real, because we've felt them and seen them before. We've probably even imitated them. (Where do we learn the way to kiss someone? From the movies.) This is reality as an infinite loop, a recursion through various emotional and visual constructs, culturally approved, indeed culturally mandated, that we assume to be "real" because we see them over and over again, absorb them, and, for better or worse, live them. In an important sense, like films themselves, "reality" is made up of repetition and assent.

Here is where the reality factor is joined with genre, history, culture, convention, and the invisible structure of film that we talked about earlier. What we call "realistic" in film is, more often than not, only the familiar. The familiar is what we experience often, comfortably, clearly, as if it were always there. When we approve of the reality of a film, we are really affirming our comfort with it, our desire to accept what we see. Desire—simply wanting to see the familiar or a twist on the familiar and receive pleasure from the seeing—is an important idea, because filmgoers aren't fools. No one literally believes what they see on the screen; we all desire and in a certain sense covet, and in a greater sense *want*, what we see, despite what we know about its probability or, more likely, its improbability. We respond with a desire that things could be like this or, simply, that we might want to inhabit a world that looks and behaves like the one on the screen. We want to share, or just *have* the same feelings that the characters up there are having. We want to accept them uncritically, respond emotionally. Our culture keeps telling us over and over that emotions don't lie. If we feel it, it must be so.

In the discussion that follows, we will steer our way through the thickets of desire and try to find why we want so much from movies and how the movies deliver what they and we think we want. By examining form and the ways in which our responses are culturally determined, we will attempt to look at our responses in order to understand what we are really getting when we ask for realism, why we should be asking for it at all, and why our expectations keep changing. Remember that many of the most popular films—science fiction and action films, for example—are fantasies; and more and more of them, from the *Batman* films (Tim Burton, 1989, 1992, Joel Schumacher, 1995, 1997) through *Spider-Man* (Sam Rami, 2002, 2004) to *The Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) and *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000, 2003), are based on comic books! Horror films and horror film parodies are fantasies that now openly depend on the viewers' understanding of horror film conventions and enjoying the ability to laugh at them. The film is proof that "reality" is not a given, but chosen.

Culture is another important idea in this book. Chapter 7 will cover in detail, what the study of culture, and popular culture in particular, is and how our very ideas about culture keep changing, almost as much as the culture that's being studied. But since we will use the term before then, let me begin to introduce it here.

Culture is the sum total of the intricate ways we relate to ourselves, our peers, our community, our country, world, and universe. It is made up of the minutiae of our daily lives: from the toothpaste we use, and the fact we u toothpaste at all, to the music we like; the political ideas we hold; our gende the image we have of ourselves; the models we want to emulate. Culture more than ourselves, because our selves are formed by a variety of influenc and agreements. So culture is also made up of the general ideological comp nents, the web of beliefs and things we take for granted in the society we live i Politics, law, religion, art, entertainment are all part of our culture: they form i ideological engine, the forces of assent, the values, images, and ideas we agr to embrace and follow or struggle against.

We will use culture here in a broad sense, perhaps close to what the Frenc think about when they worry about their culture being at stake because of th influx and popularity of American movies. In our definition, culture doesn mean "high-toned" or refer only to works of high art that are supposed to b good for us. Rather, culture is the complex totality of our daily lives and act Culture is the form and content of our selves in relation to our community, ou country, our social and economic class, our entertainments, our politics and ec nomics. Culture is the way we act out ideology.

Ideology is the way we agree to see ourselves, to behave, and to create th values of our lives. Ideology and culture are intertwined. When I decide to ac calmly or angrily in a difficult situation, my reaction is determined by ideolog ical and cultural demands of appropriate behavior. In this case it is determine by my gender, which culture forms in the course of my upbringing. Men ar "supposed" to react strongly, if not violently, while women "should" be mor passive, without an aggressiveness that would be perfectly acceptable in mal behavior. Much of our culture calls "nerdy" any behavior that is intellectuall driven and outside the norm. But "norms" are not created naturally. They ar made by the ideological assent we give to—in this instance—what kind o behavior or personality type is considered "normal." Who determines th norm? We all do to the extent to which we assent to ideological and cultura givens. If we suddenly, as a culture, agreed that intellectual work was as mean ingful and "manly" as physical work—athletics, for example—the ideologica engine might shift gears and "nerds" would become as heroic as jocks.

