

Film Theory:

Meaning and Approaches to Criticism.

Movies are entertainment. Movies are documents of their time and place. Movies are artistic forms of self-expression. Movies we see at theatres, on television, or home video are typically *narrative* films. They tell stories about characters going through experiences. But what are they really about? What is the *content* of a film?

FOUR LEVELS OF MEANING

- 1. Referential Content:** Recounting the plot of a movie, telling what happens, is the simplest way to explain it to someone else. But this is neither a film *review* nor a film *analysis*. It's merely a synopsis that anyone else who sees or has seen the movie will likely agree with. This level of content may be called the referential content, since it refers directly to things that happen in the plot and possibly to some aspects of the story that are merely implied by the plot.

A *review* (perhaps 400-1200 words) typically includes personal impressions and evaluations of a movie's content and techniques. A good review may touch superficially on topics that might be explored in more detail in a longer formal analysis. An *analysis* (perhaps 1200-12,000 words) attempts to determine how the film actually uses various cinematic techniques and elements of film or narrative form to make a viewer react in a certain way and why it makes viewers come away with certain opinions about it. Serious film criticism, whether essays written for magazines, journals, books, or class assignments, attempts to analyze films, rather than merely review them or provide simple descriptions of what happens. An analysis requires some reflective thought about the film, and usually benefits from multiple viewings and outside research.

- 2. Explicit Content:** Most films include lines of dialogue and depict obvious developments of character that explicitly communicate meaning to the viewers. Explicit content is perhaps some sort of "moral of the story" or socio-political attitude that the filmmaker is expressing directly through the mouths and actions of the characters. Some reasons the men in *Deliverance* give for taking the canoe trip include friendship and camaraderie, proving their manhood, and experiencing nature before it is destroyed by industrial development. As the plot develops, they also express personal attitudes about life and law and survival, which the writer and director obviously want the audience to think about. We also see explicitly how construction of a new dam is affecting the wilderness as well as human settlements.
- 3. Implicit Content:** A slightly deeper level of interpretation is implicit content, which may be less obvious but can still be inferred by seeing how the characters change, grow, and develop throughout the course of the film. Issues and ideas dealing with general human relations (rather than those specific to individual characters) may be fairly easy to recognize but are not explicitly stated by the characters. Sometimes implicit meanings are less obvious, and different viewers might interpret the same thing in different ways, depending upon their own experiences and expectations. In *Deliverance* we see implicitly the change in one character from being a passive follower after he is accidentally thrust into a leadership position. We see another character's casual attitude about casual sex change drastically after a traumatic experience in the woods. We see all four men force to contend with unexpected dangers in ways that imply how differently individuals can deal with the same events and suggest that certain compromises in one's ideals may need to be made in order to survive. It could even be possible to infer that the four central characters are separate personifications of conflicting values that might exist within a single individual. Such a literary technique allows an author (and viewer/reader) in effect to argue with himself over what the best or most practical course of action would be under comparable circumstances, and what different decisions might lead to. One could also identify instances of dramatic irony and argue whether certain events are meant to be considered "poetic justice" for the characters involved.
- 4. Symptomatic Content:** Implicit, explicit, and referential interpretations are based entirely on the film as a self-contained work, on "internal evidence." It is also possible to find richer meaning in a film, meaning deduced by knowing something about its creators and the time and place it was created, meaning from "external evidence" that is not possible to identify exclusively from the film itself. Sometimes this type of meaning is intentional on the part of the filmmakers, and other times it may be unconsciously incorporated into the story. Analyzing a film on this level is treating the film as a

symptom of a much greater influence than simple dramatic concerns for the characters and their actions. A symptomatic interpretation looks at the film as part of the broad context of society, reflecting and illustrating themes prevalent in the culture, in the time and place it was made, and possibly in the creator's personal life experience. This level of interpretation tries to recognize symbolic content, identifying characters and situations as metaphors for something else, or possibly seeing the entire story as an allegory about something else. *Deliverance* is an outdoor adventure and journey story set in the American south, but many critics looked at it as an allegory for the disastrous American experience in Vietnam, which was still going on when the film was made. Men conditioned by modern urban civilization believe they're more or less invincible as they travel into a rural environment inhabited by a less technologically advanced culture of backwoods people they look down upon. However, they soon discover the more primitive people can be more dangerous than they expected, they must do things they were not prepared to do to survive, not everyone gets out alive, and those that do are forever haunted by the experience. The movie *District 9* (2009) is a science fiction action-thriller, but this Oscar-nominated and internationally popular South African production by Neill Blomkamp is also symptomatic of late 20th and early 21st century attitudes towards immigration, minorities, government and corporate policies, the news media, and documentary filmmaking.

APPROACHES TO INTERPRETATION

- 1. Ideological Approach:** Identifying the content, whether explicit, implicit, or symptomatic, with a certain attitude you perceive the film takes (whether by its writer and/or its director), is an interpretation of its ideological meaning. Many films are overt attempts by their filmmakers to persuade audiences to their points of view. Others are more interested in raising various issues for audiences to think about. These may be less heavy-handed in supporting one view or another, and sometimes even come across as ambivalent, depicting opposing viewpoints as each having valid concerns and each having their good and bad points. Still other films express obvious socio-political views through their characters, but may appear to contradict them through the actions and ultimate resolutions of the plot, possibly to keep them marketable to a wider public while still raising awareness of the issues. It's up to viewers and critics to determine whether a film is effective at achieving some or all of its intentions, and sometimes even what those intentions might be. Analysis from a variety of approaches can help a viewer realize just what a film is trying to do, and to appreciate it more, whether or not one agrees with it.

