

Why a Movie is Not “Just” a Movie

All movies are fabrications, constructed with certain goals in mind. Nothing is left to chance. Everything you see in a film is there for reason. Hollywood film is one of most highly constructed, least random works imaginable. Virtually all popular movies try to disguise the fact that they are artificial creations because their success is measured by the extent to which they can convince the audience to suspend disbelief and become caught up in story being told. A filmmaker does not want the audience distracted by thinking about the enormous behind-the-scenes effort that went into creating the seemingly “real” world appearing on the screen in the front of the theater. Thousands of decisions go into making this artificial world seem “natural.”

Hollywood movies for the most part employ an “invisible style” or “formal paradigm.” This technique subordinates every element of moviemaking -- camera placement, lighting, focus, casting, framing, editing, dialogue, blocking, etc. -- to the story the film is telling. The filmmaker makes an implicit contract with the audience: at all moments in a movie, every spectator will have the best vantage point to see all the important events happening on the screen. For our part we, the audience, are asked to suspend our disbelief, to identify with the whole, non-existent, fictional space the movie creates.

The invisible style uses two methods to achieve its effect. First, “centering” by which events carrying the main story line are constantly in the foreground and in the center of the frame. Keeping all the action right in front of the viewer at all times disguises the editing which has created the illusion of continuity from shot to shot. Second, “the shot-reverse shot” technique. This process relies on eye-line matches in which the camera shots at an actor’s face, at his/her eye-level, and in the next shot shows us what the actor is looking at. This sequence isolates for the viewer what is important in the visual field. More important, the shot-reverse shot, while “invisible,” leads us to make judgements the film wants us to make about the importance of people and incidents. The invisible style has obvious ideological power: by making a manufactured story look spontaneous and “real,” a filmmaker gives the spectator as few options as possible but to agree that what has been constructed and shown on the screen is actually true, or natural.

However, as you have all discovered in talking with friends about movies you have seen, films support many “meanings.” They are very complex representations: no single message is the correct one. No film is the work of just one individual; thousands of people contribute their ideas to a film. There is no way to know how the mix of intentions represented by the actors, the director, the cinematographer, the producer, the myriad of supporting cast members contributed to the final product. Even if the director’s ideas are the most important in giving shape and meaning to a film, we can’t reduce a movie to what the director consciously intended. We all express our culture without being conscious of doing so. Human beings can’t be reduced to their conscious thoughts; films can’t be reduced to the director’s stated wishes.

And what of the audience? It’s your movie too. Audiences are not wholly captive to a filmmaker’s conscious intentions. Audience members interpret movies according to their lives, experiences, and tastes. These experiences are just as valid when applied to the interpretation of a movie as the filmmaker’s life experiences. Thus, the meaning of a movie lies in the interaction of the film and audience: a different audience and a different time will yield different meanings drawn from the same film.

Isn’t there a danger of “reading too much” into a film?

Won’t we see things that are not there? Picture yourself watching a horror film in which a group of teenagers are spending the night in spooky cabin deep in woods. It’s midnight and a couple sneaks off to back bedroom and has sex. The attractive young woman gets up, decides to take a shower, and says, “I’ll be right back.” We know that she will be toast in just a minute or two. But how do we know?

If the film were a romantic comedy we wouldn't expect this. You have "read" into the scene. Like the characters in *Scream* you know horror films operate according to a set of rules or conventions that have been established by previous films in the genre. The filmmaker depends on the audience knowing these conventions. If we don't read into the film we wouldn't be able to make sense out of it. You must read into film based on your cultural knowledge or it would just be a sequence of meaningless activities presented in no particular order.

That said, you can not read a movie any way you want. You must make an argument about what you think the meaning is by assembling evidence from the film itself and presenting it to support an arguable thesis. For example, it would be difficult to make a compelling argument that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is not about an explorer archaeologist – the familiar American hero, the frontiersman, in an updated costume complete with fedora - looking for the Ark of Covenant. It would be impossible to "read" this film as a fictionalized documentary about shoemaking in Persia ca 1000 AD. The point is that there are many ways to read, to construct an argument about, a film. Some, obviously, are better than others. Be open to multiple readings. Maybe *Raiders* is about finding God or maybe it is a film about Freudian revenge on the father. Or maybe it is about some other issue. But it is about something beyond the story it tells. It is a cultural representation that has resonance beyond the intentions of the filmmaker.

But even if a Hollywood blockbuster can tell us something about American culture, isn't it in the end "just" a movie that we really shouldn't spend too much time analyzing? Yes, it is a cultural representation, but why waste time delving into its hidden meanings when we could get so much more out of thinking about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Well, why is it acceptable to analyze Shakespeare and not *Night of Living Dead*? Instead of being put off by the relative social and intellectual standing of these two different cultural representations, why not look at both of them seriously? See if they reveal rich interpretations as cultural representations. Probably *Hamlet* is richer than *Night of Living Dead*, but the most profitable way to decide the issue is to make arguments about each production, not simply dismiss one as inherently inferior and lacking in substance.

And finally, how to overcome your understandable resistance to analyzing popular movies on the grounds that it will "ruin" the simple pleasure of watching a compelling story well told. We argue in DOC 3 that it is not a matter of ruining a film but of making your enjoyment of it richer, more complex. It is not only possible, but also more enjoyable, we claim, to combine intellectual analysis of a film with the visceral pleasure you receive from its visual and auditory assault.

Becoming aware of the cultural work representations like movies are doing is a part of the process of constructing your own identity. Popular culture, like high culture, is us: we construct it; to look closely at it is a rewarding form of autobiographical reflection.

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