The givens of ideology are actually created over the course of time and ar changeable. For example, in older films, women were seen as needing to be saved by a heroic male, a reflection of the ideologies of the time. Today, we ofter see and cheer in film a strong female character. Contemporary horror films are a good example of the newly seen power of women over destructive forces, while contemporary action films often question male heroics, even while celebrating them.

Of course, when we speak of culture, it might be more accurate to think of cultures. Neither culture nor ideology is singular or monolithic. Let's move from film for a moment and take popular music as an example of how complex culture can be and how it can move in many directions. Hip-hop and rap emerged from African American popular culture in the seventies and eighties. Rap moved from the streets to the recording studios and into the wider population

by the mid-1990s, and then separated into a number of strands. One strand, Gangsta Rap, became a way for male African American teenagers to express anger at middle-class white society. But its language of violence and misogyny also disturbed parts of African American culture and signified class and economic divisions within that culture. It brought down the wrath of some of the white establishment as well. Rap as a whole quickly transcended the music world into the larger cultural arena where art, industry, politics, and promotion are intertwined. It became sound, fashion, aggression, record sales, movie deals, police busts, highway noise, and big business. Attraction for many and irritant to some, rap became a phenomenon of the culture, a practice of one subculture (a term used to define one active part of the entire culture) and a representation of all of the culture.

The point is that culture is made up of expressions and intersections, representations, images, sounds, and stories, almost always influences of or even formed by gender, race, and economics. It is local and global, moving and changing, depending upon the needs of individuals and groups. It can be as peaceful as family churchgoing or as violent as Serbian weekend warriors, who, during the wars of the nineties, dressed up like the movie character Rambo and set out to kill those they believed were their ancient enemies.

In *Film, Form, and Culture*, we will look closely at all the contexts of film (with some references to television and new media): where it fits in the culture, what constitutes its popularity, and why popularity is sometimes used to condemn it.

Finally, a word about the films we will discuss. We will be thinking about and analyzing theatrical, narrative, fiction film—films that tell stories that are meant to be seen by relatively large numbers of people. While we will refer to documentary and to some avant-garde practice, our concern here is with the kinds of film that most people see most of the time. We will talk a lot about American film, because that is the dominant cinema around the world. But there are other very important and very wonderful cinemas and individual filmmakers outside Hollywood, many of whom make their films in response to Hollywood. We will, therefore, also address world cinema, the roles it plays, its individual filmmakers and their films.

But doing all this raises a problem. What particular films should we discuss? Within the context of a book, it is impossible to mention (not to say analyze) everyone's favorites, or to deal with films that everyone has seen or wants to see. Adding to the problem is that there is not really an established canon in film studies as there is in literature. Of course, there are great films. Everyone agrees that *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) is among the most important films ever made, and we will discuss it here. But every film scholar and film teacher, like every filmgoer, has his or her favorites. I am no exception. The choice of films I discuss and analyze is often very subjective. I've tried to follow the principle of part for whole. Rather than drown you in names and titles, my hope is that the analyses of the films I do discuss can provide tools for thinking, talking, and writing about other films; and that each discussion of film, genre, or larger theoretic principle will serve as a template for work on other films, other genres,

and other related interests. This is one reason that a few filmmakers are referred to a number of times in different contexts.

One more word on the selection of films. Because film has a history, I have included many older films, even (especially) black and white films. Black and white was the norm—the reality and the mark of realism!—before the late sixties. My hope is that you will want to see the films referred to and get a sense of how wonderful they were and still are.

No matter what the film, you will be asked to connect things and to refuse to believe that the experience of any one thing exists in isolation from any other experience. This book therefore invites you to look at the movies, and, by extension and example, television and the computer screen, as one item in the enormous palette of your own experience and the wider experiences of the culture we all belong to. It invites you to think of a film narrative as seriously as a literary narrative and to understand that the array of images and stories, beliefs and prejudices, love and rejection, peace and violence that we learn about in literature we can learn in very different ways from film. In effect, this book is about the end of film innocence; it is an invitation to discover a world in which nothing is simple, nothing is "just there," and nothing can be dismissed without, at least, your being conscious that dismissal has consequences.

The FFC DVD-ROM is a companion to the text: it covers many films, but not every film that's in the text, and it occasionally goes beyond the text to demonstrate what can only be shown with moving images. The films excerpted in the DVD-ROM complement, more than duplicate, the examples used in the text. Sections in the text that are directly explicated on the DVD-ROM are so noted. For a complete table of contents for the DVD-ROM, see the inside front cover.