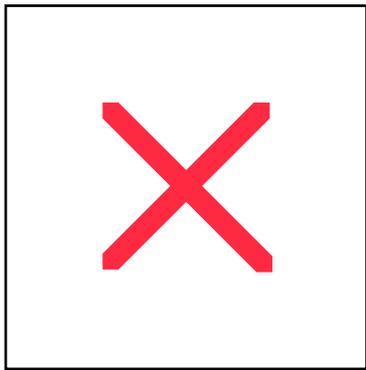


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Studying Cinema

2000

People talk about the movies they see, and some people write about those movies for newspapers and magazines. How does film studies, as an academic discipline, accord with these more common ways of talking and thinking about films? The two ways of thinking about film aren't completely distinct, I think, but some differences are worth noting.

First, ordinary discourse about cinema centers on evaluative talk. "That movie was great! I loved it!" "Really? I didn't think it was very good." Likewise film reviewers take as their primary goal the evaluation of films, giving thumbs up or thumbs down, saying whether they regard them as worth the ticket price or not. Academic film studies can involve evaluation, but for most film scholars evaluating a particular movie isn't, or isn't always, the goal.

Secondly, ordinary conversation tends to be ahistorical, in the sense that this or that movie is not seen as part of a

tradition or long-range trend. Most reviewers follow this tendency; they typically don't have the space or the mind-set to put a film in the context of film history. When a reviewer does invoke a historical context, it's usually the present: a reviewer often treats a film as reflecting current social trends.

Third, and most important, typical talk about movies isn't very analytical. It doesn't explore how the parts of the film relate to one another in systematic ways; it doesn't dissect strategies of plotting or aspects of style; it doesn't examine the ideological maneuvers the film might execute. A reviewer might mention such factors, described more or less evocatively ("jagged montage," "incoherent motivation," etc.) but again, there is seldom the space, or the inclination, to probe such matters.

Film studies, it seems to me, is an effort to understand films and the processes through which they're made and consumed. Film scholars mount explanations for why films are the way they are, why they were made the way they were, why they are consumed the way they are. Most ordinary talk about movies, and most film journalism, doesn't ask "Why...?" questions, or pursue them very far.

Explaining anything involves analyzing it, at least to some degree. Analysis is a matter of breaking up whole phenomena into relevant parts and showing how they work together. Thus a film historian interested in how a particular studio worked in 1930 will distinguish among the studio's operations (studio departments, say, or phases of the moviemaking process). An academic film critic will divide a film into parts (scenes, sequences, "acts") to see how the overall architecture works. Explaining something also

involves describing it. A film historian trying to explain how a studio functioned in 1930 will describe the work routines; that's a necessary part of the explanation. An academic film critic will describe a scene in detail, for that's necessary to understanding why it carries a particular meaning or achieves a particular effect. Analysis and description are rare in ordinary conversation and in film reviewing because of limits of time and space, but also because the film scholar is interested in something that isn't so pressing for other parties: explanations.

There are different types of explanation. Historians often look for *causal* explanations, the way that events or circumstances x and y shaped event z over time. Film analysts and theorists often seek *functional* explanations—how x and y work together, at any given moment, to create the whole z. Again, these are concerns that typically don't arise in ordinary conversation or film reviewing.

When film scholars talk about movies, they usually also offer interpretations: claims about the nonobvious meanings that we can find in films. Interpretations can be thought of as particular sorts of functional explanations. An interpretation presupposes that aspects of the film (style, structure, dialogue, plot) contribute to its overall significance. I argue this in more detail in *Making Meaning*.

Finally, I think that film studies is best defined as a process of posing and trying to answer *questions*. Most ordinary conversation about films serves other purposes—to share information, to have social exchanges with people, to learn more about others' tastes. Film studies certainly has these aims too, but like other academic disciplines, it seeks to answer questions in a systematic way, one that is open to

discussion and criticism. So film studies centers on certain sorts of questions: those that require explanations as answers.

One type of talk about movies resembles academic film studies quite a lot, though: the talk of fans. Fan subcultures love to describe their favorite scenes, often in great detail, and sometimes they engage in analysis. Fans are also highly evaluative in their talk (“Wasn’t the lightsabre duel cool?”), but in intriguing ways the specialized discourse of fans runs parallel to that of academics. The arguments mounted elsewhere on this website presume that theories, historical arguments, and film analyses are efforts to mount persuasive explanations which are, in turn, answers to particular questions.