Once people realized that films could do much more than provide simple entertainment, a variety of theories and approaches were developed to help analyze films in order to understand how they created responses in viewers and just what they might mean. Different approaches examine different aspects of a film for different reasons.

- 2. Formalist Approach:** A formalist approach looks at the film itself, its structure and form. Thus, while other approaches often use some degree of external evidence to analyze a film, a formalist approach will focus primarily on internal evidence. This approach might analyze how the way the plot presents the story material forces the viewer to see things at certain times and have reactions that might be different if presented some other way. A narrative analysis will examine how a film employs various narrative formal elements (such as character, setting, repetition/variation, etc.) to convey meaning to the viewer. Analysis of specific formal techniques might concentrate on a film's use of *mise en scene* or photographic composition, camera movements, editing choices, sound in relation to the image, etc., noting the effect of those techniques on how the viewer perceives the scenes and interprets what they mean.
- 3. Realist Approach:** A realist approach examines how a film represents "reality." Some films attempt to make techniques "invisible" to viewers so the characters and situations are always the primary focus. Others attempt to use cinematic techniques to replicate a certain type of reality the filmmaker wants the audience to experience -- love, aging, memory, insanity, drug use, etc. Some films are more concerned with creating moods and emotional impressions than with depicting a traditionally plotted story with an obvious beginning, middle, and end. These films may be attempting to convey a type of reality important to their creators, hoping that viewers will pick up on it, but non-mainstream use of techniques and non-standard structure may require a concerted effort on the part of a viewer to understand, multiple viewings, or even an explanation by the filmmaker. Look, for example, at the

unusual films written or directed by Charlie Kaufmann, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Synechdoche New York*, *Adaptation*, and *Being John Malkovich*.

- 4. Contextualist Approach:** A contextualist approach to analysis always considers a film as part of some broader context. This can be society at large (as in the symptomatic interpretations mentioned above), the particular culture, time, and place that created it (i. *Culturalist approach*), the director's personal life and previous body of work (ii. *Auteurist approach* that assumes the director is the "author" of a film), or various psychological and/or ideological contexts.
- 5. Psychological Approach:** A psychological approach often identifies plot elements with theories of psychologists like Freud or Jung, looking for sexual symbolism, treatment of the subconscious, representations of the id, ego, and superego, etc.
- 6. Dualist Approach:** The dualist approach looks for pairs of opposites (male-female, good-evil, light-dark, urban-rural, etc.), possibly identifying them as symbolic of contrasting tendencies in society or human nature itself.
- 7. Feminist Approach:** A **feminist** analysis concentrates on the portrayals of women in a film -- are they strong, weak, stereotypes, protagonists, antagonists, etc.
- 8. Marxist Approach:** A Marxist critic will attempt to associate characters and events in a film as representative of class struggle, labor vs. management, poor vs. rich, oppressive governments, and other Marxist sociopolitical concerns.
- 9. Generic Approach:** A generic approach looks at a film as a representative of a genre, comparing it with other films from the same genre and finding meaning by identifying shared symbolic motifs or variations from the expected formula. This is especially useful when a film intentionally subverts or inverts various elements of traditional generic formulas. A generic analysis often benefits from a wider-reaching contextual approach, as a substantial number of genre films (especially science-fiction, fantasy, and westerns, but also others such as journey films, war films, and historical dramas) incorporate intentional metaphors and symptomatic content relating to contemporary society at the time they were made. Another way to examine a film in a certain context is to chronicle its reception by audiences and critics over the years. Some films were huge popular and critical successes when originally released, but were all but forgotten within a few years or perhaps a decade or two. Other films were virtually ignored when they first came out, but gradually gained viewer and critical acclaim to the point that they're now considered major masterpieces or beloved favorites. It's possible that a film originally rejected by critics but popular with the mass viewing public gradually reversed that position over the decades so that it is now critically respected but largely disliked by the general public. Still other films provoke a certain amount of controversy, falling in and out of favor from one decade to another as public and/or critical tastes change.
- 10. Genetic Approach:** The genetic approach follows a film through all stages of its creation and release. It will examine and evaluate various drafts of the story and script, memos about changes during production, continuing through various cuts of the film made for preview audiences, theatrical release, re-edited rereleases, television and video editions, and later "definitive" director's cuts.

A viewer can use any one or combination of these critical approaches to try to figure out just what a filmmaker is trying to say in a work. Different approaches may embrace or totally ignore other approaches to come up with similar or completely opposite ideas about what a film really means. There may be as many different interpretations of a film as there are critics, but examining a film from a variety of approaches may reveal things one never even considered while watching it for the first time. Of course, trying to use every approach to analyze a film would result in a book-length study. Any particular film may lend itself most easily to one or two specific approaches in detail, with some consideration of perhaps one or more other approaches. Writing a brief critical analysis, whether five pages or 25 pages, requires narrowing down the scope of your coverage to only what strikes you as most important about the film and what you consider most rewarding to discuss.